

Article by the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch: "The challenge for Kostunica"

If Yugoslavia is to be accepted by others, it must start recognising its neighbors' sovereignty, says Wolfgang Petritsch

It is time to deflate the champagne atmosphere in Belgrade. As the West's senior envoy to Bosnia, I have some hard questions for Vojislav Kostunica, Yugoslav president, who I plan to meet soon.

Mr Kostunica's most obvious quarrel with the international community is his refusal to recognise the legitimacy of the war crimes tribunal in The Hague. For those of us trying to implement the 1995 Dayton peace accords in next-door Bosnia and Herzegovina, this could make for difficulties.

In the euphoria at the near-bloodless revolution in Belgrade, hundreds of millions of euros in aid should not be allowed to flood into Yugoslavia without some strings attached.

First, the revolution is far from complete. With Stalinist thoroughness, Slobodan Milosevic, the former Yugoslav president, put tens of thousands of his own people in powerful positions. Agitprop workers on the propaganda sheet Politika deftly supported the revolution but only after weeks of scurrilous personal attacks on Mr Kostunica. The loyalty of legions of Milosevic cadres is similarly ambiguous.

The human suffering during the last decade in the Balkans under Franjo Tudjman, the former Croatian president, and Mr Milosevic remains a deep wound at the heart of the new Europe we want to build.

Bosnia and Herzegovina hurt most under their misrule. But Bosnia is now making a tentative recovery, fighting the nationalist virus that threatened to consume it. Essential to this recovery have been the far-reaching changes in Croatia which, although less spectacular than those in Belgrade, have so far contributed more to peace in the region.

Tonino Picula, Croatia's new foreign minister, made his first official trip to Sarajevo – a clear recognition of this country's borders after years of trying to undermine them under Mr Tudjman. The government is actively pursuing war criminals. In addition, it has unceremoniously dumped Croats who try to continue with the nationalist project inside Bosnia. In question now is the European Union's ability to act fast enough to reply in kind.

The first question I will ask Mr Kostunica is when he plans to recognise Bosnia and Herzegovina and to establish diplomatic relations. Those wanting to hand Mr Kostunica cash and rush him past the usual checks for membership of the Council of Europe should watch this very carefully.

I will suggest to Mr Kostunica that the surest way of securing Kosovo, where Serbs have just as much right to live as ethnic Albanians, is to recognise Bosnian sovereignty. Then the international community will be honour bound to ensure a future for Serbs there as was agreed under UN Security Council resolution 1244.

Suspected war criminals must be brought to justice. For Bosnia this means Radovan Karadzic, the Bosnian Serbs' wartime leader, and General Ratko Mladic, his military commander, now reportedly holed up in Belgrade. Only then can the region reconcile itself with its past and look to the future.

I will appeal to Mr Kostunica's passion for the rule of law and suggest that if Yugoslavia wants to regain full membership of the UN, it should be willing to work with its institutions. That includes the war crimes tribunal in The Hague.

For the first time since the war, Bosnians are asking about jobs, their children's education, corruption and other vital issues now ignored by the nationalist leaders they last elected. These leaders are still fighting the war by freezing what passes for a legislative process in the country.

Mr Milosevic's people have been intimately involved with supporting the Serb nationalist "project" in Bosnia, holding back the Serb half of Bosnia's economic development by many years.

I will ask Mr Kostunica whether he intends to sever this corrupting support, as Croatia has done with its own hardline nationalists in Bosnia. I will suggest that the real future for Serbs in Bosnia is not to suffer the isolation Yugoslavia has suffered at second hand, as has been the case for the past five years, but to help create economic prosperity. This will only come with a single economic space in Bosnia.

Mr Kostunica has also been landed with the largest refugee problem in Europe. The more Bosniak (Muslim) and Croat refugees are able to return to their pre-war homes, as they have begun to do this year in towns controlled by hardline Serbs, such as Srebrenica, the more likely it is that Serb refugees in Yugoslavia and Bosnia will get their own homes back in Croatia, Kosovo and other parts of Bosnia.

These issues are preconditions for a peaceful Balkans. Only once the new Yugoslavia has taken this on board should the international community do all in its power to help Mr Kostunica realise his vision of an ordinary, European country. Only then can the revolution be said to be complete.

The writer is high representative of the western nations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, responsible for implementing the Dayton peace accords. He was Austrian ambassador to Belgrade.