

Speech by the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, to “Circle 99”

At the weekend, a British national newspaper complained in an editorial entitled “A passport to our own destruction”, that an attempt by Brussels to introduce a “Euro” passport was an “assault on the nation’s identity”. It went on that British citizens had already lost a one thousand year-old right to use pounds and ounces, being “forced” instead to use kilos and grams. The newspaper said it would all end up with Brussels taking control of the British armed forces. It printed a small letter to cut out, sign and fax to the British Foreign Office, with the words: “I wish to protest at the EU’s plan to remove the royal crest from our passports.”

A controversy about passports is familiar, I think, to you all. At this point I’d like to introduce the mainstay of this speech, Dnevni Avaz’s cartoonist Dzoko Ninkovic. Cartoons sometimes tell us more about feelings, and are more to the point than many a written text. Mr Ninkovic recently drew a cartoon of a BiH parliamentary assembly session in which the speaker says, “All those against the Law on Travel Documents, please raise your hands”. A sea of three-fingered salutes goes up.

Are British newspaper commentators, when they write to defend passports or English sausages from EC regulators, much different from the RS National Assembly on passports? Or for that matter, Croat policemen who insist on wearing “Herceg Bosna” shoulder flashes? Or Bosniak officials who insist on bussing out Bosniak kids from return areas in eastern RS to schools in the Federation? The answer is clearly ‘no’. All of us are prey to knee-jerk nationalist responses.

I wanted to kick off with passports this morning because surrounding them are two burning issues which face all of us here – Bosnian citizens and the self-proclaimed do-gooders of the International Community.

Firstly, they raise the issue of national identity. How can this be satisfied only a short time after a bloody war was fought here in the name of various national identities?

Secondly, they call into question what rights the International Community have to exercise power in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Frustrated with waiting for the BiH parliament to adopt the Law on Travel Documents, I imposed the law at the end of September. At the beginning of the 21st century, is the Office of the High Representative some ghost come to haunt Bosnia and Herzegovina – and myself – from our common Habsburg past?

“Knee-jerk” nationalism and the exercise of legitimate power in Bosnia and Herzegovina are, I believe, two important questions facing voters ahead of this month’s general election. International aid and commitment to Bosnia and Herzegovina are already running low. The economy, still run in too many areas along ethnic lines, is a mess.

With voters in Croatia, Yugoslavia and even in the majority Albanian province of Kosovo casting their ballots for moderate candidates and an end to the violence of the recent past, another nationalist win in Bosnia and Herzegovina would only see this potentially rich country isolated politically and economically.

I don’t for a moment believe the majority of Bosnian citizens want to remain prisoners of nationalist leaders who would block their entry into Europe. But fear and paranoia remain all too prevalent – and are all too easily exploited and whipped up, like some of the pre-election posters show.

Are our efforts here really worth the candle at the end of the

day? Has this country moved forward in any way at all?

In May 1992, a reporter for the New York Times filed a report from Zvornik where he interviewed a man involved in the killings that "cleansed" the town of Bosniaks. "'Normal people turn out to be beasts, as if you're watching a Frankenstein movie. They become monsters'," the man told the reporter. The journalist concluded: "Anger, barely suppressed, erupting suddenly into violence; fear and suspicion fed by rumours and half-truths, becoming paranoia; a burning sense of past injustices unavenged, and of similar tragedies ahead, if ethnic rivalries are not corralled, punished and expelled: This is Bosnia, six weeks into a civil war that is spiralling ever more dangerously out of control." This was in May 1992 – that's probably why he used the expression "civil war."

Eight years and one war later, the OHR representative in Zvornik says around 5,500 Bosniak families have returned to the Zvornik area. He says only nine families have returned to the town itself but return there is now underway with 50 other apartments freed up for their rightful Bosniak owners. The Municipal Assembly last month voted unanimously – Serb and Bosniak members – to cooperate on returns. Lines of communication between the Tuzla Canton government in the Federation and Zvornik are open. Tuzla will have spent an estimated 1 million KM this year on improving the roads in return areas around Zvornik.

The latest figures I have from the RRTF show refugee minority returns this year to have doubled compared to 1999. The nearly 30,000 registered returns are a small fraction of the hundreds of thousands still waiting. But this year the Dayton Agreement's Annex 7 is no longer a dead point on the International Community wish list. The strict implementation of property law has made Annex 7 a living force.

