

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative "We want Croats from Aluminium to apologise to Bosniaks and Serbs"

OHR is probably the most controlled international agency in the field – The Report on Aluminium Factory is a legal, economic and moral issue – I will not accept that Croats receive compensation for 53 unpaid salaries, Bosniaks only for nine and that Serbs receive no compensation at all – I want all inhabitants of Mostar to benefit from the Aluminium Factory in Mostar, regardless of their ethnic origin

The Report of the Independent Audit Team on the Aluminium in Mostar should be taken as an assistance to parties to move from the deadlock which exists since 1997 towards future privatisation, says **Wolfgang Petritsch**, the High Representative of the international community in BiH, in his interview for the Oslobođenje newspaper.

Oslobodjenje: Ambassador Petritsch, how do you assess the transparency of work of the international community, particularly of your Office?

WP: OHR is probably the most controlled international agency in the field. I have weekly meetings with the Steering Board composed of the ambassadors of member countries. Each sixth week we are paid a visit of Political Directors from capitals of all member countries, and in intervals of several weeks we have here a group of financial experts from the Steering Board who control each and every Dollar or Euro disbursed in this country for payment of staff or support of the OHR programmes.

I must say that it is definitely a failure of the international community that, in these six years, although hundreds and thousands of internationals have worked in this country, we have not managed to explain how modern democracies work. The strictest possible rules are applied when it comes to disbursement of international funds, the money of our taxpayers.

Oslobodjenje: Do you maintain that the work of OHR has been absolutely transparent?

WP: Give me only one example that it hasn't.

Oslobodjenje: The most recent example is the Report of the Independent Audit Team on privatisation of the Mostar Aluminium where the value of this economic giant has been reduced from 1,4 billion to 190 million KM. Some political parties have characterised this as legalisation of plunder. And there was also an attempt to sell the licence for the third GSM operator at a price lower than its actual value. How could this happen?

WP: The problem has started with your first sentence already. There is nothing in the whole Report which should compel you to accept that the value of the Mostar Aluminium amounts to 190 million KM. This is the main problem, this is an essential lack of understanding and a misinterpretation, partly based on the facts because the interested parties presented only some selected facts to the media. When you read the whole Report, you can understand that it is a legal report consisting of an analytical part and a part containing recommendations. I am concerned that scandals and accusations had been launched before the Report was fully available. This cannot resolve a rational discussion on such an important and serious issue, as the Mostar Aluminium indeed is. It is the most efficient company in the whole BiH, directly or indirectly employing nearly 30.000 persons.

Oslobodjenje: Croats mainly?

WP: This is what I wanted to say: they are mainly Croats. This is also a scandal that should be examined. And it shall not remain so. It must be resolved, but this was not the subject of this study. It has been submitted to the authorities. This is the first time I am referring to it officially: it is now necessary to examine the Report, it is necessary to take it as an assistance to parties, intended to help them move from this deadlock towards the future privatisation, to depart from the deadlock which has persisted since 1997. It is necessary to have very clear negotiations between the Federation Government, the Aluminium Management and the Federation Privatisation Agency. It is crucial to find a solution, because the ownership structure issue is still open. This does not help to anyone and we must find a solution.

We must be very cautious, because it is a very successful company. I wish other companies – whose operations were suspended by the war or other circumstances, as BH Steel, for example – were much more successful. It would be much easier for the international community to leave this country. If this were the case, we would sooner be able to leave this country and stop contributing aid to this country.

This is, however, not only a legal issue as far as I am concerned. This is also a financial issue. And a moral one also. Things that happened in the past are utterly unacceptable. I am now speaking as a representative of the international community. Such issues should be discussed at the Federation Government sessions, it being a political representative of the Federation, as well as sessions of the management of the Mostar Aluminium. I urge both parties to thoroughly review the report and to deal with really fundamental issues.

Oslobodjenje: Does the report state that “it would not be very wise to annul the illegitimate decisions of the Aluminium for political, practical and economic reasons”? I think this sentence gave rise to the attack of the media. What does it mean?

WP: As a journalist, you know that every sentence must be read within its context. Secondly, it is the opinion of independent experts, findings based on an audit. It is not a law. The Government and the Management of the Aluminium must now discuss it. It is only one of many assessments. The sentence, therefore, must be viewed within the context of the whole report, which represents a pioneer work. This is the first attempt since 1997 to disentangle this issue. It is the responsibility of media to report correctly.

Oslobodjenje: The domestic members of the Audit Team have been exposed to pressure. If your background is an inaccurate document, it is very likely that the whole discussion will be based on false grounds. You will have another conflict with the Council of Ministers, as it was the case with the third GSM operator.

