

Interview Paddy Ashdown, the High Representative for BiH: "People in BiH don't understand that if reforms fail this country's going to die"

We aren't going to be here forever. We aren't gods, we aren't protectors. My job is to create the institutions of the system and then leave. I haven't come here to make myself popular but to do a job, to establish a statehood for this country together with my BiH colleagues so it can join the EU. Existence of nationalism is easy to understand. Six years have passed since one of the most destructible wars in the second half of the 20th century. In Northern Ireland we needed more than thirty years to try to settle the conflicts and we haven't succeeded yet

Paddy Ashdown, High Representative in BiH, enjoyed only a brief period of tranquility after taking office from his successor Wolfgang Petritsch. In the recent weeks, the media in BiH have launched a real offensive, accusing Ashdown of sympathizing with SDA, preventing Karadzic's arrest, while the more serious ones begrudge that, after an election where nationalist parties took victory, he is going to make it possible for the parties that won a small number of votes to become parliamentary parties with the so-called compensatory mandates.

Paddy Ashdown emphasized at the beginning of his mandate that his most important goal was establishing the rule of law and self-sustainable economy, because without these two elements, the project of BiH as a state simply would not succeed. The new High Representative for BiH is described in different ways: on the one hand his efficiency is being emphasized while on the other the media continue their attacks. What the "ordinary folk" observed and attributed to Ashdown's good sides is discipline. Different to his predecessors, Ashdown never goes into an airplane directly from his car on the runway, but waits patiently at the passport control together with other citizens.

We spoke to Paddy Ashdown in his Sarajevo office.

Vjesnik: Mr Ashdown, much criticism has been made at the expense of your office and the International Community because of your dissatisfaction with the fact that the largest number of votes in the elections was given to nationalist parties, and that there are attempts to change the election result with the so-called compensatory mandates. Why?

Paddy Ashdown: Such allegations are sheer nonsense. It's not up to the Office of the High Representative to intervene and interfere with the work of institutions established to do that work in accordance with international standards. So, do we have such an institution in BiH? We do. It's called the Election Commission. Who made such a decision? This Commission did. Further, the Election Law was drafted by BiH authorities. So if you wish to challenge the Election Law you have to speak to the Constitutional Court of BiH. The Office of the High Representative has no role in this, as it did not draft the Law or took part in its implementation. The most important characteristic of these elections is that they were for the first time administered by BiH and it was done excellently. People will say the opposite, of course, but such allegations are nonsense. If people wish to change the electoral threshold of 3% then it has to be done in the institutions I mentioned. They can't come to me for that. Those politicians who say that these issues should be dealt with by the Office of the High Representative live in the past. We've withdrawn from that area. This whole situation looks a little like - we need to blame someone for what we failed to do well. BiH politicians can't really boast of efficiency in resolving problems of this country. The economic situation is difficult, political decisions are hard to make. Don't you think that this political system has only contributed to fragmentation of politics and additional inefficiency with, for instance, 14 parties?

Vjesnik: You have such a situation with fragmented parties in many European countries, but here, we are talking about Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Paddy Ashdown: True. But we won't be here forever. We aren't gods, we aren't protectors. My job is to create the institutions of the system and then go. We created the institutions to administer elections and the left this work to BiH authorities. Otherwise, it would have really been a protectorate.

Vjesnik: Still, American ambassador Bond said that we couldn't expect progress and cooperation with members of nationalist parties. Will you be able to work with nationalist parties?

Paddy Ashdown: Look, those who know a little about BiH and want to make comments from 10,000 miles away, or those who've come to BiH and observe the situation from Sarajevo's perspective seem to ignore the facts of these elections. If they claim we have a come-back of nationalism they must take into account that fact that each nationalist party won fewer votes than in the last elections. But, there are also negative effects when it comes to the needed reforms. In every Eastern European country the first reformist government had a catastrophic defeat in the next election. If you look at what happened in Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, you will see that the countries returned to communists or nationalists. That's the rhythm of politics. But that didn't prevent them from getting closer to Europe. Does this mean I'm going to have a harder job than if I had 99% reformists in power? Of course. But, does this mean that the work is impossible? No! It's about a wrong perception of the situation in this country. Of course, I'm not naïve and I know that politicians say one thing and do another, specially in BiH and in the Balkans. I judge people by what they do, not by what they say. Still, it's indicative that some politicians have realized in the past two years that they have to change their rhetoric.

Vjesnik: Do you then believe that some new process has begun in BiH?

Paddy Ashdown: It's a metabolic process. After the liberation war, let's call it that because all the three sides claim so, we had nationalist groups. That's normal, otherwise how would a war be waged, anyway. But, with time, left center parties began appearing. I think we are at the beginning of this process. Old nationalist groups began to separate slowly into different groups. Someone told me – into reformists, pragmatists and obstructionists. The process will be extremely hard because nationalism is still a strong element in BiH. But anyone who knows the circumstances in BiH can see that the atmosphere is slowly changing towards constructionism.