This week, the first mosque to be reconstructed in Republika Srpska, in Kozarusa near Prijedor, was reopened in the

presence of leaders from the four main religious communities. Metropolitan Dabrobosanski Nikolaj, current chairman of BiH's Inter-Religious Council, called the mosque's reconstruction the "resurrection of an entire civilisation".

A headline this week in The Christian Science Monitor from Boston, standing back to look at the changes in Bosnia and Herzegovina and those of its neighbours, read: "Balkan nationalism loses steam." The journalist wrote: "Old Guard Balkan politicians, who used ethnic hatred to galvanise supporters and wage bloody wars in the early 1990s, are giving way to less nationalist successors. The result for Bosnia is change – even growing ethnic tolerance – that was unthinkable in wartime."

The impression is growing: People here now just want a normal life. National interests come fourth in a series of opinion polls held by the National Democratic Institute. What really bothers between 70 and 80 percent of Bosniak, Serb and Croat voters is jobs. Our cartoonist, Mr Ninkovic, recently scribbled a morose group of people in rags, watching flag-waving representatives of the three main Bosniak, Serb and Croat nationalist parties marching about. One of the onlookers, a posmatrac, comments: "We're all the same now – hungry, poor and cheated."

The pace of change for Bosnian citizens and foreigners working here remains frustrating for both. But the waning madness in places like Zvornik, with its mosque intact on the Yugoslav side of the Drina, is why I believe passionately in the continued engagement of the International Community here in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

But our continued engagement here will depend very much on how we approach the two problems I have already outlined: national identity and the legitimacy of the International Community's work here. (Cut: in the eyes of Bosnian citizens who did not vote for me.)

It would be a huge mistake to underestimate the ability of nationalist leaders' silver hammers in tapping the country's various knee-jerk nationalisms.

In 1946, an employee with UNRRA in Sarajevo – the precursor to UNHCR – wrote that the nationalisms of Bosnia were now a thing of the past. “Everything that is young is thinking the right way... Now we don't care – is he Moslem, is he Catholic, is he Orthodox? Now it is brotherhood and unity.”

Ivo Andric wrote in the same year: “On every occasion you will be told: LOVE YOUR BROTHER, THOUGH HIS RELIGION IS OTHER...But there has been plenty of counterfeit courtesy since time immemorial. Under cover of these maxims, old instincts and Cain-like plans may only be slumbering.”

Which way is Bosnia and Herzegovina headed? Will it be a truly tolerant society, based on the rights of the citizen instead of the forced cheerfulness of “brotherhood and unity”? Or will it be a return to the murderous times of Cain?

I am a cautious optimist like the cartoonist Mr Ninkovic who in another sharp picture summed up the situation here as follows. The first of three captions, “yesterday”, shows all three sides at war; the second, “today”, shows the three groups huddled together and staring at each other suspiciously; the third, “tomorrow”, has all three groups mixed together, chatting and walking their dogs, with one character exclaiming: “It's a nightmare – everything's just as it was!”

But much of the debate is still couched in nationalist terms. One glance at some of the election posters shows the nationalist parties feel safest in chasing the easy knee-jerk response from voters.

Mr Ninkovic this week had his own say on the election slogans with a cartoon of ordinary Bosnian citizens drowning. Amid them, one boat carries Croat officials who hold up a placard

saying “Opredjeljenje ili potopljenje – decide or drown”; another boat carrying Bosniak officials has a placard with the word “nadglasajmo – vote out” erased with the following slogan written underneath: “Glasajmo za korupciju i lazi – vote for corruption and lies”; the officials in the Serb boat hold up the slogan: “Zivot damo, entitet ne damo – We’ll give our lives, we won’t give up the Entity”.

What comes to my mind is to urge Bosnian citizens with the same words Franklin Delano Roosevelt used in a radio address to depression-hit America in 1933: “...the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

The paranoia and divisions of nationalism lead only to absurd state-lets, which cannot function in the global marketplace. There may be a bit of curiosity and noise about the royal coat of arms on British passports and some healthy suspicion of Brussels-based Eurocrats. But no British citizen wants the country cut off from the economic advantages of the common market. The European-level courts are also proving a strong guarantor of human rights in Britain, as a State level court would for all citizens in Bosnia.

