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Interview with Ambassador Hans Ola Urstad, Head of OSCE Mission to Serbia and Montenegro¹ on the state of environment in Serbia

Pollution Is a National Problem

There is a tremendously high level of pollution in Serbia and something has to be done urgently to protect this beautiful country and make it more appealing for the development of tourism and economy – said Mr. Hans Ola Urstad, Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia and Montenegro.

Considering the fact that he has been living in Serbia for more than five years and that he has visited almost every place in the country, Urstad is certain that he is well aware of the local problems, especially in the field of environmental protection. Our collocutor has noticed that there is high level of pollution in a great number of Serbian towns, and the problem of solid waste disposal is visible everywhere as well as absence of public solutions to the problem.

“There are a lot of illegal, unauthorized waste dumps on river banks and the pollution permeating through the soil may contaminate the water in many regions of Serbia. One of the most striking examples is channel Danube-Tisa-Danube, especially the part between Kula and Vrbas, which is gravely polluted; I even dare to say up to a dangerous level. Unfortunately, this is not the only site with high pollution. There are also places where people burn their waste, while in the country I am coming from we are aware that this also pollutes the air.”

The OSCE Mission to Serbia has limited capabilities to provide direct solutions for existing environmental problems, but they can assist by exerting pressure to the decision makers in all levels, from national to local. He believes that this task can be accomplished in co-operation with the journalists raising awareness of the politicians on the importance of environmental problems in Serbia.

“Among decision makers and general population in Serbia, awareness on the importance of environmental problems is not high enough. I have to say that the situation in Serbia has improved, but when there are major political, economic challenges and problems, present in most transition countries, the environmental problems are seldom in the top priority of the state. This is also the case with Serbia. I will not dare say that people have no good will to make a difference, but in order to do things properly it is necessary to solve manifold problems. First, solving these problems is quite costly, and secondly it often requires strong pressure from NGOs, media and associations of citizens. As with other subjects, politicians have to understand that solving these problems demands for co-operation of all sides, and media can contribute by properly informing politicians about environmental problems in the field.” Urstad believes.

The OSCE Mission has supported involvement of Serbia and Montenegro in solving European environmental protection problems and as a result of this there will be a Ministerial conference on the subject in Belgrade during April next year.

¹ As of 29 June 2006, Ambassador Hans Ola Urstad is the Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia.

“We co-operate with all Missions in the region, and in a way we can influence the improvement of regional co-operation. Major characteristic of pollution is that it spreads across many borders. This problem is common for all environmental threats except maybe the waste disposal. Our role will be to encourage authorities in the countries of the region to do their best in solving mutual environmental problems.” In the forthcoming period major OSCE activities and projects in the field of environmental protection will be aimed at the local, regional and state authorities to introduce European environmental standards in all segments of the society. The Mission can assist the legal sector in Serbia to adjust national legislation with European countries and would aid implementation of these laws. Urstad believes that the NGO sector is not sufficiently involved in solving national problems in any country. There are very few examples where NGOs have improved the efficiency of problem solving.

“I think that public pressure is much lesser than it is necessary for the authorities to understand the importance of certain environmental problems and put them on their priority list. The main thing has to be bringing everybody’s attention to the importance of healthy and clean environment, from year to year”, says our collocutor.

For Norway, Hans Ola Urstad’s homeland, environment is very important as they have vulnerable nature that can easily be endangered by oil and gas which are considered to be their national resources. Second important national resource in Norway is fishing and tourism is equally important. Developed tourism demands for clean and healthy environment. Politicians in Norway regarded environmental problems as very important over the past thirty years and are working hard on its protection.

“One of the crucial questions is whether the economy is ready for solving environmental issues. A concept widely implemented around the globe for years envisages that industries and major polluters pay fines for pollution they cause. The industry in Serbia should play a major role in solving environmental problems by taking care of the environment in full capacity. I have seen factories here which are directly polluting water channels or rivers and are not doing anything to solve the part of the problem which is causing the pollution. If one is building a factory they need to calculate all the costs necessary for protection of the environment. This way of thinking is not only a step towards a healthier environment but needs to become a part of the entire system that aims at healthy environment. Factories that are already working need to obey the regulations and include expenses for environmental protection into their production costs. This is the way things should be done in entire Europe” – says Urstad.

Recognizing the importance of environmental preservation, the OSCE Mission to Serbia and Montenegro has implemented a year long programme for journalists reporting about this issue. The Head of OSCE Mission has expressed his hopes that journalists who had participated in this programme have received the skills that would be useful in their future work and would understand that field work is very important as well as bringing public attention to important topics for the society, especially the parts where pollution has unfortunately been very high for years.