

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative for BiH: "Good Faith for Peaceful Balkans"

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Austrian diplomat, until May this year in the position of the High Representative for BiH, Wolfgang Petritsch has gained great experience in the territory of former Yugoslavia. As an Ambassador or Envoy he has worked in Serbia and BiH.

He was praised and criticized for almost everything he did. Currently, while he is coming to the end of his mandate in BiH, he is drawing attention to himself by insisting on constitutional changes, which, according to many, would determine the success of his stay in BiH.

"My time hasn't yet run out. I still do have time in my mandate. When you take the Dayton Peace Agreement into consideration, I think that the issue of return of refugees is the essence of the DPA. This year, the figures of returns are very impressive, almost 40% higher than the previous year. The year of 2000 was called a year of breakthrough in return of refugees by the Human Rights Watch", assesses Petritsch the results of his work in an interview for Reporter.

Reporter: However, we are not talking about figures only. How are things with real life in BiH?

Petritsch: The more important thing than the figures relating to returns is a real return to their homes by those who have that right and that is a recognized fact in the whole of BiH now. Maybe there are still some areas of extremism present in BiH, but it certainly would not prevent us from doing our jobs. The second thing I would like to mention is that, just after arriving, I mentioned the concept of ownership. I had a feeling that both the politicians and the citizens of this country were too focused on the International Community and its assistance and that they did not feel responsible for their own destinies. The situation has changed. Due to the Alliance's takeover, we have a new way of thinking. To a certain extent this relates to the RS as well. Currently, practically all of the ruling elite accepts BiH as a functional state. I am not satisfied with the pace of economic reforms. I think that people are more aware now that they cannot live on national identity. Something else is needed. Jobs are needed, schools for children, pensions, etc. For that we need true economic reform. That is essential. Not only would it heal war wounds but it would take this country to the 21st century – By privatization, foreign investments, business undertakings of certain people in this country. This is a European country where people are very well educated and this country has both economic and intellectual potential, which should be stimulated by the Government.

Reporter: Is corruption the main cause of the unsatisfactory economic situation in BiH?

Petritsch: I think that corruption is one of the most important reasons for the lack of progress in economic terms. First, it destroys what already exists and second it prevents foreign investments. A serious company or businessman does not want to invest in a corrupt system.

Reporter: As an Austrian diplomat in Belgrade, as far as we know, you were dealing with a problem of corruption within the Embassy on the issuance of visas. What is the level of corruption in the International Community in BiH and what did you do to fight against it?

Petritsch: What I had been doing in Belgrade was essentially to improve the system for issuing visas. I do believe that I managed to do that. That is only one example. Of course, wherever there is corruption one should fight it. As for the International Community presence in BiH, I can assure you that here, at the OHR, and the same goes for other international agencies, the World Bank, the IMF, etc, we have the strongest and most efficient control mechanisms. I cannot say that there is no potential for corruption anywhere in the world. Generally, responsibility is also very important besides control and transparency of everything one does. These three are the most important principles for the International Community, as well as for any local institution.

Reporter: Where does corruption start? Is it by bribing policemen on the roads or by misuse of political position?

Petritsch: Both are corruption. We could discuss this for hours. I have already said that there were so many sources of corruption. I think it is very important to see that we need institutions, a system, which in its essence prevents the existence of corruption.

Reporter: There is an anecdote suggesting that you, during your work in the position of EU Envoy, when you traveled from Belgrade, you had a driver who drove fast all the time. Also, he always had 10 to 20 DM for police in case they stopped him. That is why I ask you where corruption starts. Is it from giving 5 DM to a policeman or is corruption a far greater problem for/in society, because it comes from the top?

Petritsch: This anecdote is not true. For diplomats some of these rules do not apply, so it was not possible that we were a source of corruption. Whenever I was in a vehicle there was no attempt to bribe any policeman in Yugoslavia.

Biography:

High Representative of the International Community for BiH, Wolfgang Petritsch assumed his duties in August 1999. Previously, from October 1998 to July 1999. He was Special Envoy of the EU for Kosovo and represented the European Union in negotiations on Kosovo in Rambouillet and Paris at the beginning of 1999. From September 1997 to July 1999 he was Ambassador of Austria to the FRY. He performed the duties of Head of Mission and Public Relations attaché of the Austrian Mission to the United Nations in New York (1984-1992), and Advisor for Public Relations for the Austrian Chancellor (1977-1983). Petritsch has also performed duties at the Austrian Foreign Ministry and in the Office of the Federal Chancellor. He received his doctoral degree in the History of Southeastern Europe from the University of Vienna.

