

INTERVIEW: Peter Semneby, outgoing Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia about Croatia approaching the EU, co-operation with The Hague and return of refugees

Croatia is now a country with a vision of the future

By Miroslav Filipovic

Ending his three-year-mandate as head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, Peter Semneby (45) this week visited Vukovar-Sirmium and Osijek-Baranja counties. During his farewell visit to Osijek, we spoke with this experienced Swedish diplomat, who headed the OSCE Mission to Latvia before coming to Croatia.

How do you assess the current situation in Croatia at the end of your mandate? What are the areas in which Croatia made the most progress and what are those where there are still difficulties and unresolved issues?

The situation [today] is significantly different than when I came here. Then my first impression was that this society is disoriented and missing a vision about its future. In the meantime, the situation has changed significantly, specifically having in mind the commitments regarding joining the EU. The Croatian vision of the process of joining the EU is neutral, it has no ethnic background and it could be shared by all citizens regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation. This vision has helped the work of the OSCE Mission to a certain extent, because these issues represent the values upon which the European Union is based. Nevertheless, there are a large number of issues yet to be resolved and on which attention should be paid. When it comes to the issues of OSCE concern, I may say that the legislative framework is quite good but there are still certain problems about the implementation of laws. Issues which will continue to be the focus of our attention concern the implementation of the Constitutional Law on National Minorities, primarily those articles providing minority representation in the bodies of state administration, judiciary and the police. Moreover, there are still many programmes for the return of refugees that should be implemented. We particularly emphasise the biggest outstanding issues facing refugees – the issue of former occupancy/tenancy right holders and the provision of housing to refugees who wish to return. In the end, the advantage should certainly be given to aspects of judicial reform which are on the OSCE Mission's agenda; primarily the right to a fair trial. Regardless of the ethnicity or some other characteristics, all citizens ought to have the right to equal access to courts and all the courts ought to treat everyone equally. This is extremely important in cases related to war crimes or the repossession of property.

Croatia on the doorstep of negotiations

During your mandate, what was the role of the OSCE in reforms and adjustments Croatia had to make on its path to join the European Union?

Almost all issues we are dealing with are on the EU agenda as well. Therefore, together with the European Commission, we still have a significant role in assessing the progress Croatia has made in areas I mentioned earlier. I may say that the EU certainly appreciates our information and assessments on Croatia. Certainly, we do support Croatia in its efforts to achieve standards needed for full membership in the

EU. It is important to point out that those political criteria cannot be solved overnight. This is not something that can easily be put on the agenda and then resolved by a pen's scribble. Even then, when Croatia achieves the envisaged political criteria, primarily those regarding the protection of minority rights and rights to a fair trial, it will be necessary to continue to invest some effort in order to maintain these standards. That is why I believe that Croatia may further benefit from the OSCE presence.

Do you believe that Croatia today, except for the issue of co-operation with the Hague tribunal, has met the conditions for opening negotiation talks with EU?

I cannot answer this question because the answer lies completely in the hands of the European Council. And as for the question about the level of co-operation with the ICTY, the answer must come from The Hague. As for all other aspects, it has been confirmed that Croatia has met the conditions and it can be said that Croatia is on the doorstep of negotiations with the European Union.

Lack of confidence of refugees

One of the biggest issues in the beginning of your mandate three years ago was the unresolved issue of return of refugees. What has been done in the meantime?

In Serbia recently I had an opportunity to speak with many refugees from Croatia and I noticed among them a large amount of distrust because of constant delays in the implementation of the return programme as well as in providing housing for them and resolving the issue of former occupancy/tenancy rights holders. They have no confidence any more in the Croatian authorities' ability and good will to work out what they have promised. Such a situation is dangerous. All these deadlines have expired and we still have a plentiful category of people that have not yet decided to return because of their lack of confidence; this means that the problem has not been solved yet.

How would you assess the attitude of authorities towards national minorities, especially towards the Serb minority during the past three years?

Two very important steps have been made lately. The first is the adoption of the Constitutional Law on National Minorities which represents a good framework for resolving minority issues. As for minority representation in the elected bodies, a lot has been done. However, there still remains to solve minority representation in administration, judiciary and the police.

The second important step from the political point of view was the signing of an agreement between the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and the Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS) following the last parliamentary elections. By that agreement, the minority issue has been placed into the focus of political attention, which was not the case before. However, there are many obstacles about the issue of implementation of this agreement which need to be sorted out.

Slavonia – an example of reconciliation

During your mandate, you frequently visited Slavonia, which was the most war-hit area. From the OSCE point of view, how do you see the situation here in comparison with other Croatian regions?

This is certainly a specific area in Croatia. Regardless of its recent difficult past, the area of Eastern Slavonia has peacefully reintegrated into the Croatian system, which gives a plus to this area over other war-hit areas. This region could serve as an example of reconciliation for the rest of Croatia. Having in mind its historic characteristics, ethnic composition and its geographic position, this region will have to employ these resources and achieve prosperity. We cannot forget that this area is an important crossroads and it could have an important role in resolving and strengthening the relationship between Croatia and neighbouring countries. However, the greatest danger I see here is the fact that ethnic groups, firstly Croats and Serbs, live separated. They are ghettoised in a certain way. Should they not establish mutual relationship and enhance trust, they could stay ghettoised. I think that this is one of the greatest challenges for this region.

Colourful and vital media scene

How do you assess the situation regarding the media scene in Croatia? Is there enough media freedom?

The media scene is pretty colourful and vital, and the greatest challenges are related to the practice that remained from the previous authoritative and totalitarian regimes. Along these lines, I will mention that Croatian courts are still ruling against journalists for libel. Also, there are still temptations to force political pressure on the media, on Croatian Radio and Television among others.

After Croatia, where will the diplomatic road lead you to?

I still do not know where I will go but I will firstly take a longer vacation. It is possible that I will write something based upon the experience I have gained in Croatia and I believe that I will be able to use this experience in some different manner in the future.