Interview: Paddy Ashdown, The High Representative for BiH for Vecernji List: “Croats in BiH are the smallest in numbers but they are the most influential”

BiH has the lowest inflation rate, that is, it has the most stable currency, we have freedom of movement and elections are taking place in peace. Much more has been achieved here in six years than in the Northern Ireland in 30 years…

The interview with the High Representative in BiH, Paddy Ashdown, took place in his Sarajevo Office. At the beginning of the interview, we asked for his impressions on progress in BiH.

PA: I was among the first soldiers who marched in Belfast, where I used to live 30 years ago, when Catholic houses were burned down. Believe me, nobody has returned there, yet 250 thousand people have returned here. Although, we in the Western countries consider that the progress is not being achieved quickly enough, I still think that what BiH has achieved after the war is truly remarkable.

Could you exemplify?

PA: For example, BiH has the lowest inflation rate, that is, the most stable currency, we have freedom of movement and elections are taking place in peace. Much more has been achieved here in six years than in the Northern Ireland in 30 years. However, BiH does not have time on its side. We now

have a long way to go. Considering the length of the road, we have to speed up the progress to have this country functioning. We have to enable people to work, have functioning economy and fully functioning Government. Unless we go through a full reform, we will fail. Therefore, we have to speed up everything.

Grabovac Had to Resign

Immediately upon your arrival you removed Grabovac. Why did you fail to appoint somebody to his post? Now a Bosniak, in the capacity of the Deputy Minister, carries out these duties?

PA: The High Representative does not have such powers. To be completely clear, Vracar – who is a Serb – resigned by himself. Had he failed to do so, I would have removed him. Grabovac did not resign so I had to remove him.

Do Not Call Me Lord

I have a dilemma as to how to address you – Lord, High Representative, Mister…

PA: Please do not call me Lord, just Paddy or Mr. Paddy. Some people call me Lord Ashdown. However, I am not one of those who rejoices in titles. Besides, British Lords do not have a great reputation in the Balkans.

I Want to Buy a House Here

Do you feel safe in BiH?

PA: Absolutely. My wife is here and she says that she feels safer in the streets of Sarajevo than in London. My daughter with her two children will arrive next week. She will stay here for a week and afterwards we will go to Korcula.

Will you build a house here like you predecessor? You should maybe look for a location in Siroki Brijeg**?**

PA: My wife and I would like to have a house here. We are looking and searching. That is all I am going to say at the moment.

International Community Stays

You said that BiH does not have time on its side. Why?

PA: In the next two to three years the international community will decide on whether it will continue to contribute to the stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina or simply remain here to prevent the spread of instability, regardless of the fact whether we are positive or negative partners.

In many ways the future of BiH will depend on who will win at the forthcoming elections. Whom would you like to see as a winner?

PA: It is not my job to prejudge the outcome of the elections or select a winner. It is my job to work on reforms taking this country towards Europe. I will co-operate with everybody, that is, with those who are committed to the reform in the country. I will also have to work against all those who want to obstruct and wish to push BiH backwards. I am only interested in programs and activities. It will be impossible to work with those parties and people who want to bring this country back to the past. It is what people do that is important to me, not what they say.

Your predecessor spent a lot of time removing HDZ's candidates. You have ensured the continuity. What is your assessment of the current work of the HDZ?

PA: You should ask the HDZ. It is impossible to work with forces that want to draw BiH back into conflict, destructive nationalism or the past. We simply have to wait and see what different parties are going to do.

Why do you avoid meetings with the HDZ?

PA: I do not meet with the political parties' politicians – not with the HDZ, the SDP or any other political party. I meet with them only if they are public office holders. For example, I met with Lagumdzija in his capacity of the Minister of Foreign Affairs or with the HDZ member, Miljenko Jelic, as the Siroki Brijeg Mayor.

Political Investigation into the Hercegovacka Banka

Will you present the results of the investigation on Hercegovacka banka just before the elections?

PA: As far as the Hercegovacka banka is concerned, the rule of law is the most important issue for me. I am absolutely determined not to allow a system that will be dominated by politics. There are some people who have even suggested to me that the case should have been treated as a political act before the court. I said no, because the investigation into the Hercegovacka banka will be lawful. When everything is ready the results will be known. They will not be used for political purposes.