Vjesnik: It is claimed in BiH, though, that nationalism is coverage for failures in economy or coverage for corruption.

Paddy Ashdown: No, it's easy to understand the existence of nationalism. It's only been six years after one of the most destructive wars in the second half of the 20th century. We needed more than 30 years in Northern Ireland to try to settle the conflicts and still haven't succeeded. Many Croats, Serbs and Bosniaks in BiH are linked with nationalist parties, not because they are nationalists at heart but because they are still afraid. I can't say, knowing what happened, that I blame them. The most important thing is that this fear disappears. What's important is processes, not events like a big meeting in some marble hall in Europe or some new Dayton. People are safe and are not afraid when they have a job, economic security, trust in the rule of law. People trust politicians when they are clean and know they can trust them. That's what we're trying to do in BiH. That's why I'm saying that processes are important and not events.

Vjesnik: You have personally been exposed to some strong attacks recently by the media in BiH concerning issues such as the one that you protect Karadzic. It's interesting that these attacks didn't come from those who allegedly regard you as a suspicious character from the international community. How do you respond to these attacks?

Paddy Ashdown: Mr Alibabic's attacks are so incredible that I don't want to mention them at all, because they don't deserve comments and I don't want to give them any importance. The accusations he made are sheer nonsense. On the one hand, he accuses me of supporting SDA, on the other of protecting Karadzic. I leave it to people to draw their own conclusions. But, you see, I'm not here to make myself popular. I've come here to do a job, which is to establish a statehood of this country together with my BiH colleagues so it can join Europe. Doing this, I will be a threat to all those who wish for things to remain as they are. Of course I will be attacked from time to time. I'm a politician and I understand political attacks. I was attacked in the past by much better people than now. I want to do my job, and that's not responding to attacks but creating a programme for opening new jobs to people. I'm a practical politician and I'd like to know what I can do in order to improve people's lives. I love these people and this country. After all, I've decided to buy a house here and invest my own money. If I can make people's lives better we will dismantle the nationalisms and create the structures this country needs. If you make popular decisions here, don't make them at all.

Vjesnik: Let's go back to Karadzic. Carla del Ponte is very keen on having Karadzic arrested and brought to justice. How about you?

Paddy Ashdown: We have the same wishes.

Vjesnik: Still, people don't understand. Such operations are extremely effective in Hollywood films.

With all the satellite surveillance technology, spies and special forces on the ground, arrests are made quickly and efficiently. Why can't this be done in BiH?

Paddy Ashdown: You're right, it's hard to understand for ordinary people, but not for someone with military experience. Let me tell you something. When I was in Northern Ireland, a bomb exploded killing 80 innocent people. Do you think we found the bomber? You can control every leaf of grass or a piece of a road, listen to telephones, have people under surveillance, but such operations are extremely complex. They are even harder in areas such as BiH, where Tito fought six German divisions with 15,000 men. Such operations are very hard even with the satellites you mentioned. Besides, you are hunting a man who lives among the population that provides him logistical support. I'm certain NATO is fully committed to this task. What I'm not sure of, though, is that the RS authorities are doing everything in their power to meet this obligation. Actually, I'm quite certain they aren't. If you want to catch Karadzic, you must first remove the support he enjoys and then you can find him. I said clearly to the RS authorities that the patience of the world is running out. I told them that the support and funding mechanisms for Karadzic must stop. I think such support to Karadzic is given even by the very RS authorities. If such support doesn't stop, the RS will pay a much higher price, much higher than it pays now.

Vjesnik: The RS is in the middle of a scandal about arms sales to Iraq. Do you have in mind this price?

Paddy Ashdown: This question isn't about the RS or BiH. It isn't about a new sin but old sin, which is part of the old JNA generals' network. Some of that network is in Belgrade and I assume it's also in the Federation and in Montenegro. What the RS authorities need to do is clean the remnants of this network. Is it going to appear in Croatia, too? I don't really know. This is primarily about a military network. So, I'll say three things: we have to have a full investigation, it has to be public and the International Community must be involved in it. This investigation must be divided into two parts, to establish responsibility, the one at the political level, too. Those responsible must take the consequences.

Vjesnik: Are you going to intervene as the High Representative?

Paddy Ashdown: I am if I have to. I will leave them space to act alone. If they fail to do that, then I'm going to intervene surely. We must establish mechanisms for arms control at the state level and remove it from the entity level. And besides, we must establish civilian control over the armed forces and this process must be accelerated just like the process of creating single armed forces. NATO has its criteria and standards, and everyone in BiH who thinks that we can do without it deceives himself and his people. It's important that people in BiH, particularly in the RS, understand that there is a choice. They can be as they are now and fail to join NATO, but they can't pretend that they can join NATO without implementing reforms.

