Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative in BiH”There will be no new Dayton”

In the early 90s, Europe let down BiH – The US supports the EU’s proposal that I review the current international structures for the civilian implementation of the Peace Agreement for Bosnia and Herzegovina

The High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina Wolfgang Petritsch is very busy these days. His article in which he opposes the idea to restructure the Balkans, published in last Sunday’s “New York Times”, gives reason to think, and the messages after his meeting with the US Secretary of State last week were very clear and encouraging.

We asked Ambassador Petritsch to answer a few questions related to appeals published in the media to change the territorial organisation of the Balkans, but also to assess certain events in our country. Though travelling abroad, the High Representative has found time to answer our request in writing.

Media attacks

Q: In the last few days, we had an opportunity to read articles in influential U.S. media – Newsweek, the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal – which advocate a restructuring of the Balkans and the partition of the multi-ethnic states in this region. How do you comment these appeals?

A: People are entitled to their opinions but I believe that these views are wrong and based on a very poor grounding in

the region's history. The redrawing of borders in the Balkans is an old idea which has proven – time and again – unworkable. Neat borders containing mono-ethnic states are impossible and out of touch with what is a European – no, global – reality which is that mono-ethnic states do not exist. They never have. This isn't a peculiarly Balkan problem. If you start to divide people up, where do you stop? How do you judge this? The redrawing of Balkan borders by the Great Powers in 1878 led to a century of instability and grudges in the region, culminating in the recent wars, which were again an attempt to draw new borders and only produced terrible ethnic cleansing campaigns and suffering.

What Bosnia and Herzegovina – and indeed the whole Balkan region – needs is Europeanisation. This is the project I'm pushing every working day, to provide this country with laws and mechanisms protecting its constituent peoples and citizens that meet EU criteria. Through this, all citizens here have rights backed by the rule of law. This – along with economic reform – is the guarantee of future regional stability.

Substantial progress

Q: The appeals we are talking about ask for a new international conference at which all this would be worked out. They say Dayton hasn't succeeded and it's time for a new try. To which extent are the advocates of this view right?

A: If you are talking about a new conference on Bosnia and Herzegovina – there is no need for such a conference, and there won't be one. The international community stands firmly behind Dayton and will not allow it to be annulled, or BiH to be carved up. There is too much progress: refugees have started returning, there is a framework in place to foster the transition to a market economy and investment, BiH for the first time since the fall of Communism has a government that is reform-oriented, embraces the state and does not include the war-time parties. Also, Dayton itself allows for changes:

at the moment, the set-up of the Entities will change in accordance with the ruling of the Constitutional Court on the constituent status of the three peoples in both Entities. At one point, the elected representatives can also start thinking about changing the core of Dayton, Annex 4, the Constitution. The time for it has not yet come. First, Dayton needs to be implemented in full, then the people here should take a closer look and see if anything needs to be improved.

The Berlin Congress

Q: You wrote your own reply to the supporters of partition in the "New York Times". I must tell you that your article worried me. Truly, I didn't know the situation was that serious. What kind of reactions have you received related to the article?

A: Well, at first I couldn't believe that people were talking about 1878 again so I was keen to counter this idea as quickly as possible. I think with the recent violence in Macedonia, there has been a feeling in foreign capitals of "oh no, here we go again". I was very keen to point out that it needn't be like that. I am confident that my views have firm support both in Europe and in the United States – that continued engagement with the Balkan states we have and bringing them back into the European fold is the surest means of a prosperous and stable future for south-eastern Europe.

Q: It is also Jelavic and his HDZ who advocate a new conference on the Balkans. What is your answer?

A: I already answered it: there is no need for another Dayton, and there won't be one.

Q: There is a feeling that the American administration is impatient and that it wants to withdraw from the Balkans, passing this hot potato on to the Europeans. Is this correct?

A: The United States is a vital partner to the peace process

here and I was reassured on my visit to Washington last week that the new administration has every interest in remaining engaged. That being said, it is crucial that Europe takes on much of the responsibility now. In the early 1990s, Europe failed Bosnia and Herzegovina. But I think Europe has learned valuable lessons and is ready – and willing – to tackle its responsibilities here. This is how it should be – Bosnia and Herzegovina is a part of Europe. Europe's willingness to reach out to Bosnia and Herzegovina is being demonstrated by the "Road Map" – a list of conditions drafted by the EU for BiH to fulfil in order to conclude a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU. There is also the Council of Europe, which is keen on welcoming BiH as a member, the Stability Pact, and many other initiatives. BiH's future is in European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Powell gave me his full support

Q: Are the Americans unhappy with your work, as claimed by Newsweek?

A: Newsweek does not make any such claim – their editorial does not mention any officials, but argues in favour of new borders in the Balkans. The Americans are of course an extremely important factor in peace implementation here in BiH and in the wider region, and support my work. When I was in Washington last week, I had warm and frank talks on BiH's future with Secretary of State Powell and other officials at the State Department and the Pentagon. I think the good relationship we have will continue. Secretary Powell expressed his full support for me and for the proposal by the European Union that I review current international civil implementation structures in Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to maximise co-ordination and efficiency.

Matic is ready to adopt legislation

Q: How do you assess the first steps of the new governments at State and Entity level?

A: It's early days. But Prime Minister Matic appears very keen to move ahead with the adoption of vital legislation, and the new State government shares the international community's sense of urgency in the need to push ahead with returns, economic reform and rapprochement to Europe through the fulfilment of the "EU Road Map" and the conditions for membership of the Council of Europe. I think this is reflected at Entity level, whatever the problems we've had in recent weeks. BiH citizens are hungry for a better life and I think the new administrations realise the need to move fast.

The destruction of Ferhadija is a barbarian act

Q: How do you comment on the decision of the Banja Luka authorities to issue the permit for the reconstruction of the Ferhadija mosque?

A: It is good news that the urban permit has finally been granted. Of course I'm disappointed that it took so long – the authorities were 20 months late in issuing this permit, which the Human Rights Chamber had asked for in June 1999! The urban permit is now the first step. Now the Islamic Community has to submit blueprints for the mosque, and based on those, the authorities have to issue a building permit. I hope and insist that this will happen fast. The destruction of Ferhadija in May 1993 was a barbaric act. The international community considers the reconstruction of all significant historical and religious monuments and places of worship a litmus test for the commitment of the authorities to reconciliation, return and tolerance.

I welcome Milosevic's arrest

The arrest of Slobodan Milosevic done by authorities in Belgrade is a very positive step demonstrating significant determination to rule of law, which is of a crucial importance for the lasting peace at the Southeast of Europe. By this act, the authorities in Belgrade moved forward on the long journey of stability and peace in the region. Milosevic's arrest demonstrated the entire region that no one is above the law.

This especially implies on war time leader of Bosnian Serbs Radovan Karadzic and Army commander Ratko Mladic. They have both been indicted for genocide and crimes against humanity by the Tribunal in Hague. I have personally been engaged on building the cemetery for the victims of massacre in Srebrenica and I know that their families shall not find peace until those who committed this horrible crime are not held responsible for their crimes. BiH citizens can not fully be concentrated on building their future until they are clear with the things from their past – said the High Representative, answering on the request of our newspapers to comment on Slobodan Milosevic's arrest. Ambassador Petritsch emphasised that his current job in BiH, the country that suffered the most during the time of Milosevic's ruling and his influence, shows importance for the individuals like Milosevic do not avoid being held responsible on behalf of the justice in Hague.