

Petritsch Condemns Bosnian Leaders

Author: [Janez Kovac](#)

International officials are running out of patience with Bosnia's incompetent leaders

Bosnia's top international mediator, High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch, is on the point of giving up on local leaders who are pushing the country into a serious political and economic crisis.

Returning from the latest meeting of the Peace Implementation Council in Brussels last week, Petritsch told journalists, "The international community is definitely running out of patience. It is really pathetic what is going on in this country."

Such was his frustration that he unilaterally implemented long overdue legislation on new common travel documents, blocked for months by Bosnian Serb representatives in the state parliament.

Petritsch's unprecedented outburst, which surprised even the most seasoned observers of Bosnian politics, was provoked by local leaders' obstructionist attitude towards political reforms.

As the November 11 general elections approach, the ruling Bosnian Serb, Croat and Muslim nationalist parties, in many cases working in unison, have been preventing reforms simply because they fear they will further dent their already woeful reputation.

Unless the Republika Srpska and the Federation parliaments urgently pass necessary amendments to pension and employment legislation, Bosnia could lose hundreds of millions of dollars of reconstruction aid over the next few years.

Despite warnings from the Office of the High Representative, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, Bosnia's nationalists continue to pursue their narrow political interests.

As a result, governments and parliaments in both entities, as well as at state level, have lately resembled a circus, with the Prime Minister of the Bosnian joint government, Spasoje Tusevljak, the main attraction.

The administration had been in limbo for nearly six months because of political bickering. Against protests and pleas from international organisations, the nationalists appointed Tusevljak, an economics professor, to kick-start the government.

The West's worst fears were soon realised as Tusevljak's foolishness and incompetence became all too apparent. His long, meaningless tirades turned him into a laughing-stock. Journalists turned up to his press conferences just to have a giggle.

Other Tusevljak gaffs included calling a government session unaware that half of his cabinet were out of the country on a business trip and spending a fortnight in Australia to watch the Olympic Games.

The state and entity parliaments are no less risible, with nationalist parties resorting to all kinds of undemocratic, dirty games to block legislation that they believe might harm their electoral prospects.

Unless long-delayed employment and pension legislation is adopted within the next week or so, Bosnia could lose hundreds of millions of dollars of support from the IMF and the World Bank.

This would further damage the country's image in the international donor community, which is already refocusing its funds and efforts on new trouble spots in Kosovo, Montenegro and Africa.

Unless the politicians get serious, Bosnia - already racked by a 340 million German marks budget deficit - could this winter be facing a serious economic crisis with governments unable to pay salaries and pensions.

Meanwhile, new corruption scandals are shaking the republic daily, but prosecutors, financial police and other law-enforcement agencies seem to be doing very little to investigate them. Numerous commissions of inquiry have been set up, but to date none have published any findings.

According to international agencies, Bosnia is losing 500 million German marks a year just from unpaid taxes on cigarette smuggling - an amount sufficient to cover the country's budget deficit and substantially improve conditions for workers and pensioners.

On his return from Brussels, Petritsch accused the country's "irresponsible" leaders of forcing the West to reconsider its involvement in Bosnia.

"We are nearing an end in many ways, the international community could move out of this country," he said. "I will hold the government and the parliament responsible for this disaster."

Petritsch called on Bosnian citizens to use forthcoming general elections to oust their incapable, unco-operative, obstructive and corrupt politicians.

"I really do hope that these elections will put an end to this ... unprofessional political behaviour," he said

Janez Kovac is a regular IWPR contributor

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