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Interview with Ambassador Dimitrios Kypreos, Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia

We are establishing whether judges' complaints are justified

Author: Ivana Tosovic

Belgrade – Serbia has more to do in the fields of fight against corruption, strengthening of economic transparency and in finding solutions to the refugees' issues. On the other hand, in line with the strong policy of Serbia's EU accession, in 2009 Schengen visas were lifted, Interim Trade Agreement was de-blocked and the report of the ICTY Chief Prosecutor before the UNSC on Serbia's cooperation with ICTY was in a positive tone. "Additionally, official candidature for Serbia's EU membership was submitted. However, there is more that should be done," Kypreos points out.

As he explains, Serbia achieved a lot in the fields of police reform, the work of the Parliament, judicial reform and the media, while in 2009 Schengen visas were lifted, Interim Trade Agreement was de-blocked and the report of the ICTY Chief Prosecutor before the UNSC on Serbia's cooperation with ICTY was in a positive tone.

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Q: How would you assess regional co-operation, especially with Croatia, in light of the importance of regional co-operation for Serbia's EU accession, but also in light of numerous unsolved issues (lawsuits before the ICJ, Kosovo, the Hague, refugee issues)? What are the possibilities for improvement of the regional co-operation?

I took up the position as Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia on 21 September last year and not long after I received an invitation to participate in the regional ministerial conference on fight against organized crime. President Boris Tadic also took part at this conference. Organization of such conference, involving the countries of SEE, and especially taking place in Belgrade, was unthinkable 10 years ago. The very fact that it was held in Belgrade, at the ministerial level, is a measure of the achieved progress. On the other hand, such progress demands more to be done, because the problem of organized crime still exists. Not only Serbia, but all countries of SEE are facing this "societal illness." In terms of regional co-operation, when it comes to refugees issues, the OSCE would like to see the co-operation of all countries involved. I refer to the signatories of the Sarajevo Declaration: Serbia, Croatia, BiH and Montenegro. Serbia hosts the largest number

For further information, contact Ivana Jovanovic, Acting Head of Press and Public Information
OSCE Mission to Serbia

Tel: +381 11 3606 151/150, fax: +381 11 3606 116, mobile: +381 63 251.778

E-mail: ppiu-serbia@osce.org

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of refugees and we would like to strongly welcome intensive and close co-operation of all countries.

Q: Countries in the region are achieving positive results in the area of economic cooperation, as well as regarding fight against organized crime. However, there are still political problems. How should the problems be overcome?

The problems do exist, as well as encouraging signs. The initiative of President Tadic and Srebrenica Declaration before the Parliament should be mentioned, as they could make significant influence on the reconciliation process in the region. Also, newly elected president of Croatia, Ivo Josipovic, gave encouraging statements related to the future relations with Serbia.

Q: How do you see the role of the OSCE in regional co-operation?

The Mission is actively included in this process, for example, speaking of refugees together with the EU, UNCHR and Council of Europe. We are all active and encourage this process, and I hope that we will soon make a significant breakthrough, if not the final solution.

Q: I believe that you are familiar with the amendments to the Law on Public Information. There were numerous objections to this Law, such as high fines, self-censorship and media censorship. Do you think that these amendments to the law would increase self censorship in Serbia?

In the media field a lot has been achieved, since today in Serbia there are print and electronic media which deserve to be identified as serious. At the same time, it is necessary to do a lot more. It is always difficult to find the balance between the freedom of the media and protection of individual rights. In order to achieve this, the extremes should be avoided. The OSCE Mission would in no way support, or defend unreasonable fines for journalists, or other provisions which could in the end become an obstacle to the freedom of journalist profession. So, it goes without saying that the OSCE Mission especially supports free media activity.

Q: The new court network in Serbia began functioning in January and the names of new judges and prosecutors were publicised a bit earlier. There were many complaints that there were political influences during the selection and that judges are not sufficiently independent. How do you see the process of Serbia's judicial reform?

I must say that the OSCE Mission does not have concrete data on the criteria adopted for the election of judges and prosecutors. We are trying to collect information on modalities of these elections. I would not want to comment on the process of these elections without precise data. On the other hand, the OSCE Mission encourages the bodies that have conducted the elections to present to both elected and non-elected candidates a clear picture of the way these decisions were made and about the criteria applied to make these decisions. I think that this would be a very positive step towards transparency and towards strengthening of the authority of bodies that conducted the election.

Q: Did the OSCE receive complaints from non-elected judges?

In such a huge election process, there are always complaints. We are trying to determine whether these complaints are justified, which is why I repeat that we would strongly welcome if the two bodies that conducted the elections of judges and prosecutors would present information about the election to the people interested in it. There is no need to present it to us, because we are talking about the procedures that are primarily of interest to the Serbian society.

Priorities

Q: What will be the OSCE Mission's priorities during your ambassadorial mandate?

I would like to emphasize that the key word here is the partnership with Serbia, co-operation, joint work in order to reach best OSCE standards, which are also the EU standards. Serbia's membership in the EU is, as I understand it, the main goal of the Serbian Government and the one accepted by main opposition parties. Our goal is to assist the Serbian Government, society and civil sector to, as soon as possible, reach international standards in the fields of democratization, rule of law, implementation of laws, media and human rights, which, as I said, happen also to be the EU standards.