Art of Diplomacy

11 AUGUST 2026

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Source: Wolfgang Petrisch

A Conversation with Wolfgang Petritsch, President of Marshallplan Foundation at Austria

In an international landscape increasingly defined by systemic disruption, a shift toward authoritarianism, and the erosion of post-war multilateral structures, the practice of diplomacy is undergoing a profound transformation. During an EPIS Informal Talk, Ambassador Wolfgang Petritsch —former EU Special Envoy for Kosovo and High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina—reflected on his extensive career, the mechanics of conflict negotiation, and the indispensable role of patience and empathy in international relations.

From History Student to the Frontlines of Diplomacy

Reflecting on his entry into international affairs, Ambassador Petritsch noted that becoming a diplomat was not his initial ambition. Having studied history, political science, and German literature, his career took a decisive turn when he was appointed personal secretary to former Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky. Working alongside Kreisky during high-level

engagements across the Middle East served as his primary "school of diplomacy," providing him with firsthand insight into complex geopolitical negotiations and statecraft. After formally entering the Austrian Foreign Office, his career spanned various international postings, culminating in his appointment during the escalation of the Kosovo conflict in the late 1990s.

The Art of Negotiation and Engaging Non-State Actors

Addressing the realities of conflict resolution, Ambassador Petritsch emphasized that peace processes often require engaging directly with non-state armed groups and insurgencies. Recalling his tenure as the EU Special Envoy for Kosovo, he detailed the strategic decision to include the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in political negotiations despite strong domestic and international resistance. He stressed that bringing insurgent leaders into a structured peace process requires establishing clear boundaries: "If you want to talk politics, then you have to stop shooting," he observed, highlighting that long-term stability depends on transforming armed factions into political participants.

The Erosion of Professional Statecraft and Multilateralism

A central theme of the discussion was the noticeable shift in contemporary diplomatic practice away from established multilateral channels. Ambassador Petritsch expressed concern over the decline of professionalized, indirect negotiation frameworks that characterized major peace accords like Rambouillet or Dayton. He warned that current geopolitical crises are increasingly managed without the necessary institutional depth, expertise, and strategic patience. The departure from traditional multilateral mechanisms—such as those anchored by the United Nations—has created a volatile international environment where conflicts risk escalation due to a lack of structured diplomatic engagement.

The Role of Middle Powers in a Shifted World Order

Examining the changing global balance of power, Ambassador Petritsch highlighted the growing importance of middle powers—such as Türkiye, Germany, and regional leaders in Africa and Asia—in maintaining international stability. As superpowers increasingly operate through unilateral or coercive measures, middle powers possess a distinct interest in preventing conflict, as their economic development, supply chains, and security infrastructure are directly vulnerable to regional instability. In an era where neither hard power nor authoritarian models guarantee total military or political victory, middle powers can act as crucial anchors for regional order and diplomatic mediation.

Advice for the Next Generation of Diplomats

Toward the conclusion of the conversation, Ambassador Petritsch shared three core principles for aspiring diplomats and international relations students:

- **Maintain Genuine Curiosity:** Cultivate an authentic interest in global affairs, extending beyond personal or national boundaries to understand broader international dynamics.
- **Acquire Deep Cultural and Historical Insight:** Effective policy work requires a thorough understanding of the history, politics, and cultural backgrounds of the nations involved.
- **Practice Respect and Empathy Without Compromising Ethics:** Principled diplomacy demands respecting interlocutors—even perpetrators—to achieve peace, while remaining steadfast in the defense of human rights and the protection of victims.

About the Interviewed: Ambassador Wolfgang Petritsch is a distinguished Austrian diplomat, international mediator, and leading authority on foreign policy. Renowned for his pivotal role in the Balkans, he served as the EU's Chief Negotiator at the Kosovo peace talks and as High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Currently President of the Austrian Institute for International Affairs (oiip), he bridges decades of high-level statecraft with deep academic insight into global security and conflict resolution.