

Farewell Press Conference by the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch

Holiday Inn, Sarajevo, Friday 24 May 2002

Alexandra Stiglmayer, Senior Spokesperson: Hello and thank you for coming to this last press conference by the High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch. As we already are a little bit late, I'll give the podium to Mr. Petritsch straight away.

Wolfgang Petritsch, High Representative: This today is not only the last press conference, this is a farewell press conference. Let me start out, and also apologize for being a bit late, but I visited the Euro Info Center on my way here. I was very much impressed, I must tell you, by what has been achieved with the creation of this Center. In a way, this illustrates what the consistent theme of my three years in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been – which is also illustrated by my book, “From Dayton to Europe.” I think in many ways you have arrived now in Europe. This Info Center is an example of how, step by step, Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is geographically of course part of Europe, is also becoming, more and more, institutionally, politically and so on, part of this uniting Europe. You know, the integration of Europe is a very slow and cumbersome process. So is the establishment of statehood for Bosnia and Herzegovina also a very slow and cumbersome process.

I am not going to go too much into details now. I am not going to comment on the 42 decisions that I have signed over the past 36 hours. I would just like to make a few personal comments and remarks.

Actually, as the High Representative here I was quite

frequently forced to display what we call in our language *Zweckoptimismus*, which can be translated as a certain kind of optimism with a purpose, with a goal – to see more that the glass is half full rather than half empty. There were times when I doubted that this country would ever become a viable state, that it would overcome certain problems. Nevertheless, I pretended to be optimistic because I think it is very important to have a positive attitude, a can-do attitude: problems can be overcome. But let's not call them problems, let's call them challenges. It's like in sports: it's like for a mountain climber to overcome difficulties and dangers. I think this spirit is what this country needs and this has to be expressed, of course, through the people and with the people.

There were, of course, many moments where I doubted that this could ever become a country. I know, we all know, it is still very divided. But it has closed ranks and it has become so much more of a state than I would have believed could happen three years ago when I arrived. I am now thoroughly confident, not any longer optimistic, but concretely confident, based on the concrete achievements and progress that you have achieved here in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Of course, the journey to Europe – which is so well exemplified in this Euro Info Center with so many brochures, beautiful books and information – this road to Europe will be quite bumpy still. There is also always the imminent danger that you could lose direction. That's why I considered it so important to steer the course. It can be done and it can be achieved. I know this from my own historic experience.

I come from a country that only several decades ago was probably in a similar situation as Bosnia and Herzegovina is now. A country that nobody wanted, no citizen in Austria wanted this country. There's even a slogan that attests to this fact. We went through many difficulties, and we overcame these difficulties. The disaster of Second World War finally

brought home the message to the Austrians that we need to take a radically different course. And you, as a post-war state and society, should also think in these terms: to take a radically different course. You have the goal in front of you: that is Europe and the European Union. I know that you can do this. Of course, again it is the example of Austria for me personally that convinced me that these small steps, very frustrating work, make sense because you must not lose the vision that a viable Bosnia and Herzegovina is indeed possible and that it can indeed become part of the European Union eventually. I think this continued confidence and continued can-do attitude is what I consider so important.

During my tenure here, I did not have too much time, unfortunately, to spend with what I would call the “real people” – the ordinary people, returnees, people who have to fight in every day life for survival – because I was tied down in my office to prepare the necessary Decisions and to do sometimes very boring, bureaucratic work. But these were for me the most impressive and the most touching moments in my three years here – when I saw the vitality of the returnees coming back to try to re-establish themselves. I mentioned yesterday in my speech the example of a couple in Srebrenica – returnees putting in place jobs for themselves with an Ascinica.

Here in Sarajevo where I used to go jogging – unfortunately less and less so – past the Kozija Cuprija, I have over time seen the return of Serbs, among them an old couple living there now under dismal circumstances in UNHCR-provided homes. But they are surviving, and they are more confident than they were two years ago when they first returned. It’s also so touching for me to see how much they feel as belonging to this city of Sarajevo because this is where they were born. This is where they used to work and where they spent most of their lives.

