Interview: Paddy Ashdown, the High Representative for BiH:”We don’t have favourites “

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There will be a discussion on the regional principle of rule of law in London on 25 November You should always disregard 60% of politicians’ statements made during elections* Do not doubt that people of this country will know how to recognise reformists during the forthcoming elections*

Paddy Ashdown: The international community will not falsify the results of the elections because we do not control the election process, end even if we did, we would not do so.

BiH will implement these elections in whole and we do not play any role therein. It is clear to me that BiH is a place where it is possible to hear various conspiracy theories.

Yet, even if the international community wanted to interfere in the election process, which I once again do not think could happen, we do not have favourites in these elections. What I am telling you is the ultimate truth: we do not have favourites in these elections, the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Paddy Ashdown, told “Dnevni Avaz”.

We made this interview during our drive between Stolac and Trebinje, which was interrupted on several occasions by Ashdown’s exclamations of admiration for the beautiful landscape of this part of Herzegovina.

Maturity of Voters

Dnevni Avaz: If this was the case before, I do not understand why you don’t have favourites now?

Paddy Ashdown: Simply because it would be wrong. Some might feel better if we had “our” candidates, as this was the case before, but this would not be correct. The political circumstances/environment in BiH has matured. I think that the biggest mistake made by politicians, and maybe even by journalists, is that they keep underestimating the voters.

I think that Bosnians simply do no want anyone, including us from the international community, to tell them how to vote. Should this happen, it would render an utterly opposite result. In simple terms, the political environment here is mature and we can rely on the intelligence of the voters.

Dnevni Avaz: But you have been telling people how to vote, you tell them to vote for reforms.

Paddy Ashdown: No. We do not tell them how to vote. I think that it is clear that the future of this country lies in reforms. I am a servant of the Dayton Agreement and the people of BiH and I must speak in open terms and ensure that this country becomes a part of Europe. I think that this is what the people want. They also want a successful state and this requires reforms.

Dnevni Avaz: And the reformists are those who practise reforms. Who are they? Where are they? In the Alliance? The Party for BiH? SDP or SDA? In all parties or in none?

Paddy Ashdown: You will certainly not trap me into answering such a question. Do not doubt that the people of this country will know how to recognise the reformists in the forthcoming elections. Your questions are well designed, yet I will not answer as you suggest me to do.

Constitutional Arrangements

Dnevni Avaz: At the beginning of you mandate you also raised the issue of the internal structure of BiH as a problem. You were thinking aloud as to whether this country should be rearranged, the powers of municipalities increased, cantons abolished, Entities dissolved, the state decentralised…

Paddy Ashdown: I said that we would have to discuss it eventually. Someone asked me whether we should discuss it immediately. My answer is negative. I think that we should focus on justice and employment. If we are able to provide people with jobs, progress and economic security, it will be easier to open constitutional issues. This issue is therefore not our priority, but it will have to be raised eventually.

Dnevni Avaz: What is the international community expecting from you?

Paddy Ashdown: On several occasions they have told me: Paddy, go there and realise the reforms. If BiH is truly reformed, we will be with you. If you fail, we will certainly not leave the country, yet we have other priorities throughout the world. It could well happen that the international community stays here merely in order to prevent instability in the region, which would endanger reforms and progress in other countries.

Dnevni Avaz: But the neighbouring countries have again and again raised the issue of the sovereignty of this state. Look at the declarations of Kostunica and Djindjic.

Paddy Ashdown: I would really ignore what these persons have said. Generally, during elections, you should always disregard 60 percent of politicians' statements. This country will not return to the past. You have 12,000 soldiers who secure your right to vote for the future, because the past will not be restored.

The whole world is committed to preserve the BiH borders and

everyone in Serbia knows that any suggestion to change the borders would deprive them of the opportunity to join Europe. This will not happen. All politicians are trying to scare voters into voting for them. Do not listen to them.

Door to Europe

Dnevni Avaz: Rasim Kadic has suggested that the accession of BiH, Serbia and Croatia into the European mainstream should be linked. In this way the neighbours could not rush at BiH as they please…

Paddy Ashdown: He has a very good point. My task is to help your integration in Europe. Yet for all people in the Balkan I have only one message – beware. The door to Europe will not remain so widely open forever. Once we realise what is the price of the forthcoming extension, this opening may grow narrower.

I therefore suggest to my friends in the Balkans that they should not hesitate too long in front of the door to Europe as supplicants begging to be let in. It would be much better if you combine in a powerful economic space that will enter Europe as a valuable resource. Do not count on it that begging for mercy and appeals could be your admission ticket to Europe.

Dnevni Avaz: In a recent interview for "Dnevni Avaz" Javier Solana announced Balkan conferences which would discuss various sets of issues that would improve the situation in this region.

Paddy Ashdown: This concerns a meeting that will be held on 25 November in London. Numerous representatives of the International Community will attend it as well as representatives of the countries in this region. I will certainly be there. On one occasion, during my discussion with Prime Minister Blair, I suggested that we should remedy our mistake. The only single space that exists here is the Mafia

space. They are united, and we are not. We do not have a single economic space, single market, single democratic terrain or civilian space. If the Mafia can operate at the level of the region, we have to do the same. This is the intention of the conference, where we will discuss order and the rule of law here, not borders or similar issues. This will not be a new Dayton or anything like that.

I made two “enemies”

Paddy Ashdown: I have been honoured to exercise my mission. My wife and I have grown attached to this country. We plan to buy a house here. This will extend my stay here beyond my present mission. I do not know whether I will stay here two or three years. You must ask this question of my bosses in the European capitals, and my wife too. Over the past period I have made two “enemies” in BiH: the first one is the lack of self-confidence among extremely talented and gifted local people. I can understand this. It has only been six years since the terrible war ended, yet I believe that people will recover from this shock.

My second “enemy” is the impatience of the International Community. It has been only six years! And we accomplished here in BiH much more over this period than in Northern Ireland or the Basque country within 30 years. And I keep reiterating to persons from the International Community that they should not give up and withdraw as they are on the threshold of victory. I think that they will not withdraw.

Karadzic cannot stop us

Paddy Ashdown: It is clear that the page of the war in BiH cannot be closed without three things: completion of the return process of refugees, arrest of Karadzic and Mladic and full reconstruction of the Old Bridge in Mostar. When this happens, the past will be put entirely behind us.

One thing is clear to me – the position, especially of

Karadzic, is clear indeed – he cannot stop us. He can slow us down, yet his obstructions while he is wandering across Zelengora Mountain, hiding even from goats and shepherds, cannot prevent reforms. His arrest indeed has been pending for too long now, yet his influence has grown weak. If people want reforms, they will be implemented regardless of what he thinks or advocates.

Large-scale reforms must start after 5 October

Dnevni Avaz: What do you expect after 5 October, 2002

Paddy Ashdown: I will tell you what has to be done. Large-scale reforms must start after 5 October so as to take this country to the front of the queue for accession to Europe, and not to leave it behind. I think that BiH has potential to do so. However the pace of reform must be expedited and we must shift to the following phase – from justice to employment. The authorities of this country must be more efficient and cost effective and the political space must be cleaned up.

Furthermore, we have to comply with obligations to implement economic reforms, create a single economic space, simplify the taxation procedure, introduce a more efficient customs policy . . . the bottom line is that this must be the most attractive investment area in the Balkans. In Croatia investment per head of population amounts to 324 KM, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina it amounts to just 24 KM. This must change. Furthermore, we will raise standards in politics. The Grabovac case was the first example to this effect and the next step will be a discussion as to whether the Law on Immunity should be changed, principles of ethical conduct introduced for politicians…