

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative in BiH: “World Bank halts BiH Donor Conference”

For half a year now, we have been waiting for the fulfillment of a number of preconditions set by the European Union. * Beginning of ‘encouraging cooperation’ between Lagumdzija’s Administration and Entity governments. * The International Community stays committed to its Dayton responsibilities in BiH.

Wolfgang Petritsch, the most senior representative of the International Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina is returning from his visit to the United States with two important pieces of news. One is positive and expected: in New York during his talks with UN officials, and with the foreign ministers of Spain and Portugal – who are in January to take over the chairmanship of the European Union and the OSCE respectively – he received strong assurances that the UN and the key European institutions will remain firmly engaged in implementing the Dayton peace agreement.

The other piece of news, rather less pleasant – with which he departed for Sarajevo from Washington – was also not unexpected. He learned at World Bank headquarters that a scheduled donors’ conference for BiH will be put on hold until 18 conditions for a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU have been fulfilled. The European Union has tasked the central authorities and the leadership of the two Entities in BiH with ensuring that the conditions are fulfilled.

"This program of future work, required by the EU, was to be prepared by mid-year [2001], however, this is still not done," said Petritsch in an interview with SENSE immediately before his departure from Washington D.C. "Unfortunately, until these conditions are met, the World Bank and the EU will not be able to organize the scheduled donors' conference. Potential donors are staying on the sidelines until BiH shows the required results and drafts a program for future development. We are in a situation where it is becoming increasingly clear that the responsibility for further progress in development in BiH is being transferred to local authorities."

Despite the present stagnation, the highest international representative in BiH is an optimist and believes that Lagumdžija's central government in Sarajevo – having achieved "significantly better cooperation" with the Entity governments – will succeed in keeping BiH on the course which was set six years ago in Dayton. "One can finally regard [the authorities], both in Sarajevo and in Banja Luka, as a team capable of resolving problems. For example, they demonstrated a readiness to achieve a compromise with regard to the Election Law. A good compromise at that, the sort of compromise which will be needed in the future as well. For, there are numerous contentious issues which could, realistically, be resolved by compromise, and that is the essence and the wisdom of modern politics," said Petritsch, adding that the symptoms of this "policy of compromise" are starting to emerge at the State and Entity level in BiH – which is, as he notes, "good in comparison to the previous situation, but not enough in reference to the needs of the present moment."

Speaking about a problem which has completely preoccupied the International Community, Wolfgang Petritsch told us that it is his impression, from the UN General Assembly Summit in New York and from his high-level conversations in the State Department, that the present engagement of all available means

in the fight against international terrorism will not have a negative effect on the unfinished business of the International Community in BiH.

This primarily refers to the search for indicted war criminals, where – as Petritsch stressed – “special encouragement” has recently come from RS Prime Minister Mladen Ivanic, who expressed a readiness to consistently implement the Law on Cooperation with The Hague, which was adopted last month by the RS National Assembly.

“This situation is very clear: as long as the indicted war criminals, in particular Karadzic and Mladic, are beyond the reach of justice, one cannot count on the full normalization of the situation in BiH – the normalization which would include the reduction or the end of the international military presence,” Petritsch said. “In the meantime, my interlocutors here have assured me that, despite some new international priorities, the USA will not leave unfinished a single task it has accepted by signing the Dayton Agreement.”

In about six months, Wolfgang Petritsch, will end his mandate in Sarajevo. Asked how he sees his mission – in particular, the initiative to streamline the International Community’s activities in BiH – Petritsch told SENSE: “The International Community is interested in creating a responsible partnership with local authorities in both Entities. However, there is a special problem in relations with the Republika Srpska. It is necessary that politicians in Banja Luka understand the need for cooperation – among themselves and with politicians in the Federation – in the process of building a single state. Without the BiH state, capable of moving closer and one day joining the EU, there will be no Republika Srpska. I have the impression that most politicians in the RS are finally beginning to understand this.”