

Interview: Paddy Ashdown, High Representative of the International community to BiH: “Politicians use fear to prepare the people for elections”

Putting emphasis on the victimization of all three peoples in BiH ahead of the local elections is very dangerous and destructive for the whole country, says High Representative, Paddy Ashdown

“I hope that in this pre-election period we are going to think of the future, not of the past. However, I know that prior to earlier elections politicians would rather use fear, than hope”, Ashdown said.

His assessment is that all politicians, “perhaps the nationalist parties, in particular”, are using the victimization of all the three peoples to prepare their voters for the local elections planned for the beginning of October.

Nezavisne novine: But in BiH, the issue of victimization ahead of the elections is not played up only by politicians, but by certain media outlets too?

Paddy Ashdown: I will not comment on that in particular. The media and politicians in this country are very close just as in every other country. This is not about a story on the alleged threat to only one of BiH’s constituent peoples, it’s not this that worries me.

What worries me is the fact that in this way we could go back

to the old way of holding elections, and the so-called political competition as to who is the bigger victim. Instead of speaking of the future, of fighting crime, of reforms and Europe, attempts are being made to get votes on the basis of who the victim is. This is the case with all the three peoples. Some Croat politicians want to frighten their Croat voters in to believing that education reform will destroy their language and identity. This is nonsense. The same thing is happening in the RS, where politicians claim that Republika Srpska will be destroyed if people don't vote for them.

Nezavisne novine: In the last six months the story of the victimization of Bosniaks has been stressed most of all. Why?

Paddy Ashdown: No, there is the same story everywhere. In Sarajevo, the victimization of Bosniaks is being stressed, in Banja Luka one hears that Serbs are being victimized, in Mostar, one hears the same thing about Croats. This prevails on all three sides.

Nezavisne novine: So, this story is being used in the whole state to prepare voters for the local elections?

Paddy Ashdown: For politicians, this is an easy way to get votes. If the people really want to speak about the past, I have nothing against it. But, the elections that are ahead of us represent an opportunity for us to continue making progress in reforms and to talk of the future. There is a lack of understanding and information, certain assumptions are being made or misinformation being spread. What is behind this is the allegation of Constituent peoples victimization. Evidence of this can be found in the story that there is not a sufficient number of Bosniaks in courts: in 2003, in RS, there were only six Bosniak judges and prosecutors, and now there are 60. This would not have happened without the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Councils.

Nezavisne novine: The owner of the Newspaper publishing house

“Avaz”, Fahrudin Radoncic, does not agree with your claims on the representation of Bosniaks in judiciary.

Paddy Ashdown: I do not want to speak about one newspaper, one party or just one people. Victimization is being presented as a problem on all sides in BiH. The reason is the same in the whole of BiH – the easiest thing for political parties, perhaps for nationalist parties especially, is to frighten the people before they vote, telling them that they are the only ones who can protect their own people. This is easily done, but is very destructive for the country. It is more important for BiH to use this opportunity, and the progress that has been achieved – for which credit goes to the current authorities. BiH has made a lot of progress in the last year, more than was expected by the international community. With the parties in power, we have done more in the field of reforms than anyone could have believed; the same can be said about the creation of state institutions and in opening of the door to Europe and NATO. It's better to go back to the issues of concern to ordinary people, their real problems, such as employment.

Nezavisne novine: You have already said in some way that the current emphasis on the victimization of Bosniaks in “Dnevni avaz” is an attempt to create a suitable pre-election atmosphere?

Paddy Ashdown: Precisely. But this is not being done by “Avaz” alone, but by all sides in BiH, and all newspapers.

Nezavisne novine: All newspapers?

Paddy Ashdown: Not all newspapers in the country, but newspapers on all sides. I can mention newspapers in the BiH Croat and Serb communities which are doing that. I can mention some other newspapers on the Bosniak community that are doing that. All three peoples and newspapers supporting them are in danger of doing so, which is not strange, for this happens in

my country too.

Nezavisne novine: “Avaz” pointed reactions to the court’s ban on writing untruths about the SDP leader, Zlatko Lagumdžija, have been assessed as an attempt of exerting pressure on the judiciary? In your opinion, what is the goal of these pressures?

Paddy Ashdown: The goal is interfering in the independence of judiciary: but that won’t be a something that politicians or newspapers will decide on, nor will it be influenced by demonstrations organized by some newspapers. An independent judiciary is a European standard and there is no compromise on that. If this standard is changed we lose our chance to get closer to the EU. It is wrong to single out one newspaper, one party, for this is a broader issue that affects all the three peoples. Croats must understand that education, which takes into account cultural differences, is also a European standard; the RS must understand that a modern state cannot be built within Dayton. It would be bad if we were to go back to the politics of competing for who is the bigger victim.

Nezavisne novine: How do you comment your photograph published on the front page of “Avaz” where you are sitting underneath a calendar with a photograph of Radovan Karadžić, who has been indicted for war crimes?

Paddy Ashdown: The way I work is to keep meeting with people, my close protection team is often annoyed about this as this exposes me to danger. I was with returnees in Srebrenica, with Serbs in Rudo... I am willing to take all risks, and sometimes a risk is a political risk as well. With regard that photograph – I was traveling on the bus from Gacko to Bileća where I talked to the people at the bus station. That was not a formal meeting. There was a calendar in the background. If people think that it is important, fine.

I know that this is also a political risk that I take in order

to talk to ordinary people across BiH, in the environments in which they really live.

Nezavisne novine: The newspapers of Fahrudin Radoncic, who claims that you two are personal friends, “advised” you to resign over that photograph. Are you going to listen to the advice of your friend Radoncic?

Paddy Ashdown: I have many friends in this country, and there are also those who claim that we are friends. I do what is right, I support what has been done, not the people. Many people give advice to me, but I have to act in the way I think is right.

Nezavisne novine: Do you expect some other “compromising” news about you to be published in “Avaz”?

Paddy Ashdown: I expect the best from all the people in BiH. Many were accusing me, but I have to do my job.

Appointment of the minister of defense is not delayed

Nezavisne novine: What is the risk the BiH authorities are taking if they do not finish the appointment of the BiH minister of defense and his deputies by March 1?

Paddy Ashdown: The authorities must choose between a very short deadline and selecting the right person who will represent our future, not our past. I believe that it is more important to choose the right person. We need to have people that we are going to be proud of in public office in BiH, because they represent us in the world; that is the case with the BiH Minister of Defense as well.

I think that Andan Terzic’s decision not to accept the candidacy of Branko Stevic was a correct and courageous one. I have little more to add other than that I do not believe that Mr. Stevic is the person who should represent us before the world’s leaders.