

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative

ONASA: After the political opposition won the elections in Croatia, what changes do You expect in BiH?

PETRITSCH: Well, I believe that this is definitely progress which spells progress for the whole region, including Bosnia and Herzegovina. First of all, I believe that relationship between the Croats, being the citizens of this country (BiH), and Croatia will definitely improve, there will be new and probably more realistic view upon the overall situation, meaning basically that the Croats here will realize they live in sovereign Bosnia and Herzegovina and therefore they are the citizens of this country and that they have to also try to contribute to the reconstruction of this country. On the other hand, of course, because of the same language and culture there are ties, historic ties. There will always be a special relationship between the Croats here and the Croats across the border. I believe that it should and could be a great advantage for the Croats here, as they could serve as a bridge between these two sovereign countries of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I had several meetings over the past couple of days with the Croat leadership. I talked with president (of the Croat Democratic Union and BiH Presidency Chairman) Ante Jelavic, (BiH Foreign) Minister Jadranko Prlic, (Deputy Chairman of the BiH Council of Ministers Neven) Tomic, (President of the New Croat Initiative Kresimir) Zubak. I also met cultural leaders, as well as the Church leaders, Vinko Cardinal Puljic, fra Petar Andjelovic. My impression is that they all are realizing that there is a historical chance for the Croats of Bosnia and Herzegovina to find a more constructive way in order to

improve the faith of the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and that means, basically, cooperation with the two other constituent peoples, cooperation with the international community, and also, of course, cooperation on an equal and democratic footing with neighboring Croatia.

ONASA: Is there enough time for them to rebuild this faith again?

PETRITSCH: Well, I believe that there is a chance now to turn around the minds of the Croats here, who sometimes feel like prosecuted minority, which they should not. They are not a minority here, they are also not the Diaspora people. They are the constituent people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and this should give them more reassurance also that Dayton and Washington agreements provide for them quite a lot of the rights, that they should fully exercise. They should keep in mind that they comprise about ten percent of the population and have won a third of the positions or influence in many of the institutions. That, I believe, is very important to keep in mind and that could strengthen the feeling of the Croat population that they are important in this country and that they can make important contributions to the reconstruction of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is so important for me to say that a Croat in this country can be a good citizen of Bosnia and Herzegovina and a good Croat at the same time, that is possible!

ONASA: In regard to what You have said, do You think that the Croats and the others might choose to vote for the opposition this time, at the elections in 2000, the force which would represent all the citizens of BiH, as the Croats in Croatia did?

PETRITSCH: I do not want to side with any of the democratic parties here, but my advice is that the citizens of this country, including the Croats, should think very carefully when it comes to such an important decision as election is ?

to vote for the right people into positions, people who will support the well-being of the people, who will get them jobs and have political programs that promote the overall development of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and at the same time, as an extension, the well-being of the Croats in this country.

ONASA: Do You think that, in case the same political parties remain in power in BiH, there could be any changes, at least in those areas in which HDZ, with support from Zagreb, was the obstructing force?

PETRITSCH: Definitely, there is not going to be a support for the obstruction any longer from Zagreb, from the government over there. This is definitely finished and over. In my meetings with the top leadership of the Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I was very clear with my message. I said "take this opportunity and let's come back to the table and talk to establish a relationship of partnership between the international community and the Croats" and I must say I got very positive signals for this.

ONASA: And, maybe, the partnership between the two countries...

PETRITSCH: Of course. That is something that the two governments and two countries should be most interested in. We are encouraging this relationship. These are, after all, two neighboring countries with a lot of common history and common interests also. Just think of the situation that now, with the Stability Pact which is focusing the region, the regional cooperation will be decisive. So these countries that are ready to cooperate with the neighbors will have a huge advantage of isolationist policies that sometimes are also practiced here, in this country.

ONASA: Are You more optimist now, when it comes to the establishment of the state border of BiH?

PETRITSCH: I had a very long meeting today (Thursday) with Mr. Radisic (Zivko, the Serb member of the BiH Presidency), and we

devoted enormous part of our time to discuss the consequences of the Serb side not to vote in the Parliament for the border service. There, I made it clear that I expect cooperation from the Serb side. I expect cooperation from all three sides, but in this case in particular from the Serbs, because their representatives voted against the state border service. We know that Minister (for Civil Affairs and Communications Marko) Asanin is in charge of the state border service, another Serb. So, therefore, in this respect, it is their responsibility now to be really more constructive.

I told Mr. Radisic that, no matter what happens, the international community will insist on the professional state border service. We want to stop the borders to be a problem for the rest of Europe when it comes to organized crime, when it comes to migration. If BiH wants to be the partner in Europe, it needs to take care of its own problems. The border service is very substantial contribution to the improvement of the relations with Europe, but now, since BiH wants to become a member of the Council of Europe, this border service is a concrete and very important contribution on the way to the Council of Europe.

ONASA: That is about the adoption of the law, but what about the situation in the field, once the law is passed. Do You expect the obstacles in implementing the law?

PETRITSCH: The international community is so involved in constructing the border service, that I, being a realist, expect the problems, but they can be solved. We are committed to this, and we would not allow a digression. The state board service has to be implemented, and there is no question.

ONASA: Is there a deadline, and have You prepared any measures to make sure the state border will function?

PETRITSCH: This is an ongoing process. We already have the first 30 border policemen for training in Austria, another

group is right now in Austria been trained for this and, eventually, there will be all together up to 3.000 border policemen. There will be the border police established at the airport in Sarajevo first, because this is the most important gateway into Bosnia and Herzegovina. Then, we will go on with important border crossings around BiH.