Along with the Hercegovacka banka the investigation into the murder of Croat Minister, Jozo Leutar, is very frustrating for the Croats. You also promised that you would do something?

PA: It is my job to ensure that all cases before the court are treated properly and particularly that there are no unreasonable delays. It is not clear to me why the defense did not enable the trail to progress are unclear to me. I am monitoring the case in terms of whether there is obstruction or delay, but so far I have had no reason to undertake any other steps.

A napkin as Evidence

Mr. Paddy, Croats feared your arrival very much.

PA: I would answer your question with a question – why?

Among other reasons, I would emphasize the damn napkin.

PA: What you need to know is that I have devoted my life to fighting destructive nationalism. Why did I come here during the war? Because that is exactly what I realized and saw here. I am against crime regardless of the criminal's background. If a court asks for evidence from me, I will present that evidence. I would present such evidence against Bosniaks, against Croats and against Serbs. I went to the Hague to testify with regard to the napkin, I went to the Hague as a witness against Mr. Milosevic. If the Hague invited me in regard to a crime committed by a Bosniak criminal, I will go again.

The Defense Obstructs the Leutar Case

Obviously, you advisors failed to inform you that judge Miso obstructs the trail in the most serious manner. For example, he has claimed that the key witness, Merim Galijatovic, is in the USA. However, our journalists took a photo of carefree Galijatovic barbecuing in the vicinity of Sarajevo a few days ago?

PA: It is not a question for me, but for the court. I simply consider that the delay of the trail on the side of the defense is surprising. I might be wrong. Anyway, I cannot get involved in all the problems. There are far too many. I have an armful of problems. I get lost in them. Therefore, I have to concentrate on certain issues, otherwise I will not be able to achieve anything. I do not get involved in details if they are irrelevant.

Croats as the smallest people are much afraid of being dominated by another people. This fear is being enhanced by High Representative's decisions that mostly remove Croats from their posts?

PA: Croats may be numerically smaller, but in terms of economy they are the strongest. Herzegovina is an economic power in this country. Croats in Herzegovina can gain more from reforms that will encourage free trade. Croats can do it better than any other nation. Croats from Herzegovina can use association with Europe much more than other people.

Why?

PA: Because there will be no borders in Europe in the future. Relations with Croatia can be relations without frontiers, if Croats in Herzegovina realize that they are the smallest people but can be the most powerful in economic terms. Therefore, they should cast their vote for reforms, as they can build the reforms easier that anybody else. In Herzegovina I said – have faith in yourself.

We Will Stay Here

How long will the High Representative stay in BiH?

PA: I have the contract for a year.

So, the High Representative will stay in BiH only for a year?

PA: I did not say that. I sad that I have the contract for a year.

You did not answer my question then?

PA: I do understand your question. You are referring to the time when the international community will withdraw from BiH. I can say right now – it will not withdraw. The international community will stay here. It is only unclear in which form it will be. It might simply be to control the area in order to prevent instability from flowing over to neighboring countries – Serbia and Croatia, or we might stay here as an active partner in state building efforts.

There is No Greater Croatia

Recently a Bosniak MP has warned you that you should still fear Greater Croatia and Greater Croatia?

PA: I do not believe that the Government in Zagreb is interested in a Greater Croatia. If you want to revive those ghosts from the past, scare people before the elections you can certainly act to that end. However, it is very destructive. When we speak about BiH's future, I think it is perfectly justified to say that Zagreb will play a constructive role in that process. I said recently to Kostunica and Mesic that there is no problem that can not be resolved here. However, these problems have to be resolved in the regional context.

Although you constantly emphasize your readiness to fight against alteration of borders I still think that deep down you are in favor of some changes in BiH?

PA: Noooooooo.

So, you do not consider that the are too many borders within BiH?

PA: Yes, probably.

And you would not change that?

PA: But that decision is up to BiHs citizens. In order to be absolutely clear I will emphasize the following – the Dayton Agreement is our fundamental principle. I cannot change it. You have to know that with all its shortcomings it is the Agreement that brought peace. There will not be a new Dayton Agreement. It can be changed only through your agreement. People have to reach agreement. I am aware that in this BiH, it is easier to have trade with Germany than with Banja Luka. If you do not change that your economy will collapse. I can only wonder for how long will teachers, health workers and

others who are without money choose to remain silent while great amounts of money are being spent on bureaucrats and politicians.