

Interview: Paddy Ashdown, High Representative for BiH: “None, not even the international community, is infallible”

Katolicki tjednik: You arrived to BiH at a time of high tensions between BiH Croat political representatives and the international community, more precisely, High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch. Croats here expected further confrontation with your arrival, but, fortunately, this has not happened. Do you think that the international community made wrong moves towards BiH Croats?

Paddy Ashdown We have to be honest and clear and say that that no one, and even the international community, is infallible. What I can say with certainty is that no mistake, in any segment, was made deliberately. The tensions you mention were caused by those who should have taken care of the interests of BiH citizens, and Croats as well, rather than embarked on an unconstitutional road instead, because of narrow party interests and even private and criminal reasons, trying to protect what they have gained over the backs of those who they claim to represent.

Katolicki tjednik: How do you comment the role of the Catholic Church?

Paddy Ashdown It has a very important role to play in rebuilding communities and understanding between different communities, just like the activities of all other religious communities. This is what I said the other day when I met with Cardinal Vinko Puljic.

Katolicki tjednik: Many media and politicians in the world think that the BiH project under the protectorate of the international community has not given the desired results. BiH is one of the poorest and most corrupted countries in Europe. Return looks good only on paper. Despite the cosmetic constitutional changes in the RS, it remains an exclusive entity of the Serb people, walls and barriers between the three peoples are enormous in reality... One has an impression that the country is held “together” only by force and there is no wish for a common state?

Paddy Ashdown Remember Europe after World War II, enormous unemployment, black market, corruption and poverty. Look at Northern Ireland 30 years later – almost no Catholic has returned, and you here have over a million people who have returned to their property. What BiH does not have, and it is obvious from your question, is the orientation towards the future, there is little optimism, while all potentials, particularly the human potentials which are the most important, exist. We can and wish to help and that is what we are doing, but it is you, BiH citizens, who have to be the decisive force of the engine, driving towards European integration, which is the ultimate future for BiH.

Katolicki tjednik: Serbia has been sending messages for years now - and it is something that Prime Minister Zivkovic also did after Kostunica and Djindjic - that possible secession of Kosovo from Serbia and Montenegro will lead to further changes of borders in this region, i.e. joining Serbia?

Paddy Ashdown I want to echo what Prime Minister Terzic said. By giving such statements, if they have been reported accurately, Serbian officials do more damage to themselves than they do to BiH. If Serbia ever tried to claim the RS it would fail and Serbia's path to Europe would be blocked. As Javier Solana has said, the days when BiH's borders were decided in Belgrade or anywhere else are over. However, I stress that one should always be cautious with media reports: my own experience with Mr Zivkovic is that he is a modern and pro-European leader who respects the territorial integrity and sovereignty of BiH.

Katolicki tjednik: Croats are the smallest people in BiH. The majority of Croat intelligentsia and people think that the latest changes of the BiH and Entity constitutions and the Election Law seriously eroded their constituent status. Can we say that they are the least satisfied ethnic group in BiH and do they have a reason to feel so?

Paddy Ashdown Absolutely not! No one serious could have illusions that the process of constitutional changes would satisfy everyone. It is a process and not an event. Anyone who thinks that their rights guaranteed by the Constitution, whether individual or collective, are violated can take legal action. The question of the implementation of the constitutional changes and their further treatment is a matter for the elected representatives of each people and all citizens in BiH. It is up to them to fight for these interests and the overall

progress with all might. It is the people who elect politicians to lead them on their behalf and hold them responsible for the results achieved, in the field of the constitutional status and any other field. The Croats may be the least numerous constituent people in BiH, but they have the ability to be the economic powerhouse of BiH.

Katolicki tjednik: Do you think that time has come for serious consideration of changing the Dayton Agreement? How do you see the future of BiH and its three peoples? Do you think fundamental changes in the state setup are necessary?

