Interview: Paddy Ashdown, High Representative: “The interests of Mostar’s citizens will be crucial for my Decision”

*High Representative in Herzegovina * 500,000 KM a week will not be spent on politicians but on citizens * Responsibility of political parties and individuals*

Ahead of us are the last 14 hours of negotiations with political parties and other representatives. I can’t say that we are looking at anything else but a “zero” chance to reach a consensus, although we will try to reach that consensus during these last negotiations. However, I am not optimistic. In any case, today is decision day for Mostar, and it seems to me that this decision will, inevitably, be based on action taken by the High Representative.

Negotiations carried out with politicians and parties in Mostar have, so far, been useful as they have given me a good idea of what the citizens of this town want – says the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown, in an interview for “Dnevni Avaz.”

Two principles

When the final decision on Mostar is rendered, I will be guided by two principles. First, I will try to incorporate into the final decision means of allaying the fears and concerns presented to me by the political parties. The second, most important principle, is the interest of Mosta’s citizens.

A recent survey, carried out on scientific principles,

indicated that 82.3 percent of Mostar's citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, believe it would be absolutely wrong for one people to govern the city on their own. The vast majority of citizens agree that it is of vital importance to ensure the existence of mechanisms that would prevent parallelisms, and that the city must be united. Almost 75 percent of surveyed citizens think so. These are the opinions that I must carefully consider.

We interviewed the High Representative on Tuesday, at the time he was already on his way to Mostar.

Even though he did not confirm anything, it is most likely that Ashdown will issue a quite detailed decision on the future organization of Mostar. The key city officials, as well as the main officials of Mostar municipalities (to be extinguished), will be directly responsible for its implementation.

Dnevni avaz: What will the Mostar Decision contain?

Paddy Ashdown: Allow me to first say that the decision on Mostar must be made by the end of the month. If we were to miss this opportunity, we would have to wait for another three or four years, which would be completely unacceptable. At the same time, this would have a negative impact on BiH as a whole, and its efforts to join the EU.

With regard a decision, it is a well-known fact that, unfortunately, there is no trust between Bosniaks and Croats. This is why everything has to be based on clear principles.

In addition, there must be a single administration.

None of the peoples will have an absolute majority in the city. Efforts will be made to ensure fair principles of power sharing. These principle will be achieved by upholding the electoral system implemented throughout all of BiH. It is clear that it does not represent pure democracy, nor is BiH

ready for such a thing. This is why the principle of positive discrimination will be established, following the model used at the state level. This principle applies to Croats at the level of BiH, so why couldn't it be applied to others, who might be a minority in Mostar.

In addition, other safeguard mechanisms will be put in place, though it is possible that some decisions in the City Council will be made by a majority vote.

The priority for me is the establishment of a decentralized system that will serve the citizens, not the politicians. Let me make one more thing very clear: rumors have spread that I would announce a decision, which would leave all the employees of the municipal administrations jobless the very next day. This will not happen. There will be a transitional period, and many people who are currently employed in municipal administrations will keep their jobs.

Some time ago I lead a "revolution" just like this one in Great Britain, and today it has become a model of the most modern system in Europe.

The money saved, some 500,000 KM a week, will be spent on citizens and not on politicians.

Dnevni avaz: One of the big issues of concern relates to the number of councilors within the Mostar City Council from one people…

Paddy Ashdown: These details are being considered, and I want this to remain an open issue as of yet. However, the ensuring that one people can only have less than 50 percent of council seats is one of the safeguard mechanisms that will be upheld.

No supervisors

Dnevni avaz: How will the Mostar Decision be implemented?

Paddy Ashdown: There will be no supervisor appointed as in the

Brcko and Zepce models. The mayor and his deputy and the municipal mayors will be in charge of implementation. I will monitor their work and ensure that they are implementing, rather than obstructing, the decision. The organization of Mostar is an obligation under Dayton, and those who obstruct it will be considered as obstructionists of Dayton, and they will have to bear the well-known consequences.

It is quite clear that there is individual responsibility, but also there is the responsibility of the political parties involved in this process. I do not want to dwell on the details, but I know that everyone was given a very clear message in that regard.

There will be other consequences for failing to implement this decision tool. The World Bank has said that it would not invest money in Mostar if the situation there remains chaotic. A similar message came from the EU and USAID, and you can guess what individual investors and businessmen are thinking. Do not forget that the Investment Conference in Mostar is coming up soon, and no one should have any doubts that investors will certainly not invest their money where there is such chaos.

It is also becoming clear today that Elektroprivreda Mostar, which used to allocate substantial funds to this city's budget, will not be able to do that any longer. As of April 1, EP Mostar will not be able to top up Mostar's budget were the situation there to remain chaotic. The World Bank is ready to accept an extension of this responsibility, if the situation in the city improves.

Dnevni avaz: Will the International Community formally assist the implementation of the Mostar Decision?

Paddy Ashdown: All parties in this city have indicated their desire for some kind of technical assistance in the implementation of the decision. I have to point out that the

key officials of the city and its municipalities will be the main implementing agents, and we will assist in ensuring the technical aspects of implementation. We will announce the details today, but I can tell you now that my deputy Werner Wnendt will monitor this entire process. The responsibility for implementation is in the hands of Mostar officials, whom I will hold accountable.

No obstructions

Dnevni avaz: How do you evaluate the actions and behavior of political parties so far in this process?

Paddy Ashdown: What we are dealing with here is a very serious problem. It has not been dealt with in the last ten years, and resolving it is not a simple task. I can understand why this is the case.

All parties have demonstrated their readiness to change the situation, they have indicated their fears and worries, and I respect that. So far there have been no obstructions of the negotiation process, each side and each political party was mindful of the interests of its group, but for me the most important thing is what the citizens of Mostar think, not what this or that group thinks.

Dnevni avaz: You recently said you would hold the state-level party leadership accountable for the situation in Mostar.

Paddy Ashdown: Parties must ensure that their decisions are implemented in the field and respected by their locally-based branches. So far I have not seen any obstructions in this process. If there are any, and I do not expect them, these political parties will be held accountable, in addition to individual accountability. However, I hope there will be no obstruction.

To the citizens of Mostar I must say that there is no system that cannot be destroyed. I want to give Mostar a chance, but

I cannot give it a future. That is in the hands of politicians, and only the citizens of Mostar can prevent them from ruining this opportunity.

Stadium under the competencies of the city

Paddy Ashdown: The stadium, the swimming pool, the garbage depot…these are just some of the facilities which all the parties agreed should be placed under the city's administration. At this time we are unable to determine the technical details that will be the basis for administrating these facilities, so it is possible that I will take care of this issue.

I am thinking of establishing some kind of a process, comprised of local staff led by international representatives, in order to define the best and easiest model of transferring these facilities to the city and having them serve all the citizens of Mostar, not just one particular group.

Message to bishop Peric

Paddy Ashdown: There is widespread lack of understanding, and it is especially reflected in bishop Peric's letter.

Only Mostar and Sarajevo are individually mentioned in the Dayton Peace Agreement. Sarajevo's status under Dayton is well known – it is a divided city, whether someone likes that or not. Mostar's status was left unsolved, and it is an issue that must be resolved. My responsibility, according to Dayton, is to resolve this issue. I have no other responsibilities of this kind. Dayton simply did not envisage any.