

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative in BiH

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SD: Can you comment briefly on the current situation in BiH.

WP: There is an increase in the number of people returning to their homes, and the nationalist grip on parts of the country is being systematically loosened. There is still a huge amount to be done, of course. For example, since the adoption of the property laws, 43,266 families have been able to pick up the keys of their pre-war homes in the Federation, 19,332 in the Republika Srpska and 1,433 in the Brcko District. But the rate of returns is slowing. Disappointingly, the increase in the implementation rate in the Republika Srpska dropped from 2% in March to only 1% in April, giving an average monthly increase in 21% in April, giving an average monthly increase in 2001 of less than 1%. The implementation rate in the Federation during this period has risen faster than that in the Republika Srpska, but the rate of increase remains slow, not yet having reached 2%.

The implementation of property laws has been particularly problematic in Cantons 7 and 10. However, in this region the Municipal Housing Offices have finally started to increase the rate of evictions, and we expect that the May statistics will show a significant rise in the implementation rate. Moreover, in view of the coming summer months and the end of the school year, we expect the housing offices throughout Canton 7 and Canton 10, to increase even further the implementation rate and to utilise the time when it will be easier to move for families with children.

At the state level, of course, the new Council of Ministers has demonstrated that politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be placed in the service of economic development instead of being held hostage by unproductive and uncreative nationalist slogans. Functioning state institutions are key to the economic recovery that Bosnia and Herzegovina needs. This is also true for putting in place the legislation that BiH needs in order to move closer to both the Council of Europe and the European Union

SD: The education system in BiH has been inherited from socialism. Clearly, certain changes have to be made. What is OHR's attitude to this?

WP: Education has to be a national priority, to the same extent that economic recovery and refugee return are national priorities – and of course, an efficiently organized and properly delivered school curriculum will support economic recovery and refugee return. So we need commitment at the highest levels of government, and an understanding that a high-quality education system is not a luxury but an absolute necessity. Through creative initiatives and financial support from the Council of Europe, the World Bank, the European Union, UNESCO and a host of NGOs, and with input from educators in BiH we want to see the effective setting of nationwide standards for pre-school, primary, secondary, higher, vocational, special and adult education. We want to see the introduction of a nationwide syllabus with a common core that has the flexibility to allow the expression of cultural heritage while promoting universal values of tolerance – and sustaining the highest academic standards.

Education practice in Europe has moved on. The simple learning of facts and overloaded curriculum do nothing to prepare BiH's youth for a European future. If the young people of BiH are to compete with their peers in Europe, curriculum reform is vital. This needs the support of teachers and politicians in BiH.

SD: Young people are leaving the country in droves. Is there anything OHR can do about this?

WP: Yes, we will continue to work with the state and entity governments to put in place the sort of economic, social and political structures that will make BiH a country that young people want to live in, a place which offers careers and opportunities, where the quality of life is high. We have already come a long way from the devastation

and despair that were the legacy of the war. The economy is functioning – though at a level which is still unacceptably low – and we are trying to establish the rule of law across the country, for example, through the work of the Judicial Review Commissions. What I would say is this: young citizens of BiH, those in secondary school and university today, will enter the job market just as things are getting better. You are at the beginning of what promises to be a steep rise in living standards and job opportunities. This is not the time to leave BiH; this is the time to stay and make the most of the opportunities which were absent five years ago but which are now multiplying.

SD: There are two universities in Mostar. Surely this is absurd? What do you think about this situation?

WP: Universities deliver an educational product. Their existence depends on tnds on their ability to deliver that product in a professional and efficient manner. If an educational institution exists for reasons other than its educational function, I do not believe it will be able to exist indefinitely or perform satisfactorily. The situation in Mostar is reflected elsewhere in the country. There are too many universities, which means that funding and teaching resources are overstretched. In many cases, the qualifications awarded by the universities are not recognised. These problems, and possible reforms, are being addressed by the Higher Education Council.

