

Interview: Paddy Ashdown, High Representative for BiH: "Croats from Herzegovina are Engine for Development of BiH"

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The High Representative for BiH, former leader of the British liberals and peace mediator, Paddy Ashdown, has been in Sarajevo since May, and, as it seems, he is trying to keep up the pace with the speed of reforms that should be implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the forthcoming period. Ashdown spoke to Slobodna Dalmacija about that, but also about the unavoidable topic, the division of BiH on the napkin and the role of nationalists in the region.

My main slogan in the first address I gave, the one I adhere to is: first justice, then jobs through reform. The reason is very simple; the creation of peace does not rest on democracy in the first place, as we thought, but rather on justice. Until you create the rule of law, you cannot create the security of the people, security of democracy and the economy, security of investments and all that follows that. We first made that mistake here, and then once again in Kosovo, because we did not establish the rule of law immediately.

This is No Colony

Slobodna Dalmacija: After the rule of law is established, the next step will be the recovery of the economy. Can the people of BiH expect new jobs, a better living standard?

Paddy Ashdown: People in this country are very diligent and talented, and when it comes to entrepreneurial skills and resourcefulness, Croats in Herzegovina represent a potential “thermoelectric power plant” for the recovery of the economy. Such abilities should be encouraged. This country will either undergo reforms or fail. It will either undergo reforms or die. The next four years will be decisive. Therefore, we have to speed up reforms in the country. Much has been done; since the end of the war. To date, more has been done in Bosnia and Herzegovina than in Northern Ireland for the last 30 years!

Slobodna Dalmacija: In these few months that you have spent in Sarajevo as the High Representative, have you already detected your “enemies” on the road you want to take?

Paddy Ashdown: I have not detected them, people are very kind to me and these people come from all parts of the political spectrum. I have discovered that there are reformists in almost every political party in BiH. But, in BiH there are different kinds of enemies; lack of self-confidence among the people. People think that they cannot change the situation. My other enemy is “weariness” on the part of the international community. When I say that word, it sounds like a criticism, but that is not my intention. The fact is that the war here finished six years ago and that the attention of the international community has moved to some other areas. I often caricature that by giving an example of the time in which my mandate in BiH started; my friends here in BiH say – we had Greeks, Romans, Turks, Habsburgs, now we have you – please do tell us for once what we are to do! And I tell them that this is not a colony and that they have to have confidence in themselves and their own possibilities. My friends from the

West, on the other hand, say – we have spent money, endangered our soldiers' lives, we stopped the war and how come you are not Switzerland already?! I give the following answer to them: well, Mr. Blair, Chirac, Schroeder, look at your own societies, you have not created any miracles yourselves! It is very difficult to build a society after a war. You have to be patient and support Bosnia and Herzegovina in these painstaking reforms.

Slobodna Dalmacija: Taking into account that you have said that Bosnia and Herzegovina relies on the region, how do you comment on statements such as the one by Vojislav Kostunica, who spoke about Republika Srpska joining Serbia?

Paddy Ashdown: The mistake of the West was that it had a wrong approach to the resolution of issues in the region – namely, we would resolve one issue and botch the other; we recognised Croatia, but fouled up Bosnia and Herzegovina, we fixed the situation in BiH, and forgot Kosovo, we fixed the situation in Kosovo, and messed up the situation in Macedonia. That is why regional co-operation is important. Croatia and Serbia as Bosnia's neighbours have a very important role and I welcome what is being done by President Stipe Mesic, Minister Tonino Picula, Prime Minister Ivica Racan, for it is a constructive role. That is why I want Serbs in Belgrade to work in the same manner and some of them do, like Goran Svilanovic. We are now in the middle of the pre-election campaign in Serbia. Kostunica says that his words were misinterpreted, wrongly quoted in the media. I accept that. His important comment was the one he made here in Sarajevo and it is best to leave this last episode behind us. I want to say to the people in Bosnia and Herzegovina that the past will not come back unless they allow it. Of course, there are those who like to bring back the ghosts of the past and intimidate people, but they are not the future. Therefore my message to the people is to ignore such provocations.

Elections Will Not Stop Reforms

Slobodna Dalmacija: The elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina will be held on 5 October. What are the options?

Paddy Ashdown: Great changes have happened in Bosnia and Herzegovina. If we look at the “old” nationalist parties, then one can see that reforms are happening within them as well. This should be taken into account. The “old” nationalist parties are no longer as they used to be. I would want to see them go through reforms. I hope that the people will, generally speaking, vote precisely for reforms. Old blocks of homogenisation of people are no longer possible. I do not know what the results of the elections will be, but I am fairly confident that, whatever the outcome, reforms will continue, and at an expedited pace. When people go out to vote, they should think of who could take them through these reforms in the best possible manner.

