

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative for BiH”I don’t want the Croats in a ghetto called third Entity”

Of course, there won't be any economic or other sanctions against the Croat people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I removed Mr Jelavic and three other officials exactly because I did not want the Croats to end up in a ghetto called third Entity, which would result in economic isolation and impoverishment

The dismissal of Ante Jelavic has been one of the most radical moves of Wolfgang Petritsch since he became the High Representative in BiH with the far-reaching authority to dismiss people who obstruct the Dayton peace process. Due to that, we asked him for an interview about the implications of his decision, which, whether we want it or not, part of the Croats in BiH perceive as an annulment of their electoral will.

Additional measures against extremists

You have removed Ante Jelavic as well as three other high officials of the HDZ BiH and barred them from further activities. Can further sanctions be expected?

I made it very clear. There will of course be no economic or other sanctions against the Croat people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Indeed, I removed Mr Jelavic and the three others because I did not want Croats caught in a ghetto called the third entity, which will only result in economic isolation and poverty. If necessary, I will take additional measures to prevent that, but they will not be directed against the Croat people as such – only against individual extremists.

The removed officials of the BiH HDZ have announced that the Croat self-government will go ahead despite the sanctions. What will you do if that happens?

I have sent a clear signal to the HDZ that the course they embarked on is a clear violation of the Dayton Peace Agreement. The ball is now in the court of the HDZ to return to the Constitutional grounds they decided to leave. I have made it clear that the international community will not allow any establishment of parallel structures.

Which is the strategy of IC in case that Croatian National Assembly insists on its decisions and the Croats in BiH actually support that policy?

I can't discuss operational matters with the public.

HDZ radicalises threats

As a last resort, are you ready to engage SFOR in order to enforce your decisions?

Threats do not contribute to the current situation. It was the HDZ leadership who fled into radicalisation of language and threats. Mr Jelavic himself even threatened with war in one of his speeches. I have no interest whatsoever in engaging in this rhetoric. It is my duty to reach out to the Croat people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. But I can tell you that the entire international community, all the Steering Board members, the other international organisations, and all other concerned are united on the issue of the HDZ and the protection of the BiH Croats.

What will happen with the HVO in case that Croatian National Assembly realises its announcements and tries to bring it under its control?

The so-called “Croatian National Assembly” does not have any legal authority in Bosnia and Herzegovina and I expect every institution, in particular the executive institutions in the country to keep this in mind. If they receive any order from the “Croatian National Assembly”, they will have to consider it as if coming from a private person.

What do you expect to happen with the HDZ BiH? Is a further radicalisation of attitudes in the HDZ possible?

Mr Jelavic himself in his first statement after my decision underlined that he has no interest in escalating the situation beyond the framework of political discourse. I take him by his word and remind the HDZ that they already went beyond the acceptable.

The interests of the three peoples - identical

According to the International Community, the Croatian National Assembly is lead by a group of people that is not interested to work for the benefit of BiH Croats, but wants to protect own financial interest along with criminal activities. Can you provide evidence for those claims?

The interests of the Croat people in Bosnia and Herzegovina coincide with the concerns of Bosniaks and Serbs in the country. They are concerned about their safety, their economic well-being, the future of their children and the future of their own country. These are concerns that were not addressed by the HDZ leadership. Rather they tried to establish a third entity in order to protect the privileged status of a handful of people. Their only means of political campaign was fear, claiming the position of Croats in the country was not equal. But how equal would a third entity be for the Bosnian Croats living outside Herzegovina? Of course, there is evidence for the criminal activities of certain HDZ members, but we cannot release them before our own investigations are finished and the investigative and judicial authorities finish their job.

If this is so, how do you explain the fact that the majority of Croats voted for the HDZ in the last elections?

The HDZ relied on a campaign raising fears and hatred among the people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Despite that, I have to say that they did not do particularly well in the past elections. Rather, if you compare these election results to the ones in 1996, the HDZ lost 50 percent of its voters.

It seems that BiH Croats a key problem is that a majority of them support a policy that will harm their own interest in the long term. How do you comment on that?

