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Interview: Peter Semneby, Head of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Mission to Croatia

The Time Has Still Not Come to End the Mission to Croatia

I hope that the work on the Constitutional Law on the Rights of Minorities will not start from the beginning, but that many solutions from the withdrawn draft will be taken into consideration

By Sanja Despot

From the rich career of the Swedish diplomat Peter Semneby, the Croatian officials like to emphasize precisely the last part – Semneby came to Croatia in January, after the successful closing of the OSCE Mission to Latvia. Until the end of the last year, that country had monitors, although it has been an official candidate for the membership in the EU for a long time already.

- **Will you also put an end to the Mission to Croatia?**

It is not the right time now to discuss the end of the Mission taking into account that I am still at the beginning and the OSCE has numerous tasks here. When the remaining issues are resolved, we will end the Mission, because all OSCE Missions are temporary by their nature.

More local staff

- **In the course of the last discussion on the extension of the mandate in Vienna, the Croatian Government requested from the OSCE to concentrate more on specific projects and include more local staff in the Mission?**

With regard to specific projects, one has to keep in mind that they require financing. The power of the OSCE reflects itself in numerous areas, but the financial side does not belong to them. Our strength lies within a very comprehensive political mandate and our knowledge of the situation in the country. As far as the composition of our Mission is concerned, we are going through a transitional period, the changes caused by the reduction of the budget. The entire organization is currently undergoing cuts. Although there will be no dramatic changes in the structure, we will downsize in the course of the year, and include more local staff.

- **What are the main still unresolved problems?**

The issue of the return of refugees is still the greatest reason for our concern. There are good intentions at the national level, but problems exist at the local level, in municipalities where memories from the war are still fresh. It is important to establish reconstruction mechanisms, repossession of property, as well as to find a solution for the serious problem of occupancy/tenancy rights. The Government has done certain things, the action plan on the repossession of property until the end of this year shows that this issue is high on its agenda. But, the existing legal provisions are complicated and the courts are not always accessible to people who wish to address them with regard to property repossession. As to occupancy/tenancy rights, there has been no significant progress. I hope that we will be able to continue the dialogue with the Government in order to be able to ensure that those who were evicted from the apartments receive adequate compensation, regardless of whether we talk about the areas of special state concern or other parts of the country. Especially if those persons intend to return to Croatia.

- **Therefore, the OSCE standpoint on the issue of return of occupancy/tenancy rights, i.e. the necessity of providing compensation to former users of that institution, has not changed at all?**

No.

Through consensus to the Law

- **Are you still dealing with the same number of 50,000 families to be recognized that right, as it was stated by Bernard Poncet in the last report?**

I do not want to enter into a debate about numbers. We need to find a solution regardless of the numbers.

- **High Commissioner for the issue of minorities, Rolf Ekeus, spoke with Croatian officials about the problems related to the adoption of the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities.**

He offered co-operation to the Government, so that the Law would be drafted as soon as possible. It is regrettable that the adoption of the Law has been postponed several times already, and that the latest draft, which included also the recommendations of the Venice Commission, was withdrawn before it reached the Parliament. The work now should not start from the beginning, but it should take into consideration many solutions from the already withdrawn proposal. I hope that, through the involvement of all interested parties from the very beginning, it will be possible to reach a consensus on that Law, which is of fundamental importance and which represents a commitment Croatia undertook in order to enter the Council of Europe.

I am not worried about discussions in the coalition

- **Does the international community share concern about the biggest crisis of the coalition Government in Croatia so far? Is it dangerous for the stability in the region?**

- I would not make far-reaching conclusions from the discussions taking place in the Government. They are natural in coalition governments. I think that Croatia has a functioning democratic political system and I do not worry about the results of those discussions.

Information of importance for the EU

- **What are your main tasks?**

- In the forthcoming period, we will intensify a dialogue with the Government, since the issues that we are dealing with gained additional significance after the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU has been signed. The majority of issues from our mandate are mentioned as priorities also within the dialogue with the EU. Our information will be significant not only for the Government, but also for the Union.