Paddy Ashdown I have said several times already that I do not look at Dayton as the ceiling but as the foundation on which we can build. What is necessary for this is a consistent implementation of the agreement itself and political will for its building. A lot of energy is spent in discussions about further refinement and changes of Dayton. Yet for the people of BiH, it would be more useful if this tremendous intellectual and every other kind of energy was directed into reform and economic recovery of BiH. Imagine if we all dedicated ourselves to reforms of the judiciary, economy, institutions of the state. Imagine what we could achieve. This is what troubles the common citizen in BiH and therefore, I think all energy should be invested into improvements on this front. Dayton will one day change; but it will be up to the people of BiH not the international community.

Katolicki tjednik: Do you also sometimes feel defeated knowing that over 60% of young people wish to leave BiH, listening to the announcements of economists that BiH cannot expect any steps forward in terms of raising the standard of living in the future years, that this country has enormous bureaucracy, corruption, human trafficking and drugs...?

Paddy Ashdown Bosnia and Herzegovina's biggest export today is its youth – its future. This hemorrhage of the young and the talented poses perhaps the greatest long-term threat to this country. We will not succeed, unless we succeed in stemming or reversing this. That means two things. First, providing our young with education and training, inside Bosnia, that equips them for success. Second, creating the environment in which education, talent and hard work can translate into jobs and prosperity. Having said this I can add that dedication and success of reform processes will have a huge impact on the youth population and therefore a long-term future of BiH.

Katolicki tjednik: Could you tell us what your relations are like with the strongest Croat political party HDZ and which collocutors in the BiH public life you appreciate the most?

Paddy Ashdown Our relations are completely fair and I have nothing special to say about that. As for individuals, I have been saying from the beginning that we are not so much interested in individuals and parties but in specific programs and ideas which will bring a better life to BiH citizens.

Katolicki tjednik: If you made an assessment of the current authorities in several words, what would you emphasize?

Paddy Ashdown The answer is that the new authorities have only recently been formed. The process of coalition-building took some time, but also the process of reviewing candidates. A lot of time was spent on the establishment of the new civil service, that is to say, on trying to maintain earlier ways of doing things. And on the other hand, we have achieved real moves forward in the work of the Council of Ministers in the economic field. You already know that proposals by businesspeople from BiH have been adopted by the Council of Ministers and in both Entities. Each of these reforms was a reform for which business people from this country said: if this reform is adopted, it will be easier to do business, to export from BiH. What would be the best is if the local partners make much more serious commitment to the reforms and double up the effort and pace since one thing BiH does not have is time.

Katolicki tjednik: Do you believe in “educational dictatorship” and governing a country without any responsibility for the results achieved?

Paddy Ashdown No! I have been saying since the beginning that I will consider it my biggest success if by the time I leave we can at least see when the HR's mandate will end. For this to happen, there must be more participation of domestic political forces in the whole reform process. It is the people of BiH who should hold their elected politicians responsible for what they promise in election campaigns in contrast to what they fulfil during their mandates. I am here only to help but the main engine must be your people if we all want success for BiH and its inhabitants.

Katolicki tjednik: Do you carry out opinion polls on what BiH citizens think about the actions of the international community, how they see the work of OHR?

Paddy Ashdown Of course but we do not comment on them.

Katolicki tjednik: What can the High Representative say are real and encouraging hopes for better life of the citizens of this country and is it realistic to expect that BiH should move forwards with a big and sincere compromise and agreement between all the three peoples, maybe with less assistance from the International Community?

Paddy Ashdown I am an optimist. BiH must, as well as all the countries of Central Europe, become a member of the European Union and NATO. If we look at the map of the European Union, it can be seen that the European Union is increasingly being expanded within the Balkans. It is only a matter of months before Hungary and Slovenia join the European Union. The real answer to the problems of BiH is the European Union framework, for the national issues of BiH will be diluted within that context, BiH will be an EU member state together with Croatia, and ministers from Zagreb and ministers from Sarajevo will be working together in Brussels. BiH will be a member state of the EU, but so will Serbia. And Sarajevo and Zagreb will find out in Brussels that they have common interests. They will have common views on economic issues, for the economies of this region have similarities between themselves and it is unthinkable in that context for inter-ethnic violence to occur, the kind we saw in this region ten years ago. They say that every 30-40 years ethnic conflicts occur in the Balkans. However, what is important is that all the countries of the Balkan region, in 20 or 30 years, will be within the EU and NATO. Therefore, I am confident that history in this region will not be repeated.