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Candidly on Thursday

Champions of Chauvinism Heading for The Hague

By Guest Commentator Wolfgang Petritsch

Culture ranges from the way we speak, and the beliefs with which we set out on lifeąs journey, to the customs of our town and country. And it can be defined by criteria outside family and nation. Classical music is a primary culture for some people; sport is for others. Cultural vectors overlap. People who share the same national culture share it in limitless and limitlessly interesting ways.

It need hardly be said that in Bosnia and Herzegovina, culture has often been expressed over-simplistically – war profiteers, for example, are invariably among the greatest exponents of "cultural" preeminence. This has been particularly in evidence of late with regard to Croat culture. Indeed, many of those who have been making a great deal of noise about protecting Croat culture are ill equipped to reflect the complex aspirations of their countrymen.

As we enter fresh political, social and economic territory, chauvinistic slogans are not only tedious, they are a liability.

Complexity is time-consuming

The rights of constituent peoples of BiH are being secured through hard work and good will – thehard work and good will – the constitutional process is time-consuming and complex. At the beginning of this year the countryąs largest Croat party withdrew from the debate. Leaving their own voters out in the cold.

That was a mistake.

The HDZ has since then expended a great deal of energy on trying to set up a kind of “Croat statelet”.

Another mistake.

The sort of political arguments we have heard from the HDZ – supposedly in defence of Croat culture – have been hopelessly simplistic. The contention that ethnic rights can be secured only through territorial control does no justice to the legitimate and hugely varied aspirations of the Croats who live throughout the territory of BiH.

Spectacle of Slogans

The Croats of Bosnia and Herzegovina have been presented with the singularly unimpressive spectacle of some of their elected representatives substituting slogans for policy. Slogans do not create jobs or build schools, and the glib promises made by some politicians in successive elections have not been kept. Likewise, threats against moderate Croats do not contribute to a secure future for the Croat people as a whole.

The HDZ are well aware that slogans are inadequate and threats are wrong. These elements have begun to re-engage in normal politics. I am more than willing to work with them. Bosnia and Herzegovina needs dynamic and forcefmic and forceful Croat politicians to serve the interests of their own constituency and the interests of the country as a whole. The country wonąt prosper unless its Croat people prosper, and the Croat people wonąt prosper unless the country prospers.

Which brings me back to the question of culture – its complexity and its potency. Looking ahead, there is no question of a diminished role for the Croat people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. No legislation can pass without the consent of their representatives in the Constitutional Commissions, which have been tasked by me to ensure that the rights of all

citizens are respected throughout the country. Last yearąs Constitutional Court decision states that all Constituent Peoples, including Croats, enjoy the same status in both entities.

Cultural Chauvinism Out of Place in the Global Economy

The new political and economic circumstances in the region demand a higher level of complexity than the chauvinism of the recent past. Cultural inclusiveness is an integral part of prosperous modern democracy – cultural chauvinism is conspicuously out of place in the global economy.

There is no obvious role for politicians who organise riots, withdraw from democratic debate or dabble in structures which would perpetuate their own power at the material expense of their constituents. It is no surprise that such po such politicians are attempting to portray their culture as a narrow and fragile thing that is constantly under threat. The reality is that Croat culture is complex, resonant, rich and resilient. It is the culture of, for example, the Franciscans who spread literacy in Bosnia and Herzegovina when other parts of Europe were bastions of superstition and ignorance; it is the culture of, for example, the Art Academy at Siroki Brijeg, which sustains a vibrant tradition of painting and sculpture. This culture will survive and prosper. It is not threatened. It is needed.

We are passing through a watershed in the region. The champions of chauvinism are heading for The Hague. The rest of us can now get on with the business of normal life. Democratic market economies are enriched by the cultures of their citizens. For me it is a matter of the greatest inspiration that Croat culture, with its rich connections to the broader European tradition, is an integral part of the social and political fabric of BiH.