

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative "Dayton is not the New Testament"

Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative of the International Community in B&H, explains why the country has reached a critical moment in its development:

Two or three months ago, the four editors of the Sarajevo magazine Dani (Senad Pecanin, Mile Stojic, Nerzuk Curak and the author of this article) presented ten action points for Bosnia and Herzegovina. The proposal was that Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative of the International Community for BiH, by using the powers vested in him by the Dayton Constitution, should relieve all the political agencies of their duties for the period of one year.

In that time, he should introduce the "requirements of the European integration process, and establish the principles for the financially efficient organisation of the state agencies." In practice, this meant that he should establish a one-year protectorate, thus saving the country from the disaster to which the domestic ruling structure has obviously been leading it.

Wolfgang Petritsch's response came soon enough. After having analysed closely all the action points, he rejected the proposal, and once again affirmed his concept of Ownership.

Q: Do you possibly have, Mr. Petritsch, also some personal, and not only diplomatic-career motivation for Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkans, having in mind your language background, your Southeast European studies etc?

A: Of course. I was always looking for such job with which I could completely identify myself. Of course, one cannot plan in advance this kind of work – one cannot plan to become the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, I can tell with pleasure that, after having worked for 25 years publicly, now I happen to be in the situation for the first time to be able to use the knowledge which I acquired while I was studying the Southeast Europe and Balkans in the 19th century. However, that is, I could say, a good theoretical base for my work here. My stay in the USA and Paris for so many years allowed me to have a practical insight into the possibilities for the expansion of the positive influences of the western civilisation. I was born in that region of the border where German and Slavic cultural influences are mixed and touched. I grew up in a village with 16 houses and one church, where my mother ran a restaurant. There was also a school with one classroom in which we were all together, all of us from 6 to 14, and we attended the classes in two languages in German and Slovenian. It was a real microcosm that was always like a mirror to me, no matter where I happen to be – in New York, Belgrade or now in Sarajevo. I was haunted by that everywhere, it was like a proof that it is not only one, exclusive identity that is important. It helped me a lot to understand that the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural systems are not and cannot be a problem, but essentially the only right way to the future. And it was also like that in the former Yugoslavia – its multi-cultural system and its multi-ethnicity were not the problems, but on the contrary, the real problem was the war that was being made against it.

The Power of Media

Q: In what way do you see the role of the public and media in our political life?

A: A complete collapse of communication is in the bottom line of any conflict. Whenever I have time enough I read again and

again about the history of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are, clearly, many causes, many reasons, and a number of persons who were involved in all of that. However, it is fascinating, and at the same time tragic to me that it was not finished as a Greek drama with catharsis. When one looks at it more closely, first the main actors can be identified, I mean the political actors whose names are very well known. Whenever a worse turnabout would happen, the reason was always the lack of communication, the lack of understanding and readiness to hear what the other side has to say, for a compromise to be found possibly. All of that, as it is well known, used to happen in the context of exclusively ethnic, nationalistic way of thinking. I see the beginning of the tragedy in the beginning of 90s, when the nationalist parties started cooperating. The only reason for their cooperation was the struggle for power. That is the " eastern sin ": one has no intention to look for the solution for citizens, for people. Who will grab more political power was the only thought. It was the centre of their thoughts, their interest. The media played out a big role in the conflict, I mean in the ex-Yugoslav area. They were the way for conveying of the nationalist, exclusive messages and made them stronger. They suggested the public that there was no other solution but the war.

Q: Is our media culture significantly different today?

A: My answer is that media are a field that is in the very centre of my work here. One of our most important tasks is to help the media get transformed into a true democratic power, to become aware of their true civilisation and civil function.

Q: Recently, you have been warning that Bosnia and Herzegovina is in danger of economic disaster. It clearly includes the other aspects too: social, psychological, moral....Can those processes be irreversible, after which the country will not be able to recover for a long period of time? And, generally speaking, what is, in your opinion, economic picture of Bosnia

and Herzegovina in the near future?

A: One should understand that this country is in a kind of double transformation. First on the list is the repair of war damages, the physical and psychological ones. I think that a lot has been done in the light of physical reconstruction in the four years and a half. Our capabilities in removing of the psychological damages, caused to the people in the war, are much more limited. Now, four years and a half after the peace agreement was signed, we have been going from the economy based on offering help to the economy that will be based on investments. This is the key moment in the development of Bosnia and Herzegovina and that is the reason why I recently warned that there is an imminent threat of crisis for Bosnia and Herzegovina. That was also the appeal to the people in the country to get involved more actively in the reforms' processes. I also mentioned another kind of transformation: it is the transformation from the communist, commanding type of economy to the economy of free market. I think one should talk about that so that people could become aware and understand the importance of those problems. The reforms can be successful only if people do tackle them.

Dayton on the scale

Q: The role and the function of the HR in B&H does not have a previously tested model, it is brand new. How frustrating, or encouraging is it for you?

A: I am very aware of how unique my situation in B&H is. We have to be aware of the fact that this is a unique experiment in the world. Neither the IC nor I, as the HR, should think that we are the only ones who know how this society and state should look like. There is no space for arrogance, there is no space for us to act as if we knew better. At the same time, we should have no illusions about what is possible to be done from the outside. From the very beginning, the most frequent words in my vocabulary have been: We are here to help you. It

was for this reason that I introduced the concept of "ownership." It has been accepted very controversially here. But I did it deliberately to provide for a start of the process of sobering up. We in the IC think that the first stage, physical reconstruction of the country, is much easier than the one at which we currently are. It is much easier, for instance, to rebuild a bridge than has a positive influence on the people's minds and hearts. Physical infrastructure can be the basis for a society, but can never be the goal itself. Thus, the success of the IC, in fact, depends on the people here.

