Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative in BIH”The Stories that I Am Leaving Are Untrue, I Just Signed the Contract and I’m Staying for Another Year”

** In the following year there will be a special focus on the economy and on economic reform, the legal system, the police, and the public broadcasting system * This government could go down in history by making a successful switch to a modern society in a very short period of time * For the activities of the OHR we have 25 million Euros at our disposal*

Perhaps not even Wolfgang Petritsch himself could have expected that the process of taking destiny into one’s own hands, which he personally inaugurated two years ago when he began his first term of office as the High Representative, would be so painful.

He does, however, concede in a diplomatic fashion that there have been “misunderstandings” between the OHR and its dialogue partners. The dynamic interview for Express, lasting for a little over 60 minutes, reflects only a portion of the atmosphere and relations between the international community and the domestic public.

WP: Now they are calling us “foreigners’ not “the international community”. This change of terminology is significant,” says Petritsch when asked whether he feels a growing hostility towards the international community.

Necessary reforms

Express: A few days ago you presented a detailed report about your first two years, but you also announced what you will be doing in the next twelve months. Are you optimistic that you will implement what you have announced?

WP: The international community has done a lot in BiH in the last two years. Based on that, I believe that we will do even more. Particularly in the field of economy and economic reform; it is necessary to complete the reform of the legal system, the police, and the public broadcasting system.

Express: Are you talking about things that will be completed, or are you only hoping that they will be completed in the next twelve months?

WP: I believe that some of the things that I mentioned should be completed in this period. I am, however, aware of the complexity of the situation, the elections that are planned for next year, and the campaign for them is already beginning. The opposition paints the picture in black, and the authorities, naturally, in bright colors. It is up to me to continue to push things forward, sticking to the decisions of the PIC concerning reform, in order to establish the basic preconditions for a modern state.

We are, therefore, talking about an independent judiciary, a professional police force, and public media that truly serve the citizens of this country, as well as about creating

legitimate foundations for a successful economy in this country.

With economic reform we are already entering the area of transition, which is increasingly becoming our task, and trying to introduce a market economy in BiH. We have effected a true change by moving from talks about reconstruction to issues of real reform.

Express: You have mentioned four important areas that you will be focused on in the forthcoming period. In each of these fields there is an ongoing, very fierce conflict with the Alliance. I would say that one side wants to control all of these services and processes, whereas the other side claims that it wants to create professional bodies that will comply with the laws and serve the citizens.

WP:I have to insist and I do insist on principles based on which these reforms are being implemented. But, I also understand the needs of the government, which the international community is fully supporting and which needs concrete results and successes. In the short-term, some of the reform measures may be painful and unpopular. That is why we have to take care of them and minimize them, and emphasize the positive effect of these necessary and inevitable measures. This government could go down in history for making a successful switch to a modern society in a very short period of time.

Express: The road that the present government is taking seems to lead to conflict with the international community.

WP:I wouldn’t call it conflict. It is rather an “intensive dialogue” that has been launched. In it both sides have to learn “new rules” and create a routine. Because all of this is quite new, you have misunderstandings, miscommunication, or,

simply, different approaches. It is clear that the international community is working much more successfully, so what happens sometimes is that we are not that good at emphasizing the importance and explaining why the issues we are talking about are so important. A whole range of issues we are discussing now are new to this region.

We believe that dialogue has to be intensified, which is why I inaugurated the Partnership and Civic Forums.

Express: I don’t understand why new institutions and forums have been introduced?

WP: The task of the Partnership Forum is to support the institutions. It is not an alternative of any kind, it is a body which will primarily support the state institutions. The Civic Forum will enable discussion of many issues with various people, for the purpose of a better and deeper understanding of the problems of this country.

If there are misunderstandings, then it is a problem for the people who live here, not the international community.

This also makes it possible for me to learn more and understand the situation through this body.

Express: The idea of forums is a good one, then?

WP: Yes, absolutely. This is a real and concrete breakthrough in the ownership concept.

Express: If this is proven not to be the case, will you be willing to assume responsibility?

