

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative "Without Change Of Power, BiH May Become Europe's Pauper"

Like never before, in a very short period of only several months, numerous events took place in BiH and its surroundings, of which each one can individually claim the attribute "crucial". General election in BiH, ousting Milosevic in Yugoslavia, announcements of changes and referendums Š These are only a few events that mark or will mark permanently the contemporary history of our country.

All these events were a good enough reason for an interview with Wolfgang Petritsch, High Representative.

Will you sanction, and if so in what way will you sanction, those representatives of the BiH Government who openly oppose the DPA, for example, requests to withdraw the decision on the make-up the House of Peoples of the FBiH Parliament, announcing the death of the Federation at the pre-election meeting of the HDZ and the like?

I am here to help the citizens of BiH help them live normal lives, have jobs and decent salaries, decent pensions once they retire, business opportunities, a good education. Talking about the Croats in BiH, I am acutely aware that they are the smallest people and as such deserve special care and protection. Democracy can always be measured by how the smallest member of society are treated. I am determined to ensure that the Croats enjoy all the rights they have under the Dayton Agreement and the BiH Constitution.

Sometimes I am forced to sanction political parties or officials who work against the interests of the people. I don't like doing it, and it is always a last resort. But my interest is the ordinary people, and not the political parties.

Do the Croat citizens need parties that are busy organising so-called referenda, or do they need parties that will provide for a better living standard? The opinion poll the HDZ wishes to carry out is clearly part of their pre-election campaign and an attempt to distract from the real issues at stake.

There is a body set up, the Election Appeals Sub-Committee (EASC), which ensures that everyone abides by the rules set for the pre-election period. If the HDZ chooses to break these rules, the EASC will consider the matter.

Can the upcoming elections really bring the improvements that the whole IC favours and what is your pre election message to the voters of BiH?

Elections are the basic democratic means for bringing about change. It will not be easy to overcome the stagnation of the last five years but it is important that BiH sends a signal that the people want progress. And I am sure they do want progress. So, they should simply think which candidate or party is more likely to solve the economic standstill in BiH, improve the living standard, provide the children of BiH with a good education.

The electorate and the political leadership must remember that there have been significant changes in the region, and without progress in BiH, donor countries and possible investors will direct their attentions elsewhere. Investors and donors are already tired of having to battle with inefficient government administrations, laws that do not help them develop their business and a political leadership that defends only its own narrow self-interest.

People in BiH must consider what is really important to them, and then which parties are most likely to achieve these goals.

In Yugoslavia and Croatia there has already been a change in the governing structures. What makes OHR's work in BiH easier, the fact that the HDZ is no longer in power in Croatia, or that there is no Slobodan Milosevic in the FRY?

We have seen some very significant changes with regard to Croatia's approach to BiH. It seems that Yugoslavia too wishes to play a positive role in the implementation of the DPA. They are both fully aware that their interest and the interests of their citizens is best served by taking a positive role with regard to their international commitments and thus making possible full acceptance into the various European structures.

In both cases the realisation that isolation can only lead to poverty and dissatisfaction amongst their citizens has

taken root.

How can these changes be of use to people in BiH if at the next elections they again vote for the same politicians?

The changes in the FRY and Croatia will certainly have a positive effect, and the democratic changes in Croatia are already being felt. Bosnia and Herzegovina should no longer be the subject of external undemocratic pressures.

The evident changes in Croatia and Yugoslavia also present a challenge to BiH. If there is no change in BiH there is the very real possibility that it will remain the poor man of Europe, an "anachronistic" state, excluded from the many positive economic and social benefits that come with being a part of Europe.

The President of the FRY, Vojislav Kostunica only recently came into power and he has already visited Sarajevo. Some individuals and certain BiH parties feel this visit came too soon. Is this type of approach justifiable? Was it too early for the first man of FRY to visit BiH?

President Kostunica and I have had very frank and open discussions. His recent visit to Sarajevo has shown that he recognises international rules applying between states and his clear support for the implementation of all aspects of the DPA is very encouraging. The FRY is a guarantor of the DPA and so should play a positive role.

It is important for BiH to have good relations with its neighbours; this promotes trade and freedom of movement, which can only have a positive effect on the whole of BiH.

Is Vojislav Kostunica really the person who can help normalise relations between BiH and FRY, and in the implementation of the DPA?

President Kostunica proves to be a very capable and courageous statesman. He has expressed his support for the DPA and its full implementation, which includes respect for the authority of the Hague Tribunal and the sovereignty of BiH. I expect his full support on matters of DPA implementation in compliance with Yugoslavia's obligations.

If the only pre-requirement for the creation of diplomatic relations between BiH and the FRY was the retracting of the case against the FRY that before the International Court in the Hague, should BiH do that?

There are many issues to be resolved between BiH and the FRY. The recent visit of President Kostunica to Sarajevo shows the FRY's willingness to tackle these issues and it has opened the possibility for future talks between the two states. Diplomatic relations would be the best way to start this, and for this reason I support the open bi-lateral discussions that are taking place between the two sovereign states.

The Croatian Government recently expressed concerns because of the alleged imperilled position of BiH Croats, which, according to them was caused by the PEC decision on the make-up of the Federation House of Peoples. Do you have the impression that the new Croatian government is continuing the HDZ's political approach towards BiH?

No, the Croatian Government's approach has had a very positive effect on BiH. By starting to legalise and regulate relations in a normal way between two sovereign states the Croatian Government has had a positive influence. The questions of refugee return and war crimes are issues that the Croatian Government has indicated they wish to tackle. If there is to be lasting stability in the region these issues must be resolved in a way that supports the law and basic human rights.

Ambassador Barry has visited Zagreb to discuss the requirements regarding changes to the makeup of the Federation House of Peoples. It is clear that the present Croatian Government upholds the law and that the changes to this body are in line with the decision of the BiH Constitutional Court.