

Interview: High Representative for BiH, Wolfgang Petritsch“Connections that authorities have with people from past ruin RS”

“Refugee return is a central issue for the International Community. It is the main reason for our existence in BiH and we shall not give up unless we ensure the return and re-instatement of property for all. The second important issue is BiH state institution building. The third issue is economic reform and I am not satisfied at all with developments in this domain”, says Petritsch.

After returning from Brussels where he met NATO officials, the High Representative in BiH, Wolfgang Petritsch, gave an interview to “Nezavisne” and spoke about many issues such as the possibility of BiH joining the Partnership for Peace programme. He also repeated that BiH is going through a historic moment just before the implementation of the Constitutional Court Decision on the constituent status of all three peoples, openly pointed his finger at parties still obstructing the democratic processes, and announced he would still do a lot of good work for BiH before the end of his mandate.

NN: Mr. Petritsch, are you satisfied with the meeting you had in Brussels with the NATO representatives and what are the main conclusions of this meeting?

WP: I am very satisfied with the meeting I had in Brussels. It has been reiterated again that the IC in BiH and NATO will work together, as NATO Secretary General George Robertson said. It has also been stressed that there is a need for reforms in BiH and I think that it is more urgent now than it was a year ago or two years ago. There is a possibility that BiH stays behind the other countries of the region and, at the same time, it has been clearly pointed out that the arrest of Karadzic and Mladic is absolutely on the top of their priority list. At the meeting with the NATO Secretary General I received full support for my strategy and it is obvious that NATO and the Secretary General support my concept of ownership and greater reliance on domestic factors. All these things have been reiterated at the meeting I had with EU Commissioner Patten, who fully supports my strategy, because the EU is the most important partner of BiH. We also discussed the necessary reforms whose implementation has not been finished yet: for example the reform of police forces. I also had a meeting with Mr. Busek who is the new special coordinator of the Stability Pact. I know him from Austria and I think he knows this region very well so I think he will be of great help to BiH so that BiH could reach the level of self-sustainability.

NN: Media reported that in Brussels you discussed the BiH accession to the Partnership for peace program. What are the chances that BiH access the Partnership for Peace program in the near future?

WP: The decision on BiH eventual accession to the Partnership for Peace program will be made by NATO. BiH is preparing itself for the Partnership and this is something that the IC and especially the SFOR fully supports. There is a need for further and more powerful reforms in Entity armed forces. The defense policy that the BiH Presidency adopted last year should be implemented and I think that a country like BiH cannot afford such a large number of troops. There is also a very important economic factor, which also has to be taken into consideration. Therefore, I lobby for more robust reduction of entity armed forces and integration of demobilized people into economic programs so that they could help build their country. Moreover, BiH has to function at a much higher level as a state, which is the only way for BiH to join the process of European integration. But, as I said, the final decision on BiH accession to the Partnership for peace program will be made by NATO.

NN: Do you believe that the RS will agree to some sort of a fusion of its armed forces even at the highest command level as the NATO Secretary General mentioned on several occasions?

WP: I believe that the defense policy, adopted by the BiH Presidency, will be implemented, because the RS has no other alternative than to cooperate with all other factors involved in the entity armed forces restructuring process in a full and constructive manner.

NN: On several occasions one could hear statements from your Office that the implementation of the BiH Constitutional Court ruling on constituent status of all three peoples in BiH has a historical importance for BiH. What is your assessment of work of the constitutional commissions from both Entities and the work of the authorities in general?

WP: I think that both constitutional commissions did a great job and now is the time for parliaments and public to start the discussion and that is what is partially happening. When it comes to the RS, it is very important that this discussion is not set as exclusively a discussion among Serbs. I think it would be in the interest of the Serb side to reach out to Bosniaks, Croats and Others to get involved in the discussion so that, at the end of the discussion, they come up with something that represents a joint view of all three constituent peoples.

NN: BiH Federation authorities stress the need for setting up the house of peoples in the RS, arguing that only such a body could provide equal rights for Bosniaks and Croats in the RS. What is your view on this issue and is it true that you recommended the RS authorities to set up a commission that would be capable of fulfilling the similar task?

WP: You see, it is not my duty to make such binding proposals. That is the role of Entity parliaments and they have to decide on mechanisms which they can ensure so that the requirements outlined in the BiH Constitutional Court decision become political reality. In this case I stick to principle. The number one principle is a true implementation of the BiH Constitutional Court decision. What I want to see are substantial solutions, which will ensure full representation of peoples and citizens of BiH in both entities. There are several ways to achieve this goal and it is the responsibility of political parties to identify the best possible ways. I would also like to point out that politicians in their talks have to focus on essentials, on the real effects of the solution and not get carried away with rhetoric.

NN: Would the 1991 Census, and politicians from the BiH Federation especially stress this, be a basis for distribution of power in the RS?

WP: Of course the aim of the implementation of the BiH CoCo ruling is full representation and protection of rights of all BiH citizens and peoples. I reiterate, it will be a duty of political representatives to identify the best possible solutions and certainly the 1991 Census is one of the things which, in my opinion, could be a very good solution.

NN: If Entity authorities fail to harmonize their views on the issue, will you then, as a final resort, impose the decision?

