

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, The High Representative in BiH

Wolfgang Petritsch: 'A hero of our time' or 'a merciless protector' "

A preliminary investigation of misconduct at the Bank has shown that the situation is worse than we expected!

In a wide-ranging interview with our newspaper the High Representative of the IC in BiH responds to questions about recent events in the RS, and Croat self-rule and the aftermath of the Hercegovacka Bank case. He also discusses his stay in BiH and how long it might last; he addresses accusations that the IC does not want to arrest Karadzic and Mladic, and he touches on his successes and failures

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During the last two months several events have taken place in BiH which have seriously threatened the stability of the

country. First, after the general elections there was a complete breakdown in relations between the strongest Croat party in BiH, that is, the HDZ, and the representatives of the International Community. After this 'a spectacular' OHR action took place with regard to the Hercegovacka Bank, followed by the self-disbanding of the HVO. Rounding out the crises were the events in Banja Luka and Trebinje, where groups of Muslims were stoned during ceremonies which had been organised to accompany the groundlaying ceremonies for mosques in these cities and which had to be abandoned. All these events are very much related to the name of Wolfgang Petritsch. For some people he is 'a hero of our time' while for others he is 'a merciless protector'. For some people this Austrian diplomat is 'the right man in the right place', while the number of those who admit that they hate him is not particularly small. This Austrian diplomat had been expected to prevent some of these events from happening, and to impose penalties following others. In an interview given to our newspaper, the High Representative clarifies his actions over the last two months and explains the reasons behind them.

HR: The BiH public expected you to react resolutely to the events in Banja Luka and Trebinje and to replace leaders of the RS. Why did you not do this?

WP: I believe that it is important to say that the reactions were very contradictory. Some people say that I was too harsh, and others that I was too moderate. I believe that we can talk about, let us call it, a middle way, which is good and which corresponds to a measured political action and not an action whose purpose is achieving short-term results. As you know, the Minister of the Interior of the RS resigned and the Heads of the Police in Banja Luka and Trebinje, as well as the Head of the RS Intelligence Service, did the same. This has happened through authorized bodies of the RS and this is what I told political leaders in Banja Luka. Politicians there should act efficiently in order to preserve the rule of law,

in order to prove that they are responsible. And this is the very direction that we should take in future. Those were horrible events and soon after they had taken place I said that I would not accept any vague explanations and that, finally, I want to see responsibility taken at the local level. When I started to work in BiH I defined the responsibility, that I am talking about, by the following words: the Authorities in this country have to identify and solve problems by themselves. Despite all these horrible events, as I called them, I can discern a positive side in all this, because the authorities in the RS reacted resolutely and they have shown that they can improve the situation.

HR: It seems that in the case of the Ivanic Government you are acting the same way you did with the Dodik Government, which used to have your uncritical support regardless of its failures?

WP: The Dodik Government did not have my uncritical support.

HR: The facts prove that you never penalized Dodik's behavior, although during his mandate he did little to promote positive change in BiH, and today there are criminal financial activities which are being ascribed to him?

WP: I can give you two answers. First, from the very beginning my political philosophy has been grounded on the premise that I never support individuals, but only principles. For me there are no friends and enemies in this country. As far as I am concerned, I only have partners in BiH. They should do what is necessary. If they do not do it, it is logical to expect undesired consequences. You have mentioned Dodik. I have to say that I dismissed some Ministers even from his Government, and I reversed some decisions that Dodik himself had approved. I did this because he did not respect rules and the rule of law. The same applies to the Croat and Bosniak sides. Now I will tell you a secret: if in any situation I employed double standards in the job that I am doing here, I might as

well return to Austria tomorrow, I would not be successful at all. I have to be objective here and I have to treat everyone in the same way.

HR: Is the IC responsible for the events in Banja Luka and Trebinje?

WP: I have repeatedly stated that in order to work in BiH I have to take the responsibility and I have always done that. I feel responsible for events in BiH. As far as the Ferhadjja Mosque in Banja Luka is concerned I feel especially responsible because I forced the local Authorities to issue a construction permit. This is a responsibility that I fully accept, and I will never give up my original purpose. I will never abandon the building of a multi-ethnic BiH.

HR: Why did SFOR not react in Banja Luka, while it did react in Mostar in the case of the Hercegovacka Bank? I would remind you that Mr. Jacques Klein, obviously angry, asked in the building of the Islamic Community 'where is SFOR, where is someone out of 20.000 of them'?

WP: I have to say that I fully appreciate the SFOR decision with regard to the deployment of forces in Banja Luka and Trebinje. They acted this way in order to secure the lives of ordinary citizens who were targeted by the protesters. Experts have told me that there would have been many more victims if SFOR had acted in a different way. As far as the Hercegovacka Bank is concerned, you will remember that my aides were beaten up and held against their will because SFOR chose to remain in the background. At that time for the first time in my life I had to make a decision about life and death. These people were threatened, an ultimatum was issued that one of my aides would be killed every five minutes. Probably this was one of the most dangerous situations since the end of the war. So we made sure that the next time experts entered the Bank in order to take necessary documents, they were completely safe. The destruction inside the Bank building is a

sad fact but this was the consequence of a lack of cooperation, and violence that hooligans in Mostar perpetrated. When you are facing a well-organized militant group then you have to use all the means that you have at your disposal.

