

Interview: Paddy Ashdown, High Representative: “Older politicians can’t think about the future of BiH”

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Ljiljan: How satisfied are the members of the Peace Implementation Council with what has been done in Bosnia and Herzegovina so far? I would say, the PIC is concerned over the slowing tempo or reform, and the European Commission is looking for urgent measures to accelerate the reforms. How much are the local politicians aware of this position?

ASHDOWN: Let me say first that I'm not dissatisfied with what the current authorities did during the last year, regardless of the obstacles we had in front of us. Those who say that national parties cannot implement reforms are not right; the results say so. But this doesn't mean much more couldn't have been done. However, if Europe sees now that BiH politicians are exerting pressure on the judiciary, it will not be good. We will show with this that this country is open to instability, which means we are closing the door to investment ourselves. This would be a real disaster for this country. The European Commission will see whether we are successful or not. There are four key tasks ahead of us and their realization or lack of realization will decide if we are successful or not. We will continue working on the strengthening of the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council which will protect the independence of the judiciary, which is a basic European principle. There is also the creation of the single intelligence service. Only if we resolve all issues that we have in front of us will we be successful. No issue can be done superficially. So, in the first six months we will know whether this country has a future in Europe or not. Everything is in your hands.

Ljiljan: How much are the local politicians aware of what you were just talking about?

ASHDOWN: I think our problem is our complacency and inability to realize what huge tasks lie ahead. Let me use an analogy. We have in front of us a big mountain, a really big mountain that we have to climb. In the last year, most people were saying we would not be able to climb even to the first plateau, but we did that. Of course, when people came to the first plateau they said it was exhausting and they had to rest, but I must keep on saying that we still have in front of us the biggest peak we must climb. I must keep on saying that I am sorry there is no rest because we have to move on.

Ljiljan: The world's attention is on Afghanistan and Iraq, the enlargement and elections in the European Union, less and less on Bosnia. How much is this situation making the BiH economic position more difficult?

ASHDOWN: It's true that this position makes economic development of BiH hard, but we must bear in mind that this could be a good sign, not bad. It's not good to be a problem in order to draw someone's attention to oneself. And the problems we are resolving now lead towards strengthening the economy, because we can no longer count on international aid. We must realize that all we achieve must be our result and not the result of the International Community. The sooner we realize this the faster we can move on.

Ljiljan: Reforms in the area of customs and tax are vital for BiH. They are a precondition for reforms which will follow in the medium term. What needs to be done in the area by the middle of the year?

ASHDOWN: I agree fully. This is something concrete we must do. We must find the seat: Republika Srpska is a cause for concern because it did not find the seat for the ITA. But we must take steps to start working. We needed a long time to select a director. At the same time, we must unify customs. These are practical and specific tasks. I have spoken to my colleagues in the European Union. They believe we could do much work on the introduction of VAT by January 1 next year. In my opinion, if we don't do this, we will lose a unique opportunity to show the European Commission that we can deliver on the set tasks. I'm an impatient and ambitious man and I will do

everything in my power to get to that goal.

Ljiljan: It is no secret that tax and customs evaders pocket millions of marks instead of sending them into the budgets. How satisfied are you so far with the government's fight against this phenomenon? Do you see from the scandals we had in the past that there is an interaction between certain politicians and criminals?

ASHDOWN: Who can be satisfied with the fight against corruption? This is still a current topic, it's still in the tissue of this country, and it's hard to remove. But, this is not characteristic of Bosnia and Herzegovina only. Maybe this is due to some mistakes that the International Community made because we needed seven years to establish the rule of law in this country. All this tells us what a fight is before us. What you are talking about is deeply rooted in all the years after the war. If you ask me whether I am satisfied with the tempo of the fight against this I will tell you I am not.

Ljiljan: There is an impression that some politicians do not have any responsibility towards the citizens of this country and towards the future of the young generations. How can one explain this?

ASHDOWN: This is a tough question. I think it's in a politician's nature to think short-term, and myself being a politician, this is true of me, too. So, it's in the nature of a politician to think short-term indeed. If you think about the future, you must think about the next 15 years at least and your politicians think the future lasts for four years, as long as their mandates last. I think this is natural although it's not good, of course. But, something else concerns me. I keep saying that young people should not wait for the old to give them power but they should take it themselves. So, they must want to take power, because it indeed belongs to them and not to the old politicians. Young people must be more energetic, more entrepreneurial and seek a place for themselves in politics in order to ensure a future for themselves. Old politicians will not give it to them. I have really come to love this country. And I'm really surprised by the great difference between the politicians who are over 40 and those who are under 35. They think differently. For the former, solutions are still imposed by the past, while the latter have rid themselves of the past and think about the future. This is the key difference. So, the problem is that politics is dominated by old politicians. That's why the things are as they are and there are no new ideas. The past with old politicians is always within reach. This is the case in my country, too.

Ljiljan: Where do you see people with new ideas who are not burdened with the past?

ASHDOWN: Well, I see them in municipalities. They have the feeling that they must serve citizens. For example, I'd like to point out the mayors of Tuzla and Rudo, but also the mayor of Siroki Brijeg. I wish they hadn't put up the statue of Franjo Tudjman, but this is the place where there are people who are oriented differently than we think, regardless of them having this national character. If we want to see new forces, it's better to look for them in smaller places as they are not burdened with high politics. Let me not forget to mention the mayor of Turbe, whom I met on Bjelasnica.

