

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative for BiH, for Globus: “Man who dethroned HDZ from power in BiH”

Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative of the International Community in BiH, on the occasion of his leaving of this position in which he will be succeeded by well-known British politician Lord Paddy Ashdown is giving a review of his mandate: **Billions of Kunas sent from Zagreb disappeared in Hercegovacka Banka**

Robbery: Croatia paid 1,16 billion Kunas for war veterans, who did not receive money, in Hercegovacka Banka

Church: Certainly, Catholic Church as a co-owner of Hercegovacka Banka, would not want to be part of a criminal association.

After three years in the role of Governor of a post-war BiH, Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative of the International Community in Sarajevo, leaves to a new position in Geneva. Lord Paddy Ashdown, the well-known British politician will come to his position.

Globus: Has BiH really become a state?

WP: It is still a weak state, however, an increasing number of its citizens support it now. The political life has changed even in the Republika Srpska where the level of acceptance of BiH was always lowest.

Globus: According to your information, how many displaced persons have returned so far?

WP: I believe that in total we have 50 %. Croat population has big problems with return to the Republika Srpska, however, I believe that we have created conditions for return through the recent constitutional changes. I believe that these constitutional changes are the biggest success of my three-year mandate in BiH. About 140,000 Croats displaced from BiH now live in Croatia and according to our information only about 20,000 of them want to return. It is a big problem.

Nationalistic games

Globus: Recently, while entering Mostar, I saw, next to the big board carrying the name of the City, an equally big sign ‘Bleiburg’. Your Office has often had poor communication with the Croat corpus in BiH, especially in Mostar?

WP: I know what Bleiburg meant to the Croat people. It is a place not far away from the town in which I was born. I also know about the roots of the tragedy and that is why I think that everybody should understand that people should live together. There is no need, today, more than fifty years later, for one to live with the shadow of Bleiburg. Bleiburg should be understood as a historical lesson. Mostar can not be Mostar without coexistence.

Globus: One of the unsolved episodes which has not been seen through completely is the Hercegovacka Banka in Mostar, in which you installed the provisional administration more than a year ago. Could one finally talk about the results of the investigation?

WP: A year after we installed the provisional administration in the Hercegovacka Banka it is quite clear that all our suspicions were true. In addition, some things that we could not expect were discovered. The Hercegovacka Banka was obviously a part of a wider strategy aimed at de-stabilising, and even destroying BiH as a state. *The New York Times* and *Time* carried in the texts written by their journalists that the problem of the Hercegovacka Banka was the one that possibly, to the biggest extent, imperilled the Dayton Agreement. I agree with that. Had we not reacted, we would have had a political and economic problem, and clearly, serious organised crime. We cut off the uncontrolled influx of money to the separatists and stopped their biggest source of financing. On the other hand, we prevented the Federation from falling apart. As the HDZ illegally proclaimed Croat self-rule a year ago, it was from that Bank the Croat officers were offered bigger salaries if they left the Federation Army. When we took over the Bank, they were not able any more to offer bigger salaries than the military salaries.

Very dangerous was also a boycott of taxes, boycott of customs in conditions of a weak, newly-established financial system. Of course, there was a criminal side as well, which we are slowly uncovering now, step by step, through the investigative bodies and courts in charge of further procedure. It will be seen how wide and how organized was the political-criminal network around the Hercegovačka Banka.

One of our tasks is to protect the citizens from dubious bankers, to protect their savings deposits. Therefore, we immediately started returning the money to the depositors of the Bank. So far nearly 5000 depositors have received their money back. A couple of insiders in the Hercegovačka Banka grabbed all privileges, took big loans without returning them and were not requested by anybody to pay the money back.

Annual support

Globus: Annual support from Croatia was also pouring down to the accounts in the Hercegovačka Banka...

WP: Although the decisions about the money were made within a small group of people, Croatian support was intended for the whole Croat population. I will give you an example from the year 1999. At that time the Croatian Government paid in one billion and one hundred and sixty million kunas for war veterans, the Croat Council of Defense (HVO), families of killed soldiers and other purposes. I can state with full responsibility that a larger part of that money never reached the beneficiaries. What I have just told you is only one example, only the year 1999.

Globus: Where did the money end up?

WP: We are reconstructing thousands of documents step by step in order to get the data about all transactions. That goes very slowly because the databases have been destroyed. Employees of the Hercegovačka Banka tried to delete all the data, however, as you know, the modern technology of computer hard discs is such that the data cannot be irreversibly deleted. We have managed to restore all the entries, thousands of documents pertaining to various transactions.

Globus: You resolutely claim that the Hercegovačka Banka served a number of HDZ officials, however, the co-owner of that bank is also the Herzegovina Franciscan Province, that is, the Catholic Church.

WP: We have to pay tribute to the Catholic Church that surely would not like to be a part of a criminal association in any way. However, I believe that full cooperation with the authorities is in the interest of the Church in order to prove that there has not been any involvement in criminal activities. There is a great interest for that among the highest Church authorities in BiH and I have personally informed Cardinal Puljić about various phases of the procedure on several occasions. I wanted us to preserve good relations when it comes to such sensitive issues.

Apartheid in heavy industry

We shall not allow discrimination of Bosniaks in Aluminij

Globus: The Mostar Combine Aluminij, which is worth almost half of the economy of the whole state, is a crucial mechanism of the economic power of BiH Croats. Are you satisfied with the situation in Aluminij?

WP: Not at all. Aluminij is the most important for the economic recovery of the region, however, also for the process of reconciliation. Obviously, in terms of economy Aluminij is very successful, however, at the same time we still have some forms of apartheid which we do not want to accept and which we shall never accept. Eventually, different treatment of employees will endanger the economic prosperity of Aluminij. For each big foreign company which does business with Aluminij and we are aware that some famous world concerns are among them, the facts about unequal rights of Croats and Bosniaks are utterly unpleasant. It is a question of time as to when some of these companies will start looking for a new supplier. I openly warned Mijo Brajkovic, the CEO of Aluminij, of this situation. They earn a lot of money, however, it cannot be a justification for a different treatment of Croats and Bosniaks. Also, Aluminij has to respect some moral norms.