

Open Letter from the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, to the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Six years ago, the peace agreement that has guided Bosnia and Herzegovina's recovery from the war was signed. It has kept its most important promise: it has maintained peace and paved the way for Bosnia and Herzegovina's return — albeit slowly — to normality.

As always when we are marking a Dayton anniversary, I could say: much has been achieved but a lot remains to be done. This is true – but what is also true is that things in Bosnia and Herzegovina have fundamentally changed and that its future will be determined not only by Dayton implementation, but also through its integration in Europe.

Today, I firmly believe, we are looking at the historic chance to turn Bosnia and Herzegovina into a really “normal” European country, which functions and offers its citizens the things that citizens need: security, jobs, social services, a working administration. In relation to the outside world, a “normal” country meets its international obligations; after the September 11 attacks against the US this is particularly important. I am optimistic because I now detect, at all government levels, the acknowledgement that certain things have to happen if this country wants to make the decisive leap forward. Equally important — I detect the willingness at long last to make these things happen.

For many, including myself, the progress that has been achieved seems to have come painfully slowly. But remember: in 1996, no refugee or displaced person was able to return home unless his home was in an area controlled by the ethnic group to which he belonged. People were even afraid to travel. Still a year later, Mr Krajisnik, a member of the Presidency, refused to enter the venue for Presidency meetings by the same door as the other Presidency members; never mind the possibility that the Presidency might be able to reach actual decisions.

Today, the situation is fundamentally different: the Presidency, whose members recently traveled together for an audience with the Pope, increasingly acts as a united body that deals with issues that are crucial for BiH's further development. The Prime Minister is working hard to make his cabinet efficient, and actively lobbying for support abroad, presenting BiH as a country that wants to advance. Refugees and displaced persons belonging to so-called “minority” groups are returning in large numbers – the main challenge now is to provide returnees with basic reconstruction material and ensure that they have access to jobs, social services and appropriate education for their children. Economic reform has moved to the top of the political agenda because everybody has realised that only an economically stable country will be politically stable. The concept of a single economic space is no longer contested in either Entity. And we are discussing amendments to the Entity Constitutions which will secure the rights of BiH's constituent peoples throughout its territory. These are phenomenal changes.

Many factors have contributed to the new situation. The political changes in Croatia and Yugoslavia have certainly played an important role. But what I consider most important is that the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina have become tired of nationalist politics and have brought political parties into power which embrace the idea of the State, which are reform-oriented and which were not in power during and immediately after the war. My relationship with the State Government is now based on partnership and no longer on my making up their minds for them.

Of course, we still have a long way to go. The State has yet to become fully operational and effective; many State-level institutions that every country needs are still waiting to be established. Annex 7 has to be fully implemented; I am not happy with the pace of property law implementation, and I have not seen enough examples of municipalities actively welcoming back returnees and helping them settle in again. The economic reform agenda is long, and we are just beginning to implement it. Unemployment in BiH is far too high, and the country still does not have the sort of business-friendly environment that will attract foreign and domestic investors.

Republika Srpska must realise that it will be strong only if the State of BiH is strong, and that the State is not an enemy, but a structure from which Republika Srpska will benefit because, via the State, it will enter Europe. Many political parties with a Croat prefix must realise that the Croats of BiH are not, and will not become, a minority. They are a constituent people that is fully protected by the BiH Constitution, and they have to find their place in BiH taking advantage of this Constitutional framework.

The issue of war crimes is not resolved yet, though it is the basic requirement for reconciliation. The education system must be reformed in order to provide Bosnia and Herzegovina's children with high-quality tuition and teach them about each other's language, culture, history and tradition.

In addition, we have to create an efficient and independent judiciary and police because these are indispensable elements of a functioning democracy.

But everybody appears to be willing to work on the outstanding issues, and this is what is important. Who would have thought that in the year 2001, the RS would pass a Law on Cooperation with the Hague Tribunal, announce that ten indicted war criminals, including Karadzic and Mladic, are being searched for, and discuss the need to transfer some authority to the State in order to make it functional, as RS President Sarovic did last week? (Of course, what matters are actions not words, but these announcements are nonetheless a promising sign.)

If we press ahead with all these issues, Bosnia and Herzegovina has a good chance of becoming a "normal" country soon. The domestic authorities will be able to move from the current partnership with the International Community to full ownership of the political process. When I introduced the Ownership Concept more than two years ago, I thought of it as a long-term strategy. Now, with the Consultative Partnership and Civic Fora up and running, ownership has become a real prospect.

The present situation has enabled the International Community to re-think its role. Currently, we are engaged in a process of identifying our core tasks and recalibrating the future engagement of the civilian agencies in such a way as to make best use of our respective expertise and maximise our efficiency. This does not mean that we will leave any time soon – but it is yet another sign that things are moving in the right direction in BiH.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's future is clearly Europe. The recent past has shown that many issues that we are pushing as peace implementation issues are identical to the kind of steps that are necessary if Bosnia and Herzegovina is to integrate with the rest of Europe. The criteria that Bosnia and Herzegovina had to meet in order to accede to the Council of Europe, which is expected to happen early next year, and the requirements it still has to meet in order to come closer to a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union (the 18 issues on the EU Road Map), are "Dayton issues" – see Election Law, see property laws, see single economic space, see economic reforms, see Human Rights Chamber decisions.

As Bosnia and Herzegovina meets these requirements and moves closer to Europe, and as the European Union reaches out to its Balkan neighbours, the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement will be overtaken and gradually replaced by the Europeanisation process.

It is the Dayton Peace Agreement that has opened the way to the Europeanisation process. And with the Constitutional Court's decision on the constituent status of BiH's peoples in both Entities, it has shown again that it is a living agreement that offers many possibilities. It has proven that it was the right agreement after the war and that it has not lost, and will not lose, its validity.

The accomplishment of the end goal is in sight: Bosnia and Herzegovina can become a "normal" country that offers its citizens what they need. The question is no longer whether and how, but when. Let's get there as quickly as possible.