Interview Paddy Ashdown, the High Representative for BiH”I have been fighting against nationalists my whole life”

Some people say he wavers. Others say he wants to make Bosnia a protectorate. The High Representative for BiH, Paddy Ashdown, says he is neither of these two, but only a practical politician.

He underlines he will accept the politicians that people elected, although he is not very inclined towards the parties they represent. Regardless of who is elected, he expects concrete deeds from them not only words.

“I judge people by what they do not by what they say”, said Ashdown, who, during the interview passionately spoke about his vision of Bosnia.

Ashdown thinks that Bosnia does not have problems with security but with the economy. “These people need jobs, not words”, said Ashdown.

Ashdown believes that BiH has moved from a post-conflict state into a transitional state, in which the economy is what divides people not security. Ashdown further said that BiH has to move faster in order to protect its people until it joins the European Union. “BiH has to complete reforms very fast”, said Ashdown. It is very clear from Asdown’s words that the Orao affair might slow down this process because everything depends on how the RS Government will conduct the investigation.

BiH authorities have to find those responsible and punish

them. Ashdown said that otherwise he would use his authority to prevent the slowing down of economic reform. Reacting to allegations recently made by removed director of FOSS Munir Alibabic, Ashdown said they are not worth commenting on. Despite the problem with the Orao affair, Ashdown said that BiH has been rejuvenated in the last six years. “The worst is behind us, but there is still much to be done. It is very important to establish the rule of law and so far I think we have managed to set up the structures for implementation of the law”, said Ashdown.

Nezavisne: The election results aren’t in keeping with your optimism. There is a chance that the parties which started the war in this country, take the places they had before the war?

Ashdown: It really does not matter to me who is going to be in the government, because regardless of who will be in the government, if we do not implement reforms, we will all fail. I will consider it as my personal success and the success of the people in power only if we succeed in implementing the reforms. I am determined to give this country over to the peoples of BiH as soon as possible. We do not have too much time to do it. If you are asking me if I would have liked to see different election results? If you ask me, I wish that the turnout was 99% and that 99% of voters voted for reform. However, I am a practical politician. I have to work with what I have got. I said to all the politicians with whom I met in Banja Luka – Dragan Kalinic, Milorad Dodik, Mladen Ivanic, that they cannot join Europe unless they implement the reforms.

Nezavisne Novine: Did you ask them about the Orao affair?

Ashdown: We discussed that issue. I think they know what to do. I should not have to repeat what has already been said.

Nezavisne: Can the government that was involved in the Orao affair participate in the process of reforms?

Ashdown: They must implement the reforms in order to prevent affairs like this one from happening again. A full investigation needs to be conducted. Preliminary results of the investigation have to be presented naming those responsible. I expect a detailed report to be released in two to three months, and when the preliminary results are released, those who are found to be responsible will have to take the responsibility, regardless of the position they may hold. I told RS officials: "I am leaving it to you to deal with it, and if you do not do it, then I will.". It is also necessary to create state-level mechanisms for control of arms sale. I also told them that the reforms need to be accelerated in order to set up civilian control over the armed forces. If I had to use my authorities, in case this case is not completely resolved, then I will do it. If they do not do it, then I will.

Nezavisne: Since you have come to Bosnia you have insisted on political responsibility. Why didn't you raise that issue when it came to the Orao affair?

Ashdown: Because the investigation is not yet completed. It would be completely wrong to make such a move before the investigation is completed. Do you maybe know in which direction this investigation will go? Do you know how massive this affair is? I do not. Some people say that the traces lead to the BiH Federation. Of course I am ready to react, but only when I know all the facts.

Nezavisne: We interviewed you two years ago. You were much more decisive regarding many issues in Bosnia.

Ashdown: (laugh) I cannot believe that there are many people who would accuse me of being indecisive for the past six months. Others say that I am making Bosnia some sort of a protectorate. Therefore, you can criticize me as much as you like, but I will react only when I want to react, and that is, when I know all the facts.

Nezavisne: However, it is obvious that the IC in BiH sometimes looks lame.

Ashdown: (laugh) If you are saying that for me that is fine, but I believe that many other people would disagree with that.