I personally prefer the political approach of Mr. Djindjic because it is very important to take Yugoslavia to European integration as fast as possible. I also admire his courage in dealing with war crimes.

Reporter: After your involvement in Kosovo which some described as too acquiescent towards current Serbian policy in Kosovo you were characterized as being a Serbophile?

Petritsch: I must say that the old Belgrade administration thought that I was pro-Albanian. The reason why I had to leave Belgrade on the day the NATO air-strikes began was the fact that the Belgrade administration was spreading lies on television claiming that I promised Kosovo would become independent, which of course was not true. I want to say that I am neither pro or against any of the nationalities who live here, because that would lead my diplomacy directly to catastrophe. The thing that you need as a diplomat or as a politician or someone who is involved in such a complex and difficult issue, is that you have to try very hard to be as impartial as possible. That is the only way to preserve yourself and to stay out of the problem given that there are too many problems around.

On Milosevic:

I fully support the work of the ICTY. For BiH and also for other countries of the region, it is of the utmost importance to identify the perpetrators of the horrific crimes that were committed here. Crimes were committed in the name of entire nationalities, but in the end the crimes were planned and committed by a small group of people who did not care for the well-being of the people but only for their own self-interests. One of the preconditions for reconciliation is to bring these people to justice. It will end the idea of collective responsibility so that BiH, which is a truly multi-ethnic society, can become a peaceful country in which none of the nationalities will harbor resentment towards another nationality. In that sense, the Milosevic trial has a huge and immeasurable importance given that he was indicted for having caused and stood behind all of the wars in the former Yugoslavia. When the role that he played in these events becomes clear, Serbia and Serbs will be able to face the things that happened and start the process of overcoming the past. In that sense, the trial is just a beginning of the process that Serbs will have to go through, especially for their own sake.

Reporter: You used to meet with many people who were opposition politicians at the time and who are now in power. Who of these opposition politicians was the greatest disappointment after Milosevic was ousted and the opposition took power?

Petritsch: When I worked as an ambassador in Belgrade I used to meet with Djindjic, Covic and Kostunica of course. I used to meet with almost all of the politicians who are in power now. I think that, all in all, the DOS representatives are doing a good job under extremely difficult conditions. As for your question, I have to say that it is not up to me to say who the greatest disappointment is. I think it is much more important if they are disappointments for their people. Generally speaking, I think they have done a good job.

When we speak about Karadzic and Mladic I think it is very important to say that it is perverse that these two persons are considered war heroes in some circles.

Reporter: Could the Djindjic-Kostunica conflict have any impact on the stability of the entire region?

Petritsch: It is very clear that in every democracy there are different views. I personally prefer the political approach of Mr. Djindjic, because it is very important to take Yugoslavia to European integration as fast as possible. I also admire his courage in dealing with war crimes.

Reporter: How should cooperation between BiH and FRY on one side and BiH and Croatia on the other look in the future?

Petritsch: A pre-requisite for moving faster towards Europe is the close cooperation of these three states: in economics, culture and every other field. I think that in a way it strengthens BiH, a country which has suffered a lot of destruction, which makes it even more difficult for people and authorities to recover. So, I think that a true and frank cooperation based on good faith would help the Balkans to become a much more stable region.

Reporter: You stated that the 1991 census would be a good model for distribution of power or participation in the Entities' authorities. However, 1991 brought us the war. Would the renewed application of this model strengthen nationalistic forces in BiH, regardless of the fact that parties with democratic prefixes won at the last elections?

Petritsch: You have just stated the most important difference between the pre-war situation and now, and that is, the nationalistic parties brought this country into the war. Now, we have a lot more democratic forces on the scene which accept the idea of a modern state and European integration. I believe that we really have to concentrate on the future. So, viewed statistically, we need a stable basis to implement constitutional reform and ensure the representation of all nationalities in major RS institutions and that is the last census.

Reporter: Will the nationalist parties try to use the same tactics that made them successful in 1991 to intimidate people with slogans like "if you, in the RS, vote for SNSD or PDP they will turn you over to Muslims"?

Petritsch: I really do not believe that these very dangerous slogans could be accepted by people because the people know where these slogans led to – the war.

