

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, High Representative in BiH”54 million German Mark of Croat(ian) aid disappeared to “nowhere”

On his way back from Brussels, where he discussed with NATO and EU representatives the current BiH conflict between the HDZ and the International Community and the possibilities of finding a solution, the High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch stopped in Zagreb to have a meeting with Prime Minister Racan and his associates. The initiative for the Zagreb meeting was, as Petritsch said, almost mutual. “Minister Picula proposed in the telephone call, a meeting that I was about to propose, so that we could, at this serious moment, evaluate the situation and coordinate our views.” After talks with the Government, Wolfgang Petritsch expressed his views to Vecernji List on the way out of the crisis and the expected Croat(ian) role in the search for a solution..

Q: Someone recently said that for stability in BiH the “body language” of its neighbors is very important. What do you think of the “body language” of the Croatian government towards BiH?

A: For the stability of BiH how its neighbors act is really very important. I believe that Croatia has a good attitude, starting from the first statement of President Mesic when he told the Croats in BiH something like your capital is Sarajevo, we in Zagreb are behind you, but do not expect that we will take care of you. The Government expressed their wish to develop relations with BiH as those of one state with another, maybe the special relations agreement with the BiH Federation is a thing of the past. Those are very positive and constructive messages for stability in BiH.

Coordination of the International Community and the Croatian Government

Q: But the impression is that there has been a certain emptiness in Croatian policy towards BiH in the time between the first messages and the current situation.

A: I cannot speak on behalf of the Croatian Government and I am sure that in the past year it had many more urgent matters it had to solve and that the issue of Croats in BiH was not a priority. But I believe that now the IC and the Croatian Government, as the Prime Minister Racan said, are very coordinated when it comes to the Croat question in BiH. It is still necessary that the new Government in Sarajevo joins it as an equal partner. There are Croats in that Government, member of the Presidency Mr. Krizanovic is a Croat, the Prime Minister is a Croat, and the President of the Federation Mr. Karlo Filipovic is also a Croat. Now there are almost ideal conditions for the establishment of the cordial and very constructive relations between Croatia and BiH.

Q: Speaking concretely what would be the desired role of the Croatian Government in seeking the way out of the current conflict of HDZ BiH, headed by Mr. Jelavic and the international administration?

A: After it confirmed that it respects the sovereignty of BiH I believe that it is very important that the Croatian Government establishes contact with the Croats in BiH and assures them that they are significant part of the regional development and that they can be a very important bridge between BiH and Croatia.

Q: Who could be the interlocutor on behalf of the Croats in BiH in such a conversation?

A: Essentially it would be the governments of the both countries but also church authorities and cultural institutions. I believe that, what we in the west call the institutions of the civil society, should be developed further, from organization for protection of human rights down to organization for return of refugees which should work together. At this moment let's say it is very important to encourage the return of Croat refugees to BiH.

Q: Still the current conflict of the international administration and the Croats from Herzegovina cannot wait for the development of the civil society. Do you see a way out and whom do you count on as the interlocutor from the Croat side?

A: I count on all those representatives of the Croat people who respect the legal institutions of BiH and who are ready to work within the legal framework. Several of those who overstepped the law and who act within the parallel institutions of authority cannot be considered interlocutors. Unfortunately, the dialogue with them is no longer possible.

Q: According to that criteria, Ante Jelavic and his associates which acted within the Croat self-rule could no longer be political partners in finding a way out. On the other hand, Jelavic stated in the interview with our newspaper that he has been meeting with your people and that they talked about the way of overcoming the conflict.

A: That is not true. We are in contact with the people whom are very close with Mr. Jelavic but who are not actively engaged in the self-rule, people who do not hold formal functions in it.

HDZ BiH needs to be closer to the democratic Croatia

Q: It seems like an attempt of the division of HDZ BiH, where those who did not hold the formal functions within the self-rule could be accepted as partners of the IC.

A: I do not think it is an attempt to devide HDZ BiH. I think that it is up to HDZ now to decide which way they want to go. Will it be in the direction of reforms, which means being closer to the European democracy and democratic Croatia, or to continue the way Jelavic and several of his closest associates have chosen. But that is their free will and their own decision.

