

Petritsch Issues Bosnian Serbs Stark Warning

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The international community's High Representative in Bosnia-Herzegovina, BiH, has told Republika Srpska that it must abandon ethnic bigotry and improve its human rights records if it wants to survive.

Let me make it perfectly clear. Without a serious commitment to constitutional, social, economic and human rights reforms, Republika Srpska, RS, may disappear. The behavior of its leaders is rendering the entity economically and politically unsustainable.

What the RS needs is honest and fundamental reform - deeds, not just words. It is clear that in this seventh year of Dayton, the RS is still a nationalistic mono-ethnic structure, an abnormal model of exclusivity where the rule of law has not taken root.

Such a community has no place in the Europe of the 21st century. There are many areas in which the RS authorities can do better in order to genuinely serve their citizens and prove to the outside world that it is a legitimate part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, BiH, which is trying to live up to the commitments of the Dayton Peace Agreement and the requirements of the modern age.

The implementation of the historic constitutional court decision on the constituency of all peoples in both entities offers the chance for a real breakthrough in RS. The RS must demonstrate its willingness to extend protection to all its citizens, including those who are not Serbs. Its multi-ethnic character, which the constitutional court has confirmed, must be reflected in its constitution.

Constitutional reform provides a unique opportunity for the RS to implement fundamental and positive change and to address the danger of its disappearance. The RS is threatened from the inside because it does not live up to European standards; because it does not treat all its citizens with the evenhandedness they are entitled to expect in a multiethnic entity; because it does not guarantee all its citizens human rights; because it does not welcome back returnees. This is what delegitimises and weakens the RS.

But it can prove otherwise. I would also say that this is also a unique opportunity for the RS authorities to demonstrate the essence of ownership, and show that they have the capacity to forge the sort of compromises which are crucial in a multi-ethnic society such as BiH.

At my (recent) meetings in Banja Luka I heard encouraging expressions of intent regarding many of these issues. However, I have heard many such expressions in the past. Now I want to see actions.

I fully support Prime Minister Ivanic's suggestion to organise a round table at which the political party leaders would hold such a discussion and try to find the right solutions. This will not be easy - but Bosnia and Herzegovina is a multiethnic country, which means that its political leaders must be able to find common ground and consensus and make compromises. This is the only way for Bosnia and Herzegovina to function and move forward. It can only do so by inclusion, not by exclusion.

RS citizens, regardless of their ethnic background, want a normal life. They want living standards that correspond to 21st century Europe. At the moment, economic prospects in the RS are still bleak. Urgently needed laws and measures aimed at reforming and improving the economy have been held up because of political - not economic - calculations.

The fight against corruption has only just begun. A large part of the problem is also the obstructionist

behavior of Serb representatives in the state parliament. Their delaying tactics and time-wasting have prevented the passage of important laws which will improve economic conditions across BiH and increase the efficiency of state institutions. This can no longer be tolerated.

The failure of the RS political leadership to embrace economic development as a number one priority is the reason that unemployment is so high in the RS. It is also the reason that those who are lucky enough to have a job for the most part earn very low salaries.

Low and irregularly paid salaries are the reason there were so many strikes in the RS in 2001. If the authorities want the economic situation to improve, they should act quickly and decisively to create a positive business environment.

I have repeatedly expressed my concern about the low rate of returns of Croats and Bosniaks in the RS. The budget allocated to facilitate the return process is inadequate; official obstruction of return is routine, as are illegal evictions; the support given by the government to RS housing offices is insufficient; and throughout the RS there is a shortage of the alternative accommodation which the authorities are obliged by law to provide.

The RS authorities have placed the very existence of their entity in jeopardy by not living up to European standards of practice and not guaranteeing the basic rights of all their citizens.

The lack of respect for human rights is another weak point in the RS government's record. One case which has been scandalously prolonged is that of Colonel Avdo Palic, who disappeared while in the custody of the Bosnian Serb army in 1995. The failure of the RS to obey the decision of the Human Rights Chamber to investigate the circumstances of the disappearance of Colonel Palic as well as to pay 65,000 KM (30,000 US dollars) in compensation to his family is shameful.

The RS attempt to pay only 15,000 KM (7,000 US dollars) is a typical example of foot-dragging. I also cannot accept the excuse of the RS ministry of defence that they do not know the whereabouts of the officer who last saw Colonel Avdic. This is dishonourable. It is unacceptable.

Cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, ICTY, is another area where words are not matched by deeds. Although in October the RS national assembly adopted a law on cooperation with the ICTY and the Serb Democratic Party in December announced its intention to expel publicly indicted war criminals from the party, grand expressions of intent are of little value. We have not seen any concrete action.

The indictees must be arrested; their continued liberty must no longer be allowed to cast a shadow over the return process.

The RS authorities have placed the very existence of their entity in jeopardy by not living up to European standards of practice and not guaranteeing the basic rights of all their citizens. Let me make it perfectly clear. Without a serious commitment to constitutional, social, economic and human rights reforms, the RS may face extinction - the behaviour of its leaders will have rendered the entity economically and politically unsustainable.

Wolfgang Petritsch is the international community's High Representative in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

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