Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, the High Representative”Multi-ethnicity is the Solution”

The re-establishment of multi-ethnicity and the success of the privatization process are the two great challenges facing Bosnia-Herzegovina.Wolfgang Petritsch, the International Community’s High Representative for civilian implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement, considers that the peace process is irreversible. He advocates the imprisonment of all those accused of war crimes, essential if reconciliation is ever going to be possible.

Mr Petritsch, the 52-year-old former collaborator of Social-Democratic Chancellor, Bruno Kreisky, was the Austrian Ambassador in Yugoslavia from 1997 to 1998. He was the Special Envoy of the European Union to Kosovo at the height of the conflict, representing the 15 at the Rambouillet and Paris Conferences – the failures of which justified the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia.

He has been in Sarajevo since August 1999, and is considered one of the European statesmen most familiar with the complex Balkan issue. On a visit to Lisbon, at the invitation of the Portuguese Presidency of the EU, he met with official leaders and took part in the preparations for the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) for Bosnia and Herzegovina, scheduled to take place on the 23rd and 24th of this month in Brussels, at the level of Ministers of Foreign Affairs.

PÚBLICO- How is it that in the recent municipal elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in which the Muslim Nationalists were defeated, the Serbian Nationalists and even the radical

Bosnian Croats gained strength?

WOLFGANG PETRITSCH- These were elections in which, for the first time, cracks in the wall of nationalism have become visible. In the case of the Federation, a moderate, multi-ethnic Croat-Muslim party has gained ground at the expense of the main nationalist party, the SDA. This is what the international community is aiming for, a moving away away from ethnic parties, in favor of modern, European ones, like those in Western Europe. Even in the Croatian regions of the Federation, the rate of participation is falling dramatically, somewhere down around 40%. The HDZ [nationalist] remains the strongest, but we're expecting to see some "cracks" here, as well.

PUBLICO – The situation in the Republika Srpska [RS – the Serb entity of BiH] is more complex.

WOLFGANG PETRITSCH – It's more complicated, due to the simple fact that the first two years of the peace process have been practically lost. This is the result of obstruction by people like Momcilo Krajisnik, who has now been arrested for alleged war crimes. But some new parties have made progress, and even the pro-Western party of Milorad Dodik has also made progress. This means that the international community is on the right path, that our efforts are paying off, albeit slowly. This is what happens when you try to change things by the democratic process.

PUBLICO – In the RS, Thiomir Gligoric, of the RS Socialist Party, and considered to be very close toYugoslav President Slobodan, was proposed by the Bosnian Serbs to preside over the central government. Is Belgrade's influence gaining strength in the RS?

WOLFGANG PETRITSCH- The candidate for the post of Prime Minister is still under discussion. Clearly, the international community can not be satisfied with a candidate who, in the

past, has been uncooperative. So, it's true, Mr. Milosevic has a certain influence, which can only be negative. He can hamper the peace process, but he can't stop it. It's more or less a question of time – you can see immediate progress in the RS when there are changes in Belgrade. And the local Serbian population understands better and better that their future is linked to democratic progress in western Europe.

The question of privatization

PUBLICO – The weakness of privatization, the very serious economic problems that persist in BiH, the control by the local political elite over the process of economic transition are other questions that remain unresolved. What's the solution?

WOLFGANG PETRITSCH- I think that, as in any country in transition in eastern Europe, the privatization process has always been a problem, never having gone perfectly, and the same applies to BiH. But we are making great efforts to organize the privatization process in such a way as to make it more transparent and objective. This is one of the big issues for the PIC meetings. We are concentrating on economic reform – and we know that privatization is pivotal to this reform. Attracting foreign investment is the only way to make BiH self-sufficient and successful. This is the main question.

PUBLICO – With regard to war crimes, several analysts have criticised the adverse political consequences of the arrest of Momcilo Krajisnik on elections in the RS. The arrest is said to have radicalized the vote of the populace. Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic [former leaders of the RS during the war] remain at large, as do many others whose names are included on open or closed arrest lists in the Hague. What are your thoughts on this?

WOLFGANG PETRITSCH – First and foremost, any time is the right time to apprehend someone suspected of war crimes. So I don't

think we should criticise the fact that Mr. Krajisnik was arrested a week before the elections, because it is a very difficult task that SFOR [NATO forces in Bosnia] have to carry out.

I am very grateful for the action that Sfor is taking, because it's an important contribution to the peace process. There will be no reconciliation in Bosnia-Herzegovina until each and every known and named war criminal has been taken before the tribunal at the Hague. We cannot underestimate this aspect, it is also very important for the population, to see that justice is being served some years after the end of the war. The three local communities, especially the Serbs, but also the Croats and Bosnians [Muslims], must understand that delivering war criminals to justice constitutes a step toward removing the collective blame from their peoples. And that is important in the process of reconciliation.

Against the ethnic States

PUBLICO- That brings us to the question of Kosovo. Are you of the opinion that the possibility of independence for Kosovo could have repercussions on the internal situation in Bosnia, serving as a pretext for the Serbian nationalists and Bosnian Croats to establish separate States?

WOLFGANG PETRITSCH – It is important to recognize, for the entire Balkan region, that there cannot be any States or provinces organized along ethnic lines. We need the principle of civil society to be adopted by the entire region, because even after the ethnic cleansing, the Balkans are still a multi-ethnic region.

And we can only guarantee peace when this is acknowledged by all of the Balkan peoples, including the Kosovo Albanians. If they want to become a part of modern Europe, they need to invite the Serbs, the Gypsies, and other minorities, back into Kosovo. The same principle applies to Bosnia and Herzegovina –

in some ways the only multi-ethnic State remaining in the Balkans. We have to convince the three communities that they must become, first and foremost, citizens of the State of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Every city in the world is multi-ethnic, it's a fact driven by globalization: no society can survive and prosper without being multi-ethnic. Why not embrace this principle? Multi-ethnicity is not Bosnia's problem, it's the solution. A modern human being has more than one identity. I am sure that the majority of people who intend to return home to their original regions can return, and we can impose at least part of the multi-ethnicity. We have to be realistic and pragmatic.

PUBLICO – Are there still major differences of opinion in the EU regarding Bosnia and Kosovo?

WOLFGANG PETRITSCH – You're right, there are, but only considering the initial phase of conflict in the former Yugoslavia. The EU and the European nations were not united during the disintegration of that country, but I believe that we, Europeans, have learned a lesson in the Balkans: the need for European integration. It was, I believe, a very hard reality check in the process of European integration. We Europeans have learned the need to be united and to have a unified political front. When I was sent by the EU to Kosovo I can say that Europe's position regarding the former Yugoslavia improved in consensus, and the EU learned to work together on many practical issues during its efforts in the Balkans. It taught us a practical lesson about the importance of integration and about having a unified stance.