Interview: Paddy Ashdown, the High Representative for BiH:”Reports on AM Sped affair worry me”

*The power of nationalists is on the decline, whilst the danger of crime and corruption is increasing * I believe in actions and programmes, not in individuals and their parties * The High Judicial Council up and running by September.*

Ashdown: Do no underestimate my resoluteness

Walking in Bascarsija

HR: I am happy to be back in BiH. I am impressed by the changes for the better in Sarajevo and I think that every day you should remind yourselves of that. Sarajevo, however, is not BiH. The situation outside of this city, which nowadays has started to look like any other European city, is much more difficult, there are places where obstruction of the peace process continues, the rule of law is not accepted, however, as a whole, BiH seems to me to be more secure than it has ever been during my visits. For Europeans, BiH looks like a dark place. However, the truth is that progress here is much greater than in case of my homeland – Northern Ireland or the Basque Province in Spain.

Great success

HR: I wish people here could understand that. This is a real miracle, says Paddy Ashdown, the High Representative for BiH, at the beginning of an interview for “Dnevni Avaz”.

DA: This exclusive interview should have been conducted at his residence, where he has just moved in. That is the same house

in which his predecessor, Wolfgang Petritsch, resided. However, Ashdown decided to give his first interview for BiH media in the City Café at Ferhadija.

DA: You have returned from a brief tour of BiH. You have visited Bijeljina, a town where atrocious crimes and ethnic cleansing took place in 1992. What impression has it made on you?

HR: Yes. We all know what happened in Bijeljina and therefore I was very touched by the tremendous courage shown by returnees. Having visited one Bosniac family and talking to them, I said that I was encouraged by the things I saw, but there still remain many black holes. One of them is the terrible condition in which Bijeljina Roam live. What I saw, how those people live, is scandalous.

Another black hole is the rule of law. The power, and, accordingly, the danger of nationalism, seems to be on the decline. It is slow, but it is happening, however the destructive power and the destructiveness of crime are increasing. I am more than determined to change it by working together with BiH authorities, who must commit themselves to this.

Problems affecting the judiciary

DA: How do you intend to deal with that?

HR: Through the institutions. By the end of July, at the latest, I will establish the High Judicial Council and I believe it will become operational. Its task will be to clean up your judicial system. I do not want this to be understood as a comment suggesting that all judges here are bad. There are some good and determined people among them. However, the fact remains that BiH has twice as many judges as Germany, yet they deal with only one quarter of the cases that are dealt with by their colleagues in that country. There are too many people who are rich and who have strong connections and whom

because of this escape unpunished.

I have therefore decided to set up one task force within the OHR, which will deal with these problems. We discuss methods for cleaning up the situation within the judiciary, a group (led by Zoran Pajic and consisting mainly of BiH citizens) suggests legislative amendments, and these are proposed to facilitate the arrest of criminals and thieves, as well as facilitating the creation of new jobs.

We will also create one unit that will deal with serious violations of law and corruption. It will support actions undertaken by the domestic authorities in order to find the perpetrators and bring them to justice.

I want to emphasise that I am determined to have those who have violated the laws brought before courts enable them to have a fair trial, and, if they are proven guilty, get them convicted in accordance with law. I will particularly target those involved in trafficking in human beings, budgetary and public funds abuses, and those who are corrupt.

DA: Have you already detected your main opponents here?

HR: This is a beautiful country with bright future and I do not see anything that may prevent you from becoming as prosperous as Slovenia and moving closer to Europe as is Croatia, and becoming equally as important as these two countries. Your ethnic mixture is a great advantage and all you need is to trust yourselves and be less patient with your politicians and civil servants. Trust the forces of change.

Election expectations

DA: Speaking of the changes, the elections are approaching. What do you expect?

HR: I would rather say what I hope for and what I fear. I am afraid that people will not be willing to vote. I have talked

to many people who do not intend to vote. They do not believe in changes, their politicians have let them down, and I am very much afraid that fewer people will go to the polls and vote. This would be wrong. Reforms are necessary and those who want to carry them out must be given a chance. Should this not happen, we will not succeed. There are two more weeks left until the end of registration and I am afraid that people do not understand that the fate of this country may depend on it.

I do not expect that people will forget the past, but I expect that they will rather focus on the future.

DA: Do you have a political favourite? Some of our politicians are already saying that they are your friends, and that you and the OHR support them and their parties.

HR: I have many friends, but it does not mean that I politically support them. Just to avoid any misunderstanding, I neither support anyone individually nor do I support any party. Let the people of this country decide whom they will give their vote to. I will support actions and programmes. Anyone who offers that – will have my support.

DA: After the last elections, the Alliance for Change was created with the assistance of the international community. Is it possible that the international community does the same thing again?

HR: I think that the situation is now more mature and that people have a greater knowledge of politics and trust in democracy more. I want to emphasise that my policy now and in the future will be to support actions and programmes, and not individuals and certain parties. For me, it is important what people will do here, and not what they will say.

DA: BiH is already facing a number of scandals which have shaken even this government. Abuses in the RS Customs Administration, the RS Army spying on SFOR, the AM Sped affair has shaken the Federation Government, obviously great problems

in the Federation of BiH Ministry of Interior…

HR: Regarding the Customs Administration, this issue is quite clear. Accusations have been made and they have to be checked through the appropriate legal procedure. However, this case clearly shows how necessary and essential judicial reform is.

With regard AM Sped, it is a very important case for me. I am very concerned about what I read in this regard in the newspapers. I have been closely following this case and I expect a detailed report about everything by the end of this week.

DA: Is it true that you said to Prime Minister Behmen that you would remove Minister Maslesa, should it be necessary?

HR: I talk a lot with a number of people. In this concrete case, it is very important for me to have the legal procedure complied with. I think it was not the case here.

Crazy BiH laws

HR: If someone who fills out an arms registration form writes something incorrect, he may go to jail. If a police officer pulls over somebody carrying a gun without registration, nothing happens. Isn't this an example of crazy laws.

If you want to start an illegal business, it takes one day in BiH. In order to start a legal business, it takes one hundred days. I want people to know that I am aware of the grey economy present here and that I understand that bad laws simply chase the successful people away.

Implementation of imposed decisions

HR: Some people in the RS argue that decisions made by my predecessor on the establishment of the High Judicial Council are wrong. I do not think so. I absolutely support and I will persevere in implementing everything that Petritsch imposed – there is a legal way to review those decisions.

I believe that these decisions were correct and nobody should have any doubt or challenge my resoluteness to establish this important body.

The High Judicial Council is essential. I do not believe, and it should not be the case, that allegations from the RS will slow down the whole process.

I have no bags of gold

HR: I was welcomed here with, I am afraid, excessive expectations. I can understand this after the hard times you have gone through. However, I am not a wizard who will resolve everything. I have no bags of gold to squander. The solution can be found in the rule of law and therefore I emphasised the following in my inaugural speech: first justice, than jobs, through reform. It takes time and patience. And the bulk of the work has to be done by you – the peoples of BiH.

Arresting Karadzic and Mladic

HR: I am absolutely sure of the determination of SFOR and NATO to do this job. I wish I had the same feeling about the RS authorities and the obligation that they have to fulfil in order to facilitate justice. For me, the question of their arrest is not if, but when. I have been a soldier and I know it is not easy, but I am convinced that SFOR and NATO will do it.

It is clear that there cannot be sustainable peace without that essential part – justice. Our progress will be faster and more successful once these arrests have taken place and I am therefore applying a great pressure to get it done as soon as possible.