The other weekend when I took my son Nikola to the Bascarsija,

I bought from one of the women there feed for the pigeons. She told me she is back now in her home in Dobrinja IV – an arbitration Decision that I had to take. These are the examples that I believe are so important and illustrative also of the progress this country is making.

I know I have already mentioned this on several occasions because it has been a constant source of concern and difficulty for me personally – the many removals and dismissals and the tough Decisions that I had to take. I was always acutely aware that these are human beings, that they have their lives and that I am interfering in their lives.

So of course I was very glad when, at the end of the year 2000, the Alliance for Change arrived: a reform-minded government that, in the beginning of 2001, took over and expressed commitment to statehood, to the idea and concept of a state of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This, I think, was the most decisive moment – a watershed situation in Bosnia's recent history. I am much more confident now that these reform-minded forces will continue to be in place, that they will succeed and that you, the citizens of this country, will succeed together with them.

Of course, this is still an uphill battle for the country. You still have to face a lot of difficult problems, but it is my hope and vision that, in spite of all of these necessary, fundamental changes in order to modernize this country, that this country and its people will preserve their hospitality, their sense of humor and this kind of lightheartedness that I have enjoyed so much.

I would like to close with a quote from George Soros that I read to the people invited to the last Civic Forum last Saturday, about the idea of a modern, open society. In it, George Soros reflects the ideas of an Austrian-born philosopher, Karl Popper, and speaks about the necessary imperfection of everything we are doing. It reads: "Our

understanding is inherently imperfect. The ultimate truth, the perfect design for society, is beyond our reach. We must therefore content ourselves with the next best thing: a form of social organization that falls short of perfection but holds itself open to improvement.”

That is the concept of the open society – a society open to improvement. This is, in fact, the legacy I’d like to leave: this idea that process, improvement and constant work in order to improve the lot and the life of this country and its people is what is so important.

I would like also to thank you very much for your support and, sometimes, for the difficulties you have provided me. But I think it has been a very interesting and intense and very good time. Thank you.

Stiglmyer: I’m sorry for crying, but this is very emotional. Questions?

Question: Ambassador Petritsch, it is very difficult to ask you ordinary questions after such an emotional speech. But you probably wouldn’t leave without telling us more about what you wanted really to accomplish by these latest Decisions you imposed, and especially by the judicial reform package.

High Representative: The last Decisions that I have taken, were, of course, prepared over many months. We had been working on preparing the ground for what I would call the final phase of peace implementation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It’s about those building blocks of a modern society that are now, in my opinion, safely in place. It’s the judicial reform and it’s the civil service reform, as the backbone of a modern society, particularly one that is multi-ethnic and as complex as yours. It’s also police reform, which we successfully managed and which will be now implemented in full. Yesterday we had a very important meeting with the key actors of Bosnian politics. It is also, of course, public broadcasting reform,

yet another building block of a modern European state. It is, not the least, the ongoing military reform – the downsizing, the rightsizing of the military. I think the least that you need is a military and armies that are basically eyeing each other and not really taking care of the security and sovereignty of your state.

So these are now the elements that are in place. I think that Paddy Ashdown will now be able to move much more decisively and faster in the implementation of these necessary ingredients, I would say, of a modern society.

When it comes to the reform of the judiciary, of course it is a very thorough, a very invasive, a very robust and a time-limited reform. Within the next two years you will see a wholly new judicial system with the necessary modern laws, with the necessary training institutes in place. Many of the professionals here – and I'm not just talking about the judiciary – are simply not up to the challenges that a modern society has to confront and overcome. It is a kind of paradoxical situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina that, because of these weak and outdated structures, you invite, so to speak, all the illegal activities – organized crime and so on. Therefore it is so important to get now this final leg, so to speak, of judicial reform successfully into place.