SD: OHR and other international institutions reacted slowly to the events that took place in Mostar regarding Hercegovacka banka. The criminal background of some of the people in parallel structures in BiH was well known. What does the international community plan to do now?

WP: A comprehensive assessment of Hercegovacka banka, in strict compliance with the Federal Banking Law and international standards, is now underway. This assessment is being conducted by the Provisional Administrator, who has complete operational independence and who will be fair and transparent in reporting her findings. I appointed a Provisional Administrator because there was reason to believe that there were certain irregularities in the way the bank was operating. The Provisovisional Administrator has taken steps to secure the bankas funds in order to protect the savings of ordinary depositors. Where there is evidence of fraud, those responsible will be prosecuted.

SD: Do you think that an entity that was created through blood and crime, such as RS, can fully respect human rights and implement the Dayton Agreement?

WP: The entities are part of the Dayton Agreement, and my mandate in BiH is to implement the terms of the Dayton Agreement. The entities are basically administrative units. Enshrined in the agreement is a commitment by all the parties to respect the rights and property of all citizens, regardless of their religion or ethnicity. The legal means of doing this, in both entities, have been strengthened by the work of the Constitutional Commissions. Events witnessed in Banja Luka and Trebinje are completely unacceptable. I have told the Republika Srpska leadership quite clearly that unless there are dramatic changes, a dramatic reform, especially with regard to human rights, freedom of movement, religious freedom and fundamental social rights for all citizens, which means Croats and Bosniaks as well as Serbs in the Republika Srpska, there will be no future for the Republika Srpska. I believe that Mr. Ivanic understands this. I hope that he understands that it is only by cooperating fully wly with Croats and Bosniaks that the Dayton process will continue, and with it the Republika Srpska.

SD: We believe that BiH can function only as a country without entities. After the recent events in Banja Luka and Trebinje it is evident that RS is unable to provide equal rights for all its citizens. Do you believe that it is necessary for RS to disappear?

WP: The events in Banja Luka and Trebinje point to serious problems in the social and political fabric of the RS, and the failure – or intentional unwillingness – of the leadership of RS to deal with these problems. But I believe that the disgraceful scenes we witnessed are the last attempts of unreformed hard liners, ultra-nationalists and extremists to stem the tide of normalisation and maintain their dream of a mono-ethnic, chauvinist, criminal environment in which they thrive by nature. I have made it clear to the RS leadership that the root causes of persistent constitutional violations have to be addressed, effectively and promptly. I will be monitoring the compliance of the leadership in this respect.

SD: Your critics are suggesting that your term of office here is almost over. Is this true? If not, how long will you stay in BiH?

WP: This is not a matter for me to decide. It is a matter for the Peace Implementation Council. The important thing is that my office continues to promote a political and economic process that delivers visible and positive results to the citizens of BiH. Naturally, that is a task that gives me enormous personal satisfaction.

SD: In conclusion, what is your message for the young people of BiH?

WP: I believe that there are many positive signs that the people of BiH and the new leadership have made a lot of progress. There are tremendous problems, but I believe that the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina have the capacity to overcome those problems. Young people are particularly important in this respect because they are possessed of energy and creativity, two qualities which in combination can overcome the greatest obstacles. The future is about resisting the present fear, and breaking it. This resistance will not come from those who feed on fear, those who follow their own nationalist paranoia, dividing people and territory in a bid to retain their little fiefdoms. Breaking the circle of fear will depend upon those who are able to look beyond borders and beyond nationalist narrowmindedness.

How will the Balkans thrive? Will there be tolerant societies that respect citizens' rights? Will the countries of the Balkans in due course claim their legitimate places in the European Union - working to promote their common interests? The answer depends on the young people of Bosnia and Herzegovina and of neighboring countries. They will decide whether fear of the future determines how this region moves forward, or whether the Balkan countries claim their right to their own future in the family of European States.