Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative for BiH:”April 18th the final deadline for changes to Entities’ constitutions”

“It is quite clear that the Election Law sets out certain deadlines which have to be respected. I am talking about April 18th when the Election Commission will announce the exact date that the elections should take place. Therefore, we have to finish with the amendments before April 18th and that is the last date before which everything has to be ended,” said Petritsch.

Wolgang Petritsch, the High Representative for BiH, has, in the past month, been given a lot of media attention, it seems as much as he has received during his entire mandate in BiH until now. This is exclusively, as the public will know, due to the exhausting inter-Entity negotiations on changes to the Entity Constitutions and their harmonization with the BiH Constitution. In an interview for the NN, Petritsch explains his views on the current political situation, developed after the RS National Assembly passed amendments to the RS Constitution, which caused a vehement reaction of the BiH Federation parties.

Nezavisne novine: Mr. Petritsch, are the amendments, passed by the RS National Assembly, at variance with the Sarajevo Agreement as the Alliance claims?

Petritsch: After a thorough analysis and assessment of the

amendments, passed by the RS National Assembly, it has become quite clear that there are some serious omissions and that some issues need to be further clarified. That is what the BiH Federation parties pointed out and that is what my experts established. To be more specific, OHR experts have concluded that the RS really did take a step forward. However, it still has not reached the point where you can say that it is a full implementation of the Agreement. That is one of the reasons why I met with the BiH Federation leaders during the weekend and yesterday again with the three party leaders from the BiH Federation who fully accepted the Agreement. I told them that they have an obligation to continue with activities regarding the adoption of amendments to the BiH Federation Constitution without any delay. I simply cannot accept anything less than full implementation of the Agreement. The Agreement is the result of an extremely positive compromise and is in accordance with European standards. The Agreement is on the table now and we cannot keep negotiating because it has to be implemented.

Nezavisne novine: Given that the day when the Election Commission will announce the exact date of the elections is approaching, is there any deadline before which the amendments have to be corrected?

Petritsch: It is quite clear that the Election Law sets out certain deadlines which have to be respected. I am talking about April 18th when the Election Commission will announce the exact date that the elections should take place. Therefore, we have to finish with the amendments before April 18th and that is the last date before which everything has to be ended and before which the amendments have to be known. If this deadline cannot be complied with, then I would like to hear the proposals of domestic politicians: How are they going to comply with the Election Law and the Constitution and have the elections held on time and, at the same time, make sure that the constitutional changes are implemented in both

Entities?

Nezavisne novine: Many people requested that you use broader authorities during talks on constitutional changes. You did not do it?

Petritsch: It is quite clear that the international community want me to be a mediator and the implementor. BiH is facing a new era, the era of domestic, local responsibility. The public criticism is correct when it says that things are moving slowly. It would be very easy for me to impose solutions. I have the right and the mandate to do it. However, that is not the way that will take BiH to the democratic future. The only right way is engagement and participation in tough negotiations in the spirit of mutual understanding, tolerance and, in the end, finishing the task. It is the public who should pose this question to its politicians, stimulate them and ask them to do something more and do it faster in the best interest of this country and its citizens thus ensuring a better standard of living as soon as possible.

Nezavisne novine: The Party for BiH announced that it would withdraw its signature from the Sarajevo Agreement unless you suspend and correct the amendments passed by the RS National Assembly. Do you believe that something like that will happen?

Petritsch: I think that all parties are responsible for fulfilling citizens' and the IC's expectations. I expect them to fully implement the Agreement to the letter and in spirit, because there is no time for games nor is there time for withdrawing signatures. I expect all responsible politicians to fully engage and to make this Agreement a success.

Nezavisne novine: What about the parties which did not sign the Agreement?

Petritsch: The Agreement is a big step forward in terms of setting up a truly democratic state, the civic state of BiH, which recognizes the legitimate and collective rights of all

peoples in the entire country. You know, the parties like the HDZ, the SDA and the SDS cannot be interested in democratic progress in this country unless they fundamentally change, that is unless they fundamentally change their party programs. Obviously they have not done that so far. What they have done is eliminate themselves from the process of improvement and establishment of democratic values. I hope that the HDZ will realize they made a serious mistake and vote for the Agreement in parliament, because that will be the last chance for them to do that.

Nezavisne novine: Do all parties have to sign the Sarajevo Agreement thus making it completely valid?

Petritsch: No, no, that is a political agreement reached by political leaders of the main parties and whoever wants to join in and sign it is more than welcome. However, the BiH Constitutional Court on constituent status of all peoples in BiH requires the parliaments of both Entities to implement this ruling.