High Representative visits Mostar and holds fourth Civic Forum

During his visit to Mostar, the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, on Friday held the fourth Civic Forum in this city, discussing issues of social importance with eleven representatives of civic society in Herzegovina. He also paid a visit to the Jewish Community of Mostar, met with students from both universities, and visited Ljubuski.

The High Representative initiated the Civic Forum last summer as a place to exchange views with representatives of civic society. Opening the Civic Forum in Mostar, he said he wanted to hear the voices of citizens and include civic society in the political discourse of BiH, as part of the effort by the international community to develop a relationship of partnership with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Much of the discussion during the three-hour Civic Forum revolved around problems in the field of education. The participants regretted the ethnically divided education system in BiH, which is particularly evident in Mostar, with its two universities, low education standards, and lack of public funds for education – despite the fact that education is crucial to ensuring a better future for Bosnia and Herzegovina. They agreed that BiH's economic situation simply could not support three separate education systems.

The High Representative encouraged the eleven participants to get together, identify solutions and start applying pressure on the responsible officials to improve the situation. "It is strange that those who claim to be most concerned about the

people they say they represent, have provided them with such a bad education system," the High Representative said. "The ethnically segregated system in the long term destroys each of the peoples because it does not provide them with the education they need in order to prosper and move their country forward. When you see that something doesn't work, then try to change it. Take the fate of this city in your hands. It is possible. Just don't give up."

The High Representative advocated the European education model, which allows for the preservation of national identities and languages but is still based on close co-operation and rapprochement. "The education system in BiH must be joint, but based on tolerance and respect for each other, including different languages and different national identities," he said. "The European Union integration process demonstrates that this is possible. I can tell you, Brussels even makes a distinction between German German and Austrian German – and we are still working together very closely and uniting."

Other topics that were discussed included Mostar's potential to become a regional centre and perhaps even eventually the Federation capital. In this context, the High Representative stressed that both sides need to work hard together to reach this goal as Mostar will not renew itself if it remains divided. He also expressed his disappointment that the City Authorities have not granted an urban permit for the construction of a regional Federation RTV studio in Mostar, despite their promise to complete this task some time ago. Money pledged by the European Commission and the Italian Government to provide the equipment for this studio will have to be redirected if the location of the new site is not confirmed very soon. This will jeopardise the creation of new jobs in Mostar.

Further issues discussed were the weakness of civic society, the lack of new and young faces in politics, the pressure exerted on individuals to behave in an “ethnically correct” way, crime and corruption, and the proliferating administration in BiH. “By air, Livno is 80km away from Mostar,” said one participant. “To get there, I have to cross three Cantons with a total of 30, 35 ministers. That means, we have one minister every two to three kilometres. Can we afford so many? And I am not even mentioning the Federation and State ministers or municipal officials.”

Concluding the Civic Forum session, the High Representative said that what unites Bosnia and Herzegovina are the problems that its citizens face. “What I heard during the Civic Fora in Sarajevo and Banja Luka is the same as I have heard here today,” he said. “If the problems are the same, I believe you can easily work together to find together a solution. A multi-ethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina is possible.”

The participants of the Civic Forum included, in alphabetical order: Josip Blazevic, president of the “Apel” association of journalists and Mostar correspondent of Nezavisne Novine; Nedim Cisic, director of the “Alternative Institute”, an NGO in Mostar dealing with multi-media arts projects; Radoslav Dodig, philosophy teacher and journalist from Ljubuski; Hamid Drljevic, professor of economics at the “Dzemal Bijedic University” in Mostar (Bosniak-oriented); Elada Hasanagic, editor with the multi-ethnic student paper “Studentski dani” in Mostar; Faruk Kajtaz, editor-in-chief of “Youth Radio X” in Mostar; Franjo Ljubic, rector of the “University of Mostar” (Croat-oriented); Ratko Pejanovic, president of the Serb Civic Council in Mostar; Ivan Petrovic, another editor with “Studentski dani”; Amela Rebac, vice-president of “Apel” and editor-in-chief of Mostar radio “Studio 88”; and Vanja Sudar, NGO activist, president of the “Youth Parliament of Herzegovina.”

The High Representative spent Friday morning with Zoran Mandlbaum and other representatives of the Jewish Community of Mostar, visiting the city's Jewish cemetery and Holocaust memorial, the site where a synagogue will be built, and "Zena BiH", a women's NGO in which many Jewish women are engaged. The High Representative fully supports the work of the Jewish Community in BiH and appreciates the important contribution it has made to the reconciliation process in BiH.

Yesterday afternoon, the High Representative met with 16 students from the two Mostar universities and paid a private visit to Ljubuski. On Thursday evening, the High Representative received the MediaPress Award from Vecernji List in Mostar and met with Mostar Mayor Neven Tomic and Deputy Mayor Hamdija Jahic. The High Representative is impressed by, and completely supports, the devoted work of Mr Tomic and Mr Jahic for the City of Mostar.