

INTERVIEW: PETER SEMNEBY, HEAD OF THE OSCE MISSION TO CROATIA

“RSK Government” Absurd

by Davorka Blazevic

IT'S NOW UP TO THE GOVERNMENT

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On the occasion of the opening of the new OSCE Office in Split, we talked with **Peter Semneby**, the Head of the OSCE Mission, about Croatia's current position on the eve of 17 March, the announced date for the beginning of talks with the EU on Croatia's membership.

Is 17 March 2005 a lost chance for Croatia or do you consider that it is still a viable date for the beginning of negotiations on Croatia's accession to the EU?

I would not want to speculate about what will happen. Complete co-operation with the Hague Tribunal is a key condition.

To what extent is fugitive General Ante Gotovina indeed the main obstacle to Croatia's EU accession negotiations and to what extent is he only an alibi for a new prolongation?

This is not at all about delaying Croatia on its way to the EU at any cost. If there is a satisfactory solution when full co-operation with The Hague is concerned, the negotiations will take place.

What is meant by “full co-operation”?

Every decision will be based on very firm evidence, but evidence is also susceptible to interpretations. The case would be resolved if the General knocked on the Tribunal's door and this would unquestionably mean the beginning of talks. If he does not appear in The Hague, then the burden of proof would be on the Croatian Government.

The condition for General Gotovina's extradition in order for talks to start is increasing Euro-scepticism in Croatia. Polls indicate that only 47 percent of citizens support EU accession. How do you comment on this?

I do not accept the thesis that the issue of Gotovina is exclusively the reason for the decreased support for joining the EU. This is a natural course of events which we noticed also in other candidate countries where, after the initial euphoria, there was a drop in support for EU membership and was then eventually stabilized. It is true that the drop has been somewhat sharper in Croatia than in other countries. What is happening here is the same as what previously occurred in Latvia. Both states are young. They emerged from

the recent difficult past, and both felt certain insecurity at the beginning of their state-building efforts. Many people perceived the acceptance of a new identity and the exchange of the national for the collective, European identity as a jump into the unknown and threat to national sovereignty. I believe that precisely this had an impact on the decrease of interest for the EU and if great effort is not exerted into increasing citizens' awareness, that decrease is going to be even larger, and it could also become permanent. The Croatian Government and the media must not focus on stating that others are trying to prevent Croatia's accession to the EU, but primarily appreciate how much progress Croatia has achieved on that path. And it has achieved a lot indeed, showing a high degree of willingness and receiving great support for that. It is admirable for a country which came out of war ten years ago to be not only a candidate already but also at the very doorstep of negotiations.

The process of Serb refugees' return to Croatia has not been completed yet, while the so-called "RSK Government-in-Exile" is being restored in Belgrade, claiming that "Krajina is under unsustainable occupation"?!

I would not assign great importance to the absurd proclamation of the "Krajina" Government-in-Exile, because in such a manner we would give undeserved legitimacy to extremist groups. It is important not to leave room for such extremists to manipulate the minds of people who feel they have been victimised. That is why governments in Zagreb, Belgrade and Sarajevo need to find a good solution for refugees. If the resolution of that issue is delayed within a longer period of time, initiatives of this type could have repercussions on the refugees and then it could be considered even dangerous.

How do you interpret the lukewarm reaction from Serbia and Montenegro, which in any case came from a low state level?

All reasonable political officials and political forces should distance themselves from such events.

The problem is intensified by the organizers' statement that they held the "re-established assembly" now only because they did not have the permission of the authorities in Belgrade to hold it before. (?!)

It is evident that people in Croatia think that it is a disturbing event. However, I consider it absurd to feel threatened by an imaginary RSK which exists only in the minds of those people. It is absurd and irrational to feel that danger lurks upon Croatia from any side. I believe that this case has been blown out of proportion. If there are such persons among Croatian refugees in Serbia and Montenegro who think that Serbs will be protected by the restoration of the RSK, then they are far from the truth. There is the Constitutional Law on the Rights of Minorities in Croatia which has still not been fully implemented, but, in comparison with such laws in other countries, it is quite generous and offers a very good framework for the protection of minority rights.

How many refugees have returned since 1995 and what about the return of their property? How do you comment on the affair regarding the sale of "Serb houses" with forged powers of attorney, in which the APN was also involved?

Official data from January this year indicate that 115,554 refugees returned, the majority of which are Serbs. Still, many returned to Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina again because of the poor living conditions. At the same time, an additional number of about 200,000 refugees were registered in the neighbouring countries, but that figure will probably decrease after new registration. The [State real estate agency] APN largely participated in purchases of Serb properties, mainly through mediators who most often charged irrationally high provisions – as high as 30 percent. We are not sure how many houses were sold in that manner, but the total number of properties bought by the APN throughout Croatia according to that model amounts to approximately eight 8,000. In this uncertain situation, it is very important for APN to check powers of attorney and, should it establish that they are forged, undertake measures to compensate the owner.

Journalists are still being sent to prison for libel, as in the case of Ljubica Letinic from Croatian Radio?

I can only say: this should not be happening! We reacted to that verdict with a public statement and in our regular report to the OSCE Council. I also raised this issue with high-ranking Croatian officials. It would be desirable to change the laws in order to make it impossible to pass verdicts of that type, although I have to say that the Criminal Code has been significantly improved in relation to this issue.

Do you see Croatia in the EU by the end of this decade?

I believe that this will take place as soon as possible, but it certainly depends on Croatia.