

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative "The International Community Will Leave When Bosnia Enters Europe"

*The leading politicians in this country believe that they can go on with their ethnic games * This is the last chance for Bosnia to receive sufficient support, not only for the return of refugees but also for the overall reconstruction and all the projects here * Some politicians can postpone, but cannot prevent the people from returning * General elections in November will be crucial*

Wolfgang Petritsch, High Representative of the International Community in BiH, says that the international community will leave BiH when this country enters Europe. In the manner of an experienced diplomat, he explains the reasons for his commitment, the current needs of BiH, the requests made by the international community to the ruling structures, in an interview which given to Mirko Sagolj, editor in chief, and Amra Kebo, journalist, during his recent visit to Oslobodjenje...

Q: Ambassador Petritsch, before the Brussels conference you warned the world public that the international community must not give up Bosnia now. The same warning was uttered by Ambassador Robert Barry, as he spoke before the Congressional Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe. How long will the international community stay here?

“What Ambassador Barry said in Washington at Capitol Hill, the seat of the US Congress, is that we all agree that the international community should stay in BiH, that it should not give it up. But, of course, that time has its limits. With respect to the fact that BiH is the country which has received most help in the recent history, one should keep in mind the tax-payers in our countries who put aside money for our involvement. What is needed now is a smooth transition from an aid-driven economy to an independent and sustainable economy.

I believe that the key task now – as has also been stressed by the PIC in Brussels – is for the international community to receive clear signals from the local citizens, local politicians and ruling structures that they are ready to take things into their hands, to get serious and take over their responsibilities.

On the other hand, I also believe that it is important for the international community itself to realise that we should not talk about an exit strategy, but, as I tend to say lately, that we should rather speak about an entry strategy for BiH into European integration processes, which will automatically mean that such a large presence of the international community in BiH will no longer be necessary.

However, Bosnia itself should become more active in that field. The institutions in this country, as well as its politicians, should understand that it is now time to take over the responsibility and those tasks which have in the past been done by the international community for them. I believe that in that aspect the media have a very important role to play.

What we now do in BiH is no longer physical reconstruction, reconstruction of bridges, buildings and houses, although of course some of that is still going on. However, now we primarily work on other things. In that sense we should appeal more to the hearts and minds of the people living in this

country. Only when the physical infrastructure starts being used in the right way and when it comes into the right hands, only then will we be able to speak about the creation of a functioning state of BiH. We are leaving once you enter Europe."

This is the Only Right Way for BiH

Q:You came to BiH only a couple of days after the New Your Times published a text on corruption in BiH. You started at a vigorous pace and continued that way until this very day. Are you satisfied with the results?

"You are right when you say that from the very beginning the rhythm was remarkable, and it has remained that way. That is simply essential, because the task we have here is a great one. I feel that I do that at the highest possible pace. What we are trying to achieve here simply requires these extra efforts, so that everybody in my organisation must work like that. I am not the only one working so much, since all in OHR, but also in other international organisations present here, work very much.

This is a sort of an extreme work situation. Despite such an intense rhythm, I am rather satisfied. I want to do the work I am convinced in and to achieve the goals which are the right ones. In the case of Bosnia I am more than ever convinced in that, more than I was when I came here some ten, eleven months ago. This is the only right way for BiH, there is no alternative, not only for BiH, but also for the entire region, and thus also for Europe. I believe that the success of the wider European project of integration and a united Europe will to a decisively high degree depend on the successful reintegration of Bosnia into Europe."

Q:You have established the principle of "ownership", which implied more ownership on the part of BiH politicians for the destiny of this country. So far you have dismissed many

officials and it seems that you are halfway in that process?

“The reason why at the beginning of my work here I established and publicly announced the concept of “ownership” is, in the first place, because it implies a process. That will not happen overnight and for that reason it was necessary that we point that out in the initial phase of my work and efforts of the entire international community in peace implementation, in order to raise the awareness that a modern state cannot function only with the political class on its top and, so to say, inactive citizens who form a majority. That does not work. Every modern society demands active participation of its citizens in everyday life and in the political, economic and cultural decision-making. What is needed is active participation of citizens who must contribute to the prosperity of society. Since I knew that traditionally and historically such an approach was missing in this region – and there I absolutely also include Austria, where I come from, where the process of civil society and democracy also started late – I knew that we had to start raising the awareness that the citizens of this country should start identifying themselves with the destiny of Bosnia.

