

Speech by the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch to the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Concluding the debate on the accession of BiH to the Council

Mr President

Chairman of the Council of Ministers

Members of the Assembly

Each time I have had the honour of addressing institutions of the Council of Europe during my two and a half years as High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I have been able to report developments bringing the country measurably closer to its goal of joining the Council.

When Bosnia and Herzegovina's candidacy for membership was first raised, clear conditions were laid out. The continuous dialogue which I have maintained with the Council's rapporteurs has been built on the systematic fulfillment of these conditions.

The reformist coalition which came to power in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the beginning of 2001 has shown a commitment to the development of statehood and the application of European standards of governance. This, together with the long-standing programme of institution building, means that the country is now in harmony with the aims and ideals of the Council of Europe. It is a fit candidate for membership.

When I began my term as High Representative in August 1999, I placed "ownership" and "Europeanisation" at the heart of my programme. Bosnia and Herzegovina and the other countries of Southeast Europe are, of course, not extraneous to the continent - they are an important part of it. BiH citizens, like citizens throughout Europe, expect the constitutional norms and the guarantees of security that a modern state provides - they also understand the civic obligations that such a state requires.

Establishing rule of law and respect for the rights of each and every citizen has been at the heart of Bosnia and Herzegovina's postwar recovery. Huge progress has been made during the last two years in enforcing the right of refugees and Displaced Persons to go back to their homes. In the first 11 months of 2001 a total of 81,000 refugees and DPs returned to their homes in areas where they belong to a minority group. This represented a 37 percent increase over the figure for the first 11 months of 2000. And 2000 was itself a breakthrough year, in which the total number of minority returns - almost 68,000 - indicated an unstoppable momentum in the process. These are in many cases returns to areas which even two years ago were regarded as extremist strongholds - no-go areas for returnees. The momentum was created by a new willingness on the part of local authorities to meet their obligations to facilitate return, and by a series of amendments to the property laws, which I imposed.

Bosnia and Herzegovina rejoins the European family as an emerging democracy. Comprehensive reform of the judicial system has been instituted. The police and armed forces are being overhauled, with international assistance, and progress is being made in the education sector. The introduction of the Convertible Mark in 1998, the systematic dismantling of government controls over the economy and the privatisation of industry, which will continue in 2002, are further elements in Bosnia and Herzegovina's double transition, from war to peace, and from a Communist system to a market democracy. Bosnia and Herzegovina has combined this momentous political and economic transformation with the monumental task of recovering from the ravages of the 1992-95 war. Yet today, with a credible currency and a basically free market, Bosnia and Herzegovina has established the foundations of a modern economy.

For much too long our efforts on the political front were frustrated by the continuing dominance of extremist

parties. The elections of November 2000 allowed the Alliance for Change, a coalition of parties united by their rejection of nationalism, to take power at the beginning of 2001. Since then, pragmatism has replaced obduracy as the prevailing characteristic of governance.

An example of this new pragmatism and willingness to assume ownership of the political process was the passage of the Election Law by the Parliamentary Assembly in August 2001. With the passage of this law, Bosnia and Herzegovina cleared an important hurdle on its road to membership of the Council of Europe. The implementation of the constitutional Court decision on the constituency of peoples will provide an important test for the authority of BiH in the very near future. I have been asked by the Peace Implementation Council to accelerate this process.

As pragmatic politics, requests for social stabilisation and economic recovery create a momentum for positive development, the international organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina have begun to streamline their operations, systematically handing over strategic tasks to the domestic authorities. This winding down is a consequence of success. The people of Bosnia and Herzegovina still need international partners - more and more so in the normal way, through business, trade, and investment. They also need partnership in sharing broader values - fundamental human rights, the rule of law, the centrality of individual freedoms - for which the Council of Europe stands. This is why membership of the Council is so important.

Some will maintain that, while much has indeed been achieved in recent years, Bosnia and Herzegovina has not fulfilled every single condition attached to membership of the Council of Europe. To these people I would say: the remaining tasks will surely be completed; the tone and substance of political and social discourse in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been fundamentally changed and vastly improved since the last elections. A regression to the failed nationalist politics of the past is possible but, I believe, extremely unlikely. Indeed, membership of the Council will buttress the progressive mainstream in practical ways. For example, democratic parties can develop more quickly and more efficiently if they are able to share techniques of consensus building and inclusiveness which are the hallmark of politics in other Council of Europe countries.

Membership of the Council will give Bosnia and Herzegovina access to additional institutions in important fields such as human rights, an area where we must continue to promote substantial improvement. The combination of stringent post-accession criteria and access to institutional support for democratic politics will further strengthen positive developments in the country. OHR is ready to fully cooperate with the Council of Europe in the post accession period.

The general elections which are scheduled for October will be the first since the end of the war to be organised by the domestic authorities. These elections will also be - pending your approval - the first in Bosnia and Herzegovina following accession to the Council of Europe. The Election Law extends the election cycle from two years to four, a significant change since it will allow the governments elected in the coming polls to follow a medium-term rather than a short-term policy agenda, which should make policy implementation significantly more effective. This can be optimised if the new administrations are held strictly accountable to the country's standing commitment to fulfill the post-accession criteria.

The elections will be characterised by an indelibly European perspective. None of the mainstream parties now dispute the central political tenet that integration in Europe is the overarching aspiration of politics, economy and society in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Accession to the Council of Europe will reinforce this European perspective; it will give the progressive forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina - by that I mean the vast majority of the country's people and politicians - the support they have a right to expect from their European partners.

Bearing all of this in mind, I urge you to vote today in favour of Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession to the Council.

Thank you very much.