

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

Journalist: Ana Bella Leikauff

- *Transcript* -

- **New Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, the 42-year old Swede Peter Semneby, is an experienced diplomat who, despite being relatively young, has gained years of experience. M.Sc. in economics, an attendant of the distinguished and expensive postgraduate School of Management in Harvard, Semneby, who speaks English, German, French and Russian, started his diplomatic career in 1986 at the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He became active in the OSCE as a member of the Mission to Georgia in 1992. Having spent several weeks in Croatia, Ambassador Semneby stated his first impressions in an interview with Ana Bella Leikauff.**
- My first impressions are excellent. I was warmly received and had an opportunity to meet most of the high-positioned Croatian officials, representatives of NGOs and *corps diplomatique*. After those meetings, I gained the impression that the issues encompassed by the mandate of the OSCE Mission to Croatia are really the Government's priority, and I am convinced that, together with the Croatian authorities, we will be able to work on their resolution in a very productive manner. I also had the opportunity to visit areas devastated by the war as well. I was in Sisak, where I visited our regional centre and the Croatian De-mining Centre.
- When you go through those war-affected areas, you realise that Croatia is a country of contrasts. The picture you see in Zagreb is very positive and dynamic, while over there, there are still huge problems in the sense of reconstruction, creation of conditions for return. The economic depression is clearly visible in those areas, as well, which is, apart from administrative problems, a significant factor when it comes to return.
- **Last year, at the time of deciding whether the Mission would be extended or terminated, many people said that, by signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement between Croatia and the European Union, the OSCE Mission became a surplus since the majority of issues from its mandate correspond to that agreement precisely.**

In the last several months, we initiated a broader dialogue with the Government regarding the issues encompassed by the Mission's mandate and I have to say that there is still a lot that needs to be resolved. The Stabilization and Association Agreement is not a substitute for the work of the OSCE Mission to Croatia. The Agreement, namely, clearly indicates that the issues with which the OSCE Mission is

dealing have great significance for the European Union and its member countries, and I am of the opinion that this would be the foundation for our work in the future.

I think that we will cooperate with the European Union in the real sense of partnership, with our work being supplemented and mutually strengthened, creating in such a manner the conditions for more profound cooperation with the Croatian Government since our activities are directed towards the strategic goals which are the same as those of the Croatian Government. In such a manner, Croatia will become an attractive and desirable candidate for membership in the European Union.

- **When you talk like that, it all seems like a long-lasting process.**

I do not wish to engage in speculations about the time limit. All OSCE Missions are by their nature temporary and, therefore, this Mission will not last forever either. I think one could say that one of our goals is working towards making ourselves superfluous, but we should focus on the resolution of tasks and not on the duration of the Mission.

- **However, it is a fact that you were the last Head of the Mission to Latvia, which was closed recently. Can your arrival in Croatia, therefore, be interpreted as a signal that the OSCE indeed intends to close the Mission by the end of this year?**

I do not want to comment on that. There are some parallels between Croatia and Latvia. Latvia has had negotiations with the European Union for some time already, and it has good chances of becoming a member in the first round of expansion. I am very pleased with the fact that Croatia has started with negotiations, and the Stabilisation and Association Agreement is the first step on that way. There are other interesting parallels between Croatia and Latvia.

There is a psychological burden in Croatia, because of the war and the victims, but I hope that, in time, it will become clear to everyone that the return of refugees is not a threat to your country, but something that is to its advantage. The return of refugees, naturally, of those who wish to return, is the only way to heal the wounds caused by the war, and, in time, of the establishment of a harmonious society in Croatia.

Naturally, there are also other aspects of that problem, like the financial one. The international community is ready to assist with significant funds, and it has already done this. However, Croatia will also have to pay a large part of the bill. In that sense, it is important to comprehend that it is not just an expense like any other, but an investment into Croatia's future, into an integrated and harmonious society, and a way towards the full membership in the EU.