ONASA: Is the international community prepared to help the process financially, once the border service is established?

PETRITSCH: First, of course, it is the obligation of the state here to provide sources for the salaries, as the matter of the principal. This is so around the world. BiH should not in the first place ask for financial support, but first to look into how to finance this. There are going to be the incomes generated through the border service, and there is going to be an improvement in the terms of customs. There is not going to be so much smuggling, so there are going to be additional revenues coming in. That is one source.

But, the international community is also ready to either financially support the border service. I had the meeting the other day with the Dutch ambassador here, and he informed me that the Dutch Government will provide four million dollars for a loan for this year for the state budget, for the state border service. This is a very generous contribution on the part of the Dutch Government, which I very much appreciate, and I am sure that this will be also appreciated by the people of the state.

ONASA: What are the relations between the OHR and the Bosniaks and Croats in Canton 7 now, after Mr Lynghjem is appointed the head of this office, having in mind that neither side was satisfied with the work of Mr. Gerhard Sontheim?

PETRITSCH: I believe that this is very unfair assessment, because Mr. Sontheim did, and still is doing an excellent job. Basically, it is really up to the authorities and the people

there to assess the situation. The new head of OHR Mostar, judge Lynghjem, together with Mr. Sontheim will continue in the course of implementing the Dayton Agreement in the Canton and in an environment which, as we all know, is extremely difficult. I am quite confident that the latest development in Croatia will also have a moderating effect on the HDZ politicians there. And of course, I will also appeal to SDA to be forthcoming, to be ready for a compromise.

ONASA: How do you assess the current situation in Srebrenica?

PETRITSCH: My assessment is that the situation in Srebrenica is improving. The municipal authorities will now again function fully. The multiethnic police will be set up very soon, and the international community is working on this. We had to set up RRTF (Reconstruction and Return Task Force) Office there in order to push the return process.

ONASA: Do You expect major improvement there before the municipal elections this year?

PETRITSCH: We have to keep in mind that Srebrenica is a very difficult area. We all know the tragic events and have to be particularly sensitive and try to do very good job there. But I am optimistic that we will make progress and improvement, and this is very important to me. I believe that we will be able eventually to establish a community there in which people will be able to live together.

ONASA: The International Crisis Group (ICG) predicts failure of Your decision on amendments to the property legislation due to the non-existence of mechanisms for its implementation...

PETRITSCH: First of all, what we do in here is to put a framework in place, and then put additional pressure to the authorities to use it. When it comes to the implementation, that is of course up to the housing offices. They will do it, through the pressure, but there is also additional money for the housing offices that would improve their quality and

efficiency. Shortly before the end of the year, I asked prime ministers Edhem Bicakcic (of the Federation) and Milorad Dodik (of the Republika Srpska) to make provisions in the budgets for the improvement of the housing offices, and thus for the improvement of their efficiency. So, there is an extra money in the budgets both in the Republika Srpska as well as in the Federation of the BiH, where the situation is more complicated because of the cantons. We are pretty much pushing the governments here to come up with more personnel and more money, and of course, we are monitoring this very closely, so that the process really goes on. In this way, I believe that ICG is not right, and I think that there would be proof at the end of this year, they will see that we have made quite substantive progress.

ONASA: ICG also proposed the amendments to the Annex 4 of the Dayton Peace Accord, the Constitution of the BiH. There are debates about the election law, which was not passed because it would not comply with the international standards for human rights...

PETRITSCH: I can give you a several answers to this, but first of all, I am here as the High Representative of the international community to implement the Dayton Peace Accords, including the Constitution. I stick to the Constitution. However, politically speaking, I see the limitations of the Dayton Accords and the Constitution, because, as we all know, Dayton was basically there to stop the war and get the communities to engage in a more peaceful exchange and to create the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

There is a possibility to change the Constitution. You need the two third majority in the Parliament for the Constitution to be changed. If there is a complaint about the certain aspects of the Constitution, and if the Parliament adopt the amendments, we will have to accept this decision.

ONASA: Now, as the law was not passed at the Parliament, what

do You plan to do?

PETRITSCH: I think BiH finds itself in a rather strange situation. There were two proposals in front of the representatives in the Parliament. Both were voted out. Now, the members of the Parliament are there without a draft, so they have put an end at the top to the parliamentary process. Members of the Parliament now have to see how do they want to make progress in order to come out with the election law, which is the most important precondition for entering the Council of Europe. The representatives are caught up in the situation, where through this decision they are actually blocking the acceptance process to the Council of Europe. This is really up to them to undo this.

ONASA: BiH citizens of Croat nationality, who possess a Croatian passport, have the deadline until 2003 to decide which citizenship they would keep. According to OSCE, within that period they can vote at the Croatian elections, unless the two states sign the agreement on dual citizenship. In regard to this, would You explain your position that the authorities should take care that such an anomaly is not repeated?

PETRITSCH: This is very easy, because this is now limited until Jan. 1, 2003. Then they have to decide for one citizenship, either Croatian or BiH. But what we are looking forward to is also that there is a bilateral agreement between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina which would regulate this. This is a transitional period, what I call incomparable to other countries, where this is absolutely not the case, an anomaly. This anomaly has to come to an end by the date that was set in order to make a smooth transition and bilateral treaty between Croatia and BiH.

ONASA: What about the BiH Croats who run at the elections here and at the same time run at the elections in Croatia. Is that legal too, to have two positions in two different countries?

PETRITSCH: I will not go into these concrete details, but it is just yet another example of what I call anomaly. That is an abnormal situation, and needs to be corrected. What is important is that it has to come to the legal basis, and it has to be regulated. It is up to Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to come up with the agreement.