“In My Heart I Carry Returnees and the People of Srebrenica”

“Many things have left an impression on me during my stay in BiH. I carry all of those stories in my heart. There are two situations which affect me deeply: when I speak to returnees, and to the survivors of Srebrenica. Returnees throughout BiH impress me with their dedication to rebuilding their lives on the ruins of their old homes.

The survivors of Srebrenica, through the internal tragedy of this country, are coming back to life. Those are the two stories that are closest to my heart.”

The principles of “ownership” and protectorate are opposing principles

Q:Are you of the opinion that the local politicians have understood that message?

“I am sure that there were misunderstandings on all sides in the beginning. At my insistence on the principle of “ownership”, politicians were answering too literally, as if only they had the responsibility for the country and as if they solely knew in which direction this country was to proceed. That is not my opinion. My opinion is that the principle of “ownership” should be established while having a greater accountability of politicians but also a broad and active participation on the part of citizens. On the other hand, there were many intellectuals in this country, many active people who thought that it was too early for that, that it was impossible, because that principle to date has never been applied in this country. They even requested the establishment of a protectorate. This is absolutely contrary to what the concept of “ownership” means. This is wrong also for the reason that the establishment of a protectorate is only an extreme measure, which is the case now in Kosovo, where all state functions have been terminated and where one should really start from scratch. This is not the case with Bosnia, for the reason that certain characteristics and structures of a civil society were in existence here and these should be supported. Therefore, I believe, as I believed at the time I had arrived, that this is the only path to tread on.

Q: Reporters from the Brussels conference have calculated that the Dayton Agreement was mentioned only by Alija Izetbegovic, and in a very vague manner, for that matter. Does this mean that the very idea of the Dayton Agreement is fading away?

“No, I do not think so. The Dayton Agreement is exceedingly a part of the peace process here so it is not necessary to mention it in particular. That is how it is now, and this represents a qualitative change for Bosnia. For, a year ago, before I had arrived here, there had been much talk on the

impossibility of existence of Bosnia, that Croats should be allowed to go and join Croatia, the Serbs should be allowed to go and join Serbia. Now, only a year later and almost five years after the signing of the Dayton Agreement, the fact that Bosnia is a sovereign, independent state and that it will exist in the future, has been absolutely and unquestionably accepted. The problems still exist – and that is the reason the international community is here – but the course mapped out in the Dayton Agreement is correct and accepted. Now what we need is to work on the program set up at the last meeting of the PIC in Brussels. Priorities have been given with the aim of strengthening the implementation of the Dayton model, where it is weak. For instance, in the area of common institutions, which should be strengthened. The Dayton model is a highly decentralized model and requires an efficient central government. This is one of the priorities and this is, as I understand it, the functioning of the Dayton model.”

Q: There are three basic messages from the Brussels conference: economic reform, return of refugees and strengthening of the common institutions. How do you intend to achieve the economic reform, when the national parties control all developments?

” I have decided a long time ago to place the economic reform in the center of our activities, so to that end we have taken numerous measures in order to weaken the political parties’ influence on economic processes. In fact, the separation of economy from the political influence is in question. That is why, in line with the OSCE rules, candidates have to decide whether they will keep a political mandate or a business mandate, if public enterprises are in question. This is the first important step in the separation of the economic sphere from the active politics. This certainly represents a big blow to the interests of the nationalistic parties. But I also have to say that ordinary people, but also those directly affected, accept such a stance more and more. The first step is in

question. The privatization program that is underway will also introduce the idea of separation of the economic and political spheres into the daily practice. The state and ruling parties must understand that their role in politics is regulatory, and that they are no longer actively involved in business spheres.

Q: The abolition of payment bureaus is in progress as well as the transformation of the banking system. You have emphasized these two issues as main obstacles to new investments. How do you see the economic picture of BiH in the future?

