Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative for BiH:"The Agreement will be implemented by the end of the year"

This is not the end of changes to the unusual setup of BiH – By refraining from voting, the SDA showed it was wrong – You have so many levels of government that it is questionable whether you can afford it

The Sarajevo Agreement on implementation of the Constitutional Court's decision on the constituent status of peoples on the whole territory of BiH will be implemented by the end of this year – High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch expects.

The man who primarily receives all praise and criticism with regard to the achieved agreement and solutions arising from it emphasizes for "Dnevni Avaz" that he was often exposed to different proposals by local politicians during the negotiations on the manner of implementation of the Constitutional Court's decision.

Notion of democracy

I didn't give way, always having before me the interest of improvement in BiH, Petritsch says.

DA: Some critics claim that these changes almost cement the situation created by war, especially on the territory of the RS, and that there are no more changes to the still pretty grotesque constitutional and legal system of BiH.

WP: That's a pretty wrong notion of democracy. Democracy

means a negotiating process and agreement founded on the constitution and legal framework through which the system can be changed. This, therefore, is neither the beginning nor the end of changes to this pretty unique system, which is incomparable to any other state in Europe. All BiH citizens didn't have the same rights on the whole territory of the country and we've seen to it that this Agreement changes that for the better.

DA: The changes we're talking about have been presented to the RS public as a defense of the RS. This Entity, RS politicians are saying, has been defended. How do you respond to these allegations?

WP: We are witnesses to intensive political rhetoric that we can listen to every day here. Some RS politicians wanted to forcefully defend some principles here, but they realized they had to go pretty far from them in order for this compromise to be made. Also, it's normal that every party is now trying to present these amendments the way it suits them best. I, of course, wouldn't give this a particularly high profile. And this, by the way, isn't only characteristic of the RS, but it could also be heard across BiH.

DA: The SDA criticizes the Agreement very strongly, presenting a whole series of specific faults. How do you respond to their claims?

WP: The SDA must defend their positions and justify the premature walk-out from the negotiations. It's obvious that the SDA realized they'd made a mistake walking out and are now trying to cover it up.

SDA – abstention

DA: They don't behave at all the way you're suggesting.

WP: You're wrong. By abstaining from voting, the SDA showed they were wrong, but they didn't find the strength to come

back to the process. They turned from the Party of Democratic Action into the Party of Democratic Abstention. But, I do appreciate Mr Tihic's announcement that they would support the implementation of the Agreement.

DA: Again, it doesn't appear like abstention. The SDA has already announced several initiatives to review the Agreement and possibly institute new proceedings before the Constitutional Court of BiH.

WP: They are all legitimate means they can use and no one with a democratic orientation stands against it. But this doesn't hide the fact that the SDA made a political mistake.

DA: After the SDA and the HDZ behaved the way they did in the Federation Parliament, do you consider these two parties the IC's partners or not?

WP: I think these parties have isolated themselves alone. They are now in isolation and that's where they're going to stay. To get out of this self-isolation, they must move and come out into the centre of activity in order to become political partners.

DA: This means you aren't going to be in touch with them?

WP: No. By declining to take part in the process, these parties have become politically irrelevant. The Steering Board of the PIC has also expressed regret over the behaviour of the SDA and the HDZ, but appeals to all parties to take a constructive part in the implementation of the amendments. This was my expectation, too. This appeal refers also to the SDA and the HDZ. But, it's up to them to prove that they accept these new changes after the voting.

New changes

DA: One of the big questions we're dealing with now is about the powers of the RS vice-presidents.

WP: The Constitutional Court's decision didn't refer to the powers of the president and vice-presidents, nor was the definition of that a part of the Agreement. This issue must be solved after the elections. However, what's important now is the fact that the three of them have the legitimacy because they are elected directly, though it's clear that the RS president and vice-presidents have different powers than is the case with the Federation presidency system. I think this issue needs to be addressed.

Personally, I believe it's much more necessary to work on the reduction of the government apparatus in the Entities.

DA: Does that mean that you also advocate the abolition of the Entity presidencies?

WP: No. Privately, I believe that one of the first next moves by leading political groups in the country could be to consider in which way they can reduce the political apparatus in the whole country. You have so many levels of government that it's really questionable whether you can afford it? Of course this now goes out of the frame in which we are talking.

DA: You specified deadlines that some changes in the Federation must be put into practice during the next nine months. How to meet them?

WP: Yes, some changes that need to happen in the Federation are greater than in the RS. For instance, you must resolve the issue of vital national interests at the cantonal level. I expect, hope and constantly argue that this issue should be resolved by local authorities. I will work on this myself, along with the International Community, so that a solution is found by the politicians you elected.

DA: There is no such precise deadline for changes in the RS. Why?

WP: There is, and it's the elections. Until then, vital

national interests will be protected by constitutional commissions. Rest assured that what was agreed will be implemented and the International Community will keep supporting this process.

Tasks for the end of the mandate

DA: You will leave the position of the High Representative at the end of May. What will you be working on until then, except the implementation of the constitutional changes?

WP: Well, I must finish what I set myself to do. Which means: the basis of the reforms in the judicial system, public services and public broadcasting must be completed. These are the three large projects setting the foundation for a modern BiH and I will work on them with dedication until the end of my mandate.

Perceptible change of public atmosphere

DA: A few nights ago citizens were invited on Federation Television to vote on the Sarajevo Agreement. About 60 citizens judged this document positive while 420 said it was not good. How do you interpret these votes?

WP: This is an obvious indicator for me that the broad public is not adequately acquainted with the contents of the Agreement. I saw from several contacts I've had in the recent days that people are unbelievably ignorant of the contents of the Agreement. They don't know the facts in the Agreement. For example, that about 50 percent of RS ministers won't be Serbs, that only two of the six most important functions in the Entities may be held by one constituent people, or that there will be two parliamentary chambers in Banja Luka with the right to protect vital national interests. In time, this attitude of the public will, I'm certain, change.

Judging by the contacts I've had already this morning, I noticed this change. Many more people than usual came up to

congratulate me. So I believe that people are now beginning to realize that this is a historic moment for BiH.

Disappearance of SDA and HDZ

DA: You called the SDA and the HDZ dinosaurs. You said dinosaurs were extinct. These animals disappeared after an asteroid hit the Earth. Are the SDA and the HDZ disappearing because you "hit" BiH?

WP: It's not me but democracy that hit BiH. Wherever democracy takes root and civil society begins to grow, nationalist parties simply lose their monopoly in representation. I'm certain this will happen here.

The world's history is full of these examples. You either adapt to the new situation – or you disappear.