

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative in BiH”I Believe In Future Of Multiethnic Bosnia”

High Representative for BiH Wolfgang Petritsch talks about results of his mission and relations of The International Community towards Balkans

Sarajevo – What the International Community has lacked so far is a fast and focused approach to Balkan crises. Problems have been allowed to spread widely before efforts to resolve them have been initiated. In fact, the resolution of many problems has tended to follow a Western political perspective. The sensitivities and vulnerability of this particular part of Europe have to be taken into account when looking for solutions – says the High Representative of the International Community in BiH, Austrian diplomat Wolfgang Petritsch, while explaining a critique which he recently addressed to the International Community through an interview in the Viennese newspaper, “Courier”. Asked whether the International Community and its key elements may lack a full understanding of Balkan national syndromes and may even add to tensions and conflict through some of their actions, the High Representative said that “there are principles which overcome emotional aspects”, stressing that these are democracy and respect of human rights. “I would say that sometimes there is lack of knowledge in terms of techniques of politics in this region”, Petritsch added.

Blic: There is talk about creating a kind of sub-European Union for South-eastern Europe. Is that possible and how realistic is it?

WP: Peace and development are not just a matter of arrangements within one state. The region as a whole should come up with a vision. In Bosnia and Herzegovina it became obvious that nationalistic rhetoric and separatists plans would not deliver bread to the people. We have reached a moment in time when countries, big ones as well as small ones, not to mention entities, cannot survive in isolation. Every single country in the region needs billions in foreign investment and they compete with one another in that respect. A way ahead for this region is through a more coordinated approach, both economic and political. I do not know if that would be a sub-European Union or simply a zone of free trade, but the EU example shows that economic integration can help in overcoming even world war.

Blic: If we summarized criticism regarding BiH, what would be your main remarks?

WP: What did we start with six years ago? Half of the BiH population were displaced, and it was assessed that more than 200 000 people had been killed. There is not even one family in this country that was spared by this war. People were being divided by hate. At first glance, this could not be overcome. Refugees could only dream about returning to areas that they had fled from, and the economic spine of BiH had been destroyed. Now we have thousands of refugees returning to areas from which they were expelled – the process has actually picked up speed. Economic development is going slowly, but it is still going. Don’t misunderstand me, one cannot deny that the situation in the country is still difficult and that the new government has a lot to learn in order to provide people with what they expect: progress and work. But, all in all, if this is not success, what is?

Blic: We have witnessed many incidents, threats and murders of returnees, incidents during religious ceremonies . . . Do you believe in the future of a multi-ethnic BiH, in which the authority of the entities would gradually fade away in favor of central institutions?

WP: The answer is straight: yes, I do believe in the future of a multi-ethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina. People in BiH have come a long way in the reconstruction of their country – refugees are returning, Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks live next to each other again. Who would wish to draw a new border now, six years after the war? Who could believe that one side would again accept such borders? People have had too many divisions. Now they have to see a road ahead. If we are to rely on solutions from the 19th century we would get answers from the 19th century, meaning bloodshed. There is no single reason for which a good Serb, a good Croat or a good Bosniak could not be a good citizen of BiH. But, the point is not in the weakening of entities but in the strengthening of state institutions. BiH can function and its citizen would enjoy the benefits of European integration. The way from Banja Luka to Europe leads through BiH.

Blic: Do you think that, six years after Dayton, after the eventual withdrawal of international

institutions, including SFOR, national tensions, and possibly conflict, could occur again?

WP: A military presence in BiH is still of the highest importance but only until the relevant police mechanisms are capable of taking over all responsibilities. This depends on success in ensuring civil rather than military peace. The basis of civil peace is compromise – which is something all sides taking part in the process have to learn. This is difficult: BiH crashed in 1992 because anti-democratic regimes in Belgrade and Zagreb stirred up the situation, supported nationalistic feelings among desperate people and even attacked the country with military and paramilitary forces. Three months ago, by contrast, representatives of Croatia and Yugoslavia signed a statement in Italy obliging their countries to preserve peace and stability in BiH, confirming that they had no territorial pretensions to it.

Blic: Your mandate has been extended recently, which says something about the support you have. But you are also very often a target of criticism of all three peoples in BiH. Are there any grounds for this criticism? What are you yourself not satisfied with?

WP: The engagement of the International Community in BiH is widespread. There is a wide range of issues – from return of refugees to economic reform and constitutional issues, and the High Representative is the final authority on issues concerning implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement. During the past years, nationalist parties in power were not willing to establish permanent order and peace in BiH; on the contrary, they tried to split the country amongst themselves. In the end, the International Community, or the High Representative, had to pass most of the laws in BiH. Of course, here and there they were not perfect; some moves could have been made differently, when we look back. But, the principle remains the same and unquestionable. However, the International Community, which now works with a government eager to implement reform and change, will withdraw from many issues and enable BiH institutions, at different levels, to do their job. That is a realization of what I have always advocated – ownership.

Blic: One gets the impression that the USA is not very supportive of your work in BiH. Is that a consequence of different views of the situation in BiH taken by you and the US Ambassador to BiH Thomas Miller. Where does this criticism come from and does it bother you?

WP: I think that that is a complete public misconception, that has been accepted very eagerly because it is such a good story for the press. The fact is that the USA, one of the most active member states of the Peace Implementation Council's Steering Board, has always supported my work in BiH. Support was also expressed by the US Secretary of State Colin Powell during his visit to Sarajevo and we have excellent working relations. As for Ambassador Miller, he was a very valuable and informed partner – whenever I had to reach a difficult decision in the last two years, he would always support me at the PIC Steering Board. I wish him all the best in his new job.

Blic: What have you identified as the main aim for the rest of your mandate? And what are the priorities in both entities as far as the High Representative is concerned?

WP: A way ahead for BiH, as well as for the whole region, is clearly marked out – regional integration and integration into Europe. Especially for BiH, this means remaining on the path of reform. Return of refugees is still in focus. It is the same with economic reform and strengthening common institutions. The violence that occurred in Banja Luka and Trebinje in May during the ceremonies to mark the start of reconstruction of mosques, and the initial reaction of the authorities, showed the level to which society in the RS still suffers from dangerous convictions and delusions. It showed that Republika Srpska has a long way to go before we can talk about the rule of law and respect for human rights there. Certainly, that is something which I will monitor very carefully during my last year.

Second, an important issue is certainly the boycott of legal institutions by the HDZ. I believe that implementation of the decision of the Constitutional Court and the Election Law will involve many important issues for Croats. I also hope that moderate forces within the HDZ will prevail and start to get involved in the legal and constitutional processes in BiH, since this is the homeland of Croats as much as of Serbs and Bosniaks.

As for my successor: whoever it might be, he will not take a very different approach because this is not a matter of private property. The position of the High Representative is a position of the International Community. Of course, there will be logical difference in personal style.

America is Satisfied

Blic: There is speculation suggesting that a kind of investigation against you is being conducted by the US Congress. Are there any grounds for this?

WP: I'm not familiar with any investigation about this. As far as I know, the US Congress has denied that there was any intention to send an investigative mission. It has also been noted that the US Congress has received detailed and regular satisfactory reports from my office.

Speculations About Candidacy

Blic: The German press claims that you are a serious candidate for the future President of Austria. Are these claims justified and will you become a candidate?

WP: Yes, I know that there are articles in the press on various public duties that I might take. But these are pure speculation. My mandate has just been extended for another year and I fully concentrate on the duties that I carry out in this country.