Q: I understand and respect your reluctance to make a problem out of Dayton. However, one should feel free to raise the issue as to whether the whole Dayton is a "system that cannot function," especially when it comes to the encouragement of ethnical characteristics that are certainly built into it.

A: In order to avoid any misunderstandings when it comes to me and Dayton: I do not think of it in a theological manner. It is not the New Testament, it is not a dogma! Moreover, I think an intellectual, scientific and political discussion on Dayton is necessary and welcome in the sense of pro et contra. However, I stand against political instrumentalisation of such discourse, especially when it comes from the nationalist parties. Each one of them has something else on their mind when they speak about a change of or compliance with Dayton! It is always about an effort to gain advantage or benefit for themselves or their respective ethnic groups. As long as there is no spirit of compromise, as long as they think of their respective ethnic groups without any regard to the other two which are as important elements of the Dayton Agreement, discussion on Dayton cannot be positive, nor can a change of it take place. My position, in the capacity of the HR, is the implementation of Dayton. I am convinced that there is space for corrections and improvements within Dayton. However, there is no political will that would lead to progress and

prosperity for the citizens of B&H. Let us take the refugee returns for instance! As you know, it is the very essence of Dayton. It is for the people to get back to their homes, their land, and to reverse what was created through ethnic cleansing, if I may use that terrible word. Dayton sets no restrictions in that respect, on the contrary, it encourages returns. Why, then, do we still have hundreds of thousands of people who have not returned to their homes? The reason is in the fact that many politicians in this country are still trying to wage and win the war with different, political and bureaucratic means. It cannot be changed with another Dayton Agreement! My view is that we should be working on the full implementation of Dayton and once we come thus far, then it will be up to the citizens of this country to make further improvements and changes. In essence, this means – to change the Constitution, and that is the normal path that is followed by all democratic countries – changing and improving their constitutions through amendments!

Votes for alternative

Q: Although the final municipal election results are not known yet, two opposite interpretations of the elections' character have come up so far. One is that it was an important and positive political change and the other is that the results of the elections, in fact, cement the ethnic division of the country. What is your opinion about this?

A: I will give you my personal opinion, as someone who comes from the outside but is inside the country at the same time. First of all, I do not think that we should judge the election results only on the basis of ethnic structure. What is far more important is that they represent the beginning of the functioning of the normal democratic “give and take” principle. Here in the Federation, you can see on the example of the SDA and the SDP that the persons in the SDP have discovered the true and distinct alternative to the traditional ideological movement such as the SDA. They raise

different issues and have different approaches, the SDP is simply a more modern party and has more Western style, and is not a mass movement with ideological programme. Therefore, the people here had an alternative and voted for it, which is a quite normal course of democratic changes. In the Croat community, the people did not have such an explicit and attractive alternative. And what did they do – they abstained from voting and the voter's turnout was even under 40% in some areas. This could be called an inter-step towards the political normalisation that has happened to Bosniacs. When you take a closer look at the situation in the RS, you can see fundamental changes. First I have to say that all the processes in the RS are falling two years behind the Federation, following the absolute obstruction that was conducted by Krajisnik and others. For those reasons, all the assistance and efforts by the IC in the RS have not had the same effect as they did in the Federation. One should bear another thing in mind: the Serb nationalism, in my opinion, has a very pronounced cultural aspect, in addition to the political aspect of it. This is why the development is going at a slower pace in the RS, the development that might lead to establishment of a multi-ethnic society and multi-ethnic parties such as Lagumdžija's party. The difference is the same as that between the democratic opposition in Serbia and the democratic opposition in Croatia. Having all that in mind, I can say, still, that pluralisation of the society in the RS is ongoing. We have Dodik's Independent Social Democrats, we have a split within the SPRS, then Mladen Ivanic's new party, which means that people have much choice. Of course, it would be too much to expect them to become multi-ethnic overnight. We have to admit that the society in the RS is still not ready for such a thing. However, there are some things that indicate that they are going in that direction. For instance, we have noted that Mladen Ivanic's party does not have the attribute "Serb" in its name. It is a sort of symbolic progress.

Electoral progress

Q: Is that why it fared so bad at the elections?

A: Who knows... Let me sum up. The progress that has been made in the country is different in the Federation and the RS, but in essence, the society is not moving towards division, the State of B&H is not being divided, but on the contrary, I think that certain consolidation is taking place.

Q: Could you, at the end, tell us the answer to the question that the B&H citizens are very much interested in: Is it known at this time whether the general elections will be held in autumn?

A: It is well known that we wanted to hold the elections based on the Election Law that would be passed by the domestic bodies. That would be the first elections organised and financed by domestic bodies. We have to say that it cannot happen yet because B&H is still not ready for such a demonstration of democratic maturity. Therefore, the ball is again in the court of the IC, and we will have to make the decision on the holding of the autumn elections in the coming few weeks. Apart from being political, it is also a financial decision. We have to ask the OSCE member countries whether they are ready and willing to organise and finance elections once again