Vjesnik: Are you concerned over the statements of the Yugoslav president that the Republika Srpska will be joined to the mother country?

Paddy Ashdown: Of course. Politicians are accustomed to making irresponsible statements at an election period. I've done that myself and said things that didn't make sense in reality, but sentiments and irresponsible statements of this kind can be quite explosive in a country like this. Of course I am concerned. I think that I was right, though, when I said in the beginning that we shouldn't trust media reports. Kostunica may have said more than he should, and maybe we should rely more on what he said together with president Mesic. Kostunica said he had been misinterpreted and the statement had been taken out of context. Of course, that's a technique politicians use often when they want to get out of an unpleasant situation. And of course we were nervous at that time. But Kostunica told us later in confidence that his position and the position of his government was the one expressed together with president Mesic, not the one from Zvornik.

Vjesnik: How do you judge the behaviour of Croatian authorities towards BiH?

Paddy Ashdown: I am extremely encouraged by the attitude of Croatia to BiH, of Prime Minister Racan and President Mesic, who I admire much, as well as my friend Tonino Picula. Let me draw an analogy for you. Forgive me that I return again to Northern Ireland. One of the greater turning points in Great Britain on its road to peace, which we haven't achieved still, occurred when we realized that the Irish government, on the other side of the border, had a legitimate role of being a spokesperson and is a good, not bad godfather to the Catholic population in Belfast. The Irish Government there of course doesn't have territorial rights, but does have a role. I was extremely happy when the Croatian government wisely decided to stay out of BiH. I stressed that when I saw Prime Minister Racan, President Mesic and Minister Picula. Croatia should play a positive role of a good godfather

instead of fully retreating. And that's what happened. This approach is very useful and very helpful for us. I hope this policy will be continued if there is a change of power in Croatia after an election. That's what the European states should do; have good neighbourly relations and I think this is a constructive role of Croatia. Besides, following the positive example of Croatia on its road to Europe and help in it is very useful to us, too.

Vjesnik: Still, you didn't say where BiH really is in this process that you keep mentioning?

Paddy Ashdown: BiH is currently in the process of leaving the post-conflict situation and entering a normal transition. While I have the office of the High Representative, BiH will move into that process and depart from what Kosovo is and come near what Croatia is now. Those who have been on that road, Slovenia and Hungary, have important roles to help us on the way. What I have in mind now are not security issues, but issues of establishing a rule of law. These are classical problems of transition.

Vjesnik: Do parties that won the election have the strength to implement reform? People believe they don't.

Paddy Ashdown: That's possible, of course. But what worries me now most is the following. BiH is faced with a short-term, medium-term and long-term threat. The short-term threat is establishing the rule of law. The long-term threat is continued emigration of young people from the country, for instance Croats from BiH to Croatia, young Bosniaks go to Washington, and the same goes for Serbs. No country can afford that. The medium-term threat is the economic, let's call it stagnation, to avoid the term collapse. International assistance is diminishing. What will fill the gap even under the condition that expenditures stop growing, which is not the case in BiH? International investment. But, it's not coming and unemployment is high. If this can't be changed you have social unrest and return to conflict. Something must be done. That's why I intend to establish a special commission and I am determined to create mechanisms to remove thousands and thousands of bizarre barriers preventing people to start their own businesses. People in this country live in a tremendous bureaucratic procedure passed on from Communism, which prevents small business from making profit. When this doesn't go people turn to gray economy. They are not criminals, they just wish to live a decent life. This country doesn't have other resources except the talent of its own people. If this isn't used, there will be no economic regeneration. That's why I'm setting up a commission consisting of international experts tasked to remove laws that prevent operation of business. If we manage to make this country more attractive to foreign investment and opening new business in the next six months or a year, then we can say we've achieved something. Who can do this? HDZ and their idea of reforms. HDZ may obstruct in other issues, but in economy they can do a lot. People don't understand that if reforms don't succeed this country is going to die.

On the "serviette map"

Paddy Ashdown: What I wrote in my diary about President Tudjman and the serviette is absolutely true. I met President Tudjman at the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Europe. We began talking. We'd never met before. We drank some wine and started an interesting conversation. He drew a map. I kept the drawing and passed on our conversation to the British Foreign Minister. It was a talk with a president of another state. I would have done this in any other case, with any other president. After the "Knin Operation" I thought I was right in showing this map to the public. I wanted to make sure that this plan, and I was certain that what Tudjman had drawn was the agreement he and Milosevic had made at Karadjordjevo, doesn't get realized. I still keep what Tudjman drew. I heard that President Tudjman's son has written a book about me and the serviette. This region is quite known by conspiracy theories, but what's in there is too much even for this region.