

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative in BiH: "I am not opposed to introduction of House of Peoples in the RS"

International community wants to see a more significant engagement on the part of local authorities and a symmetric solution in essence • Amendments to entity constitutions must be incorporated by the end of February

WP: I am not against the introduction of a House of Peoples in the Republika Srpska as well. But, the people of this country, politicians, should discuss this and agree on this... It is very important for me that the best possible solution is reached in the implementation of the Decision of the Constitutional court of BiH on the constituent status of peoples – the High Representative to BiH, Wolfgang Petritsch, said in an interview for "Dnevni avaz".

Petritsch, with whom we talked for a long time yesterday in his Sarajevo office on the modalities of the final implementation of the Decision on the constituent status of peoples on the whole territory of BiH, is aware of all the difficulties but also of the importance of the dialogue being conducted about this issue.

A single message

WP: Peace Implementation Council, all major countries, political factors, have a single message when it comes to this issue. They want to see a more important engagement on the part of local authorities and – in essence, a symmetrical solution that will ensure the protection of constitutional rights – he said.

Petritsch expects the whole undertaking regarding the implementation of the BiH Constitutional court's decision to be completed in the next two months.

WP: I expect the entity constitutions to be amended by the end of February and early March thereby implementing the decision we are talking about – our interlocutor said.

To our observation that this sounded improbable, Ambassador Petritsch said in a relaxed manner that everything had already been done and that the best political decisions were supposed to be taken now.

WP: This is difficult, but politics is also about making difficult decisions. I am faced with this almost on a daily basis. Now I expect the local authorities to do the same.

Elections are planned for October, and the Election Law cannot be complete without the implementation of the Decision of the Constitutional court of BiH. I cannot believe that this has not happened yet, and BiH will most probably become a member of the Council of Europe this year. It is a shame. Therefore, I am confident that responsible politicians will act soon – Petritsch said.

He interceded in favour of the fact that all interested parties – including both Bosniaks and Croats – should totally freely and openly come out and take part in a public debate on constitutional amendments commencing these days in the RS.

WP: This should be a multi-ethnic debate, and it is not just the Serbs who should do everything – our interlocutor said.

Petritsch calls upon politicians to take part in the debate on the constituent status and offer their ideas as to how to best complete the whole task. He welcomes the fact that the SDP, as the biggest party within the Alliance, has developed its proposals, and announces that he will carefully analyse these as soon as he gets a detailed version of what was presented to the public a few days ago by Ivo Komsic, one of the leading persons of this party.

When asked whether he considered the 1991 census to be the best foundation for a future distribution of power in the RS, at this juncture, the High Representative gave a positive reply.

WP: I think that we need certain grounds for the implementation of the decision. When it comes to figures, one needs a stable basis. I am of the opinion that the year 1991 is the best possible basis we have now.

The High Representative welcomes the fact that the SDP has accepted a proposal on the reduction of the overly expensive bureaucratic apparatus.

A historical chance

WP: I proposed that to the leaders of the Alliance at a meeting held in Sarajevo on December 19, and a day later I proposed the same to the leaders in Banja Luka. Can this country afford such a multi-layered political system? Do you really need presidencies of the entities, governors and prime ministers in ten cantons, so many cantonal governments...

Not only is it ridiculous, but it is too expensive even for countries more prosperous than BiH. I am happy that the

leading party of the Alliance – the SDP - sees a necessity to reduce such an apparatus – he said, adding that “this is a historical chance to put things in order and to adjust this country to Europe”.

When we insisted on the fact that the same solutions should be introduced at all levels of authority, in particular when it came to the names of the houses, the High Representative replied:

WP: Each possibility should be considered in order for us to have an open dialogue. We have to pay special attention to demands on the part of Croats in the Federation of BiH. They are a constituent people, and traditionally, they share power with Bosniaks in the Federation.

If they want a House of Peoples to exist in the FBiH, and this is what's been particularly emphasised by Kresimir Zubak and a few other leaders, then we have to take this into account very seriously.

When the RS is in question, the same applies to them as well. We must ensure that Croats and Bosniaks in the RS have the rights which the Serbs and Croats are going to get in the FBiH. This is the essence and quality of protection – it has to be the same, and we can discuss the mechanisms – ambassador Petritsch concluded.

Boycott of the RS “jubilee”

Regarding the remark that the Office of the High Representative as well as other international organisations in BiH have boycotted a recent event of celebration of the 10th anniversary of existence of the RS, Wolfgang Petritsch said: “I do not want to “get close to any of the questionable dates being mentioned. The RS has been in existence since December 14, 1995, though they do not accept this date. Legally, the RS was not in existence until that date. What they celebrate has never been recognised by anyone. The celebration of that date is not useful, it is not conducive to the reconciliation nor is it constructive.

House of Peoples in Croatia?

I am glad that the discussion on the Decision of the Constitutional court of BiH on the Constituent status of peoples has also begun in Croatia. I see that it's been written about, Mate Granic has some suggestions...people there are interested in this issue. The debate being conducted in BiH all these months becomes, it seems, a regional discussion. It seems to me that Croatia, judging from what Granic says, thinks about the introduction of a house of peoples in Croatia, for, I guess, Granic would not ask for Croats in BiH to get what Croatia is not ready to give the Serbs in Croatia... I want to welcome this regional approach and commitment to ensure the same rights are given to all. I think that this could really help the Serbs, who fled to the region of Banja Luka, to return to their homes in Croatia.