WP: This will not happen. What is wrong with discussions and

dialogue on various issues?

Express: That we will spend too much time talking?

WP: No. This will not happen in any case. It is important to talk about these issues, now that we are entering the era of transition. Had we talked about the third operator, for instance, things would have been resolved better.

Express: Are you trying to say that the state government overreacted in the case of the third operator?

WP:I wouldn't comment on that. Read the Financial Times article and you will understand that all of this had a negative effect on our overall efforts to attract foreign investors to BiH.

Who is wrong?

Express: So, you are saying after all that the Government was wrong?

WP: I do not wish to qualify anything, because that does not serve a positive cause. I would only say that there are certain lessons we should learn from it and be wiser next time.

Express: There were several public demands that this or that international official should go. The most recent rumor in diplomatic and political circles is the forecast of your departure. You will not be here next year, they say. How much of it is true? Are you leaving in December, as they say?

WP: A few days ago I signed a contract by which I will stay here for another year. My mandate shall last until mid-August

2002.

Express: On several occasions you explained what the problems are with the third operator or the reconstruction of BHT. In the last edition of "Dani", the editorial accuses the OHR of "finalizing these days a report that will definitely legalize the looting of the Aluminum Plant in Mostar by the HDZ phalanx lead by the 'successful manager' Mijo Brajkovic." How do you respond to that?

WP: Let me tell you, I will not respond to such vocabulary. This is the journalist's choice. The facts are the following: this is a legal audit conducted by an independent body, not the OHR.

OHR did initiate the idea that this audit should be undertaken, in order to offer a way out of the present blockade to the interested parties. I have to say that it is almost comic that I'm being criticized for helping this country to solve a problem that has been dragging on for years. This problem is, objectively, affecting the economic development and privatization of one of the most important industrial branches in this country. I really can't understand that someone is blaming me for that.

The audit is conducted by Professor Timermans, a Dutch lawyer, with his team, and he will present his findings to the government and the management of Aluminij Mostar. OHR will not decide either with regard to the report or to the ownership issue. This is a matter that will be discussed by the responsible authorities and people from Aluminij.

The report and the recommendation in it may serve as a basis for dialogue and finding solutions. The accusations in "Dani" are completely unfounded.

Express: Have you seen the report?

WP: No. OHR did initiate the launch of the audit so that Mr. Brajkovic couldn't continue with his machinations, and that the government here in Sarajevo would not be put in a position to accept a *fait accompli*.

Express: What machinations of Mr. Brajkovic are you referring to?

WP: I am talking about his claims that the privatization of Aluminij was done properly.

Growing impatience

Express: What are his mistakes?

WP: What I wish to say simply boils down to this: we are trying to ensure through the audit a rational foundation on the basis of which all of these issues can be resolved.

Express: All the things we are talking about, particularly criticism of the international community that we read and hear about in the media, indicate a certain growth of hostility towards the international community. Do you feel that?

WP: First of all, I think that we have finally entered a stage in which real problems are being discussed in this country – I am primarily talking about the economy.

On the other hand, I understand it is still the international community that is taking the lead in this country even six years after Dayton, which is a source of frustration for many, especially the thinking people. It somehow seems natural to me that now that the nationalists are not in power any longer, the polemic is turning against the international community.

But this will end, sooner or later. I am saying this because never before have I received so many positive messages and letters, encouraging me to continue, as in the last few weeks.

The ordinary people still deeply believe that the international community here has done a great job, and that its presence will still be needed for a while. However, for all this time I have been saying that you, the people here, have to start taking the destiny of this country in your hands.

Express: Did you expect that the "ownership" concept would be accompanied by a kind of verbal slapping campaign from the very beginning?

WP: You see, during my two-year tenure, I removed 66 officials, passed a number of decisions that affected in the most direct way the lives of a large number of people… I don't think that any other country has that many politicians per capita, as is the case in your country. I am therefore not surprised by the attacks.

Things are additionally burdened by too many "national problems" in addressing daily issues. That is why the wrong questions are very often asked. Fortunately, the Alliance is moving away from that, and that is good.

