Interview: Paddy Ashdown, High Representative: “Mostar will become a single city again”

British politician and diplomat Paddy Ashdown took office as the International Community’s High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina in May 2002. Many Croats in this country expressed fears at that time that his appointment was not the best solution. There was talk that the former leader of the British Liberal Party would be particularly disinclined towards BiH Croats. The main reason for such predictions may have been Ashdown’s testimony of how the first Croatian President, Franjo Tudjman, planed to divide BiH – the well-known story of a divided Bosnia being drawn on a serviette.

In the meantime, these fears have not proven justified. In public and practical ways Ashdown has tried to show that he does not want to discriminate against anyone. One of his first visits in BiH was to a Croat majority area in Herzegovina, while the second year of Ashdown’s mandate was concluded with a decision with which he secured the electricity supply to Mostar’s “Aluminij”; a company which was faced with closure as a result of pressure from Sarajevo’s “Elektroprivreda”.

These moves were applauded by Croats and, doubtlessly, they changed the Croat public’s attitude towards the current High Representative. For this reason we begin our interview with Paddy Ashdown with the following statement

»Of course, I can’t be the judge of whether there has really been a change of attitude like the one you speak of, but if

it’s true then it’s certainly something to commend. However, I’d like to say that in doing this job I am “blind” to these ethnic issues. I always place the interests of citizens first and foremost in my mind, not their ethnicity.”

Paddy Ashdown: When I first came here many people thought I was not working in their favour. Croats thought I was against them when I explained the story of the serviette, some thought I was against Serbs because of my testimony against Milosevic in the Hague, and I’ve recently been called anti-Muslim, by the Bosniak Member of the BiH Presidency, Mr Sulejman Tihic.

But, my job is to consider only one thing, the interests of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole. And I believe it is in the interest of BiH as a whole that a multiethnic society continues functioning. Bosnia and Herzegovina, if this country wants to join Europe, must change and start thinking a little more about individual rights rather than just collective rights.

Old Europe depended too much on nationalism and monoethnicity. It would like me saying I could only be Irish and not British, or if you said you could only be Croat, but not Bosnian. This is an old idea and it brought blood on to our streets. I’m in favour of new ideas, which allow and stimulate multi-tiered identities – and people can be proud of each one of them.

I hate nationalism but love patriotism. You are a nationalist if you hate others, but to be patriotic means loving one’s own country without hating others.

Let me conclude with a sentence, which maybe stands behind all the measures I take in this job – the multiethnic structure of this country is not its curse but its wealth. Bosnia and Herzegovina is the only country of the Former Yugoslavia to have preserved this gift and if we can look at its multiethnicity as something that needs to be preserved and cherished rather than a curse from the past, then we can build

BiH”

Vjesnik: We were talking about the attitude of Croats towards you. They will probably not applaud the decision which you announced you’d make before the end of January regarding the new structure of Mostar. The negotiations on the restructuring this city, conducted under the mediation of your Office, ended in a failure. And since local elections are approaching, deadlines are being set by which the City on the Neretva must adopt a new Statute, which you will obviously have to impose. Croats object saying that the method for distributing electoral mandates could lead to a situation where six Croat votes in Mostar are worth one Bosniak vote. You dismissed these accusations saying that Croat interests are taken care of in a similar way at higher levels, at the Federation level.

Paddy Ashdown: I mentioned the need to preserve the multiethnic structure of BiH. This is a pro-European idea. In this context, it is necessary to take steps to ensure the right conditions in minority areas. Let’s take the steps that are required, even if they are sometimes a little antidemocratic. Let’s do it to ensure that Croats feel safe in BiH, so that they have an influence and can cast fears that their culture in this country will disappear; or so that Bosniaks can feel at home in Mostar. This is very important.

I am not too concerned over the speculations that I could become unpopular because of a Mostar decision. I am not doing this job for the sake of popularity but because I believe it’s the right thing to.

I am confused with the Croat objections you mentioned, because, if we take such a decision, we will be introducing in to Mostar the same system for the protection of peoples which protects those of Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I am therefore surprised if the majority of the Croat population in Mostar insists on a majority rule, which would mean that such a system should be applied across the whole of BiH. It’s hard

for me to understand why those mechanisms which Croats find so necessary aren't welcome in Mostar.

In any case, a divided Mostar is no longer acceptable for the citizens of this city and if an agreement is not reached I will be forced to take a decision which will make it a unified city. The solution to this issue cannot be postponed indefinitely. It's unacceptable that the existing parallelisms should continue when at the same time there are administrative structures which will ensure that no constituent people can be dominated by another.

