

Interview: Paddy Ashdown, the High Representative for BiH: "I support all decisions made by my predecessor"

Do not underestimate my decisiveness

"In the RS, BiH as well as in the Balkans we have not created a single economic and civic space. However we have a single criminal space which works regardless of borders. This is a regional problem which has to be tackled at the regional level, because this is a threat to every country in the Balkans", said the High Representative for BiH, Paddy Ashdown, in his first interview for RS- and FRY-based media since he assumed the position of High Representative on 27 May this year.

HR: I am looking forward to new relations between Zagreb and Belgrade, just as I am looking forward to everything that has been going on in relations between Belgrade and Sarajevo. This region has all the preconditions for development. I would combine a reasonable group which, on the doorstep of Europe, would not beg to enter but would have the power of arguments to go through that door so that it would be in the interest of Europe to say – come on in. I would be glad to see Mr. Mesic and Mr. Kostunica in Sarajevo because they play a significant role and would be able to convey the message that Zagreb and Belgrade want to join Europe and that they can only do that if they have good relations with BiH as a state. If they said it clearly, I think it would be helpful for us and for them to join Europe.

Blic: What is your assessment of the current situation in the RS and BiH?

HR: There are some areas where there are still tensions, obstructions and non-compliance with the law. Generally speaking, we have a stable peace, much more stable than before. "Western people" sometimes say that Bosnia is a "black hole", but the reality is that tremendous progress has been made here. When I compare the situation here with the situation in Northern Ireland or in the Basque country, where the process of peace-building is extremely difficult, then I want BiH citizens to realize how much has been done here. As far as this issue is concerned, BiH has gone far. However, there are still some "black holes" such as the terrible conditions in which some BiH families live as well as black holes in the sphere of business...

Blic: How to overcome that problem?

HR: I am fully convinced that BiH authorities will have to tackle these issues very seriously and when they go to the elections they will have to come up with top priorities and plans to resolve the problem. If this country does not solve it then we will have to find tools and institutions with which we shall do it, such as the High Judicial Council, which is of absolute importance and which will have to reorganize the legal system as well as the judiciary. I am not saying that every judge in BiH is bad. I know that there are many of them who are very good, but in this country there are four times more judges than in the European country with the highest number of judges in Europe. We will have to set up an organization within the OHR which will deal with the rule of law, which will concentrate on setting up standards in police and form units that will deal with serious fraud cases and in cooperation with government bring to justice those people who are involved in crime.

Blic: One can hear very often in the RS that the imposition of the High Judicial Council is not in accordance with the Constitution?

HR: That decision was made by my predecessor Mr. Petritsch and I absolutely support him. One should not underestimate my decisiveness because I shall start appointing people very soon. It is the main instrument in making this area a success. Eventual filing legal proceedings before the BiH Constitutional Court regarding this matter will not slow down my activities. I will have appointed members of the BiH High Judicial Council by the end of July and the Council will have become operative by September.

Blic: You said that job creation is one of your priorities. When can citizens of this country expect to see some progress in this field?

HR: According to official statistics, production in the RS has dropped to 12%. Here we are talking about things which are closely connected. If you want new jobs, then you must have good laws. There is no one who will bring money in any part of BiH before reform is carried out. These are the gates that we must open. Failure to consolidate the rule of law in the RS and BiH is directly connected to insufficient foreign assistance. As far as my advocacy for job creation is concerned, people should not think that I said: You will get jobs tomorrow. I am saying one more time that legislation has to be sorted out first, that is, justice and legality first.

Blic: What is your standpoint on relations between authorities at the state level and Entity level?

HR: Some obstructionists think that whatever is transferred to the BiH level, then it must be taken from the Entity level. I think that is ridiculous. You can have efficient institutions at both levels as well as at lower, local levels. Whether someone likes it or not, that is what the Dayton Peace Agreement gives us. I said in my speech that BiH citizens have to work on their constitution. In my opinion the people should think about whether these structures give them the best possible solution. If BiH finds a way to create a state with 'lighter' structures, maybe it will meet Europe at the half way point, because Europe has taken that path.

EuroBlic: Currently there are two affairs in the RS - SFOR accuses the RS Army of being responsible for electronic monitoring and the CAFAO report indicates serious fraud within the RS Customs Administration? What is your interpretation of these two cases?

HR: There are some legal processes going on and I think that we should wait and see what happens. The CAFAO report shows why we need a reformed judiciary to deal with issues like this.

EuroBlic: The RS Interior Ministry filed criminal charges against the SNSD leader Milorad Dodik?

HR: That is a matter for the courts. The law sometimes can be very unpleasant. Maybe the law stops me from getting where I wanted to go if I'm an impatient man. However, without laws, you have dictators, and we do not want them. In any case, we all have to function within the framework of the rule of law, and the law will say who is right and who is wrong.

EuroBlic: During the war people fled from BiH because of the conflict. Will people keep leaving BiH but for other reasons such as the high rate of unemployment and the difficult economic situation?

HR: The high rate of unemployment and the difficult economic situation are the two greatest threats to this country. Crime and corruption are short-term problems, but the departure of young and talented people is a long-term problem. I do not think it is appropriate to compare when people run away from war and when they run away from a difficult economic situation, but certainly the continued departure of people from this country is a great threat. I set some goals to my self, based on which I will know whether I will be successful in my job in two years time or not. One of these goals is: have we succeeded in stopping young people from leaving BiH. I will be seriously dealing with this issue and listen to what BiH citizens have to say about this problem. I will also find out whether there is a framework within the OHR and the BiH Government and see if we can make some sort of arrangement for people who want to return through scholarships, or employment within the OHR or the BiH Government. If people believe in themselves, if people are tolerant and aware of their power to change things and if the IC gives them more room, then it would be very good.

A Fear of Disappointed voters

HR: have many friends among politicians with various ethnic backgrounds, and if someone is a friend of mine that does not mean that I will support him in politics. I think that people should support action, progress and concrete deeds, not persons or political parties. I know that there are some people who are disappointed. I am afraid they will not vote and that fewer people will vote on these elections than in the last elections. My message to them is that if they want BiH to look as they wish it to look then they have to give the mandate to people who will make that happen. If we do not do it - we shall fail. Let's forget the past and concentrate on the future.

Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic are a curse hanging over BiH

HR: The curse of Karadzic and Mladic lies on BiH. They are detrimental for the reputation of the international community in BiH and most importantly for the future of people in BiH. I am fully convinced that SFOR and NATO are determined to apprehend them. I also wish I were fully convinced that the RS authorities, which have the obligation to assist in their apprehension, are determined to do the same. I was a soldier and I know about people who carried out bomb attacks in Northern Ireland. They were at large even for 30 years, but in the end they were caught. I am convinced that Karadzic and Mladic will be caught. It is only the matter of time.