Express: I don't see big attacks from the people you have removed. The harshest statements are coming from exactly the opposite source…

WP: I have a feeling that the media here are very frustrated by the inability to do anything with regard to the problems, which are huge. By criticizing the international community, they implicitly admit that they believe that it is only the

international community that can do something here. This conviction is wrong.

When suddenly we are not called “the international community” anymore, but “foreigners”, I sense a certain degree of xenophobia. This semantic deviation shows me a level of frustration that is growing with regard to the international community. But, it also has a positive side. No one is afraid anymore that there could be a war here. Now people think and talk more freely…

Express: The impression is that the negative impression is only enhanced by the fact that the OHR is closed from the inside. You are not transparent to the degree which is required from our officials. We don’t know what is your exact salary, how and how much is the OHR spending…

WP:I answer to the PIC and rest assured that every *pfennig* we spend is closely and carefully scrutinized. My salary is a result of that and I earn it honestly. The work of the OHR is monitored by the countries that have a strict view of the OHR, from Russia to the US, as well as EU, Japan… Our expenditure is therefore very strictly controlled. For example, our budget for last year was cut by 25%. Now, for the activities of the OHR we have 25 million Euros at our disposal. We are the strongest organization with the smallest number employees and budget. Most of our employees are Bosnians – of 693 employees, only 251 are foreigners.

Express: When will you, then, appoint a Bosnian as one of your deputies?

WP: First of all, there is not a meeting in my office, regardless of what the issue is, that is not attended by one of the local staff. This is a good thing in many ways. Among

other things, we are more assured that we are not making any mistakes in our work system.

Express: Yes, but a Bosnian as one of your deputies?

WP: That is not my responsibility. The deputies are also appointed by PIC. (Note: the High Representative meant his Principal and Senior Deputies)

Express: Will you suggest that someone from your local staff be appointed as a deputy?

WP: In my office there are a lot of Bosnians who participate in the OHR's decision-making process. They are my guarantee that things will be done properly.

Transition and Peace Implementation

WP:I am preparing an address to the Political Directors of the Foreign Ministries of the PIC countries on the 13 of September. I will speak about the process of streamlining the work of international organizations in BiH. Clearly, the international community mandate will significantly decrease in the next few years. Therefore, this work must be done in a rational manner in order to complete what remains to be done in BiH, with as little resources and people as possible, but in the best possible way.

We are facing a new dilemma. It is a decisive one and I will specifically discuss it with the Political Directors. Namely, we have to make a distinction between peace implementation and issues faced by every country in transition; and establish the OHR's role in all that. I expect answers to questions such as what is OHR's job and what are the responsibilities and obligations of the local authorities.

Message to the SDS

Express: Following the incidents in Trebinje and Banja Luka you issued "a last warning" to the SDS and listed a number of measures which they have to implement. How many of the measures you ordered them to take have been implemented?

WP: First results of the concrete changes are evident in the work of the RS Constitutional Commission in which the SDS has its members. The second attempt to lay the corner stone for the Ferhadija Mosque was successful. I held the SDS accountable for successful implementation of that particular task. I also ordered them to establish the Commission for Reform and Reconciliation which must be a multi-ethnic body with political representatives, members of the religious communities, NGOs, youth associations etc.

Initial results are evident. The Commission was established and it is working now. I have never trusted nationalists and extremists – they are the reason why we are here. I do not believe a single word they say, I only believe in deeds. For example, look at the current discussion regarding the Hague.

I am not naďve. The SDS would like to continue obstructing, but that practice is over now. My message is clear – the SDS leadership will either co-operate or be removed.

Express: Who Plundered the Hercegovacka Banka

WP: In the next couple of weeks we will publicly present a cumulative report on results of the investigation conducted in the Hercegovacka Banka. That will show that the decision to go into the Bank was very difficult, but a correct one.

I can say already that the genuine plunderers of the Hercegovacka Banka are connected to the HDZ leadership. So, contrary to the accusations, we are not those who plundered

this Bank. That is all I can tell you at the moment, but for sure, you will be very surprised by the facts that will be presented.