

Farewell address to the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch

23 May 2002

COMSFOR; Excellencies; Ambassadors; Ladies and Gentlemen...

It is a short farewell address and I hope you will forgive me if I switch to the local language. But please be assured that my words are not only addressed to the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also to you – for all the extraordinary hard work you have put in during my time here. I know you will give all your support to Lord Paddy Ashdown. He is extremely fortunate in having you as colleagues, colleagues that I am proud to have worked with as part of the same team.

(In the local language:) I wish to say a few words of farewell to you, the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The three years I have spent here as High Representative have for me been the greatest challenge and the most special and fascinating period of my life.

For me, Bosnia and Herzegovina stands for the failures as well as the hopes of modern humanity – failures because we, the International Community, did not stop the war in time. And hopes because I believe we did the right thing when we intervened in the end, and have since then contributed to putting Bosnia and Herzegovina back on its feet.

When I arrived here, this task looked overwhelming. Formally and legally, Bosnia and Herzegovina was one state.

In reality it was a patchwork of different ethnic communities and fiefdoms eyeing each other with suspicion and even outright hostility, and offering little to you, the citizens.

Today, the situation looks dramatically different.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has grown together and become a state – not the most efficient yet, but a state nonetheless. Its leaders – many are present here this evening — and you, citizens, have assumed responsibility to turn your home country into a real home.

For this I would like to thank you. All the achievements of the past three years, the breakthrough in refugee return, the slowly improving economic situation, the functioning of the state institutions, BiH's admission to the Council of Europe, the ground-breaking Mrakovica-Sarajevo Agreement – you have made these things possible.

It is important to stress that behind all these achievements, there are human stories.

When I was in Srebrenica two days ago, I came across a small Ascinica that was recently opened by a returnee couple. On the stove traditional Bosnian dishes were cooking – sogan dolma and sis cevap -, while a few guests were sitting at the tables chatting. The owner told me that it is not easy for them, but that he and his family can live from this business and that they are happy that they have returned to their home.

Three years ago, this would have been impossible.

Such encounters, of which I had too few during my time in BiH, are the ones that have always given me the strength to continue my work.

It is the High Representative's responsibility to establish the framework for democracy to function. All my Decisions of the last three years have been intended to improve the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Yet, some of these Decisions were difficult for me to take, in particular those with which I removed certain officials – after all, they are people with their lives and hopes.

Of course, I have to mention the Mrakovica-Sarajevo Agreement.

This was a genuine compromise. And compromise will always be important in a country such as Bosnia and Herzegovina. The continual, at times frustrating negotiation of a common future is the essence of democracy. That's why this Agreement is so important.

Your accession to the Council of Europe last month shows just how far you have travelled. Of one thing you must be certain: your future is in Europe.

Undoubtedly, there are many serious issues left for my successor, Paddy Ashdown, to deal with. But I believe he has a solid foundation on which to build, and I hope he will have your support.

The goal is clear, the course has been charted, and you have already achieved a great deal. You can be proud of this. I am proud to have worked with you. This also goes for all my staff in the OHR, who have given me unselfish support during these three years.

Thank you.