

Article by the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch: "International Engagement Works"

Letters to the Editor

It is always useful to read criticism of our work here in Bosnia and Herzegovina but Stephen Schwartz's op-ed piece in The Wall Street Journal Europe ("The Great Balkan Botch-UP", Feb.15) was neither constructive nor informative.

Our humanitarian efforts here are anything but "colonial". Calls to establish a "protectorate" but Bosnian citizens fed up with some of their own political leaders are routinely rebuffed. This is why I came up with the concept of "ownership" that Bosnian citizens themselves must take responsibility for rebuilding their country and own this process.

Ownership governs all our work here.

Bosnians must now stand on their own two feet as aid money to the country is running out fast. To that end, market economic reform here is the international community's number one priority. We are already well underway with reform in this crucial area: harmonization of banking and tax laws: the closure of inefficient, ethnically based monopolies in banking and utilities and their replacement with competitive market-driven services. Bosnians are not "ignorant" of these reforms as Mr. Schwartz suggests. At the general election last November, opinion polls demonstrated that the economy jobs, pensions, investment topped the list of Bosnian voters' concerns.

We have witnessed a record level of refugee returns in the last year in both Bosnian entities not nearly as many as we want but organizations such as Human Rights Watch, usually sparing with praise, admit that the refugee logjam is broken. International engagement works.

It was the dream of integration with Europe and the desperate wish for an end to years of isolation that were the main forces behind the downfall of Slobodan Milosevic in neighboring Yugoslavia not a bankrupt nationalism out of touch with the Europe of the 21st century. Mr. Schwartz is right to say nationalism "cannot be wished or hugged away" in the Balkans. That is why we have a clear strategy to address the fundamentals the return of refugees to their homes, deep-rooted market economic reform and state institutions that work for their citizens.