

Interview: Paddy Ashdown, High Representative for BiH”BiH cannot wait too long for government formation”

RS is not at risk and does not face extinction – BiH is now at a stage of passing from a post-conflict country to a country in transition – Chris Patten’s letter is the most important document to have been sent by a foreign statesman to BiH authorities since the war – Bulgarian connection in the Orao affair

– I have seen comments in some media that a campaign to destroy the Republika Srpska is under way. This is wrong. I will say what I have already said before – not everyone must like Dayton but the reality of its existence must be respected. All I am trying to do within the domain of the Constitution is to create effective government. Therefore, there is no talk at all of the RS being at risk or facing disappearance. It was established by Dayton and it must be respected. The question now is what we can do within the Dayton structures to make the existing institutions as effective as possible. So, this is not about attempts to undermine the entities, but better functioning of the system, Paddy Ashdown, High Representative in BiH, told “Dnevni Avaz” at the beginning of the interview.

We talked to him late yesterday after he had returned from Brussels, bringing with him a very important message from the European Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, Chris Patten.

Messages from the Trip

Dnevni Avaz: You have just returned from Brussels and before that you visited the United States. What are the messages you bring from there?

Paddy Ashdown: These visits were opportunities to meet with international officials and discuss the situation in BiH, and the priorities we have for the future. Also, I explained the implications of the October 5 elections. My main message was that BiH was not returning ten years in the past, although there are some strong voices saying that. However, what happened in BiH happens in every other country in transition. So, my message was that it would be much easier for us if the reform forces had won 99 percent of the vote. I would maybe pack up and go home, leaving the work to local authorities. But this is not the case. And also, nothing happened that could slow down the reforms or stop them.

BiH is now at a stage of passing from a post-conflict period to a period of transition. The international community with the colleagues from the BiH authorities, whoever they are, will move this country from a post-conflict to a transition society. The way Poland and Hungary did it, for instance.

We have now a new chapter before us where we will deal less with security issues and much more with economic reform, establishment of a clean political space, effective government structures... That is why I asked for and received full support of the international community. They told me they would continue giving BiH their support for building the future its citizens want. But they told me, the BiH authorities must implement reforms. We will help to the extent in which the reforms are implemented.

Dnevni Avaz: We have already recognized this message in the letter you brought with you from Chris Patten.

Paddy Ashdown: I think this letter is the most important document that a foreign statesman has sent to BiH since the war. Similarly, two important things have happened recently. One good and one bad. We have had the Orao scandal. This is the biggest individual threat to BiH’s international credibility and this letter is a strong message that reforms must be the limiting factor for criminal action and this request is now included as one of the Stabilization and Association process. The letter states that if this process is not begun and clear results not achieved, the stabilization and association will not go ahead. So, a precondition for starting the procedure of European integration is that BiH becomes an effective partner to the international community and that it is capable of collecting its revenues well and that its space is sealed off to criminals.

Three reforms

Dnevni Avaz: Which reforms are necessary?

Paddy Ashdown: I think it's those three key ones: the Council of Ministers which is capable of doing what every government in the world does, and putting an end to the rotation of the chairing position; introduction of VAT at the state level, which is one of the key preconditions for joining Europe. We are not trying to undermine the RS with this, but fulfil one of the key preconditions for joining the EU. The third basis is reform of customs. Orao, too, showed they are necessary and what's worrying for me is that no Bosnian politician made any proposal on this. Commissioner Patten told me clearly that the EU wouldn't wait too long for BiH politicians to state their views on this issue. We've left them six to eight weeks to take a position, but in the meantime, our people have been working and it's time they said something.

Dnevni Avaz: How long are you prepared to wait for them to take a position?

Paddy Ashdown: I think it's a part of the coalition building process for future governments. Once they are formed, their programmes will have to offer answers to these questions.

Dnevni Avaz: They seem to be deaf to what you are telling them.

Paddy Ashdown: Of course coalitions are built on the basis of personalities and mathematics. But that won't be enough. Because a coalition government must have a programme and that's what coalition governments must be built on. They must offer answers as to what the government will do.

Dnevni Avaz: How long is the International Community prepared to wait for the forming of BiH governments?