I agree. As I said before, HDZ support is not increasing, HDZ is losing its support. And the only thing the current, old-style leadership around Mr Jelavic can do is to flee into extremist ideas.

The decision is up to the HDZ

If this is so, which strategies will the IC apply to point out to the Croats what their interests are without crossing the line of democracy?

My doors are, and will be always open. So are the doors to the political institutions. The HDZ still has the possibility to engage in the process of constitutional reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina's Entities and it is up to them to take up their seats in the House of Peoples.

A majority of Croats as well as some politicians in Croatia claim that the border of democracy has already been crossed. How do you comment that?

The border of the rule of law and the Constitutional order has been crossed by Mr Jelavic and his associates.

An argument for the establishment of the Croatian National Assembly that can often be unofficially heard among the BiH Croats is that the Croats in BiH have the right to get what the Serbs have. Is the Dayton Peace Agreement unjust, which is also claimed by the official Croatian policy?

The Croat people are fully protected and represented in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is ironic that we have to discuss this at this time, when the Prime Minister of the country happens to be a Croat, when there are means for the Croat people to prevent legislation violating their interests — be it the House of Peoples, where the HDZ would still have a majority of the Croat seats, be it in the Constitutional Commissions, where the HDZ refused to nominate any members. The problem has so far been that the leadership of the HDZ has not adequately represented the interests of the Croat people. Rather, the party's leaders have chosen to take care of their own personal interests over those of the people they allegedly represent.

What are the institutional ways to change the Dayton Peace Accord?

What can be changed is Annex 4 that is the Constitution of BiH and a two-third majority in the parliament is needed for that. Domestic political representatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina should create the future for their country. This was my aim when I advocated the concept of "ownership".

Praises for Croatia

How do you comment on the role of Croatia during the current BiH crisis?

I welcome the good Cupertino with Croatia. And I would like to express my respect for the firm stand Croatia took. The Croatian government shares our concerns about the newly developed situation, and they have expressed their deep regret over the course the HDZ has pursued. I also commend the Croatian government for co-operating with the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague.

How do you comment on the claims by respectful Croatian politicians, such as Zdravko Tomac, that the international community, through its electoral rules for the House of Peoples, has one-sidedly changed the Dayton Peace Agreement and brought the BiH Croats into an unequal position?

The change of the PEC rules was nothing but a pretext for the HDZ to start a campaign of fear. The reality for the Croat people is that there is a House of Peoples, where the HDZ would still have a majority of the Croat seats. And as I mentioned, there are the Constitutional Commissions, where the HDZ refused to nominate any members. Just think about this: the Constitutional Court declares the Croats constituent in the RS, and the HDZ does not want to participate in the implementation of this ruling – nor is it interested in the constitutional changes in the Federation, which they always complain about.

Drazen Budisa, the President of the HSLs, a strong party of the ruling coalition in Croatia, yesterday presented his party's proposal to change the Dayton Peace Accord. Have you been informed of this proposal, and how do you comment on that?

I have read about it in Globus, but we have not been informed about it officially. I really appreciate that Mr Budisa is interested in BiH, but he should focus on changes that are realistic – changes through the implementation of the Constitutional Courts Decisions, for example. The Dayton Peace Agreement as such will not be changed or overturned.

Empty seat of the Croat representative

What is the procedure to fill the empty seat of the Croatian member of the BiH Presidency?

There is the Law on filling a vacant position in the Presidency from last summer, which outlines the procedure. It is up to the BiH House of Representatives to nominate a Croat member from amongst them, and the respective caucus in the BiH House of Peoples has to approve the choice. Until then, the seat will remain vacant.

The door remains open

Do you expect that HDZ BiH officials will return to the constitutional institutions, and are you inviting them to do so?

The door was never closed, and it will remain open. I personally spent hours and hours talking to Mr Jelavic, trying to convince him to represent the interests of those who elected him and his party's delegates in legal institutions. This invitation still stands addressed to those who have remained in the HDZ.