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Interview: Peter Semneby, Swedish diplomat and new Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia

Discussions on Elections Should Not Slow Down Return

The issue of occupancy/tenancy rights should be given special attention, in order to find a way of compensation of damage for the people who lost it

Interviewer: Boris Pavelic

Peter Semneby, a 43-year-old Swedish diplomat, took over the position of Head of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) Mission to Croatia from Bernard Poncet in January. He speaks about the work of the OSCE during his mandate for our newspaper.

What will be the main points of your interest?

- We will continue with the activities that we have been involved with so far. A good part of our work is related to the process of return and reintegration into the society. We also co-operate with the Government with regard to the reform of the judiciary, hoping that we will intensify those activities. We are working on the legislative reform in the area of the media, as well.

Can you explain the bases for the reform of the judiciary?

- The issue of a large number of pending cases is certainly a priority, because it limits the efficiency of the judicial system and decreases legal security. It is also necessary to strengthen the rule of law and transparency of legislative processes. We will also suggest changes to some laws, in order to have the Croatian laws harmonised with international standards. The issue of the minority rights is also important, therefore the basic issue of the Constitutional Law on the Rights of Minorities and Ethnic Communities needs to be resolved. We are also monitoring the court trials for war crimes. Resolution of those problems is important for elimination of obstacles for the return.

Resistance to Return

Does the OSCE have specific proposals with regard to the future Constitutional Law on the Rights of Minorities, which at the moment is undergoing a public discussion?

- I would not discuss the details, but adoption of that Law is also important for the establishment of an atmosphere of trust and for the acceleration of return.

The return is the issue of utmost interest to the OSCE.

- Yes. It is important to concentrate on important issues and obstacles that still exist. I would like to emphasise that the Government made a significant progress, but certain issues still need to be resolved. The access to reconstruction funds is one of them. Furthermore, there are still many unclear issues with regard to the laws which regulate the ownership rights, both in the areas of special state concern and outside of them. We also note that the conditions for return differ from area to area. There is resistance to return in some municipalities. A particularly difficult issue is the one of the occupancy/tenancy rights. We believe that this should be given special attention, in order to find a way of compensation of damage for the people who lost the right to occupancy/tenancy rights. I had a very good meeting with Minister Cacic with regard to this issue last week.

What did the Minister tell you?

- I do not wish to discuss details. I presented the arguments and I hope that we will co-operate closely. Our meeting justifies such a hope.

Problem with Administration

The Government announced that the process of return of displaced population and property repossession would be completed by the end of this year. Simultaneously, the Serb community claims that the government obstructs the repossession of property and reconstruction for Serbs. What is the truth here?

- I do not wish to judge that. One thing is evident: the sooner this problem is resolved, the better. The problem of reconstruction maybe lies more with the administration and on local levels. It will be necessary to change some laws with regard to property repossession. The draft changes to the Law on the Areas of Special State Concern are well directed, and I hope that they will be adopted soon. A comprehensive and transparent legal system is the key issue for resolution of this problem.

Are you of the opinion that this is a technical or still a political issue?

- Obviously, there are elements of both.

Could you describe precisely the political obstacles?

- Political situation is different in different municipalities, which also affects the processes of return and repossession of property. Moreover, I hope that the current discussions on new elections will not influence the progress in those issues. Of course, in such situations, when the important political issues are being discussed, there is a risk of transferring the emphasis on those issues, and of weakening it on other ones. I hope this is not going to happen in this particular case. I am referring, for example, to the adoption of changes to the Law on the Areas of Special State Concern.

Missions Subjects to Time Constraints

Can it be expected that the OSCE Mission will finish by the end of this year?

- I would not discuss deadlines, because they should not be in the focus of our activities. It is important to resolve problems, concrete issues which are part of our mandate. When that is resolved, the Mission will of course end; all the OSCE missions are subjects to time constraints. I can add this: the sooner the tasks are completed, the better. However, they require serious efforts on the part of the authorities. I hope that we will soon make progress in those issues in which there has not been as much progress as there could have been. I want to emphasise what I also told to Croatian officials: the OSCE shares a common strategic goal with the EU and with the Croatian government. Our work contributes to Croatia becoming a more acceptable candidate and to adjusting itself to the EU standards in an easier manner. The EU is concerned about the remaining refugee and ownership problems. They have to be resolved before Croatia becomes a member of the EU, because otherwise they would become problems of the EU.

OSCE Concerned about ‘Latinica’

The OSCE Representative for Freedom of the Media, Freimut Duve, forwarded a letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tonino Picula, with regard to the case of Latinica – ‘Justice in Croatia’ TV programme. Has the OSCE received a reply from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs?

- I have not seen any official reaction. I do not want to interfere with the work of Freimut Duve, but I know that the OSCE is concerned with the possibility of criminal charges being pressed against a journalist for his/her work.