Reporter: Will the IC arrest Karadzic and Mladic just before the elections thus benefiting the SDS. There has always been something going on before the elections that helped the nationalists.

Petritsch: Because you had so many elections in this country everything that happens, happens before or after elections. However, I am convinced that Karadzic's party itself has changed its view, which means that even the most fervent advocates of the war have accepted the principle of reality. For me it is a clear indication that things have changed to a significant extent and that people want to put an end to it. However, I think that people who committed war crimes should be brought to justice. I think it is becoming more obvious with changes that are taking root in the RS.

Reporter: Do you know where Karadzic and Mladic are?

Petritsch: No.

Reporter: Do you know who knows?

Petritsch: Maybe I know the people who know it but they will not tell me. Of course it really does not matter whether I know. The important thing is that those tasked with arresting Karadzic and Mladic know, and in my view these are the local bodies, the RS Police, the Government including the president and the vice-president.

Salary:

What was your annual salary in BiH?

Petritsch: It was sufficient.

Could you make the same amount of money as a politician in Austria?

Petritsch: Even more than that.

Reporter: People indicted by the ICTY have a 30-day deadline to surrender, otherwise the RS Government will not help them with the bail. At the same time, one of the SNSD top officials, Krstan Simic strongly criticized the Government saying that by working this way the RS Government allegedly violates the human rights of people indicted by the ICTY.

Petritsch: Ask Krstan Simic what he meant by that. In fact, it is about a completely different thing. To be more precise, the support is being given to human rights when those indicted for war crimes are requested to turn themselves in and take responsibility for those things for which they have been indicted.

Reporter: Have human rights been violated in the case of the “Algerian group”?

Petritsch: I must say that this was a very difficult situation for the government and the government acted uniformly. We also have to emphasize that we must not juxtapose human rights and the war against terrorism. I think that both things are very important and as a matter of principle they should be brought into harmony if we want our democratic society to survive.

Reporter: Would you hand them over?

Petritsch: I have not been in the position to have anything to do with it. I would certainly make sure that suspected war criminals be brought to justice.

Reporter: On the Serb and Croat side yesterday’s war heroes are in The Hague and there are more and more Bosniaks who are afraid of links with terrorist groups. How can these things affect BiH?

Petritsch: It certainly illustrates how on different sides war and peace are juxtaposed. In one way, war leads to total destruction of human values. We are again trying to restore human values in this country. This also includes observing people as they are. The vast majority of people are law-abiding citizens. There is a small group of criminals, be it war criminals or any other sort of criminals, and we have to focus on them. They must not be heroes anymore. When we speak about Karadzic and Mladic I think it is very important to say it is perverse that these two people are considered war heroes in some circles.

Reporter: What happens in a similar situation in Kosovo? Some KLA leaders, who were seen by the IC as freedom fighters, are now facing serious charges, which can possibly bring them to The Hague? How does the IC see these “yesterday’s romantic freedom fighters” in Kosovo and Macedonia who overnight became a part of the terrorist network?

Petritsch: In this case it is important that criminals are brought to justice. Naturally, it is very difficult to make a distinction between a thing that is considered to be a fight for freedom and terrorism. But the essence of politics lies there – to fight for clear resolution and that is what happens in Kosovo and Macedonia. It is not about the fact that these people used to be heroes and now they are war criminals. They have been seen as such and now we simply have to distinguish the true nature of what was done. That is the point. It is a constant search for justice.

Reporter: Let us get back to the constitutional changes. In your opinion should it be Bosnian or Bosniak language?

Petritsch: It reminds me of a debate in my country – whether we speak German or Austrian. In my opinion and in accordance with the DPA, there are three constituent peoples with their languages. That is it.

Reporter: Serbian, Croatia and?

Petritsch: You answer the question.

Reporter: How do you see the future of BiH?

Petritsch: I can give you a clearer answer on that question. I definitely see a multi-ethnic and democratic BiH with its own place in Europe.

Reporter: What if the constitutional changes are not implemented by the deadline. Will you impose them? Will the implementation of the constitutional amendments be crucial in assessing whether your mandate was successful or not?

Petritsch: The changes will be implemented with the active support of politicians from both entities.

Reporter: Do you consider your mandate successful?

Petritsch: I think that a significant part of what I consider a success in this country would be an answer to your question.