

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative for BiH: "Bosnia is much more European than Denmark"

23 March 2002

This is the first in a series of interviews in which we search for the 'consciences' of countries in the shadow of Europe. The series sheds light on the troublesome quest of nations at Europe's border seeking full integration into the established Europe. In Europe's periphery, we hear complaints about lack of attention and lack of respect. Prejudices and falsification of history, these are the many frustrating observations that can be heard from Turkey to Hungary, and from Malta to the former Yugoslavia. The question where Europe begins and where it ends has not been satisfactorily answered to date. There is still uncertainty as to which roots are common and which have been imported.

The Austrian diplomat, historian and publicist Wolfgang Petritsch, who, since 1999, has been High Representative of the International Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (3,5 million inhabitants), kicks off this series. He is responsible for the civilian implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement, which brought an end to the war in Bosnia in 1995. Police, judiciary, education, the monitoring of democratic elections but also – if need be – the dismissal of domestic authorities, fall under his jurisdiction. Earlier, Petritsch (1947) was the EU-envoy for Kosovo and EU-negotiator at the peace negotiations in Rambouillet. He has written numerous books

about Kosovo and the Balkans.

The Office of the High Representative, with its modern antennae, white walls and impressive fences, sticks out sharply against neighbouring buildings. Seven years of peace in Sarajevo, but most walls are still filled with bullet holes. On the other side of the river are ruins, in the middle of the city. Shells have swept away complete window frames and door posts. The minarets that proudly decorate the snowy hills surrounding Sarajevo are still partly damaged. From these hills, snipers spied on their easy targets in the valley.

Peace? When Wolfgang Petritsch accompanies us to the severely damaged city of Mostar, we have to travel in a column of four Land Rovers. Eight armed body guards drive in front of and behind us. There is constant radio contact. The route is changed twice, unexpectedly. You can never be too sure, in this peaceful country. Buying a newspaper resembles an armed robbery: the kiosk is turned inside out, the owner searched and the area fenced off, before the High Representative can pay for his Newsweek. Petritsch doesn't *have* to pay, that is how much respect he commands. Hats are raised as he passes, the hope of a nation...

The main roads have been repaired, but as soon as you want to visit a village, you have to make your – bumpy – way through potholes filled with rainwater. Petritsch answers questions routinely, meanwhile commenting on the surroundings. He points at a village that is high up in the mountains, so far removed from civilisation that the war passed by without being noticed. 'People are only active in spring and summer. During winter, they are isolated from the valley because of the snow, and they sleep. It's as if they still live in the Middle Ages'.

Financieel Dagblad: Bosnia has been trying to distance itself from the terrible heritage of the war for seven years now. Houses and schools have been rebuilt, society is functional

again, unemployment has been brought down to reasonable proportions. But all these achievements are overshadowed by the shameless presence of war criminals who seem to enjoy immunity, despite the call from the West to bring them to justice at the Hague Tribunal.

WP: You rebuild your street and it turns out you live next to someone who has killed your family. Yes, that is unbelievably difficult. When Milosevic was handed over, people in Sarajevo said that the shark had been caught now, but that many piranhas were still swimming in the pond. The fact that war criminals such as Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic are still at large is partly because they receive assistance from a handful of Serbs who do not respect democratic principles. That is a shame. I am doing all I can to change this and it frustrates me that I have not succeeded. If responsible individuals are held accountable, the collective guilt of the Bosnians can finally make way for a new self-confidence. That's how this country can really take off.

Financieel Dagblad: Since Bin Laden's attacks on 11 September, attention for Bosnia's real problems has not only diminished, the country – of which you are more or less the Governor – has also been accused of sheltering Islamic terrorists. Does that affect you?

WP: The attacks in the United States have triggered a debate about Islam that unfortunately increasingly distinguishes 'us', the civilised world, from 'them', the dangerous, suspect Muslims. This trend is a slap in the face for the twelve million Muslims that are citizens of the European Union. While Europe is looking for a way to fight international terrorism, it must at the same time reach out to the majority of Muslims in Europe that uphold very clear values: democracy, individual rights and religious tolerance. Europe has to get used to the idea that soon even countries with an Islamic majority, such as Turkey, will join the Union. This also implies that Europe must live up to its political and economic engagement in the

Balkans. If the gap between 'us' and 'them' grows bigger, fundamentalism will find more fertile ground to breed. Rumours have it that there is evidence that Al-Qaeda has a substantial base in Bosnia. That is not true. Some maps of American cities have been found at Arabic aid organisations, but that doesn't mean that Bosnia is Europe's Afghanistan.

In my view, the government has reacted very adequately to the imputations and has made it crystal clear that terrorists are not welcome, no matter what their origin is. Besides, fundamentalist Islam is remarkably thinly spread in the Balkans. If we leave the 'us and them' paradigm behind for a moment, we would perhaps recall that Islam is part of Europe's tradition. When a Westerner visits Sarajevo for the first time, he will see the minarets in the hills. Those have been there for 600 years! In Spain we find the Islamic influence interesting, but in BiH, we all of a sudden consider the same influence as a threat? This must have something to do with the question where Europe actually begins.

Financieel Dagblad: Western literature likes to point at the historic violence that characterises the Balkans. As if it is inevitable that people have, throughout the ages, killed their kin, based on religious conviction.

