

Interview: Paddy Ashdown, IC High Representative for BiH: “Bosnia Has No Time, You Must Speed Up Reforms”

The future of this country can only be saved by local forces, and not the International Community • Politicians must tell the truth to the people • BiH is not as resolute in fighting crime as Serbia • The circle around Karadžić is closing • If Đerić wants my support, he has to start sending criminals to prison

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Paddy Ashdown, High Representative of the International Community, says that the economic crisis can be avoided, but it is now necessary to carry out urgent economic reforms and rely on ourselves and not the International Community.

“At the moment, people live in dreams. Those steps will be difficult, but the future is now completely in your hands. All those who look at the horizon expecting the International Community to come riding in like the cavalry and save the future of this country, have to know that that will not happen. The future is in our hands,” Ashdown said in an interview before the Labour Day holidays.

Oslobodjenje: Mr. Ashdown, you have been in BiH for nearly a year. What do you see as your biggest success, and what as failure?

Paddy Ashdown: I believe that others should judge what my successes and my failures are. Those priorities which my team and I identified when I came, namely jobs and justice, were a good assessment. That was also confirmed at the Bjelasnica meeting, when it was concluded that that is indeed the key agenda for the future. So that last year the main thing was not to allow other things to distract us. Priorities have to remain focused on one thing, and that is the economy.

Maybe we in the International Community have been crying wolf about the situation in the economy too often, so that now it is hard for me to convey to people how significant that problem is. Because, that is not a problem related to this year only, maybe not even the next year, but it is certainly a problem which will be demonstrated in two years' time.

Labour Day is a good opportunity for people to think about jobs and employment, which should always be in mind. I believe that here we have a major economic problem. And we have to be very straightforward and frank. It is time for the politicians and leaders to start telling the truth about it. I don't think this country will fall back into ethnic conflict — that would be very stupid; that does not pose a threat. But, I cannot predict what will happen if it comes to an economic crisis. That crisis can be avoided. But it can only be avoided if we are ready to tell the truth. And the truth is that the International Community will not stay here forever, that the future is now in our hands. Those who expect mercy will not get it. In the last seven years billions of dollars was invested in BiH and I will not discuss whether it was invested well or not. But it is a fact that after BiH we have Kosovo, after that East Timor, and then Afghanistan, and now Iraq. Nobody will stay here forever and that is why BiH is now left to itself. That will be really difficult: one third of the population lives below the poverty line, and another 20 percent live on that very line. I know how difficult that can be. But, if we do not take the difficult steps towards economic reform, I believe that in two years' time it will be much worse.

We have to decide whether we will do it now — otherwise we will not succeed, and then the problems will be much bigger. I really want to send out a message to politicians to stop lying to people, to stop pretending that someone will come from the outside and rescue us from all this. That is something we have to do on our own. Do not pretend that it can be done without problems, because it can't. That has to be done now and it has to be done fast. If we fail to do it, I cannot even start to imagine what will happen to this country.

It is a fact that the opposition will use the opportunity to send out a message that jobs must not be lost, and that should be kept in mind. And I do not criticise any of the opposition parties, because I was in opposition for 17 years myself.

Weary Reformers

Oslobodjenje: You have been warning about the difficult economic situation for months, but apparently nothing has happened. Do you have the right partners in the local authorities?

Paddy Ashdown: I do not believe in making conclusions on whether someone is the right partner or not. I judge people only by what they do. For example, the Bulldozer effort has been a great success, it has changed the climate in the business environment of this country. If you talk to the IMF, they will say that this government is much more successful than that of any other country in the sense of macro-economy. On the other hand, I have to say that I am worried and disappointed to see that those who advocated reforms during the elections now find it hard to accept reforms, for example when it comes to appointment of civil servants. It seems that those who spoke about European standards now prefer to stick to the old ways and give jobs to their followers. There can be no compromises here. I am more interested in what comes next, and what comes next is to speed up the pace.

Oslobodjenje: You have been putting a lot of effort into building up state institutions. However, people on the ground do not feel any improvement.

Paddy Ashdown: That takes time. I am a very impatient man. BiH needs more impatient politicians. Because, criminals cannot be captured overnight. First you have to have the State Court, and, for example, the Bulldozer Committee has only just started. My message is very simple: you have no time, you have to move faster. If you fail to carry out economic reform now, you will pay a very high price. It is clear to me why the opposition parties want to have new elections tomorrow. All opposition parties want that. But I believe it is important to start working. I can see some very good signs and some that are quite bad. The disappointing ones are, for example, why do we need so long to reform the civil service. How come that in Republika Srpska they have gone ahead, and the Federation lags behind when it comes to the appointment of independent civil servants? On the other hand, how come the Federation has progressed more when it comes to cleaning up the political scene (the Ethics Committee is in place now), and the RS has been stumbling along that road? How can it be possible, for example, that if a policeman from the Croatian side wants to track down a criminal, he still cannot contact the police from the other side of the border. So, there are some good things, and some bad things. It is not all black.

My message is: start acting, and focus on the economy. During President Clinton's pre-election campaign there was a sign on his door, which read: "It's the economy, stupid". That is what I say to your politicians: every day when they come to work, before they have their morning coffee, they should ask themselves what they can do that day in order for things to get better in economy.

Oslobodjenje: What is the first thing that needs to be done within the Jobs and Justice effort?

