

Novi list, 24 April 2005, p. 7

INTERVIEW: Head of OSCE Mission to Croatia Peter Semneby summarises his impressions at the end his term of office

Croatia needs both the carrot and stick of the EU

Croatia cannot implement internal reforms by itself. It needs a broader context for that. As an EU member, Croatia will have to build its identity differently than it has so far, many adjustments will also be necessary.

Interview by Boris Pavelic

The Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, Peter Semneby, is leaving Croatia these days, after a three-and-a-half year term as Ambassador. In an interview for our newspaper, he summarized his impressions about the situation in Croatia and perspectives of its accession to the EU.

Could you give an assessment of the progress achieved by Croatia during the three – and-a-half years of your term?

The most important steps have been those towards the EU. When I arrived, it was still very controversial: let us recall that the HDZ even left the session room during the vote in Parliament on the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. But now the entire political establishment has accepted the European way as a strategic goal. It is very important that the country has the goal which was lacking at that time.

Are you of the opinion that this political establishment is sincere in claiming that?

There are still those who are less happy because of that. Namely, there will be painful processes of adjustment. Croatia will have to accept standards which will annoy some people in the short run. For those who have gotten used to a society without firm regulations in the post-war period, EU membership will certainly be painful. On the other hand, naturally, the introduction of clear and foreseeable rules will be of great long-term benefit for the country. Moreover, there will be changes in the sense of its identity. Croatia is a young country, born under very difficult circumstances, with a very strong feeling of national and ethnic identity. That will have to change. As an EU member, Croatia will have to build its identity differently than in the past years. And that is difficult, particularly for a young country such as Croatia. Besides, many decisions will fall under EU competence. That implies the division of sovereignty, which will also require adjustments. But, despite all that, I am absolutely convinced that all of it will be surpassed by the benefits which the EU will bring in the future for all Croatian citizens: an efficient public administration and justice system, prosperity and economic development for all citizens.

Harassment of returnees

Despite those benefits, are you of the opinion that Croatian society has the internal strength to carry out such reforms?

It alone could not do this. Croatia needs the EU and a broader European context. It needs both the carrot and the stick offered by the EU.

The return of refugees is one of the most important parts of the OSCE mandate. Has it been improved?

Formally, everything is much better. The adoption of the Constitutional Law on National Minorities was an important step which stressed the importance of minority rights. This provided refugees with a guarantee that their problems would be seriously considered. There are programmes for providing refugees with housing care, including those who are facing problems related to occupancy/tenancy rights. Some other measures have also been undertaken and one should also mention the post-election agreement between the HDZ and the SDSS which brought the problems of the Serb minority from the margins into the focus of the political national agenda. Furthermore, by achieving the status of an EU candidate, Croatia finally became capable of leading a trilateral dialogue on return with its neighbours. The regional framework is absolutely necessary in order to finally resolve the refugee chapter. Nevertheless, there are problems, as well as disappointments. The fact that the programme of housing care for former occupancy/tenancy rights holders from outside the Areas of Special State Concern who want to return has still not been implemented is a big disappointment. I recently talked with refugees in Serbia: there is a great distrust regarding the Government's readiness and capability to resolve that issue. There are still instances of harassment of returnees at local levels - and that is disappointing. Many houses repossessed by returnees are devastated and looted, while the local authorities and police are not preventing it from happening. It is a serious problem and it sends a negative signal to others who are returning.

Incomprehensible court verdicts

I will also mention absurd examples from some local courts: a court decided that an owner had to compensate the temporary user for investments into the owner's house made without his consent. It is completely incomprehensible that the Croatian judiciary is capable of issuing such verdicts. Presently, there are two exemplary situations in which people will have to sell their houses in order to pay such compensation. This is completely unacceptable. There are several reasons for such verdicts - laws, the amendment of which we have proposed to the Government, but nothing happened. But also the atmosphere in those local communities is such that court decisions are probably biased in favour of temporary users.

Relicts of authoritarian legacy

Have you noticed differences between the former and current government?

Yes, there is a difference. The former government had to prove patriotism and that is why it was in a difficult position. This government, on the other hand, carries a heavy burden of legacy, so it has to prove its European orientation. Both governments made important steps with regard to issues such as minority rights and refugee return but, in any case, I

expected that more would be done so far with regard to issues related to the OSCE Mission's mandate.

How do you assess the media situation? Some journalists have recently been convicted.

It does not seem to me that the situation essentially differs from the one in other countries in transition. The media scene is lively and diverse. There are some problems, such as the lack of an effective self-regulatory mechanism of the journalistic code of ethics. It would be very good to introduce something of the kind. There are also relics of authoritarian legacy, such as trials against journalists over libel, which the Government should render impossible.

Over the recent months, the country has been under a strong wave of Euro-scepticism, untypical of other countries in transition at this stage of accession to the EU. Do you consider this a serious problem?

It needs to be approached seriously. There is a danger that the public might automatically accuse the EU for every problem. Politicians have to prevent that type of misunderstandings from taking root, because it could become very problematic. Much more needs to be done in order for citizens to understand what the EU will mean indeed. It is true, on the other hand, that the support for the EU has dropped, but it is not the characteristic of Croatia alone. It has dropped in almost all countries with the progress of EU accession, so it can be considered as natural in part. But there are some specifics here: Croatia, as I said, is a young country, created under threat to its existence, so it still feels vulnerable and its society is still creating a national identity. Therefore it is probably more difficult to Croatia to hand over its sovereignty to Brussels, as well as to redefine its own identity. I believe that such topics and not only technical aspects of EU membership should be publicly discussed.

If that is so, can Brussels make Croatia's accession easier?

That is not possible. The criteria are the same for everyone.