

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, High Representative for BiH "We will return money to depositors of Hercegovacka Banka and bring culprits before the court"

If they elect Jelavic again the HDZ will weaken its position in BiH

When I told the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Wolfgang Petritsch, whom I talked to in his office, that a common friend of ours from Austria considers him a popular politician, unlike the majority of BiH Croats, Petritsch answered that even in Western Herzegovina his image would change soon.

VL: I cannot believe that

WP: I will become popular even there once the data on the investigation into Hercegovacka Banka is revealed.

VL: Can you explain?

WP: The process of checking the documents of the Hercegovacka Banka has gone a considerable way already. More than one million documents need to be sorted. Despite this, I believe that the evidence will surface soon which will in turn open the possibility of adopting the first concrete measures. I hired the best experts in the field from many countries and it

took a lot of their effort to retrieve the records that the bank's leadership erased. We are talking about the computer data. The necessary documentation from the Privredna Banka Zagreb and other banks has been gathered and from all that you can see a completely clear model as to how the bank was misused.

Croat people robbed by their leaders

VL: The International Community has been accused of a robbery of the bank because of the violent raid by SFOR troops on the bank?

WP: When everything is over, it will be clear that the bank was not robbed by the International Community but by local officials who were responsible for the Croat people. They took their savings, even the money that the Government of the Republic of Croatia allocated as aid to the BiH Croats. What I want to do now is to return to the depositors their money and to have the robbers brought before the courts.

VL: The seventh Convention of the HDZ is taking place in ten days' time and it would appear that Ante Jelavic, who was dismissed by you, will be re-elected as the President (of the HDZ). Could this further complicate relations?

WP: I had to dismiss Jelavic. The move was clearly supported by Senator Biden, the Chair of the US Congress Foreign Policy Committee, and the Legal Committee of the Peace Implementation Council. I did it because he was violating instead of defending the Constitution of BiH and by doing so he did not do anything for his people. If the HDZ decides to elect the leader who managed to isolate his party and his voters from everything that surrounds them, even from Croatia, it only weakens its position.

Now Cardinal Puljic understands my motives better

VL: However, democracy is what people decide, which you annul

by the power of your position.

WP: We live in a country in which we have rules and provisions. If someone violates them then he eliminates himself. However, democratic freedoms are such that regardless of everything such a leader can be present. However, those who vote that way should understand that they weaken themselves.

VL: Five Governors of the Cantons with Croat majority, demanded a meeting with you in order to warn you that you are weakening the position of the Cantons and strengthening the Federation and BiH.

WP: I have not received such a request but I can answer this question by stating my principles. I believe that my great task is to ensure the equality of three constituent peoples in BiH. I believe that a high-quality democracy can be judged according to the fact as to how the people smallest in number feel. For this reason, I follow all requests and proposals that I receive from the Croat people, with particular attention. The Dayton and Washington Agreements envisage a complex administrative structure. You have local, Cantonal, Federation and State Authorities. In all of them Croats are adequately represented. This will be especially stressed in the framework of constitutional reform that is being implemented at the moment. However, we have to take into consideration whether the existence of such an administration is practical or not. The fact that the HDZ withdrew despite an invitation to participate should not be forgotten.

VL: A great number of Croats believe that you are the main cause of the difficult position of the Croats in BiH, and the Catholic Church, especially Cardinal Vinko Puljic and Bishop Ratko Peric, stresses this attitude.

WP: Most of the attacks against me, coming from the Croat(ian) media, are based on misinformation. I have stressed many times that the crucial part of my work refers to economic reforms.

Many people from Herzegovina are involved in trade, their market is the Federation and BiH. Ask what the HDZ has done for the development of this unique economic area. I am a member of the Slav minority in Austria and for this reason I understand a great deal about the problems that small ethnic communities in Europe face. My principle is that I always take the side of the weaker one, however I am equally against criminals, especially political ones. During my two-year mandate here in BiH all three ethnic groups have attacked me and this obviously means that I am doing something right.

As far as Cardinal Puljic is concerned I have open and frequent contacts with him and I believe that he now understands my motives better.

We are establishing a group for the struggle against terrorism

VL: The attack on the USA has been reflected on BiH to a large extent, especially because many terrorists, who are even being related to bin Laden's people, walk around with the passports of this country.

WP: After the attack on the USA, I asked myself what kind of consequences this will have on BiH. It is still a weak state and for this reason we want to strengthen its institutions. We are establishing one group for the struggle against terrorism. I am stressing that we have to be very careful so that we do not spread rumors about the presence of terrorists on BiH territory and especially insinuations that all Muslims are terrorists. There is no conflict of civilizations. It is about a conflict between criminals and the rest of the world.

VL: Still, the attack on New York stressed the antagonism between the Muslim and Christian worlds, and it might be intensified after a possible American response.

WP: Unfortunately, you can find extremists in all religions and peoples, and the basic reasons for this lie in economic

poverty. The task of the Christian and Catholic worlds – and the Pope sent this message from Kazakhstan – is to improve dialogue with other religions and to show solidarity with those who suffer.

VL: Have you, in person, been threatened these days in Sarajevo?

WP: I do not like to talk about it, however, I will tell you that I receive threats regularly.