Paddy Ashdown: I don't want to talk about it now because in two or three days we will announce our priorities, which need to be implemented before the holiday season begins. We stated nine tasks at the Bjelasnica gathering. I believe that we have to establish priorities. Donald Hays will work on that and talk to our colleagues in the BiH authorities. After those talks they will decide which are the three or four main things. Priorities could be: immediately start privatisation of a small number of strategic companies which are ready for it now. If someone were to ask me what would be the first thing on my list, I would say start moving the place of sales-tax collection from the point of sale to the point of import or production. Why? Because that takes away space from criminals and brings you additional revenue immediately, which comes to the new governments. However, I am not the one to decide on that.

Crime at the Heart of Society

Oslobodjenje: How will BiH fight against organised crime?

Paddy Ashdown: A long time was needed to assemble the right weapons and face organised crime in the right way. However, we will now start sending criminals to jail.

Oslobodjenje: How will you force the RS authorities to fight organised crime? You had a very good speech in the National Assembly, but the question is how will your demands be implemented?

Paddy Ashdown: That is very difficult. We have to have in mind that crime is now at the very heart of our society. It is not easy for any society to get rid of it. It is like a disease, it is like SARS. It is very difficult to get rid of a virus

— that takes time. I told them that it is time finally to start locking people up. You now have the State Court, you have new criminal laws. But the question is: how many people have ended up in jails. I have spoken to Mr. Đerić and told him that he has to start that process if he wants my support. But it will not be easy. There are still judges who do not have the courage to take steps against criminals. Every day when I come to my office I ask myself how many criminals there are and how many we have put in prison.

Oslobodjenje: Is there a political decision on arresting criminals?

Paddy Ashdown: Not enough. I don't see it. I believe that there is a sincere wish to clear things up. But, is there an equally deep commitment to take all steps to clear things up? I don't know. Do I see the same resolve here as in Serbia? I see it in some cases. When we had a meeting with the Interior Ministers in the OHR, I saw that resolve, that seriousness. But not the energy. Because no prime minister has been killed here. That is a hard thing to say, but such things always provoke action. But I will not fish for excuses. The fact is that we are not so resolute as Serbia in dealing with crime. The fact is that good laws, good police and some of the best laws don't mean anything unless there is the real political will to do things. I have to say that that is still not evident.

Visa Ban

Oslobodjenje: When will you publish the names of the people who will be barred from getting visas?

Paddy Ashdown: I would like to clarify something: European regulations are very clear and that goes only for those whose criminal activities support war criminals. It cannot be just any criminal. In that regard I would like to issue a warning to some politicians: in case you are at the head of a criminal organisation which provides support to a war criminal, then you can expect such a ban. But also, if you act in a way which does not support the arrest of war criminals, which is a wider definition. I believe that in the next seven to eight days we will consider the next tranche of criminals who will be barred from getting visas. I believe that that will include five, eight, nine people, a maximum of up to 25 people.

Oslobodjenje: Do you expect that to contribute to the fast arrest of Karadžić?

Paddy Ashdown: I believe that all these things together bring results. Earlier we used to stand under a tree and shake it, waiting for the apple to fall, and now we have started from the very root. So, all of these things will add up.

Oslobodjenje: How realistic is to expect the formation of a central intelligence agency, if one knows that even the existing two do not function properly?

Paddy Ashdown: It has to be done. Intelligence services are indeed a mess. Too often they carry a legacy of communism, the idea that an intelligence service should serve parties. I have to say that I am very impressed by the leadership of both Entity intelligence services, which are aware that they have to professionalise their work. Whoever thinks that they can go on without reform of the intelligence services, they should visit the grave of Zoran Đinđić. In the course of next week we will talk to the Prime Ministers and I will propose to them a way in which that should be done, and a framework law. Eventually, they are the ones who will have to decide. We have to have a deadline too. As long as we do not clear up this messy space, there will be an unfair alliance between intelligence services and crime. It is something that has to be done, Ashdown said.

Decision on Special Police Troops Is Up To Annan

Oslobodjenje: Can you do anything to annul the decision on suspension of members of the special police from Sarajevo?

Paddy Ashdown: I cannot, and that is very difficult to explain to people. Whatever my own position on that may be, that does not fall within my tenure, but that of the United Nations and the Secretary General. With that regard, people should turn to the Secretary General, Paddy Ashdown says.

On War Crimes in June

Oslobodjenje: When will the War Crimes Chamber of the BiH Court be established?

Paddy Ashdown: There is mutual agreement between us and the Tribunal about the importance of that Chamber,

about the terms of reference and the funding, including the establishment of a criminal institution, which would amount to 30 to 40 million Euro for the period of the first three years. I have told the International Community that this must be done, but it cannot be done just like that. In June the PIC will decide who will work on the establishment of this local institution, who will pay for its work and how the funds will be raised. Most probably I will go to New York with the President of the ICTY, in order to get the agreement of the Security Council. After that we can start.

Media War

Oslobodjenje: You work on peace building in BiH every day, but you have provoked what can nearly be called a media war. Why do you favour Avaz and why did you say that that newspaper should serve as an example to the others? It was not received well in the local public.

Paddy Ashdown: I don't think we have done so. I was very careful. I know that everybody has the 'personality of the year' and I believe that all my predecessors have been personalities of the year. I was also a personality of the year in British papers which criticised me very much. When I went to Avaz, I told them that they had achieved commercial success. I have to say that I do not support the editorial policy of any newspaper here, just like I do not support any party. I do not get involved in those things, I only do my work. Do I read Oslobodjenje? Of course I do. Do I pay attention to it? Of course I do. Do I pay attention to the writings of Dnevni Avaz, Nezavisne Novine? I follow all this very closely. But, eventually, I have to decide what to do. What interests me is not which newspaper or which political party, but which steps need to be taken.