WP: The Federation Government is in charge of this issue, not the Council of Ministers. In addition, the moderate voices within the Alliance understand that any premature reaction could affect it dramatically. If you should interpret a very moderate yet rather concerned statement of **Kresimir Zubak**, you must acknowledge the presence of a political danger, which is why we have to be very cautious. I would not like to reopen the issue of the third GSM operator, since international companies stated they simply could not become engaged in any business in Bosnia because of the incompetence of the political class. I do want to avoid this. My message is therefore the following: This is a legal audit and it is necessary to consider financial implications. And there is also the moral aspect, which must be taken into account. We want the responsible Croats in the Aluminium to apologise for what happened to Bosniaks and Serbs. I will not accept the solution that Croats receive compensation for 53 unpaid salaries, Bosniaks for 9 only and that Serbs receive no compensation at all. This falls within the category that I call moral issues.

Oslobodjenje: You have not mentioned the political aspect of the problem?

WP: Because we must, first of all, resolve this in a rational manner. And political agenda of some political parties tends to occasionally destroy crucial and constructive matters that are necessary for the future of this country. I want all inhabitants of Mostar to benefit from the Mostar Aluminium, regardless of their ethnic origin. And that is the ultimate goal and a political sentence.

Oslobodjenje: We now appear to have an “economic Dayton”. For, in 1995, we got a peace agreement in Dayton, which stopped the war but, at the same time, legalised the ethnic cleansing by creating the RS. And we now have a “legalisation of the plunder” of the Mostar Aluminium.

WP: Legalisation implies that there has been a legal process. This was an investigation conducted by experts. The very name prevents any legalisation. Only the government and relevant bodies can legalise it. What you have just said is, therefore, nonsense, since your statement does not take facts as the basis of an argument.

Oslobodjenje: Do you imply that the announced resignation of the BiH Federation Prime Minister, Alija Behmen, is also nonsense, should it happen that the Auditing Report be adopted or should it even be taken into consideration?

WP: Yes, I do. Because he has not said such a thing. It has been quoted in a way for which I authentically know is

not correct.

Oslobodjenje: What did Behmen actually say, then?

WP: Certainly not that he would resign. Rumours and gossip are a problem in the whole region. When I think of relatives I allegedly “have” in each company, I wonder that I do not have any in the Aluminium as well. This is something you have to be very careful with.

Oslobodjenje: The rumours may be spread because the OHR is not transparent enough?

WP: If you had only waited for the Government to receive the Report – which is a matter of courtesy – and then the media, it would be a correct procedure in a democratic and civilised country.

No man’s land – Bosnian metaphor

Oslobodjenje: How do you like the No man’s land movie?

WP: It is an excellent movie. I like that kind of black humour, which is one of the ways to survive such a tragedy. The end of the movie made me think of this country. Since, a soldier who is left lying on a mine and dare not move is a metaphor of this country and a good illustration of its explosive situation. I, therefore, sometimes get emotional in my interviews and statements, when I see that certain people react irresponsibly and do not understand the scope of a potential damage they can inflict to this country.

It is already the sixth year of the International community’s presence here in the post-war period. Along with all the good that its presence has brought, you were the only one to admit a mistake, by removing Bent Jensen. You have also qualified the recent events in Trebinje and Banja Luka as mistakes. Do you have a full confidence in Wim Timmermans, Jerker Torngren, John Shearer? It seems that the BiH public does not have it, not on the basis of rumours but on the basis of facts.

WP: It is really fascinating for me that, though the facts have shown otherwise, some media still insist on what has originally been written about these issues. I think that we have to admit that sometimes we did not immediately give enough information. I think that meanwhile we have offered all the information which are as transparent as required by the European and international standards.

I will tell you something: we are all human beings and none of us has a perfect performance. Perhaps there are some Bosnians who do have a perfect performance. But definitely the International community does not, including all these names you have mentioned, even myself on top of it. For, I am the most responsible one. Give me one example where someone who did so much work like I did has not made a mistake. Therefore, one should not ask how many mistakes somebody made, but how much this somebody contributed to BiH. I am convinced that all these people you mentioned have given their contribution to BiH. But, we have also overlooked many details. What we have done well is reflected in many letters of support sent by citizens. They want me to stay.

Oslobodjenje: When you came to BiH, you had a difficult task of building the state, which is proven by the number of laws you imposed. The result is an impressive one. Why has there been resistance as of late toward the work of your office?

WP: We are now in a very important transition stage of this country. This is your country as well as the country of the politicians leading it. They are taking it over now. Sometimes there are too strong reactions in that process, because there is no routine. I have to tell you that I have never received so many apologies from the Alliance politicians as I receive these days. For, they sometimes understand that this is not a way to communicate. In general, this is a very positive development. You should hear politicians throughout Europe and the USA: they are perhaps more decent in the manner of communication, but in essence they are very decisive. These politicians here are coming closer to that now. This is a daily process of learning how to co-operate with each other. I like an open conflict. What I hate is the rumours, stories behind someone’s back, fabrications. This has to stop. This really poisons the atmosphere in this country. An open conflict is positive for the quality of democracy whereas rumours

and hidden things are very negative.