Ljiljan: Considering the current events, how satisfied are you with the work of the Council of Ministers, Adnan Terzic, Presidency of BiH, Entity governments?

ASHDOWN: It's not up to me to pass judgement on someone's work like a classroom teacher. Doubtless, the government has done some very good things, but my job is to want continued work and never be satisfied. I must keep pushing new tasks. I don't judge people according to their label and it's not important to me whether they come from SDA or SDS, or SDP. It's important to me how they work. I don't judge people by their words but by their acts.

Ljiljan: How do you assess the initiative of European politicians to build on Dayton, since it has received support from the members of the European Parliament? Is it possible that a new international conference might be called up in which Dayton would be added to, changed?

ASHDOWN: Dayton is good because it finished the war, but it's not good for state building. That's the problem. The Republika Srpska is also aware that certain things must change. I think we need to conduct a debate about changing Dayton within Dayton, and this is exactly what we've been doing so far. We have lately delegated some Entity competencies to the state level. However, anyone who believes that someone from the international community or the European Union will fly into BiH, take the Dayton Agreement into their hands, fly away to an American air base, they live in dreams, because this is not going to happen. If we are to change Dayton, we will do

it alone. So, only the citizens of this country can change Dayton. You see, defence laws or indirect taxation laws mean a change to Dayton. Constituting the High Judicial Council is also a change to Dayton.

Ljiljan: You don't think there could be a new international conference in which Dayton would be changed?

ASHDOWN: Who will organize that? I keep saying we must implement reform fast if we want to avert a disaster. If we focused on a new international conference now we would stop the reforms and then we'd be far from Europe. So, I don't think there will be a new international conference. In fact, this conference is awaited by some who think that someone will come on a 'white horse' to help them, rather than them helping themselves. This is self-deceiving. You must build the state yourselves.

Ljiljan: So, reforms and reforms - not changes to Dayton?

ASHDOWN: Exactly, because reforms change Dayton. We don't need a prince on a white horse.

Ljiljan: Do you know a country in the world in which there are so many levels of government, with so many ministers and deputies in relation to the number of inhabitants, so many parliaments, police. Nearly 70 percent of the budget is spent on government. Can this kind of state be economically viable?

ASHDOWN: Of course I can't. That's why we must reform this bureaucratic apparatus, simplify this political structure. And I say again, it's only you who can do this. The EU demands we reform the police if we want visa-free travel. But one shouldn't think there is only one model of a state. It doesn't have to mean that a centralized model is good, such as in Great Britain. The value of Europe is that it allows a number of models. BiH may be like Belgium. If Belgium applied for membership in the EU today, it might be rejected. Will BiH be like Switzerland depends on you. We must implement reforms in order to get a state we want. Maybe we don't have to be a centralized state. Our destination is not a centralized state. It's possible that our destination is a state which will resemble Switzerland. A state of cantons.

Ljiljan: How to explain that the Brcko District is developing economically much faster than other parts of the country?

ASHDOWN: One of the reasons is that the Federation is economically in a much better situation than the RS. The more there are reforms the better the economy. But, beside that, Brcko has done much more in comparison with the Entities.

Ljiljan: The Brcko District Assembly adopts decisions faster, there aren't many levels of government, there's one treasury account...

ASHDOWN: They were the first who forgot the past because nothing constrains them... I apologize, our time for the interview has expired...

Ljiljan: Just another two questions...

ASHDOWN: All right.

Ljiljan: The Federation Parliament discussed the issue of inequality of Bosniaks in the judiciary and security systems. Sulejman Tihic, president of the SDA, said in an interview that he believed you would acknowledge justified objections raised by the SDA. Why doesn't OHR come forward with the lists of all persons appointed to the functions in the judiciary and security systems. Your reply to Sulejman Tihic was made up of ten questions.

ASHDOWN: Look, politicians must not interfere with the work of the judiciary and police. This is a completely counterproductive campaign. I cannot and will not depart from my position. If I did that, Europe would realize that politicians in BiH exert influence on the judiciary and this would distance us from Europe. Secondly, what Mr Tihic is saying is based on untrue facts. For example, 49 percent of prosecutors are Bosniaks, which tells us that Bosniaks are equally represented, and figures tell us so, not me. There are 49 percent Bosniaks in the police too. Something else is forgotten here. The Council hasn't finished its work, it hasn't even been through half its work. But if there is a campaign then laws get undermined. I think we need to do the following: we need to leave space for the Council

to finish its work. When the Council has finished its part of the work, I am certain that ethnic balance will be respected and that no one will be disadvantaged. If the Council doesn't do its work properly, then an intervention will be needed. Only then will I join those who are dissatisfied.

Ljiljan: Towards the end of the last year the most current problems were about “Aluminij” and “Elektroprivreda BiH”. When this became a burning political problem, you cut the knot with a sudden decision.

ASHDOWN: I had to act in order to avoid having further problems. This is a scandalous failure of Mostar-Herzegovina politicians. They had to act, not me. If that had continued there would be a collapse of the network and we would have destroyed a company which is the largest exporter in BiH. Surely, I had no alternative here.

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