Vjesnik: With your permission I'd like to dwell a little on the emotions you are causing in the BiH public and on another Copernican twist in the way certain groups in the country see you. This time it is about opposition parties and the media close to them. They welcomed your arrival in May 2002 with ovations, but now you seem to have become the embodiment of nearly all the problems this country has. They say you rule Bosnia too aggressively, too protector-like, without the partnership of the local authorities. They say you've struck a pact with nationalists and that it's a consequence of your belief that nationalism isn't the biggest problem in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Paddy Ashdown: I said I hated nationalism, contrary to patriotism. But, it's interesting that it's opposition parties saying the things you mentioned, not those in Government and it appears to me there is a little inconsistency here. Why do they criticise me? For accepting the election results? What was I supposed to do – they seem to think that I should have somehow disregarded the election results and put them in to power. But, doing that would have made my tenure a protectorate. It's strange they should say I've created a protectorate for not doing the exact thing which would have created one.

I've already said I am "blind" to ethnicity and I don't judge

parties by their labels, but by what they do. Who are my partners in BiH? I don't choose them; it's the citizens of BiH who do that through elections. I may like them, I may not, but that's what we call democracy.

I serve the people of BiH in the same way as I serve the International Community. I think the opposition parties should finally make up their minds about whether it's right for me to embrace democracy and work with the elected governments. It's my job to serve democracy in this country.

Am I too aggressive? Yes, I'm an impatient man. I want BiH to move forward and I put in a lot of effort and push in that direction and sometimes lose patience when things go too slowly. But, there is one reason for that – this country's been waiting for too long, there has been too much delay and what this country doesn't have right now is time.

Vjesnik: The fact is that BiH, despite a certain amount of progress made, is still not self-sustainable and ready to abolish institutions such as the one you are heading. Your mandate was recently extended until May 2005 – do you really expect to be the last High Representative in BiH?

Paddy Ashdown: This country is not a state yet. Neither was Germany in 1945, however, Bosnia and Herzegovina is on the road to statehood. We have done things that no one believed possible during the last year. BiH has changed Dayton. I did not do it, the people of this country did it – they moved responsibility for the armed forces up to the state. They began creating a tax and customs system at the state level. No one believed this was possible. I think it's fair to say that BiH has gone further from war to peace than any other country in history. Of course, we still have a long road ahead but much of what's been done is impressive. In these past eight years Bosnia and Herzegovina has gone further from war than my native Ireland has in 30 years.

I am convinced we can finish this journey. Maybe not so long into the future there will be a time when the process which puts this country on the road to Europe is irreversible. This is the goal I put to myself when I came to BiH and I'm convinced that I can achieve it.

Will I be the last High Representative or not? It depends. I can't say. But my job here is to get rid of my job. If I could be the last High Representative I would consider it a great success.

Yet, quite honestly, it will be hard to get to a point where Bosnia and Herzegovina will be able to do without the High Representative before the end of my mandate in May next year. But the closer we get to that point the greater our success. It's time to hand over the administration and rule of this country to BiH citizens. Even now, I am using my Bonn powers less and less.

Vjesnik: Speaking of the progress that has been made in BiH, there's one fact that's mentioned quite often and it is about an allegedly high return rate. On the other had, we can hear warnings that return of property does not always follow the genuine return of people. Croats complain in particular. Catholics in BiH have halved since the beginning of the war. Representatives of the Catholic Church, such as Cardinal Puljic, often warn that the International Community discriminates against Croats, Catholics, who want to return. There's also the issue of the property of the Catholic Church in BiH?

Paddy Ashdown: I've heard about such comments from Cardinal Puljic and I respect his views. But the issue of refugee return is in fact interrelated. There are issue related to return of Croat refugees into BiH, but also of Serb refugees into Croatia. If we want to build confidence between all peoples concerning this issue, we must see this linkage. It's important that we look at the refugee return problem as an

issue that concerns all states of the Western Balkans. If we could resolve this issue in this way, for instance in the way that Croatian President Stipe Mesic was proposing, it would be very good.

Cardinal Puljic mentioned the issue of the Catholic Church property in particular. I understand his point, it's a serious matter and this problem should be addressed. But, I stress again – it's more complex than just the property of the Catholic Church. There's also the issue of restitution in the whole country and you can't just resolve one small part belonging to the Catholic Church and leave unsolved the part that, for instance, belongs to the Islamic Community. So, there's a great problem and it needs to be resolved as a whole and not piece-by-piece.

Vjesnik: Although SFOR's recent hunt for Radovan Karadic in Pale ended in failure, it's still encouraging that the authorities of the RS cooperated during this raid. The issue of war criminals seems to be an additional burden to the internal circumstances of BiH?

Paddy Ashdown: Yes, we must sort out the issue of war crimes fully because we can't have peace without it. There is no stable peace without justice. The BiH authorities must strengthen their efforts in bringing war criminals to justice, and in this sense, the Office I lead has supported SFOR's operations to seek out war crimes suspects and those that assist them as well as improving cooperation between the Stabilization Force and members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Republika Srpska.