Oslobodjenje: Why is everybody attacking you?

WP: Because they think that I am the most responsible person for the destiny of this country, which is not correct. People expect everything from me, and plus they expect it to be perfect. The Government has to do its job. And it does it now. Look only at the Election law. Two days prior to its adoption in the Parliament, I sent word telephonically to these people that they had to do it. And the law was adopted. Two years ago I would have had to impose it. This is a huge progress. And some hate me for it. The reality is that the international community is withdrawing. Or, look at the reform of the pension system: thousands of pensioners protested here, and now they are receiving regular pensions, thanks to a difficult decision I made.

Oslobodjenje: Will you dismiss Mirko Banjac?

WP: Why? He has put his mandate at disposal. I think that this is a rare case of enlightenment, that he has understood that he does a disastrous job for this country.

Oslobodjenje: Boris Divjak, president of Transparency International, has stated that there have been pressures exerted on them regarding the drafting of the report on corruption within the international community. He has accused you that you have threatened him that you will terminate projects conducted by his firm "Prosperitet", and that you will discredit him, revealing that he had been an advisor in the cabinet of Radovan Karadzic. He lives in fear of the international community. Is that true?

WP: Of course it's not true. We have not done absolutely anything to prevent that report from being published. But, regardless of that, I am convinced that there is no significant corruption in the international community and I know that transparency is such that you cannot even imagine it. I have worked a lot to bring TI here and to have local experts take over that job. I was very happy that someone like **Boris Divjak**, who worked for the government in Pale and Banja Luka, and who is the person from within, who knows how the governments in Bosnia are acting, switched the sides and wants to work on transparency in BiH. I fully support him.

What I do not like is the fact that even prior to the publication of the report, in his interviews for Glas Srpski and Dnevni Avaz, he already threatened the international community. Why? I would say that this is unprofessional. I have a lot of understanding for a young man who made a mistake and he should not be afraid. I hope that he will co-operate with the international community, for he knows how the Government works. He was an advisor to **Gojko Klinkovic** in Pale. A chief of staff of **Karadzic's** cabinet works in his team in "Prosperitet". They know from within how that system works. This could help international investigators and my Anti-fraud unit. You cannot even imagine what kind of threats they are having due to the Hercegovacka bank! This is unbelievable. These people think that Boris could considerably help them if he was to share his knowledge about the alleged corruption in Pale and Banja Luka with them. He should become open in the full meaning of the word. If there are any indications that the international community is involved in the alleged corruption in Pale and Banja Luka, he should help us in that. It is in my interest to discover any trace of corruption in the international community. Therefore, he should not be afraid of me; on the contrary. He is on our side now, says the High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch.

Media must be responsible

WP: Regardless of the fact that it has been undoubtedly proven that there was no corruption or plunder on the part of the international community, it is very frustrating that these things are still written about. Why would we want to exploit the country we finance with hundreds of millions of dollars? This would be illogical, for we would have to pay for this. Some media still do not take proven facts into consideration and that is what is frustrating when talking with journalists. I know that even interviews given by international experts on GSM tender have not been published in these newspapers. Ask for example, a Bosnian who is one of the most successful experts in telecommunication area, Boris **Nemsic**, if he has given interviews. He is a BiH citizen, a Sarajevan, pioneer of VIP

in Croatia, and now he is the boss of the Austrian Mobitel, which is owned by Italians. It is another issue if the Government has ever invited him to come. You know, it would help this country a lot to invite all emigrants to return, because the intellectual elite has in big numbers left the country.

Financial Times has recently (on August 16) wrote: "BiH might wait long for a new state telecom, after the bid failed due to political pressures". This has been published only by Jutarnje novine and nobody else. I would call it a problem, if you do not take into account what international media, other governments, businessmen in particular, think and write about BiH. For, Bosnia is a part of global economy, whether you like it or not. And you have to, you who work in the media, have a public obligation to point out to the public here what the rest of the world thinks about public discussions being conducted here. You have this obligation also because of the international community, which invests big financial resources as well as the wish for the wellbeing of this country.

I want to see a Bosnian soap opera

Oslobodjenje: Will the Federation TV start with its program in September, as John Shearer announced?

WP: I think that plans are being made within TV. Many donors who financially support this transformation in the amount of 10 million Euro, expect the results. Rest assured that the international community observes very carefully what is happening. I have hardly prevented some donors from withdrawing their money once they become upset due to all these media attacks. Now, the process is developing to the benefit of the viewers. There will be extension of program. I want the production of domestic program to rise from 6% (not including the news) to 40%. I want to see a Bosnian TV, and not American soap operas. I want to see a Bosnian soap opera.