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INTERVIEW: Peter Semneby, Swedish ambassador and Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, speaks about the most important political issues for the future of Croatia

Return of Serbs more important than co-operation with The Hague

We talked with Swedish diplomat Ambassador Peter Semneby, the Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, about political issues which are of utmost importance for the future of Croatia and which also constitute a part of the OSCE Mission's mandate.

Emphasising that he strongly supports Croatia's accession to the EU, Ambassador Semneby deems that the steps Croatia is undertaking now on its path towards the EU are very important.

- I dare to say that Croatia is currently in one of the most important periods in its history since it gained independence. This is a historical moment for Croatia. As a member of the EU, Croatia will be a different country. That means it will have to give up some things, but that will be rewarded by the economic progress and unification of the Croatian society, which is still suffering from war consequences. Changes, which will have to take place before Croatia becomes a member of the Union, are very big, serious and deep.

Does the OSCE consider the extradition of General Gotovina to be the key issue of Croatia's accession to the EU?

The OSCE Mission is not in a position to determine what the criteria are for accession to the EU. What I can say is that full co-operation with The Hague Tribunal is very important for Croatia, just as it is important for other countries in the region. The issue of co-operation with The Hague tribunal is a rather straightforward one. But there are also other conditions for membership which require the utmost commitment at the level of the entire society such as return, the judicial system and minority rights.

“The return of Serb refugees must become a strategic aim of Croatia, as without its solution admission into the European Union is not possible”

Does the current Government invest enough efforts to improve those areas and satisfy the criteria for European integration?

There is still room for improvement. There are still legal and administration obstacles in that area, and it is necessary to work to overcome them. At the same time, we emphasise the need to create a more positive atmosphere towards the issue of return of refugees. In order to be able to create an integrated and harmonious society, those refugees who have still not returned should be provided with a realistic opportunity to return and repossess their property so that, upon return, they would have a place to live. It is important to understand that such an integrated society is one of the conditions Croatia must fulfil in order to advance on its path towards Europe. Namely, Europe does not want to import problems. Return of Serb refugees is not a threat, but an opportunity and necessity. We saw the willingness on the part of the Government to address this issue in the course of last year. However, specific issues need to be resolved and decisions implemented. The

best example for this is the problem of occupancy/tenancy rights and dispossessed property. Property repossession implies the return of almost five thousand houses, while approx. 20,000 requests for the reconstruction of houses are awaiting resolution – and there is also the return of apartments to persons who possessed occupancy/tenancy rights before the war. The Government has already overstepped deadlines for property repossession. We expect that owners, who did not receive their property within the guaranteed deadline, will soon receive compensation and that housing care will also be provided to former occupancy/tenancy rights' owners who want to return. A qualitative change of political relations towards the problem of return is necessary. That issue has to become a strategic national objective, just as becoming a member of the EU is a strategic national objective. Taking into account the fact that return of refugees is a condition for accession to the EU, it is logical that it must also become a strategic objective. That requires strong dedication of all parts of the political spectrum towards the resolution of that problem, so that the message could reach all refugees in their current residences outside the country.

Do you believe that occupancy/tenancy rights owners are still discriminated against?

Occupancy/tenancy rights' owners who left Croatia due to whatever reason and who now wish to return have so far not been provided with any housing. We expect at a minimum that all those who return will be provided with a replacement for the apartments they once had.

The Government adopted on Thursday a new report on return during the last three years. The report states that financial support from the international community is insufficient. Does the international community support have to increase or should Croatia rely on its own resources?

The European Union gave a lot of funds for return and reconstruction through the CARDS programme. But, it is the Croatian Government which has to bear the majority of the financial burden itself. Political leadership has to provide necessary funds and create conditions which can contribute to a more successful realization of return. The return of refugees requires a strong political commitment. It needs to be resolved once and for all. The most important thing related to that problem is to provide a more favourable social climate related to return, that is, to provide a society which is more open and acceptable towards the ideas of return of refugees.

Therefore, money is not the main obstacle towards return?

Of course, that will still require money and it will cost. The international community will continue to financially support return, but it is Croatia itself that will bear a lion's share of the costs.