WP: Yes, especially the Americans tend to be influenced by this school of thought. President Clinton only read one book about the region, *Balkan Ghosts: A journey through history* by Robert Kaplan. And that book indeed said that Yugoslavia could not be saved, because it was inhabited by fanatic and bloodthirsty murderers. That image of "the dark caverns of the Balkans" –to quote Karl May- has been portrayed so strongly that many Muslims in BiH have started to think themselves that they are no good. They are willing to take on a different identity and to repress their own culture. They turn into uncertain actors, whilst they have so much to offer. It is remarkable how the media have contributed to the creation of this negative self-image in BiH. And of course it has been a

shocking experience for normal Bosnians: from one day to another, neighbours turned into murderers, law-abiding citizens became arsonists under the spell of a mad nationalism. After the dust had settled, people looked at each other and thought: did we do this? Could we have turned into such animals, out of the blue? The same has happened in Cambodia, East-Timor and between Hutus and Tutsis in Burundi. The layer of civilisation appears to be wafer thin; unfortunately, that is a fact of life, all over the world.

Financieel Dagblad: But one insistently pointed at Bosnia, as if developments were inevitable in these parts...

WP: An artificial distance has been created between the so-called civilised Europe and Bosnia and Herzegovina. That has everything to do with our feeling of guilt: wasn't there anything we, Europeans, could have done for this part of Europe? Couldn't we have prevented the genocide? It is easier to say: no, there is nothing we could have done. How else can you explain that the West always delivered too little assistance, too late, with too weak competence? The problem has never been addressed with conviction. The inability of the international peace force only made things worse. 'Damage control', that was the assignment, whilst they should have intervened forcefully. But fatalism proved stronger than reason, and this has prolonged the war and has stirred up hatred. With 200,000 dead and 2 million displaced persons as a result. Congratulations!

Financieel Dagblad: In addition, sceptical people claim that the former Yugoslavia, and, now, Bosnia and Herzegovina, are artificial constructions.

WP: But every state is an artificial construction! It all depends on whether there is a will to live together, and on whether the political and intellectual elite can agree on a minimal consensus. In the post-Tito years, the elite was not capable of reaching such a consensus, which resulted in a

violent disintegration. In the smaller BiH, events have fortunately taken a more positive turn since. We see how Christians and Muslims can live together in peace. This is truly multicultural integration! Countries such as the Netherlands have something to learn from Bosnia: here, different churches, different schools, confessional parties that tolerate each other and religiously oriented press with respect for democratic principles exist alongside each other. And all is based on the agreement that there will not be separate states within Bosnia. Co-existence, a multi-religious democracy that can sustain itself autonomously, that is the cause I fight for in Bosnia.

Financieel Dagblad: Is the perspective of Europe, shining at the horizon, the binding factor?

WP: Definitely. Both for the Bosnian Muslims, as for the Croats and the Serbs, accession to the European Union is the sole guarantor of a long-lasting peace. It is *the* binding factor in which people put their faith, including those hundreds of thousands of people returning from the Diaspora. Despite the fact that they return to areas where they constitute an ethnic minority, they feel safe. Police and judiciary are being straightened out. Bosnia proves that there is no such thing as a 'clash of civilisations' such as Samuel Huntington – often quoted in the West – likes to state (*The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*). Democracy, freedom and human rights are positively universal!

Financieel Dagblad: How do you manage to keep Bosnia on the European agenda?

WP: That is a relevant question now that Bosnia's 'hour of fame' has passed and the Susan Sontags of this world no longer come round to publicly rant and rave about the situation. The billions of euros that have been pumped into the country have actually been well-spent -notwithstanding the criticism we encountered. We rebuilt a state that was completely destroyed.

The war not only destroyed industries, but also everything that represents human life, its cultural identity: schools, churches, statues, graveyards, mosques, libraries, hospitals, complete municipal registries. Everything that really hurts. If you manage to rebuild all this in six years you mustn't complain, even though there remains a lot to be done, especially in education. We simply ought to be on everyone's map because of the superhuman efforts people undertake here and because we set an example. But in Brussels and in the rest of Europe, people do not seem to realise this...

Financieel Dagblad: Infrastructure is not enough. Bosnia and Herzegovina also needs investors.

WP: Of course it would be easier to resolve ethnic problems if the economy was booming, but we couldn't have started out with the economy. We first had to establish a foundation and generate a dynamic within the population. Only since the elections in 2000 do we have a government that doesn't have blood on its hands. Next, the brain drain had to be stopped and again, we succeeded in achieving that. The intelligent part of the country is on its way back and is willing to roll up its sleeves and work hard. Investors do not just look for a stable environment, they also need employable people with competitive salaries. BiH should not be suffocated with too much financial assistance or compassion. Attention, respect and confidence from the wider Europe are equally important. After communism, people have not yet grown accustomed to taking their own initiatives. They need time. Once the infrastructure has been restored, in my view, BiH belongs more to Europe than some other countries that take their European status as self-evident. Take Denmark for example. Where did Rome, Athens and Islam meet, in Northern Europe or in the Balkans? In the Balkans. BiH will be the bridge between the predominantly Christian part of Europe and the Islamic Europe, Turkey for example. I do not believe that membership of the European Union is important in itself, but a partnership has

to evolve with a European perspective. To keep spirits up, it would already help if the EU would abandon visa requirements for BiH citizens. It hurts me every time I see the long queues in front of Embassies in Sarajevo.

Financieel Dagblad: How would you regard Bosnia's role in Europe, except as bridgehead in an Eastern direction?

WP: I look at BiH as the laboratory of the future Europe, a melting pot of cultures and talents, an example *par excellence* of tolerance and the will to make things work together. That surprises you, doesn't it? But that is because I have really come to know the country from within.