

Interview: Paddy Ashdown, High Representative in BiH

5 April 2004

RS Radio: You have just arrived from a meeting with the RS leadership and EU Ambassadors to BiH. I think that conditions for European integration were the main issue. Probably, there was some kind of agreement with the RS leadership on that?

Paddy Ashdown: It was not a meeting designed to reach agreement. It was, you might say, rather a tough exchange of views. I think if I were to sum it up I would do so like this: A number of very important reforms were made last year, some of which required a great deal of courage from Republika Srpska. Making these decisions last year, on Defence, on the ITA, the Republika Srpska leadership clearly showed that they had a strategic vision that this country should be part of Europe. But now there are a number of issues, including issues on a less grand scale, such as the Procurement Law, the Law on Notaries, PBS, economic reforms, in which it appears that Republika Srpska has put itself in the position of obstructing the road to Europe. And there are a number of other issues, for instance relating to cooperation with the ICTY where Republika Srpska has put itself in the position of being the main obstruction on the road to NATO.

We hope that Republika Srpska understands the seriousness of this position. It would be extremely dangerous for BiH, for individuals, and I'm bound to say for Republika Srpska itself, if the RS proceeds to be the primary block that would stop this country going to the future.

We want you to succeed, we believe you can succeed, we believe that Bosnia and Herzegovina can become a functional state within Dayton, according to European standards but please

don't put this at risk because if you did, that would be a risk not only to the country's future but also to much more than that.

The Republika Srpska authorities, for their part, reiterated their firm commitment to make the changes necessary to enable BiH to join European and Atlantic institutions. We welcome that commitment but what matters now is not verbal commitment. It's actions.

RS Radio: Do you say that it has happened today? You have warned the RS authorities, on several occasions, regarding the implementation of the conditions for accession.

Paddy Ashdown: No, my first discussion was a private one with the leaders of Republika Srpska pointing out this danger as early as I think the 5th or 6th of January this year. So this has been going on for a long time. But this now becomes serious, and even becomes critical. We are only weeks away from the key meeting of NATO in Istanbul in June and I do not want the RS to be in a position that whole of BiH is prevented from joining Partnership for Peace because of the RS's failures to ensure cooperation with the ICTY. Let me be very clear: There is a choice. Karadzic or Europe. The RS is choosing.

RS Radio: Was there a meeting on Friday with the RS leadership? There has been some speculation on the side of the media but no one has confirmed that. Our correspondent from the spot said that RS leaders were in Sarajevo. After that, the decision was made and published on Saturday.

Paddy Ashdown: I have a rule: I never comment on speculation. I meet lots of people, lots of the time. Some of these meetings are private, some are public. Generally speaking I try not to comment on them. So, this is an issue on which I do not wish to make further comment, but let me make it very clear that my decisions in relation to the SDS were taken with

regret, they have nothing to do with the unfortunate events on Pale. Here is the basis of my decision. I have specific information that indicates to me that the SDS, not necessarily with the agreement of its leaders, but that the SDS continues to maintain financial contacts with its founder Radovan Karadzic. I'm giving the SDS a space to indicate whether there is substance to this or not and I could not allow public funds to continue to pass to a Party which may be continuing to assist a war criminal network. I will look at the information provided by the SDS and decide what further action needs to be taken. This is not an attack on the SDS; this is an action that is necessary to uphold the law.

RS Radio: A lot of politicians, not only from the RS, will say that political parties are not financing themselves primarily through the budget. Political parties, and the SDS I assume, have different ways of financing. Do you think that report will provide certain information, meaning to prove that war crime indictees are financed through the SDS budget?

Paddy Ashdown: I expect it to provide true information. If it doesn't I will have to consider further steps. Every political party is in any case required to give the Election Commission a full list of its sources of financing. So this not a new requirement, this is an explanation of what they have to give to the Election Commission. I am now saying that it has to give this information earlier, it has to give it to me as well as the Election Commission. On this occasion that summary of the sources of finance must be signed by the president of the SDS Dragan Kalinic and I made it clear that I will hold him accountable for the accuracy and comprehensive nature of the information.

RS Radio: How do you comment on statements of the SDS leaders who are saying that this decision is only introduction in more drastic measures – ban of the SDS or dismissal of their officials?

Paddy Ashdown: No. My decision has one purpose only and that is to ensure the law is upheld.