The BiH authorities, primarily those in the RS, must prove their readiness to fulfilling their obligations in the area of cooperation with the Hague Tribunal and to play an active role in it, since, among other things, this is one of the preconditions for BiH joining PfP and the opening of negotiations with the European Union which will lead to the

signing of a Stabilization and Association Agreement.

Vjesnik: Western and local media often describe BiH as a terrorist haven. You dismissed such assessments recently – do you maintain this position?

Paddy Ashdown: If you ask me if there are terrorists in Bosnia and Herzegovina my answer would probably be – yes. Are there terrorists left over from the war in BiH? Probably yes. Are there Mujahedeens here from the war? Yes, there probably are. Are there Croat terrorists left over from the war? The answer here is also probably yes. I would answer in the same way with regard the existence of members of Ravna Gora Chetnik Movement…

But, the gravest danger for this country does not come from internal terrorist organizations. The danger first and foremost comes from the fact that this is a lawless space – so, the first problem is that we haven't established the rule of law and terrorists from outside can use this space for their activities. The real threat to this country does not come from terrorist organizations that remain, big or small, but from the lack of the rule of law and this is what we have to resolve. It's necessary to adopt laws establishing a state-level intelligence service to be able to tackle this problem successfully.

Dayton needs to be changed, but it's up to the people of BiH to do it

Vjesnik: We hear more and more frequently initiatives to change the Dayton Agreement and BiH's internal structure. What is your comment?

Paddy Ashdown: I think such a debate is very healthy. When I first came to BiH, I told my friends; if we wanted to be successful then we needed to begin a debate on the constitutional future of this country. Chairman Mao Ze Tung said – "let the thousand flowers bloom". This should be

applicable to constitutional ideas too.

Some interesting ideas have appeared and that is good. One of the important reasons why we will have to tackle the Constitutional issue is the cost of government in this country.

Too much is spent on bureaucracy and administration here, 60 or 70 percent of all revenue, so that almost nothing remains for education, health, pensions. We can't afford to have such high expenditures for such a cumbersome administration in BiH. BiH cannot become a prosperous modern European state if it doesn't resolve these issues.

I would be a fool to believe that the existing constitutional structure in BiH is good. It's unsustainable. If you want to hear my personal opinion – in 20 years time the entities, the Federation and the RS, will not exist in the same sense as they do now. But will this really happen? When will it happen? – If it happens and in what way it happens doesn't have anything to do with Paddy Ashdown. This is not a question that the IC should resolve. Change to Dayton is only possible on the by agreement between the peoples and on the basis of compromise made by the citizens of this country.

I wish to emphasise that citizens of this country need to discuss this first of all. Foreigners can make a contribution but the decision on the Constitution is in no one's hands but in the hands of the people of this country. The Dayton Constitution will need to be changed but how this will be done is in the hands of the people of BiH.

There are some in BiH, not exclusively but mostly among Bosniaks – Muslims, who believe that a great International Community archangel will descend upon Bosnia and Herzegovina on a shining cloud, grab the Dayton Agreement from their hands, fly off to some American airbase tens of thousand of miles away and re-write it for them. That will not happen. The

BiH Constitution must be rewritten by the people of this country, making hard compromises. Dayton must be changed and it is changing, but this change can only come from the people of BiH.

Sanader's courageous statements and Mesic's moral leadership are qualities of the highest order

Vjesnik: There has been a change of government recently in the Republic of Croatia and the Government is now headed by Ivo Sanader. How will this change reflect on BiH and in what way can Croatia help reform processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Paddy Ashdown: I will be meeting Mr Sanader next week and I am pleased to have the opportunity to meet him. Some of the statements that he has given in the past were I think very courageous – they were statements worthy of a statesman. However, the central issue about Zagreb, and I believe that the Croatian Government knows it very well, is that Croatia's destiny is Europe.

This means that good and constructive relations must be maintained with her neighbours. In the recent years, the Croatian Government played a very good and constructive role with its neighbour, BiH. This is consistent with European ideals and this is what Europe wants. I appreciate the good and close cooperation we had with the former government in Zagreb. I don't think this will change. Moreover, all I have heard of Mr Sanader leads me to believe that this good cooperation will continue. There has been an extraordinary transformation in the Croatian state, which certainly leads to a higher level of regional stability, which is again very important. – If we look at the wider context, recent events in Belgrade were a shock in many ways.

On the other hand, Croatia together with Slovenia, remains in a way, the focal point of stability in the region and I believe it can spread to other countries. It's important that

the Croatian policies of which I have spoken remain unchanged and I’m convinced that this will be the case.

I particularly admire President Mesic who I’ve known for a long time now and who, in my judgement, has moral and leadership qualities of the highest order. If we had more of such leaders in the region I think we’d have fewer problems.