These Decisions that I have been taken now and signed yesterday are indeed of historic importance for Bosnia and Herzegovina. But you have to see all these blocks together. It is this kind of holistic view that you have to apply when it comes to appreciating and understanding properly what has happened over the past couple of days. With these Decisions, I firmly believe that you and your institutions now have the necessary instruments in place to succeed.

Question: Mr. Petritsch, the RS leadership said they are appalled by your latest Decisions, in particular by the amendments to the RS Constitution concerning the judiciary,

the nomination of judges. They have announced that they will file a complaint to the BiH Constitutional Court, and Mr. Sarovic said he would call a meeting of senior officials on Monday. What is your comment?

High Representative: Well, I tell you, of course there are going to be all sorts of negative or critical responses. That is in the nature of such thorough reforms. One of the main problems – and the reason why the International Community is here and why you have a High Representative – is that the top political leaders in this country are not always up to the challenges of the 21st century. The responses sometimes sort of date back to the 19th century. I think we need to persevere here. You need to fully support these reforms. You are now in probably the most crucial reform phase of recent history. For many years you were kind in a “No man’s land” somehow in between. With the constitutional reforms you actually established a fair and level playing ground for all the citizens throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this way, the two Entities have become less relevant and more administrative units.

But this was only the beginning, and therefore I decided before I leave to make life for Paddy Ashdown easier here, and to speed up things to enable the International Community to leave this country as early as possible. But we will not leave this country before you are inside Europe, and firmly anchored in Europe institutionally. That is the reason I was fighting so hard for your country’s accession to the Council of Europe – under European conditions, of course, and not as a free ticket for some nationalist or separatist groups, parties or politicians, but for those who appreciate and support the idea and the concept of a state of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The same also applies, of course, to all the other reform efforts that we are undertaking. Sometimes they hurt, but they are necessary and will have a very positive impact.

Also in Republika Srpska, particularly now in view of the recent customs scandal that is evolving, I think every politician there is well advised to welcome the reform of the judiciary, including the president and the government in Banja Luka. This is to their benefit if they understand well and correctly what this means. And I would advise everybody to read the Decisions very carefully because this is a very sensitive reform. In all its robustness, it takes into consideration the status quo of Bosnia and Herzegovina: the complex set-up, the sensibilities of the Entities. But only to the degree necessary, so that in the end, after we are finished with this reform in about two years' time, you will have a better qualified judiciary in place. This is a service for the people and every politician should understand and, consequently, support this.

Question: Ambassador Petritsch, is there anything you feel, looking back on your two and a half years here, that you thought afterwards was a mistake to have done? Actions you regretted, instances where it would have been better not to have taken action?

High Representative: I was always considered somebody who acts decisively but thinks beforehand. Sometimes this was interpreted as if I'm sort of hesitating to make decisions. Whenever I hesitated there were always good reasons for it. Therefore I believe I can say now with some confidence that there's actually nothing that I regretted.

However, I do regret that this country is not moving faster ahead. I regret that the economy is still in dire straits and so many people are suffering. I regret that there is not greater support on the part of the local authorities – I'm talking about authorities down to the local level – to support the people and citizens of this country more, to see themselves more as public servants and not so much as bureaucrats. This I regret, but at the same time I realize that this is a matter of time. Societal changes are

slow, and unfortunately this is a fact we need to appreciate and simply accept. Things are, in fact, changeable. So I believe that I can say that most of my programs and plans have worked out, although it may not have always been done in time. But I think this is, in a way, what characterizes the Balkans. I can say this because I consider myself as being from the Balkans.

Question: Mr. Ambassador, can you tell us what will be your next professional work or job, and will that job be linked with Bosnia, and how?

High Representative: My next job will be to relax...

Question: Your professional job!

High Representative: ... and professionally I am moving to Geneva to be the permanent representative Ambassador of Austria to the United Nations and the World Trade Organization.

Stiglmeier: Thank you.