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Interview: Peter Semneby, Ambassador and Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia

Croatia Could Gain Much More from the OSCE

OSCE could in the future play an important role in this region. When saying that, I refer to the efforts and wishes of Croatia in regards to its integration into the European Union – says the Head of the OSCE Mission

New Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, 43-year old Swedish diplomat Ambassador Peter Semneby, started his diplomatic career after receiving his education at distinguished universities of Uppsala in Stockholm and Harvard in the U.S. He performed responsible duties at the Swedish diplomatic delegations in Moscow, Leningrad, Vilnius, Kiev and Bonn, and now has come to Croatia after the successfully completed OSCE Mission in Latvia, where he was the Head of Mission.

- Because of the fact that under his leadership the OSCE Mission in Latvia was successfully completed, we asked Ambassador Semneby first and foremost whether he came to Croatia with the same task: to bring this OSCE Mission to an end?**

Although I have been in Croatia for only a short time, I have been asked this question many times. Therefore I will repeat that the duration of the OSCE mandate in this region is not the key issue, moreover for the reason that all OSCE missions are temporary by nature. It is more important to concentrate on the tasks and issues that have not yet been solved. In addition to that, the OSCE could also play very useful role in this region in the future. When saying that, I refer to the efforts and wishes of Croatia with regard to its integration into the European Union. Because, we are talking about almost identical issues both in our Mission's mandate, and in the priorities stipulated in the framework of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between Croatia and the European Union. Therefore we are hoping that, besides the humanitarian aspect of our Mission, we could provide support to Croatia in fulfilling the conditions necessary to become a member-state of the European Union. With that, Croatia could get much more from the OSCE Mission.

- During your meetings with the President Mesic, Parliament and Government officials, you have stated that one of the main unsolved tasks is the return of refugees. Which preconditions should Croatia fulfill in order to achieve that task?**

This issue includes several aspects, the first of them being the issue of repossession of property. In this sense, the program adopted by the Government of the Republic of Croatia for this year is good, but there are certain principles. Specifically, it is necessary to apply the same conditions in this issue both in the Areas of Special State Concern and outside those areas. The second most important aspect is reconstruction, and the third one is a very complicated issue, i.e. the aspect of occupancy/tenancy rights category. It is important to ensure such a situation in which those who left because of the war are not in

an unenviable situation in relation to those who stayed. In other words, it is necessary to find solutions on how to compensate those people. At the same time, it is necessary to find and apply common principles in all countries of this region, because what is happening in Croatia, should, in the sense of return of displaced persons to their homes, happen in neighboring countries as well. Because the issue of quality return of all to their homes is the issue of manifold return, and in that process all countries of this region should participate, not only Croatia.

- **In one of your statements, you expressed your expectations that, after six months, the Permanent Council of the OSCE would again assess the progress accomplished in Croatia. What can be realistically expected after six months?**

We will submit the Progress Report on the implementation of commitments in May, and then again at the end of this year. It is too early now to talk about what that report will contain. There is no doubt whatsoever that progress has taken place in several fields, and it is also obvious that the focus of the Government of the Republic of Croatia has strengthened in relation to those issues that are also relevant for the OSCE mandate. It is actually the issue of return in the spirit of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. With this I wish to say that the spoken good intentions should come true. In other words, intentions should be followed by activities, an intention should be concretized. Furthermore, in a very short period of time, in a few months, we expect the solution of the issues related to the adoption of the Constitutional Law on National Minorities.

- **Do you have specific suggestions in relation to the content of the Constitutional Law?**

First of all, it is important that ethnic minorities perceive that Law as legitimate and useful. Therefore, it is extremely important that the representatives of ethnic minorities work and participate in the preparation and adoption of that Law which will concern them.

- **Lately, the issue of education of members of ethnic minorities again came in the spotlight in the Croatian public. Recently, you discussed with the Croatian Minister of Education the decision of the Croatian Government on the impending finalization of the moratorium on the content of history teaching in the Danube Region. What is your standpoint concerning this issue, how familiar are you with it?**

Any moratorium as such is a temporary measure and the removal of that moratorium should actually represent a sign of reduced tensions. When it comes to the education of children in the Danube Region, of course it is a right mentioned in all international conventions on the education of ethnic minorities. Therefore, ethnic minorities have the right to opt for education in their own language. However, it is indeed necessary to create preconditions in which that parallel education in the languages of ethnic minorities would neither be understood as, nor would it represent a sign of their isolation.

- **There are opinions that such an approach is leading towards ghettoization of members of ethnic minorities.**

Precisely, that is extremely important. Conditions must be created in which the parallel education will not represent isolation and separation of one community from the other. It

is particularly important to emphasize the significance of that in an area traumatized with the heritage of war like the Danube Region. Therefore, it is extremely important to create and determine certain measures that would promote integration, and not ghettoization and isolation. In that context, the preconditions should be created in which young people would get together and in which a certain respect for each other would develop. In that sense, the OSCE implements many of its activities throughout the Republic of Croatia, and especially in this region. One of such activities is incorporated in the PRONI association.

Scandinavian example for Croatia

- You come from Sweden, a country that has solved precisely the issues of minority rights with neighboring Finland in an exemplary manner. What is, in short, the essence of that Swedish-Finish example and how does that model function in practice?

Indeed, the example of Finland is a very good example and Finland is successful in that segment precisely because of the relation of the majority population, but also because of the relation of the minority population itself towards the majority population and the country they live in. In other words, how the minority sees both the majority population and the country they live in. To make it simple: it takes mutual efforts in order to have things functioning. Swedes live in Finland as an ethnic minority. They are nurturing their ethnic identity very much. Swedes there have no problem speaking the language just like me, singing the same Swedish songs and nurturing Swedish cultural heritage. At the same time, they have developed a sense of citizenship and belonging, first of all towards the state of Finland, and then, according to their ethnic affiliation, they perceive and declare themselves as Swedes. The fact that they declare and perceive themselves primarily as the citizens of Finland definitely does not mean that those people have given up their cultural identity and their own cultural heritage.