Slobodna Dalmacija: You have set justice, rule of law, as your first goal. However, we have witnessed numerous failed attempts by NATO forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina to bring to justice the two most wanted war criminals, Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic. What is the problem? Are they really so good at hiding or is there no political will to have them dispatched to The Hague?

Paddy Ashdown: Although the arrest and transfer have not happened yet, I am sure they will happen. The question is when it will happen, and not whether it will happen. I am convinced that NATO is resolved to arrest them. Their arrest will be one of the biggest moves to close the war chapter. The second big move will be the rebuilding of the bridge in Mostar, and the third thing will be the return of refugees. Yes, I am also impatient to see Karadzic and Mladic apprehended. I say the same thing to anyone who criticises NATO for the fact that the two of them have still not been caught – go and spend a week at Zelengora and you will see that it is not that difficult at

all to hide one or two men there. Since I was a soldier in Northern Ireland, I will mention that some bombers were at large for as long as 30 years though we searched every leaf of grass to find them. Two years ago, the fact that Karadzic and Mladic were at large represented an obstacle for the future development of this country. Now the situation is different; therefore I send a message to Karadzic, as he wanders through the hills and lives the wretched life of a fugitive, that he cannot stop our progress.

Slobodna Dalmacija: Will the diplomatic and political problem related to the Permanent Criminal Tribunal and the US have any influence on the presence of the international community in BiH?

Paddy Ashdown: No. We have made commitments and we will stick to them. I was in diplomacy and I know that countries will use all options available to protect their national interests. Even at the moment when the problem and the "crisis" culminate, the United States invest more in the development of this country and give more support to BiH than any other state.

Slobodna Dalmacija: Media have noted that you are much closer to the "ordinary people" than to politicians here. What do you want to achieve with these numerous tours, discussions with people, visits to places?

Paddy Ashdown: That is my style, I have always worked like that. You cannot know how people live and what bothers them until you are among them. It is easy to get a distorted picture of the situation in BiH by sitting in Sarajevo cafes. I cannot do my job like that. On the other hand, I have powers which may be said to be huge for one politician of liberal orientation. That is why I have said that I will rarely make use of these powers and ultimately that I will use them for the people of this country – for all its citizens. That is why it is important for me to know what people think. Finally, I

am not good at formalities, I do not like protocol.

On Tudjman's Map Drawn on a Menu

Slobodna Dalmacija: You also got some important information from the people you talked to on the ground, for example in the Leutar case?

Paddy Ashdown: The Leutar case is very interesting. When I was on my first tour in Siroki Brijeg, at a Town Hall meeting, the first question posed to me was posed by the mother of Leutar's driver, who is in prison. But, I have to be clear; I must not interfere in court cases. Courts must be independent and I have no powers to interfere in that. If courts do not respect procedures and rules, then the situation changes. I carefully follow what goes on, but I must not interfere.

Slobodna Dalmacija: You are well aware of the fact that people in Croatia remember you by the napkin with a division of Bosnia-Herzegovina, of which you said that it had been drawn by the late president Franjo Tudjman?

Paddy Ashdown: Oh, yes.

Slobodna Dalmacija: One detail: was it drawn on the menu or the napkin?

Paddy Ashdown: It was the menu; but the map became a legend as though it was drawn on a napkin.

A part of the Croatian public did not believe in its authenticity, and the son of the late president wrote a book about it?

I have to say that his book is a real conspiracy theory and that it highly surpasses the usual conspiracy theories in this region, and it is known that when it comes to that, this region is the main region for detecting various conspiracies and plots.

Listen, I am against war crimes and against crime and I believe in the rule of law. If I am asked by a court to provide something as evidence so that the rule of law could be established, I will give that evidence. But, it would be wrong to think that I am anti-Croat because I gave the court what the court requested from me, or that I am anti-Serb because I testified against Milosevic.

Slobodna Dalmacija: What is your opinion of Franjo Tudjman?

Paddy Ashdown: What defines me as a person is the fight against nationalism, dating back to the times when I was a small boy in Northern Ireland. I respect and appreciate patriots, but there is a great difference between them and nationalists. Patriotism means that you love your country, but you do not show that love by hating somebody else's country. I despise nationalists, they are a force of destruction. And if you ask me about Tudjman, I think the same of him as I do of other destructive nationalists.

ON HERCEGOVACKA BANKA

Speed must not come in the way of justice

Slobodna Dalmacija: Which stage is the Herzegovacka Banka investigation in? Is it about to be completed?

Paddy Ashdown: It is still not over, because if it were, we would have made that public. But, you have to understand the complexity of that problem. I understand that many people in Herzegovina worry about that, and also about the way in which the whole thing was initiated. I do not criticise that, but I understand that this story did raise some passions and that people expect results. I know of investigation cases in Britain which took several years. I believe that we should come to the end and to results as soon as possible, but speed must not be the enemy of justice. We will do this in the right way and it is better to complete the investigation properly than to finish it fast.