Q: You personally, as well as other international officials, have mentioned Jelavic in the context of corruption and organized crime. Do you have evidence for that after the two recent SFOR actions?

A: Those operations took place only recently. We have a wide range of documentation that needs to be analyzed but there are very clear indications that the HDZ leadership is deeply involved in illegal activities. Money is being transferred and ends up "nowhere." In that, is included the 54 million German Marks of aid to institutions from the Croatian Government.

Q: Do you have any evidence that this money was spent illegally?

A: I cannot go into details, but there are firm indications that some things, absolutely illegal, were taking place.

Q: Have you asked for help from the Croatian government and the judicial authorities in order to clarify the itinerary of that money?

A: That is the job of the BiH authorities and the international administrator of the Hercegovacka Banka Toby Robinson. They will undertake necessary measures in accordance with the BiH laws.

Q: There are rumors that help has already sought from the Croatian Government and the District Attorney but that the request was rejected.

A: I cannot say anything about that. We get the help and the support we need from the Croatian Government and that is very important to us at this moment. All further activities have to be based on clear legal foundations.

Q: Was it really necessary for SFOR to break into the Hercegovacka Banka in the night and break open the safe with explosives? Was any evidence found during this action which confirms publicly stated accusations against Jelavic and his associates?

A: The second action of SFOR was undertaken because the first one was, due to the riots organized by the HDZ, interrupted and it was undertaken during the night so that further riots and victims would be avoided. A longer period of time will be needed for the analysis of the confiscated documentation, but according to the first investigations, I believe we are on the right track.

The President who is breaching the Constitutions has to step down.

Q: If after all you do not have enough strong evidence against Jelavic and his associates you will make him a victim, you will strengthen his position and deepen the doubts of Herzegovina Croats about the motivation behind these actions.

A: Mr. Jelavic has already broken the Constitution. In any other country, a president that breaks the Constitution, the one who should protect it, needs to step down from that position. I think there are no doubts about the fact that Jelavic's position is illegal.

Q: But there is a difference in whether someone has been thrown out of political life, or whether someone is in jail, charged with criminal activities.

A: Establishing anyone's criminal responsibility is the job of the independent judiciary from which we expect the appropriate steps. Even if we do not like someone politically, he has the right to defend himself as a free man until the charges are proven. When it comes to political debate I can disagree with him but when it is about crime and breaking the law it has to be left to an independent judiciary.

Q: Mr. Jelavic and his associates are at the same time Croatian citizens. If by any chance, a criminal procedure is initiated against them in BiH, the moment they are in the Croatian territory, Croatia cannot extradite them according to its Constitution. Did you talk with the Prime Minister Racan about such possibilities and their consequences?

A: No, we did not talk about such details, they are really questions for the judicial bodies of the two states. I would not like to answer the individual questions but the issue of dual citizenship is generally a very specific issue between Croatia and BiH which needs to be solved.

Q: But those legal questions related to specific people could become the source of serious political crisis in Croatia. Have you talked with Prime Minister Racan about the danger of the crisis in BiH moving into Croatia?

A: I truly believe that the majority of people in Croatia and BiH are sick and tired of conflict. Prime Minister Racan expressed his concern for the tourist season in Dalmatia but I am pretty sure that the reasonable Croat(ian), even those from Western Herzegovina understand that they should not shoot themselves in the foot by creating new conflicts.

Full support of NATO and EU

Q: You are on your way back from Brussels where you had talks with the NATO and EU. Are new actions, like those actions of SFOR in the Hercegovacka Banka being prepared?

A: I have full support from NATO, EU, and the USA, and I believe this to be very positive. I have never announced any of my actions in advance, but I believe that the effect of the last SFOR operations is such that it guarantees faster political progress than we've had until now.

Q: Would you, after all that happened, go to Mostar soon?

A: I will definitely go to Mostar soon but I cannot give the exact date now.

Q: Did anyone threaten you after the SFOR action in the Hercegovacka Bank?

A: No, nothing more than the usual when I do something that the Serbs and Bosniaks do not like. Some of my decision cause short-term shocks, riots and turbulence, but in the long-term, people understand them as the right step forward.