Nezavisne: International community must have muscles if for no other reason then because 6 billion dollars worth of foreign aid were spent in Bosnia. Because in the end everything comes down to the fact that you were the ones who paid the reconstruction of BiH?

Ashdown: Wait, wait! In six years you have done more than what has been done in Northern Ireland in thirty years. Look me in the eyes and tell me – Did you think that in six years time full freedom of movement would be possible? Did you think that elections would take place without incident? That is a miracle. I was in Belfast in 1969 and saw the Catholic houses burned to the ground. Have any of those people returned to Belfast? No, not even one. Here in BiH you invented a new human right. You have changed the rules of war. Because so far right to return has not existed anywhere else. So do not tell me that the IC's money was wasted. Together with the IC you have created a miracle here. It is also true that there is still much to be done. Things have to move faster. In this country I have two big enemies: the IC's impatience, because they do not understand how much has been done so far and the depression and disbelief of BiH citizens, because they do not understand the miracle they have created here.

Nezavisne: You say that in BiH we have invented a new human right, the right of refugees to return to their homes, Do you really think that people would have returned to their homes if the IC had not exerted pressure on domestic authorities?

Ashdown: I have spoken with thousands of people who returned to their homes and in 9 out of 10 cases, the people told me that it isn't security which is preventing returns, but rather

the problems with employment, pensions and such. My wife and I spent a night with a Bosniak refugee family in Srebrenica some 5 weeks ago. I have never experienced something so moving. The pure courage of the people who are returning to their homes most of them women, is astounding. Women who are returning to their homes, cleaning up the rubble. Instead of living in their houses they live in huts, waiting for someone to help them. That is why I want to make sure that, through economic reform, more people return to their homes and that new, economic prospects for all BiH citizens are created. That will destroy nationalism.

Nezavisne: However, by accepting the nationalist parties return to power – the same parties that started the war in this country, you take risks. Are you aware of the risk that another Ferhadija or 30 other similar incidents may happen?

Ashdown: Is it my risk?

Nezavisne: Well, you obviously are trying to relieve the nationalist parties of responsibility?

Ashdown: I have never relived the nationalist parties of responsibility. If there is anything that defines my whole life it is the fight against nationalism. I am not your master. I am your servant.

Nezavisne: Are you aware of the risk you are facing by working with these people?

Ashdown: The only thing that could bring war back to this country economic collapse. For example, I visited the hospital in Banja Luka. The doctors are great, but conditions are horrible. On the other hand, you, the citizens of BiH, put 500 million KM into the hand of criminals because you do not have a proper customs system. If you want to beat the nationalists, you have to provide decent public services. Do not give your money to criminals. Implement economic reform in order to make this country become an attractive place to do business. Excuse

me for what I am going to say, but you will not win nationalism by chanting slogans.

Nezavisne: But here we had a good living standard back in 1990. We had a solid economy, good salaries and then nationalist parties came and destroyed everything.

Ashdown: I do not think that the current situation should be compared with 1990.

Nezavisne: But it is the same people.

Ashdown: But the circumstances are different now. At that time you did not have the opportunity to join the EU and you had two dictators in your neighborhood, who threatened you with the war. I have to warn you that countries such as Poland, who have passed through the transitional phase, had to deal with the issue of how to build a state, in a system without either a proper economy or democracy. In comparison with those countries, here in Bosnia we have only three problems – we do not have experience with a free and open market, democratic system and on top of that the war happened.

Nezavisne: Do you know what you have just said?! Do you want to take the path of reforms together with nationalist parties?

Ashdown: What am I supposed to do?! They said they would work on reforms. But you have to know that I do not judge people by what they say but by what they do. But regardless of what I think, they are elected as an expression of the people's will at the last elections. And since they are elected I told them: "Either you will implement the reforms or this country will fail. That is the way we can fight nationalism.

I Do Not Comment on Lies

Nezavisne: One of those who accuses you is Munir Alibabic Munja, the removed chief of the Federation Intelligence Agency (FOSS). He made some grave allegations against you.

Ashdown: I do not want to attach any importance to the bunch of lies by responding to it. I have more important things to do. It is not my job to make my self a celebrity. Trust me that before I leave I will make many people very upset. I am only focused on the reforms and that is why I think that people of this country will trust me.