“This is one more prerequisite for separating business and politics. We have to create a good banking system, for otherwise there will be no realistic chances for the success of privatization. Not a single private investor will invest money in projects, if he is not sure that rules, regulations and necessary laws, regulating this area, have been set up in the country, that the rule of law has been introduced and that they do business with professionals in the banking sector.

Q: How do you plan to attract investors?

“I am of the opinion that the only way is to create, as soon as possible, the environment which is suitable for investments. You can only create conditions and the environment, but you cannot force investors to invest their money in your country. You can only try and create the best possible environment for investments. Such an environment can be achieved only through the establishment of crystally clear rules and regulations protecting investors, through a good tax system and labor law, a good banking system and independent judiciary, so that every businessman may exercise his rights if a conflict occurs. In addition to that, any abuse or corruption in the political system must be energetically controlled.

US assistance in 14 days, European in a month

Q: The return of refugees has been accelerated during the

first four months but it has not been followed by appropriate financial assistance for reconstruction of houses. Can this be accelerated likewise?

“Here we have a typical example of how the large sums of money granted as international assistance were unused in the past, since the local authorities did not support the returns. The resistance was so overwhelming that the international community simply could not exercise its tasks. Now, when the international funds in BiH are being reduced, the returns are getting accelerated. We have to do our best to convince the international community that we have to support the returns, in spite of the fact that huge funds have been spent to date. For, safe return of refugees is the core issue and the heart of the Dayton”.

Q: European Union granted 50 millions euro for the returns. When will these funds become operational?

” The EU Commissioner Chris Patten and Javier Solana are aware of the need for expedient delivery of the assistance. However, the money is not the solution if there is no cooperation by the local authorities. Too many examples of obstruction are still on the scene. It is my feeling that the leading politicians in this country did not realize the seriousness of the situation. They believe they can continue their ethnic games. But, I can tell you, this is the last chance for BiH for sufficient assistance, not only for the return of refugees but also for the overall reconstruction and all projects here. These are not merely empty words indeed, since time and the money are indubitably running out.

The US Government granted 1.5\$ million to support the spontaneous returns to the eastern part of Republika Srpska. European Union secured 8 million euro for the spontaneous returns and implementation of property laws. US money should arrive in two to three weeks and the EU money, as they promised, in a month or so.

However, there may not be the obstruction by the local housing offices and politicians. This is a huge problem. The things have been moving much faster since we enacted the laws in October. It is right time, people feel much safer and are willing to risk and return. Legislation was finally put in place. However, the commitment and determination by the local politicians are missing.”

Domestic politicians are not there where returnees are

“I am dismayed at the fact that I do not see the politicians from the Government or the Presidency of BiH and other authorities traveling to the places of return, talking with the returnees, encouraging them. That would inherently be additional security for the people showing that their government and politicians are there because of them indeed. Wherever I travel I can see many international representatives from OHR, OSCE, UN, UNHCR who are trying to assist. But I do not see many local politicians. That should also be a part of their task”, criticized Wolfgang Petritsch.

Q: You opened OHR Offices in Srebrenica, Foca and other sensitive places of returns. How do you estimate their work?

“These Offices are the connection between the OHR work at the political level here and the type of macro-management at the local level which is necessary due to lack of local system functioning. I am endeavoring to appoint special envoys of OHR in places which are crucial for the returns. The eastern part of Republika Srpska has been a great problem so far, but, with joint efforts of international organizations, the situation has improved in that part of the country much more than in other parts. This is not yet sufficient, but owing to the efforts of OHR, RRTF (Reconstruction and Return Task Force) and other organizations we are achieving the progress under the most difficult conditions.

General elections will be decisive

Q:Are there any chances for presidential elections to be held concurrently with general elections?

“We are trying, in conjunction with OSCE, to find the mode of succession of a member of the BiH Presidency which will be adequate to the situation, given that this issue is not regulated by the Constitution. General elections in November will be decisive. Therefore, we have to focus on the elections and, in separate actions, seek for the solution for the BiH Presidency, given that presidential elections will be held in 2002.”

Q: How do you assess the implementation of property laws in the Federation, and particularly in the RS?

