Transcript of the Press Conference held in Brussels, 30 November 1999

Wolfgang Petritsch: Good afternoon everybody. We have just finished with the meeting of the Steering Board of the Peace Implementation Council on the level of Political Directors. We discussed a number of issues and I briefed on current economic and political developments, not least in the political sphere my decision to remove from office 22 local officials who have been persistently obstructing the peace process and the implementation of the Dayton Accords in BiH. I guess the communiqué is somewhere around and you will see that we have issued in the communiqué a number of points.

Firstly we welcomed the commitments made by the Presidency of BiH in New York and the substance in particular of the Declaration that the tri-Presidency issued there in the United States. The Steering Board further agreed to maintain the momentum that was generated there to ensure the full implementation of the New York Declaration and I guess there are copies available also here for you. We particularly noted the progress that has been achieved on the Law on the new border service for BiH. It sounds like a truism to us but it is of course important to have a state-wide border service, this is what a sovereign state amongst others constitutes, that there is a legally protected and defined border. This was not the case so far in BiH and we are trying to move very fast on this issue. We do hope that by the end of this year we will have the first border service, border police in place, and this will be also a multi-ethnic border police.

Secondly, I was pleased to receive solid support for my property implementation plan. This is a key factor in the return of refugees and displaced persons. I would just like to

remind you that out of more than 2 million displaced people and refugees, displaced during the war, there are still 1.2 million that have not yet returned to their original homes. These property rights, this new legislation which I issued on 27 of October, should help to reverse the facts of the war time ethnic cleansing.

I have already said that the Board strongly supported the action that we have taken, alongside our UN and SFOR partners, to remove from office those who have continuously blocked progress in BiH. As you have seen , I have – I guess the list is out there – I have dismissed 22 local officials across the ethnic divide in accordance with the powers that are vested in me by the PIC for BiH. So far first reactions are quite encouraging, and only a few, very few, of these officials have begun to protest their dismissals. But it should be noted that there is quite considerable public response. Many messages I have received already from average citizens are very much in support of this action and I might read a few sentences from one of these messages. One gentleman wrote to me: “This day carries great significance for the history of peoples living on this territory”. And he said the decision that I made on 29 November “had for the first time after World War II paved the road towards democratisation of our society and that it brings encouragement and hope to our tormented people and country”.

In the course of the meeting today we also discussed the situation with the media and the need to create genuine public service broadcasting. What we are doing right now, amongst many other things, is creating a public broadcasting system for BiH, basically within the realm first of the two entities each and then to have a state public broadcasting system. Here we basically and in particular spoke about the situation with Croatian state television. Unfortunately now, due to the upcoming elections in Croatia, we are confronted with a lot of politicking and influencing of the situation in BiH through outside forces coming from Zagreb, and there is also the issue

of the un-licensed local company Erotel and the need to take firm action if necessary to uphold the rule of law there.

Let me turn to the next issue that we discussed at length and this is the economic situation in BiH. We went into this in quite some detail and this is actually the start, for we are going to continue to concentrate on the economic issues. We are now in BiH, after four years, in the situation where the sheer reconstruction activities are growing to a close, meaning that physically the infrastructure of the country has been basically put back into place. Up to 80-90 % of the infrastructure, streets, 18 major bridges have been restored, housing and so on . That is basically in place now. Not so much housing but the other parts of the infrastructure in general and now funds for the reconstruction are sort of tapering out, but on the other hand the economic reform process has not yet really started and this is of great concern, of course, because we would like to see as quickly as possible more economic dynamic coming into the country.

Finally the Board was also keen to stress the need to send a strong message to the Croatian leadership in Zagreb outlining our areas of concern in regard to the upcoming elections in Croatia and the participation of Croat citizens, dual citizens living in BiH who are also citizens of BiH. These are some of the issues, or actually the most important issues that we discussed and I am ready now to answer your questions.

Patricia Kelly (CNN): Returning to the 22 sacked officials, if any of them refuse to leave, what are you going to do ?

Wolfgang Petritsch: First of all I can assure you we are not going to use SFOR for this but what we are going to do is – there is a contingency planning in place – we are going to isolate these politicians, we already have some experience with this, and we will be able to eventually force them out. We are trying to work through the local democratic institutions, encourage city assemblies, encourage also the

population to support these decisions and, as I have already pointed out in many cases, in an overwhelming number of the cases, we get public support for this, we get even political support from the very same constituency, so I am quite confident that after couple of days we will be fully successful.

