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INTERVIEW Peter Semneby, Head of the OSCE Mission on the dispute over the HRT and the completion of return of Serb refugees

Croatian Television should be protected even more from politicians' interference

By Deana Knezevic

Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, Ambassador Peter Semneby, is addressing the Croatian public this week along with Ministers Zuzul and Kalmeta. It is only a part of the campaign by which the international community attempts to improve the completion of the return of refugees in the region. In this interview Semneby explains details, but also touches upon the latest affair with Croatian Radio and Television (HRT).

The introduction into the new announcements of amendments to the Law on HRT were the objections made by the Speaker of the Parliament that the state television passes him over in favour of the President of the State. Is it necessary to change the Law on HRT and what do you think about this situation?

In the recommendations, which were made by the group of experts comprised by the OSCE, the European Commission and the Council of Europe, it was stated, *inter alia*, that the Law on Croatian Radio and Television should be revised. That group concluded that the procedure for the appointment of HRT Council members should be changed in such a manner so as to depoliticize that procedure. While doing so, they had in mind the basic principles of public television. One of those principles is that the HRT and the programme concept itself should be protected from political interference. The HRT must at the same time be responsible to the HRT Council in the fulfilment of its public television role. According to our observations, the situation on the HRT has improved after the most recent changes. There are some other recommendations made by the expert group as well. The most urgent recommendation is the necessity to adopt the Law on Electronic Media. That Law would establish the framework for all electronic media, whether they are public or private. At the same time it is also necessary to set-up a Council that will be protected from direct political interference.

When legal changes become current, this is usually linked with the ambition of the authorities to achieve greater influence over the television, not to give up on it...

Discussions on the Amendments to the Law are legitimate discussions. However, any attempt by politicians to increase their influence over the Council and the programme of the public television is unacceptable.

How do you assess the situation in Croatian media?

Generally speaking, I would say it is satisfactory. We are still witnessing examples of hate speech in some local media but, on the whole, the situation is good. In democratic societies media has a lot of power and a lot of responsibilities. Croatian media need a

greater degree of self-regulation which would be assisted by the establishment of an efficient Media Council. That Council would take over responsibility for complaints against the media and journalists. It is important that this is a self-regulating mechanism.

There is the Council of Honour with the Croatian Journalists' Association?

Yes, but that is not a body that would fulfil such a function that I was talking about. We assumed a standpoint that libel should be decriminalised. Our position is that libel should be dealt with in civil procedures and that the journalistic profession itself should assume greater responsibility for the resolution of complaints against the media.

You are planning to have a joint press conference on Wednesday together with Ministers Zuzul and Kalmeta. What would you like to achieve by that?

We are initiating a Public Awareness Campaign for better understanding of the importance of the return of refugees. The objective is to encourage refugees to decide by themselves whether to return or not. They can make such a decision only if the conditions for return have been created. Judging by the progress in the process of property repossession and reconstruction, I think we will be able to conclude in the not too distant future that those conditions have been created. Refugees should have a possibility to return to a secure environment.

Despite the affairs with Ustashi monuments and cases of Serb returnees living in sheds and stales?

The campaign will not only address refugees, but also receiving communities at the local level. The objective is to demonstrate the importance of multiculturalism and tolerance, to create an advanced society in the spirit of European integration. After Croatia has made crucial steps towards the European Union, we are of the opinion that this is the ideal moment for such a campaign. I would say that this is the final stage of the nation-building since Croatia gained independence. The political context for such a campaign is more favourable than ever before.

What about refugees who had lost occupancy/tenancy rights?

At this moment, former holders of OTR are the only category of refugees who do not have access to housing if they want to return. The most important issue at this moment is to resolve their problem and that is a condition insisted upon both by the OSCE and the European Commission on behalf of the international community. Out of all other conditions, that is the most important condition that needs to be fulfilled to eventually close the refugee file.

If you were suspicious of the HDZ at the beginning, what is your standpoint now? Are you convinced about the sincerity of that party regarding the return of Serb refugees?

I would say that Prime Minister Sanader, who plays the key role in formulating that policy, is sincere. The Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) is of course a large party with a complicated past, and it is unrealistic to expect that Sanader will immediately have 100 percent of support for such a policy. So far, the process of transition has been very smooth. Positive relation towards the return of refugees and towards minority issues has become an integral part of the political mainstream.

ABOUT SEKS' STATEMENTS

We expect politics to listen to the experts

How do you concretely look at the statements made by the Speaker of the Parliament?

I would not comment on individual initiatives. A discussion on this topic is legitimate and what we are expecting is that both the ruling parties and the opposition will remain within the boundaries of reason and focus on the recommendations made by the Expert Group, formed upon the initiative of the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the European Commission.