“I am not satisfied yet. There are problems both in the Federation and the RS. Many politicians have not realised yet that there is no other way. They may delay things, but they cannot prevent people from returning. I think that returnee pressure will speed up return to the areas where it was weak. I do not wish to say whether it is better in the Federation or the RS. We still have big problems in the RS, particularly with the Ministry of Refugees in Banja Luka, which directs the process of implementation of property laws in a rather bad way, even worse than some of its departments in the field. There are still big problems in the area with Croat majority too. But the areas with Bosniak majority are not all great either. We always have to be on alert and keep promoting return. We are now in the middle of the return season; much has been achieved, the numbers are very encouraging, but we are still far away from where we would like to be.”

Transformation of RTV BiH goes well

Q:How do you see the transformation of RTV BiH?

“It is an extremely hard and complicated task. First, one of the really successful stories is the transformation of the broadcasting system and establishment of the Independent Media

Commission. The Transfer Agent now works on the establishment of the Federation TV and announces the formation of a public system at the state level. All in all, I believe, although we have exceeded all deadlines, the project is going on well. The objective I have set is that the public broadcasting system should become an important factor in the peace process. We need such a system in order to provide necessary accurate information to a wider auditorium, so that citizens may identify with the country and take ownership of it. In order to achieve this we need a good public broadcasting system."

Q: If the Federation TV is going to have two channels, one in predominantly Bosnian and one in predominantly Croat language, what will then those who voted for SDP watch? Why did you allow such a division?

"I think that each of the media should be suited to the needs of people. This decision, in fact, reflects a certain moment in the development of this country. I am sure that, once the situation develops, the public broadcasting system will change as necessary. Therefore, I do not see this as a problem, but as a process, as a part of the process of development of the public broadcasting system. Besides, you must bear it in mind that they are not going to be separate channels. They will be complementary channels and the editorial staff and leadership will be common. This is now discussed and being resolved by the Council of the Federation TV and international experts."

Q:How do you see the US involvement after the presidential elections?

"I am completely convinced that the USA will continue with its policy as before. US interests when it comes to Bosnia and Herzegovina are great, because Dayton is a historical achievement in which Americans played the decisive role. That is why I am pretty convinced that USA involvement, which is necessary, will continue."

Q: How do you assess the involvement of EU countries?

“I think that, by holding the PIC meeting in Brussels and accepting the role of the host, the EU signalled that BiH was a European question and that it completely embraced not only the problems of this country but also its possible bright future as a member of the European Union.”

Q: Is there any inconsistency between the USA and EU when it comes to the conditions for accession of BiH to the Council of Europe?

“I do not think there is. We all agree that Bosnia should become a member of the Council of Europe as soon as possible. On the other hand, it is important that the Government of BiH demonstrates decisiveness in fulfilling the conditions agreed in negotiations. Regardless of when Bosnia becomes a member of the Council of Europe, whenever it happens – it needs a Council of Ministers immediately. It is one of the preconditions for accession. But a functioning government is necessary, first of all for the country itself, and only then for the Council of Europe. This also applies to the Election Law. First and foremost of all, it is needed by BiH and its citizens, and secondly, it is a precondition required for the accession to the Council of Europe. All the preconditions and conditions are clearly there for the sake of the benefit of the country. Once they are fulfilled – and I hope it will be soon – I am looking forward to this membership. Because, I expect from the future membership of BiH in the Council of Europe assistance for our efforts here, support for the peace implementation.”

Q: What is your position with regard to the constitutionality of peoples of BiH at the entire territory?

“That decision is before the Constitutional Court and therefore I do not want to comment on it. We need to hear the decision first.

Izetbegovic's great contribution to Bosnia's survival

Q: Can you comment on the announcement of Alija Izetbegovic to withdraw from the Presidency of BiH?

"First of all, I do not wish to comment on this action now because President Izetbegovic is still the Chair of the Presidency of BiH until 12 October. I think we should use this time so that he can be an active President till the last day. I believe that, when President Izetbegovic leaves office, there will be time for historical and political appraisals of his personality. I think he led this country during the worst of times and it is surely something that needs to be analysed. Obviously, his contribution to the survival of the country is great.