RS Radio: Mr. Ashdown, when it comes to implementation of your decision some things from it are unclear. The money from the budget goes to all parliamentary parties and is used for salaries of delegates, their per diems, etc. Does your decision mean that members of the RSNA will temporarily lose their rights for per diems, etc?

Paddy Ashdown: Let me be very clear. All public funds given to the SDS from public revenues are stopped until such time as the SDS has proved that is not assisting in funding of war criminals. I simply can't risk public funds going to a party that continues to fund war criminals in direct contravention of the conditions of International Law.

RS Radio: So far, your action has been aimed against the SDS only. You also announced that some action should be undertaken towards other participants in power, who are not only from SDS. You also said that you would not allow the entire country to miss its chance to join Partnership for Peace because of obstruction by the RS authorities. On the other hand, the RS authorities claim that they want reforms and that they are determined to cooperate with The Hague.

Paddy Ashdown: Words are cheap. It's action that NATO will judge by. Here are the actions, or should I say the scandalous lack of actions. Serbia & Montenegro sent Milosevic to The Hague, almost exactly three years ago. The Federation authorities have sent their people to The Hague and found their war criminals, some of them. The Government of Croatia has sent people to The Hague. In the nine years since Dayton, the Republika Srpska authorities have arrested not a single war criminal, and sent not a single person to The Hague. 25 war criminals have been sent to The Hague from the territory of Republika Srpska, every one by the International Community, not one by the Republika Srpska. There is only one way that

you can look at that, there is only one conclusion you can draw from that and that is that the RS has not carried out its international responsibilities in relation to the arrest of war criminals and cooperation with the ICTY. To put it very bluntly, if the RS had fulfilled its responsibilities it is probable that the events of last week at Pale would have not happened.

Allow me to say a word extra. Everybody deeply regrets injuries to civilians, whatever the circumstances, whatever the time and whoever has caused that. Everybody will want at this stage to wish the injured an as fast as possible recovery and our thoughts will be with their family. I include myself personally in that. As well as speaking as the High Representative, I speak as a human being. NATO is an alliance of democratic countries. It has procedures to look into these matters and it is doing so. It takes it very, very seriously if civilians are injured, but it has a mandate and a duty to seek war criminals and it has to do that, in particular in this instance if Republika Srpska refuses to do it.

RS Radio: You didn't say explicitly that the SDS is responsible for everything you said about arrest and Pale action.

Paddy Ashdown: Absolutely. It applies to all the authorities and you need to remember that the SDS, although a major party in Government, has not been in the Government all the time. It's all the RS authorities who are responsible.

RS Radio: Is the International Community aware that, with actions such as one from the April 1, it causes negative feelings towards itself and strengthens radical forces. It looks like the International Community does not understand how a collective view of citizens is created. How can the IC influence the change towards democratic procedures?

Paddy Ashdown: Of course we consider these very carefully, but

justice is blind. Whenever crime is committed you have to ensure the rule of law. You can't say because this is a difficult circumstance we're going to let this injustice go. We speculate, but let me just speculate for a moment. If NATO had firm information, it's their information I haven't received it, that Karadzic was in a certain place, NATO must act immediately in the absence of any action from Republika Srpska. It can't say we're not gonna act because the political situation is difficult. This is obviously not an easy time. It's a time of great fragility, we know what is happening in the region, but the law is the law. It has to be enacted whether it is an easy time or a bad time. If a war criminal, an indicted war criminal, is in a position where they can be caught we have to try to do that.

RS Radio: Because it's in the interest of our company, RTRS, I have to say that we are expecting the legal framework for public broadcasting. In which phase is the project now, where are the obstacles, who is obstructing it?

Paddy Ashdown: I'm not going to impose this. This is a requirement that comes not just from the Feasibility Study, it comes from Dayton – the requirement to have two Entity broadcasters whose existence is absolutely guaranteed and a State-level service with some shared facility. It's a Dayton requirement as well as a Feasibility Study requirement. If the RS can not agree to that, it not only impedes Dayton it stops the country going to Europe.

RS Radio: You're talking about RS authorities?

Paddy Ashdown: Yes, absolutely. Let me assure you, those who argue that this is about centralizing the broadcasting system are telling a simple lie. There's an absolutely guaranteed position of the RTRS within the State system. So, this is not a threat to RTRS but it needs to be done.

RS Radio: What's the problem?

Paddy Ashdown: The problem is that unfortunately Minister Dokic does not wish to allow the establishment of a statewide system with certain common services as required by Dayton. I hope we'll overcome it. Thank you very much for having me on your program.