Douglas Hamilton (Reuters): Going into year five. Do you think that Radovan Karadjic is still a major force undermining Dayton ?

Wolfgang Petritsch: Well, not so much when it comes to the day-to-day political process in BiH, but Karadjic of course is unfortunately of great symbolic nuisance to the situation in BiH. It sends a message that we would not want to be conveyed but which is almost on a daily basis as long as Mr. Karadjic is at large, this message will be conveyed that justice is not applied in the same way. I can assure you that it is of greatest concern to me as the head of the civilian implementation in BiH to keep this issue on the agenda.

Oana Lungescu (BBC World Service): Could you spell out your areas of concern about the Croat elections and how do you respond to the accusations of the Bosnian Croat ruling party, the HDZ, that your decision to dismiss Bosnian Croat officials is surprising and inadmissible.

Wolfgang Petritsch: First of all I do not believe that it came as a surprise to most of the people who were dismissed. In fact some had already packed their stuff before they even received my letter. They were expecting in fact that this would happen. Because we are in constant touch with the people there on the ground, so they were put on notice that, unless they comply, something will happen and it eventually happened. I think that it was long overdue in fact. So therefore this is more political rhetoric and I would not attach too much attention to this. Elections in Croatia – there are basically two areas of concern. First of all, and this I expressed also

to the leadership in Zagreb at the beginning of this month, first of all there should be equal access to the elections for every citizen of Croatia living now in BiH, including the Serbs from Krajina. This is my first concern. There is a lot of foot-dragging going on when it comes to re-instating Krajina Serbs to Croatian citizenship. This is something that we are pushing very hard, and then secondly, as we know, Bosnian Croats are also double citizens, also citizens of Croatia, and they have had in the past an inordinate influence on the outcome of the elections, so my second concern is that we, OHR, SFOR and OSCE above all provide such an environment for the elections that they take place in a free and fair way, meaning we are not going to allow that the Bosnian Croats will vote in any place. They have to be restricted to the consular and diplomatic offices of Croatia in BiH. There I can tell you we are in touch with both the Bosnian authorities and with the Croats.

Question: You said these 22 people were across the ethnic divide. Could you break them down? Second question – is it a problem for you now that SFOR troops are being shifted over to KFOR? Do you see it in any way as a problem for the stability of the area?

Wolfgang Petritsch: I may say first of all that of course we did not try to establish ethnic balance between these three ethnic communities when it comes to sacking them. It just so happened. The criteria are totally different ones and not ethnic ones of course. From the Republika Srpska we have nine Serbs, and from the Federation 13 people of which six are Croats and seven Bosniaks. So 9 Serbs, 6 Croats and 7 Bosniaks. The reasons for removal are manifold but basically they can be reduced to a consistent pattern of anti-Dayton activities. Whatever serves the purpose of re-uniting the country, of reconciliation, everything that is so to speak the gist of Dayton, the spirit of Dayton they violated. And your last question, SFOR is now under way to draw down its troops

from 30,000 to 20,500. This will be in effect by March, or something like this. For me this is not a real problem as long as the remaining troops are capable of maintaining the necessary security environment which is necessary for the implementation of Dayton Accords. I had a meeting yesterday with NATO Secretary General, George Robertson, and he promised that the remaining 20,000 would compensate, so to speak, the draw-down by being more mobile and more flexible. Let me state one thing, the situation in BiH now is such that we are not confronted any longer with immediate break-out of war.

This is over by now, people, and this is also what you can see by the reactions to my decision yesterday, there is no turmoil, there are no demonstrations, there are no attacks, at least so far. The overall climate is becoming much more peaceful than it used to be, so therefore sheer numbers are not a big problem to me. I believe that SFOR is fully capable, will be also with its new numbers fully capable of handling the security situation in BiH.

Robert MacPherson (AFP): What do you see will be the impact of the passing of Franjo Tudjman now that his death is pretty much a question of when and not whether it’s going to happen?

Wolfgang Petritsch: The post-Tudjman era definitively will be much more conducive to a more relaxed atmosphere, first of all between the two countries, between Croatia and BiH, and then in particular when it comes to the situation of the Croats in BiH itself. I believe there was much too much of an influence, both ideologically as well as financially. This I was convinced by many of the opposition leaders, all in fact by the opposition leaders will definitively wane. There is going to be a new chance for a new beginning in the relations and I believe that this will also have a sobering effect on the Croat leadership in BiH. It will make them more realistic in their approach to the day-to-day politics there, and also this will of course be very helpful in the implementation of the Dayton Accords in rather general terms.

