

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative in BiH: "High noon for reforms"

At the recent meeting of the Peace Implementation Council Steering Board, one saw a "detailed and essential" discussion of the situation in BiH and the situation surrounding BiH. "Following September 11, there is less focus on BiH, which will also be reflected in lower aid and a lower international presence in the country, whose only chance is reform," said Wolfgang Petritsch, speaking to SENSE news agency.

"The day of September 11, when terrorists attacked the USA, is also connected to BiH. On one side, the PIC Steering Board is very satisfied with the results of the fight against terrorism and the work of the inter-Entity coordination team which was established for that purpose. On the other side, it was emphasized that the reduction of donations, which BiH was already facing, will be even more pronounced after September 11. The attention of the International Community is now focused on a completely different part of the world. Thus, the Board warned local authorities that it is high time they grasp the seriousness of their situation and tackle the implementation of reforms," said the High Representative of the International Community in BiH, Wolfgang Petritsch, after the meeting of the PIC Steering Board.

In an interview with SENSE, Petritsch emphasized two additional political points following the meeting of the PIC Steering Board: one is that the Board expects the implementation of the Election Law in order to ensure that the elections scheduled for next year go ahead smoothly. The other is that the Board is "deeply irritated and largely dissatisfied" with the manner in which the SDS is blocking reforms in the Republika Srpska.

According to Petritsch, the meeting of the Steering Board was unusually long because the discussion about economic reform, in view of the presence of representatives of the World Bank and the IMF, was "detailed and essential". The reform model, covering, among other things, privatization, pensions and invalid insurance, tax reform, economy, air transport and the railway system, was viewed very positively by the Board. In the sphere of media reform, the launching of Federation Television was also commended, as was the positive role of neighboring Croatia in this project.

However, the Board noted with concern that local authorities are not undertaking economic reform energetically enough, and it called on them to understand and accept that it is high time that reforms are implemented. Representatives of the European Commission joined in this discussion, pointing out the large contrast between neighboring Croatia, which on Monday, via the Agreement on Stabilization and Association, entered into agreement with the Union, and BiH, for which, as was remarked, "one could not even guess as to when this could happen." The European Commission is concerned that now, BiH could lag further behind in this project, and the only thing that could avert this is that the local authorities take responsibility for reform.

The political directors, who form the bulk of participants in the PIC Steering Board, spent a good deal of time discussing the Republika Srpska. The economic situation in the Entity is described as dramatic, and the SDS was cited as the main culprit for the failure to implement reforms. "On the part of the SDS we face a total obstruction and the Board would like to send a very strong message to Banja Luka," Petritsch remarked. In this very tone, the High Representative will speak on Monday in Banja Luka, SENSE discovers. "The entire discussion about the SDS passed amid a good deal of distress, and the scope of irritation, deep dissatisfaction and the utter lack of patience when it comes to the SDS and the situation there is great," the High Representative told SENSE.