WP: I must tell you that the decision rests with Entity parliaments. This means that they have to decide on mechanisms and institutions that would make sure that the BiH Constitutional Court ruling on the constituent status of all three peoples in BiH is implemented, e.g., that the BiH Court ruling is converted into political and social reality. I want to stress again: what I am asking for are substantial solutions. I want to see full representation throughout the country and full protection of rights of citizens and peoples. In this context it is very important that politicians have to be ready to reach compromise. In the end, in the best case scenario, a consensus should be reached, because we are talking about constitutions, which are the most important pieces of legislation. The more consensus, the better for citizens of this country. This is a big challenge for politicians of this country, and regardless of where they are from, be it the RS or the Federation, they have to understand that they represent human beings, the citizens of this country who finally want to be equal.

NN: Occasionally one can hear opinions of more or less influential domestic politicians who say that BiH is a protectorate. What is your comment?

WP: No, this is not a protectorate. My approach has always been that what we do here is helping the local bodies to do what should be done. I intervene only when I have to, only when no other solution is possible. But, we also have to see that, six years after Dayton was signed, the international community want to see local politicians taking responsibility to a greater extent. I say again, compromise is a key word and pragmatism is the second key word. We have to be aware that we live in the 21st century and, therefore, local responsibility is a very important issue for further developments.

NN: What is your assessment of work of the Alliance for changes at the BiH Federation level and its

partnership relations with the ruling parties at the state level?

WP: The Alliance inherited a very difficult situation and the new government is spending too much time in fighting against the legacy of the past instead of concentrating on the future. On the other hand, one year is a very short period for a politician to prove his capability. However, despite everything, I must say that progress is visible. It has been achieved gradually, slowly, but the progress is here and it can be seen by the example of the Election Law, greater orientation to Europe and greater pragmatism in approach to everyday politics, especially when it comes to people such as Lagumdžija and Ivanic. For example, Ivanic has been in my office and he and Lagumdžija are more like average European politicians, which is very positive. However, when it comes to economic reform, this country is far below European standards. Of course, economic reform, privatization, restructuring of the economy – these are key and I believe that much more will have to be done in the following months and years. But let me summarize, now I am more optimistic than when I first assumed this position.

NN: Which political parties, in your opinion, are obstructing democratic processes?

WP: Those are the parties that we call nationalistic. These parties think about conflicts, about war, about ethnic divisions and not about integration and pragmatic approach. Unfortunately, you have a basic example in the RS and that is the SDS. Despite certain progress that has been made in dealing with some issues such as their statute, you can still see that when it comes to exercising politics, for example in the BiH Parliament they stick to their old approach to politics, which is basically a policy of obstructionism. This policy is aimed at distracting attention from positive ideas and undermining the willingness to make a democratic compromise. These parties, i.e., their representatives do not understand that with this approach they are ruining the lives of their citizens and people. This is still a big problem for BiH.

NN: Do you believe that leaders of the SDS are still in contact with Radovan Karadzic?

WP: My impression is that there are too many connections with people from the past and these connections, in a way, are destroying the RS. They weaken the Entity and leave RS citizens deprived of a fair chance to work on economic prosperity and find a better life. It also leaves RS youth deprived of a future.

NN: In a couple of months your mandate in BiH will terminate. What is your view on your work in BiH? Do you think that maybe you could have done more?

WP: You know that the High Representative's mandate is very short. Karl Bildt spent a year here, Carlos Westendorp spent two years and this is my third year here. It is a long time and I have heard on several occasions that one year in BiH is like three years somewhere else. However, it is still January and I have a couple of months ahead of me, which I intend to utilize to the fullest possible extent and that is why I would rather not summarize my work. I hope that I will be able to include a few more important things in the report about my work in BiH, so I will give you the summary in a couple of months.

NN: Does this mean that the question of the most important things that lie ahead your successor will be phased out?

WP: I think it is very clear that, regardless of the fact that I have spent more time here than my predecessors, I can do only one part of the huge job that the international community has to do in BiH. However, some issues and achievements that I find very important are already emerging. One example is the issue of refugee return. I am encouraged and very glad to see that the process of refugee return is taking place faster and faster in the RS. One can notice the great desire and energy of these people to return to their homes, and RS and Banja Luka authorities should show more appreciation of that. The process of refugee return is a central issue for the international community. It is the reason for our presence in BiH and we shall not give up unless we ensure the return and re-instatement of property for all. I am very glad that I could contribute to that to a greater extent. Only think in the first eleven months, more than 36.000 non-Serbs returned to their pre-war homes in the RS alone. I think that is impressive and at the same time it is not good enough.

The second important issue is the building of BiH State institutions. Now BiH looks more like a State, but the functioning of the State has to be brought to a level that the State does more for its citizens. RS citizens have to

understand that the State institutions are not institutions designed only for Croats and Bosniaks, but designed for all three constituent peoples and Others. Serbs can and should play a very important role, but some RS politicians should be more constructive in their approach and do more for people they represent. The third issue is economic reform and I am not satisfied with this field. I think that when it comes to the privatization process, this political selfishness, shortsightedness is completely inappropriate. Politicians simply have to realize that their basic task is to ensure a better life for people and after all it is the economy that gives us a better life. Even in that domain, the progress is slowly becoming visible such as the development of economic space and regional cooperation between BiH, Croatia and the FRY. The exchange of people and goods is in full swing, so I believe that these efforts are very promising but still there are many specific efforts that have to be made.