The economy is where integration will move fastest in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is this area, along with returns, which remains my priority. It is jobs, not what alphabet or coat of arms is used on a passport, that worries people the world over. The surest and quickest way to see the Dayton Accords implemented is to appeal to people’s self interest – for instance cheaper telephone bills.

The carving up of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s telecommunications infrastructure along ethnic lines has not ensured better, more modern and cheaper services. Bosnians pay some of the highest rates for telephone usage in Europe – I wonder where the money goes.

This month, I hope to open up state-wide licenses for mobile

telephones. The three existing operators will have to compete across both Entities and I can safely bet customers will subscribe on price – not the company's supposed ethnic allegiances. The same goes for other utilities.

This “functional integration” tied Europe's seemingly implacable post-war foes together in the European Coal and Steel Community – overseen, interestingly, by a High Authority – which paved the way for a common currency five decades later. German and French troops, enemies for centuries, are at the heart of the new Eurocorps.

So what of Bosnia and Herzegovina's own “High Authority”, five years after the Dayton Accords were signed? Is the High Representative a help? Or a hindrance? Do the powers of the High Representative make a mockery of the whole elections process in the first place? When laws such as the one of travel documents can be imposed whenever he or she wishes it?

There was a particularly harsh article in Ljiljan last month, written by a self-proclaimed intellectual, which among other things accused the OHR of behaving like a latter-day Communist Party central committee, which aims to force Bosniaks out of Bosnia. The idea that somehow the International Community is picking on Bosniaks is ludicrous. But the charge that the OHR is unaccountable to Bosnian citizens – and having “Olympian powers” – is a serious one.

Firstly, there is a strong perception that removals and decisions never deal with the big guys. One of Mr Ninkovic's cartoons has a large, grim-faced OHR official holding up a tiny minnow of a fish, who declares: “This is guilty for everything.” An office the size of the OHR simply cannot “run” a country this size. The job of administering this country belongs with Bosnian citizens – not with my office.

Fed up with nationalist leaders' zero-sum games what passes for a legislative process here, intellectuals called for an

international protectorate to actually do something. Mr Ninkovic, again, saw immediately the problem with this. In one cartoon, Bosnian legislators lie in hammocks. One of them, on reading a newspaper headline which reads, "Petritsch decides", says he could get used to this kind of work. I'm sure the legislator could but I won't let this happen. The amendments to the pension law, artfully dodged by nearly all lawmakers, is a case in point.

I am answerable to the 55 countries and international organisations that make up the Peace Implementation Council and ultimately their taxpayers. But that's cold comfort for a Bosnian citizen. I argue that the High Representative has extraordinary powers for an extraordinary time. Five years ago, Bosnia and Herzegovina was at war. The country's present leaders have driven Bosnia and Herzegovina into the sand, burying their own heads in it while they're about it. Therefore, something needed to be done.

A protectorate is not the right answer for this country. Bosnia and Herzegovina needs energetic leaders with vision to take this country back to Europe. The OHR is here to help those leaders who genuinely want to take Bosnia and Herzegovina there, whatever the inevitable future fights with EC regulators on British sausages or Bosnian cevapcici. The OHR can't – and won't – impose "brotherhood and unity". This country will only ever function, win prosperity, when the leaders voted into office take responsibility and take decisions.

Now is the time to vote in these new leaders, as Bosnia and Herzegovina's neighbours have done in Croatia and Yugoslavia. Next door's changes mean any serious talk of tinkering with borders has ceased – to play with maps here is to play with fire.

I'd like to leave the last word – or image – to Mr Ninkovic. In the first of three pictures, a man spreads his arms under a

bright sun in Croatia. IN the second, three bleary-eyed characters blink after a light has been switched on in a dark room in Yugoslavia. The last picture shows a man stumbling in the dark, in what represents Bosnia and Herzegovina, and who asks: "Will it ever dawn here?"

That, ladies and gentlemen, depends on the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina themselves. They can make a real start at the ballot box on Sunday, November 11. The OHR, I myself, the International Community will continue to do all it can to help bring light to this beautiful and potentially prosperous country.