Croatia is facing parliamentary elections. What will be the focus of the OSCE Mission? What is your greatest concern?

Croatia reached the political maturity which guarantees the readiness for conducting democratic and free elections. I am not concerned. But the OSCE will further engage in different manners in order to follow the electoral campaign and the elections alone. Twenty election observers will arrive to Croatia soon, significantly less than in the former

years. We will also monitor media coverage of the pre-electoral campaign. We will support GONG in its information activities. With the Government we will especially discuss the possibility for out-of-country voting, that is, the voting possibility of Croatian Serbs in Serbia and B-H.

“Double voting right is not necessary, as positive discrimination of minorities already exists in Croatia”

How do you comment on some requests that national minorities should vote on minority lists and on lists of political parties?

Positive discrimination of minorities already exists in Croatia. The representatives of minorities have been guaranteed seats in the Parliament, which guarantees the protection of their interests. Furthermore, the adoption of the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities was a significant step and an example of a fruitful co-operation between the international community and the Government and the Parliament on a difficult and controversial problem. As a result, Croatia has a good minority law, whose implementation needs to be a priority for the Government.

The rules for media monitoring of the elections in the electronic media have divided opinions. Private television and some non-governmental organizations are of the opinion that they do not have to comply with those regulations since they are not a public television, but the regulations should be applied to HRT only. What is your standpoint with regard to that issue?

It is not uncommon for legislators to pass this type of regulation although there can be different ways to approach the issue. In general, however, this regulation as far as I can gather from reports is in line with accepted international standards. The aim here should be to provide equal access to media and fair coverage.

Can an opposition victory in the elections slow down Croatia’s accession to the EU?

It is important that the opposition shares consensus on the accession to the EU. Croatia went through an important period of changes in the last two years, which confirms that consensus on how important it is to do everything possible for entering the EU exists in Croatia.

It was mentioned in the last OSCE report on the progress of Croatia that war crime trials before domestic courts are still conducted in a politicized atmosphere. Is that still the case or has Croatia overcome, in the meantime, according to your opinion, this shortcoming?

We have seen numerous cases in which justice was hampered and in which trials were conducted in an impartial manner, depending who the defendant was. It remains to be a concern. The Lora trial is an example. Therefore, there is still a need for these trials to be carefully monitored, especially because of the announcements that The Hague tribunal will transfer some cases to the Croatian judiciary.

According to your opinion, are Croatian courts and judges capable of conducting such trials?

Some are and some aren't.

There are often talks about the departure and the end of the OSCE Mission to Croatia. They claim that Croatia is on a safe way of democratization and monitoring by the OSCE is no longer needed. When will the OSCE end the Mission in Croatia?

A lot still remains to be done. The extension of the Mission's mandate will be discussed at the end of the year. The OSCE is still needed and the mandate will most probably be extended. In fact, since a lot of initiatives have been taken by the Government lately, we have more to do than ever before in order to give advice on legislation and support its implementation.

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

It is good that Croats from B-H wish to vote

What are your views on the voting of B-H Croats who are Croatian citizens? Some opposition leaders announced the possibility of bringing Croats from B-H with buses to Croatia for voting.

We are particularly concerned about the voting of Croatian Serbs in Serbia and B-H because this seems to be the category of voters who face obstacles the most. There are quite a few difficulties there. For instance, accessibility to polling stations, the up-to-dateness of voter registries. Individual initiatives, such as is the one you mentioned, I cannot comment on. Speaking in general, it is a positive thing that different categories of voters are highly interested in elections and electoral activities.

Peter Semneby, 44, is a Swedish diplomat with a long, successful career. He was educated in Uppsala and at Harvard. He has an M.A. in economy, speaks English, Russian, German and French. He started his diplomatic career in 1986 in the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Sweden. As a diplomat, he worked in Swedish diplomatic offices in Moscow, Leningrad, Vilnius, Kiev and Bonn. Until the end of 2001 he was the Head of the OSCE Mission to Latvia. He became the Head of the OSCE in Croatia in January 2002.