

Interview: Paddy Ashdown, the High Representative for BiH

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Prologue: The European Stability Institute (ESI) Report on the work of the Office of the High Representative is intellectually and factually unsustainable, says the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown. What is said in the report, says Ashdown, OHR is already implementing in BiH.

BH Radio 1: Mr. Ashdown, can you comment on the allegations made by the ESI in their report according to which we don't have a democracy in BiH, but the rule of international experts?

High Representative: I have a very high regard for ESI and Gerald Knaus in particular. Unfortunately, I must say that the report could have been more specific in its claims about the most important issues in BiH if it was to provide a more precise picture. Likening the International Community to a British "Raj" is not a valid comparison as the International Community have invested 17 billion Euros in BiH. Specifically I regret that the authors of this report failed to come and talk with people from the OHR, neither did they, as far as I know, speak to anyone from BiH. The report is, I'm afraid, inaccurate, and incomplete as we are already doing those things that the report recommends.

There is no problem with asking the OHR about the Mission Implementation Plan; about how there are more and more BiH staff in the OHR and how one day the OHR will work less and everything will be taken over by the local authorities, who are already starting to do this in areas such as the return of refugees. The ESI's Report could have been more complete as we are already doing what the recommendations call for.

That brings us to a very important issue and I'm very happy about that; the reduction of the OHR's role and an increasing takeover by the local authorities. We have done a great job in this regard; on economic reforms, the customs system at the state level and other very necessary reforms. What doesn't make me very happy is that an organisation that I respect has written a report without contacting us - which would have made the report more complete. The main issue is: Is it time for the accelerated transfer of tasks to the BiH authorities? The answer is: Yes!

BH Radio 1: The report also states that you rule BiH like an Indian Maharaja. Do you really feel that way?

High Representative: No. That's why I said that this comparison is preposterous. Let me explain something; the British Raj appointed itself and determined its own official powers. First of all, we are committed to the people of BiH. Once they ask us to leave then we will do so. We are a part of the peace process that the international community committed itself to. Secondly, the Raj was extracting India's natural wealth and using it to Britain's benefit in the 19th century. As I said, we have invested a lot in BiH. Thirdly, the British Raj tried to remain in India for as long as possible. We have published the OHR's Mission Implementation Plan, which outlines what should be done before we leave to the BiH authorities. That is the underlying fact of the matter and should make more headlines. It is sad that a respectable organisation gets involved in something intended just to grab newspaper headlines, but that is intellectually and factually unsustainable.

BH Radio 1: Yes, but many media outlets in BiH have taken the ESI's points as well made and agree with the points the ESI makes...

High Representative: Well, with regard the fact that many people agree with the Report's recommendations, I'll simply say that we are already putting those changes into place. Had they asked us what we were doing when drafting the report, they would not have missed the fact that we are doing this already.

In fact, I agree that the day when the international community's role is going to be smaller is coming. The use of the interventionist powers assigned by the Dayton Peace Agreement will be reduced tremendously. It is not hard to agree with the report because it proposes steps that we already have taken. For example, the report does not mention the Mission Implementation Plan which sets out the tasks to be completed before the International

Community leaves. The report also states that the Decisions we make are not challengeable. The fact is they are challengeable; they can be revised by the BiH Constitutional Court and by the European Court of Human Rights. The report states that I use my powers more than previous High Representatives. That's not true; I am using them even less, and then only when they must be used. Had we failed to undertake action, would BiH have a state controlled customs system now? No, it would not. But it is important to complete the process through local institutions, not through OHR. An example is BiH's closer association with the Partnership for Peace; and this makes military reforms necessary.

For the sake of all the things we do, if everybody agrees with the report – than I will too, but I think that report is incomplete.

BH Radio 1: Would you explain once again the role of the International Community and the OHR in BiH?

High Representative: The function of the OHR in BiH is to do its job as quickly as is possible. My job is what needs to be done as part of the Dayton Peace Agreement. That means to find something in common with the parties in BiH that are working on creation of peace in BiH. Once BiH is constituted as a self-sustainable state my job will be done and we will leave. I am committed to doing that as soon as it is possible. My job is to create state of BiH that, as I said when I arrived, is a self-sustainable country on the way to Europe; to leave BiH to be ruled by local people.

BH Radio 1: The conclusion of the inter-parliamentary debate held between the European and BiH Parliaments, determined last week that this is the right time for the reduction of OHR's role. Do you agree with that position?

