

Article by the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch: COMMENT & ANALYSIS: “Why Jelavic had to go”

The Croat member of Bosnia's three-way presidency was a threat to peace and stability in the region

In banning Ante Jelavic from public office yesterday, I fulfilled my mandate to protect the Dayton Peace Accords and so secure the hard-won peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Mr Jelavic, the Croat member of Bosnia's three-member presidency and the leader of the nationalist Croat Democratic Union (HDZ), has behaved in an unacceptable manner for the head of a state committed to punishing war crimes. He has repeatedly called for the partition of the country. He attended a rally last week where he sang the praises of Dario Kordic and Mario Cerkez, two war criminals convicted for crimes against humanity by the international tribunal in The Hague last month.

At the weekend, Mr Jelavic called on Bosnian and Herzegovinian Croats to cease all co-operation with the legally elected government in the Federation half of the country, dominated by Bosniacs (Muslims) and Croats. This threatened to tear up the Dayton Accords and put Mr Jelavic on a collision course with the rest of the country's citizens and with the international community. Mr Jelavic is from the old school of Balkan politicians. In his determination to shore up dwindling support and keep his hand in the till, he resembles Slobodan Milosevic, another politician of the past.

As the region begins to enjoy a kind of peace, politicians

such as Mr Jelavic and Mr Milosevic have no qualms that their only hope of survival is to drag everyone else down with them.

"The time of national parties has certainly not passed," Mr Jelavic said recently, and some outside the region appear to agree. The fighting on the border between Kosovo and Macedonia reaffirms the apparently unbreakable cycle of violence and mistrust for which the word "Balkan" is a pejorative byword. It is time to exorcise some Balkan ghosts. After 10 years of conflict and deep mutual distrust, Bosnia and Herzegovina has its first non-nationalist government. A decent majority in the country's state parliament chose a mixture of Bosniacs, Serbs and Croats as ministers and their deputies who will work side by side to build a secure and prosperous Bosnia.

Bozidar Matic, Bosnia's new prime minister, is a respected economics professor, the former head of Energoinvest, one of the country's largest companies, and a Bosnian Croat. Mr Jelavic's HDZ does not like that last point one bit. Mr Matic's opening speech to deputies was a radical departure from the usual nationalist rhetoric. He laid out a clear reform agenda: to press ahead with privatisation; to tackle the country's chronic unemployment; and to fight corruption. My office is working hard to back Mr Matic's reform agenda, harmonising banking and tax laws and closing inefficient, ethnically based monopolies in banking and utilities. Businesses such as mobile telephone companies will be licensed to compete across the whole of Bosnia and not in the ethnic ghettos which the nationalists have tried to create.

The international community's work is part and parcel of opening Bosnia and the rest of the region for business and eventual integration with Europe. The establishment of a state that respects the rule of law not only helped a record number of refugees return to their homes last year (more than 67,000 minority returns, almost double the 1999 figure) but also sets a firm precedent for business.

Bosnia wants trade, not aid. It is this functional, business-driven approach that will bring a lasting peace to south-eastern Europe.

Serbia's new leaders see this clearly and know that any refusal to work with the UN war crimes tribunal on Mr Milosevic and other indictees will cost them dearly in lost European and US aid. Stipe Mesic, the Croatian president, this week roundly condemned Mr Jelavic's anti-Dayton actions.

Where once multi-ethnicity brought Bosnia to blows, members of its multi-ethnic population are catching up with their neighbours in choosing a government that will work for them as citizens with rights – not as isolated collectives in thrall to a nationalist rhetoric of fear. Mr Jelavic's party refuses to co-operate with the new government, as it is bound by the country's constitution to do, because it knows its currency of fear is fast losing value.

Time is not on the side of the nationalists or the institutionalised banditry that has plagued Bosnia, Serbia and other Balkan states for too long. It is only a matter of time before Mr Milosevic will face trial in The Hague.

As the people of south-eastern Europe work towards stability and prosperity, what they need from the international community is a clear signal that it will stay the course. That means a blunt refusal to any calls for the redrawing of borders in the region, which, as the conflict in the Presevo valley in southern Serbia demonstrates only too well, can only ever end in bloodshed.

The writer is the high representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, responsible for the civilian implementation of the Dayton Peace Accords.