Paddy Ashdown: Don't forget that BiH has no time to wait and lose. This country has been given six months within which it must liberalize its economy and attract foreign investors. After this it will face a debt crisis. It must be done, otherwise it will be impossible to fill the gap that will appear because of the falling foreign donations and investment and ever larger amounts that have to be paid to service debt. It's possible that governments aren't formed before March. Can BiH afford this luxury? Can BiH wait for another 4 to 5 months with essential reforms which will create new jobs and attract foreign investors to this country? Of course we have to be patient in the coalition building process, but must never forget that time is not on BiH's side.

Dnevni Avaz: If they fail in this, are you going to react, impose decisions, remove people?

Paddy Ashdown: Let's wait and see what happens. You can't ask the goalkeeper how he intends to keep his goal when the ball isn't in the stadium yet. We all know very well what needs to be done. I'm encouraged by the fact that everyone speaks in favour of reform and change. At the same time, we have said now more clearly than ever what needs to be done. Now we believe that people should deliver on what they promised. I will say one thing clearly - BiH can't wait and can't hesitate, and least of all can't afford not to implement what was promised. If this doesn't happen we won't leave, but the nature of our relations will change, because why would British taxpayers give large amounts of money for a new mission here if you aren't capable of implementing reform. You don't have much time and changes must be implemented.

Dnevni Avaz: Have you set a final deadline for formation of governments?

Paddy Ashdown: No, we must wait for this to happen naturally. No High Representative before me gave such deadlines, and I won't either.

Orao damage

Dnevni Avaz: You mentioned the Orao scandal yourself. What do you know about that?

Paddy Ashdown: My information is fragmented. I can tell you my assumptions and they are that this goes very far. I don't think this is about some new crime. I think it's about the old network and old links between generals

from the period before the break-up of Yugoslavia. I suspect that this network reaches very far, maybe to Bulgaria and Montenegro, and that it goes beyond ethnic and political borders. We still can't say who is and who isn't guilty for this and that's why we have to wait for the whole investigation. I think, while I'm here, two things will mark my work: the complete picture of the whole event – and I believe that we'll have the first fragments in about a month, after some aspects of the investigation have been carried out; and second, I will try to let people decide themselves what to do before I act. So, let's be patient.

Dnevni Avaz: You mentioned Bulgaria. Can you be more specific?

Paddy Ashdown: No, I can't. I don't know all the details, and even if I did, I wouldn't tell you. But, I will tell you something else: I wouldn't be surprised that the money earned on this was used to fund the structures for protection of war criminals.

Dnevni Avaz: What's your assessment of the measures that the RS authorities took so far with regard to Orao?

Paddy Ashdown: I am deeply, deeply disappointed with the behaviour of the politicians there. If they had instantly taken the situation seriously, we wouldn't be in these problems now. They tried to sweep it all under the carpet. They are acting now, but I think their actions are a result of fear. But, if someone thinks that this will end up with the removals we've seen, I would be cautious there. I don't think it can satisfy people. And I don't think the International Community will be satisfied with it. If BiH gets before the sanctions committee it will have a negative effect on every citizen in the country.

Big constitutional changes

Dnevni Avaz: Is Orao the reason for big constitutional changes?

Paddy Ashdown: I think it would be inappropriate to use this affair for something like this. What we have here is that some people put the BiH's reputation at risk with their criminal actions. I think it would be very wrong to turn this now into a wide campaign of change. There are constitutional matters arising from this problem, such as a necessity of state control over exports, civilian control over military services, appropriate customs services. If we'd had appropriate customs services they would have prevented this from happening. So, Orao isn't a stick with which we will beat up politicians from the RS in order to make them do something. This is a very specific issue and we are treating it as such.

Meetings in residences

Dnevni Avaz: How do you look at the issue that certain ambassadors receive representatives of certain political parties in their residences and talk to them?

Paddy Ashdown: It's a normal thing for me. Ambassadors are paid to know what is going on in the country and what people think about, and they are doing their jobs. It's up to BiH politicians to decide what coalitions they would build and on the basis of what. I don't believe that any of the ambassadors here are trying to influence the formation of coalitions and governments.

Suspicion about nationalists

Dnevni Avaz: How realistic is it to expect the EU to be suspicious about the state government consisting of representatives of nationalist parties?

Paddy Ashdown: I think this is a wide-spread opinion. We want to see reforms. Nationalists haven't proved themselves as reform-makers so far. We are now receiving surprising messages from these ranks. My answer is very clear – we will trust your actions, not words, and of course there is a dose of skepticism towards nationalists. As far as I'm concerned, I will judge them by actions and not by what they say.