High Representative: Yes, I do. That's exactly what I said. I welcome the report of the inter-parliamentary group since we have done much already. The plan for reducing the OHR's role and everything we are doing here was established when I arrived in BiH. What I did first was to present the Mission Implementation Plan. This plan contains the details that must be put in place and the issues that must be resolved before we leave. The result of all that should be the reduction of the OHR's role. That is why I welcome the ESI's report. It contains several important things such as; the establishment of a State-level customs system – something we are doing right now; we must complete military reform in BiH, which has also been started and is in the inter-parliamentary group's conclusion; they call for the establishment of a state security and I agree with that. What remains is the reduction of the role of the OHR and I am determined to do that.

BH Radio 1: Partner relations between the International Community and local authorities is important too. How are those relations today?

If you take a look you can see what kind of partnership that is. To find solutions we have create Commissions like those for the reform of the customs system and the introduction of VAT. It is these Commission that create that legal framework, and the Commissions consist of BiH politicians. We are lead BiH towards Partnership for Peace – the members of that commission are also domestic politicians. Who is building the state institutions? Is it international community? No, it is your domestic politicians. That's partnership. OHR provides a structure, which then allows BiH politicians to create BiH institutions. That's what that partnership means; institutional commissions are given new life.

BH Radio 1: It is a fact that you have the power to remove anyone with no need for further explanation and that is a fact that is often criticised.

High Representative: As far as I can recall the ESI's report says that I use my powers without oversight; that's not true. I am responsible to the 15 nations that make up the Steering Board of the Peace Implementation Council, who are helping BiH. I am responsible to the International Community through the UN Security Council and just to be clear, now that BiH is a member of the Council of Europe, I am automatically accountable before the European Court of Human Rights.

If for example you are trying to disable the structures that support war criminals, then you must take action. Believe me, the criticisms that are coming from the International Community are that we have not been determined enough with regards war criminals. Therefore, I must take determined steps such as freezing bank accounts.

What is more, I am responsible to BiH citizens – but I don't think that there is a large number of them who think that we should be working less. In fact people keep repeating that I should be doing more. Sometimes I think people should decide what they want me to do. If they really want me not to the Dayton Peace Agreement powers, than that should be a matter of agreement. Such criticisms do not exist in BiH – more often I hear; “you have not done enough, you should do more to arrest Karadzic”.

BH Radio 1: Even though BiH as a state hasn't got enough money for education and health the deputies in the BiH and FBiH Parliaments decided to increase their salaries...

High Representative: You must decide whether I, as High Representative, do too much or not enough. It is logical to say: Yes, this report says you are doing too much – why do more then? Automatically, in this case a decision on the deputies' salaries is parliament's job and not the High Representative's. If I were to be determining salaries then I would be behaving like a Maharaja, but I am not going to do that. The BiH authorities and members of the Parliaments must take responsibility for that decision. That is not a job for the High Representative, and were I to get involved, then I would be guilty for acting like a Maharaja.

BH Radio 1: One last question. Are we in BiH ready to take our destiny into our own hands without the assistance of the International Community?

High Representative: Not yet, and it would be surprising if you were. The International Community is aware that many important things have been done in BiH in last 6 years. I can't name one country that has passed from war to peace so quickly. Even my home country, Ireland, hasn't been able to do that. It would be a miracle if a country destroyed by the war manages to develop into self-sustainable country so quickly. My message for the citizens of BiH is: the worst is behind you. You have travelled a fantastic distance. Now, we have the same problems as Hungary or Poland had – problems we know how to solve. That is why I don't think BiH is ready yet, but it will be soon.

It would be sad if I, at the end of my mandate, were unable to see clearly that BiH is ready to take its destiny into its own hands and the International Community in its current form were still needed: I would have to ask my self what have we missed? I don't want to set this into a specific time frame but I am convinced that the day when the international community is able to quit its interventionist approach is not far away.

When we arrived, BiH was severely wounded and an infusion was the only way that it could survive. That type of engagement is no longer the case but we still have to help BiH on its way to Europe. That is why I think the ESI's report is incomplete. Had they come to speak to us about the important issues, or on speed of the implementation of things we do it could have been different. I am sorry that an organisation like that, with an international reputation, is doing it's job that way. Questions like International Community's engagement in BiH and where is BiH right now are relevant and are addressed by my office everyday.