HR: *Do you mean that in Mostar the events were connected to an organized militant group, while this was not the case in Banja Luka?*

WP: Militant groups were acting in both Mostar and Banja Luka, but the local Police, the Special Police also reacted, and they succeeded in setting free those who had been obliged to seek safety in the Medzlis building. The Serb Special Police did that. I wish I had seen the Croat Special Police helping us in Mostar. Ur. Unfortunately, I did not see anything like that.

HR: *Did the Mostar Police have an opportunity to react in a similar way?*

WP: The street riots started almost three hours after our peaceful entry in the Hercegovacka Bank building in Mostar. That means that the police in Mostar knew for at least three hours what we were doing. And the police, if they had been professional instead of being committed to one party, could have reacted. Hooligans with crew-cuts and black leather jackets were shown on television using their mobile phones. Others began arriving following these calls, and the Police did not prevent the violence from escalating. Those hooligans are the same people who entered the Hercegovacka Bank building and destroyed it. That was a fundamentally criminal act that we cannot accept. The Croat people must not accept such behavior, either. Croats should be interested more than anyone else in distancing themselves from these criminals. You have such criminal elements everywhere, in Germany, in Austria, but there is an important difference: most of the ordinary citizens are against the activity of those elements. Everyone

in the civilized world is against the kind of criminal act that took place in Mostar. Therefore, it is indeed important for the Croat people to distance themselves from those extremist and criminal elements. ts.

HR: Could an action such as that in Hercegovacka Bank happen in Western Europe?

WP: The International Community has a great responsibility in BiH. The High Representative has extensive powers, but an extremely big responsibility, as well. The International Community has spent 5 billion Dollars on the renewal and reconstruction of BiH. A great proportion of that money has gone to the Croat-majority territories. I visited a Croat village near Travnik last week. Over 60% of the housing units there have been rebuilt, and with funds from the International Community. Do you know who will pay for the reconstruction of historic monuments in Mostar, Pocitelj or some other city? Most of those funds will be provided by the International Community. What I expect from the people here is to abide by the law. That also applies to the people who managed Hercegovacka Bank. My Office is in possession of very strong evidence showing that Hercegovacka Bank abused its banking license, and we know that the 54 million Marks that the Croatian Government sent for the Croat army component in BiH never reached the young Croats in the Army. They have been deceived and their money has been transferred from Hercegovacka Bank elsewhere. This could happen nowhere in the Western world, and a report about an incident of this sort in the Western world would be completely out of place.

HR: When do you expect the conclusion of the Hercegovacka bank investigation and what will you undertake if your suspicions are found to have been correct?

WP: I can only tell you that the preliminary results of the investigation show that things are even worse than we thought. Vast sums were stolen. This is money that was deposited as

savings with the bank by Croats. This money was used for illegal activities and for personal benefit. I assure you that the money will be returned to all the honest depositors of the Hercegovacka Bank. I will not allow that honest Croats lose their money because of a small group of Croats who were involved in criminal activities. Off course, I cannot comment on the future course of the investigation. It is still in progress and I cannot precisely say what action I will take later on. It is hard to determine the time frame for the completion of the operation, because the previous administration of the Bank is not cooperating. These people must take responsibility for the Croat depositors not being paid their savings on time.

HR: An interesting issue is the arrest of war criminals. How do you comment on claims that there is not enough determination on the part of the International Community to bring the prominent figures from the list, Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladtko Mladic, to The Hague?

WP: I must say that I am anticipating the arrest of Karadzic and Mladic with great impatience. The trials of the two will be the key to the peace process, and, even more, for reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As you know, with every arrest there is a question of security. But I assure you that I will not permit this issue to be marginalized.

HR: There is much speculation about your stay these days or about your departure from BiH. Is the information, which says that you expressed a wish to stay and continue to perform your current duties, true, and that basic agreement on this has been reached?

WP: You must be aware of my deep devotion to the peace process in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I am more interested in this country heading towards Europe than in my mandate being extended or not. This will have to be decided by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the member countries of the Steering

Board of the Peace Implementation Council.

HR: During your mandate as High Representative until now, what do you regard as having been your greatest success and what do you regard as having been possible failures?

WP: I would not like to take credit for things which are the result of work done by many Bosnians, Herzegovinians and members of the International Community. But I can say that I am noticing with pleasure progress with regard to the return of refugees. People have gained confidence, and that enables them to return to the homes and flats from which they were expelled. I regret that this country has not achieved as much progress as it might have, in terms of the dynamics and the extent of returns, but this is due to politicians whose program is far removed from the interests of the citizens they are supposed to be serving. Instead, these politicians are trying to pursue their own narrow interests.