Zekerijah Smajic (Sense news agency): About the 22 local officials, is the job now definitively finished or you are planning to extend the list?

Wolfgang Petritsch: You will understand that I am not going to comment on my future activities. The dismissal of officials is in my power and I will continue to use these powers whenever this is necessary but it does not mean that I will say today yes I will go on . This will depend really, and this is what I tried to follow in the past, this will depend totally on the officials themselves. If there is a problem, then we will have to tackle it but we will cross the bridge once we are there.

Dragan Blagojevic (Beta news agency): You mentioned that the Steering Board stressed the necessity for economic reforms. Could you confirm that lack of economic reforms, lack of privatisation influences also the lack of private investment ?

Wolfgang Petritsch: We are definitively not satisfied with development in the economic sphere. This is an open secret. When you look at the country you will see there that things are economically not moving, neither the privatisation – we are behind I would say almost two years – nor in the field of small and medium size businesses, which is actually the backbone of every economy. Not a lot has really happened. This of course depends very much on a lack of confidence that is still there. The ethnic division creates a big problem for all potential investors, both domestic – they would much rather go to a foreign country and invest there – and above all for foreign investors coming into the country. So to create an environment that is conducive to investment, that is of utmost importance. We are doing this both in the legal field as well as in the political field. What we have done yesterday, this is not least to push forward the idea that private investors would never go into a municipality where you have a mayor who is simply not willing to abide by the laws and to really push ahead with the Dayton Agreement. This is something that is internationally supported, yet some of the local leaders are

absolutely against it and they of course are preventing economic development. So to get rid of these people, these politicians, is part so to speak of this new strategy to create an economic environment where potential investors would think, would realistically think about investing.

Dragan Blagojevic (Beta): And the reason was also the corruption?

Wolfgang Petritsch: Corruption is of course, as in many of the other transition countries, corruption is a big issue and we are addressing this almost on a daily basis. I have already at the Steering Board Foreign Ministers meeting in New York on 22 September proposed the creation of what I called an Anti-corruption and Transparency Group. This is an inter-agency group which is headed by my Principal Deputy in Sarajevo. We are coordinating all anti-corruption efforts as well as trying to get more transparency into the dealings both in the economic field which is of course as we know intimately tied into the political field there in BiH.

Robert MacPherson (AFP): Do you think that it would help to have an international conference to perhaps touch up or to make necessary amendments to Dayton ? This is one of the ideas that ICG suggested.

Wolfgang Petritsch: I believe that first of all there are many wide areas of Dayton not yet fulfilled. So therefore I think that we should concentrate on these areas because once you open up Dayton you open up Pandora’s box. I know there is pretty much space still within the Dayton framework which can be filled with the necessary activities, there is room enough to do so. In the longer run we will see, once we are there I am sure that the international community would welcome any input on the part of people themselves who are directly affected by the Dayton Accords, meaning the Bosnia Herzegovinians to come forward and present ideas how to change the Dayton Accords, but for the time being I don’t see any

real sense to this.

Lada Stipic Niseteo (Vecernji List): What are your further steps concerning public broadcasting in BiH ?

Wolfgang Petritsch: As you know, there is a public broadcasting system in the Republika Srpska in place now. We have a very modern system which is beginning to work. We are now about to create public broadcasting system in the Federation, which means basically that we are trying to get the Croats and the Bosniaks to cooperate and to work together on a Federation television. There is also ample opportunity for private enterprises – when it comes to Erotel in Mostar, this is a Croat outfit. They have an opportunity to produce their programmes and there are many other opportunities to do the same and to do even more. What is important also is that we have established IMC, Independent Media Commission, which is basically the media watchdog for public and private television there which hands out the licences. We are now in the process of building a modern public broadcasting system, which I am confident will contribute in a large degree to the democratisation of the country, to building up modern structures that eventually we will be able to leave behind BiH when once it stands on its own feet, and there the public broadcasting system is very important.

Douglas Hamilton (Reuters): Kouchner says that he is trying to run Kosovo with 1,700 policemen. How many police you have in BiH now ?

Wolfgang Petritsch: Of course the situation in BiH is quite different. I think that alone in the Republika Srpska we have 12,000 local police. We have the UN police contingent there, IPTF, but they are basically there in order to assist and support the development of a local police force, to modernise the local police force so therefore in this respect you cannot really compare Kosovo and BiH.

OK. Thank you so much.