

INTERVIEW Peter Semneby, Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, talks about how much Croatia's accession to the EU depends on the return of refugees

International politics partly responsible for division in Vukovar

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ZAGREB – We talked with Peter Semneby, the Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, about progress in the area of refugee return and a possible influence of that issue on Croatia's accession to the EU.

How has the return of almost 200,000 Serbs who are still outside the Croatian borders progressed?

Despite almost 10 years already having passed since the war ended, this issue is still open. Many refugees are in the neighbouring countries, particularly in Serbia and Montenegro. Therefore, I believe it is time to start thinking about a long-term solution to this issue. Those people must not remain living as refugees.

We won't be forcing anyone

Do you have any data on how many out of those 200,000 people actually want to return?

For now we do not, but we understand that return represents yet another, dramatic change in their lives.

It is a fact that the majority of refugees will decide to remain where they are, but it is tragic that so much time has passed that it is easier for them to decide to stay than to return. We, naturally, do not want to force people to do anything, because that would not be humane either, but we want to make sure that those who want to return have good conditions in place for that. It means that, if they want to return, they must be provided with a secure environment and adequate accommodation. Should they on the other hand decide to stay, they must have a possibility of integration in the local community.

It is important that they understand and feel that they have been offered a choice. Otherwise, serious problems are created, reasons for accusations, even for hatred, which is a big problem taking a long-term view. It is, therefore, equally a humanitarian and a security issue.

Hatred because of WWII is still current in some areas, thus the question is how to gather in the same place those filled with new hatred from the recent war?

It must be explained to everyone in the country, whether Croats, Serbs or something third, that they need to concentrate on the future, not the past. That is difficult, and I would say it represents the main challenge for us from the international community, but

also for the entire domestic political establishment. The role of the EU is essential in that, because precisely the EU should become a joint focus in the future.

Economy is the main problem

What is the main problem in the return of refugees?

There are two main problems: accommodation and economy. Accommodation is something that could be resolved relatively quickly and easily, depending on priorities. Economy is, of course, a much more serious problem, especially in the areas devastated in the war. There is chronic unemployment there today, no production or possibilities to earn a salary. However, we hope that this will also be resolved through the assistance Croatia will receive from the EU.

Areas to which people are supposed to return are also characterized, among other things, by the lack of basic infrastructure. How will that problem be resolved?

That is what we are currently discussing with the Croatian authorities: that, apart from building houses it is necessary to reconstruct infrastructure. A couple of months earlier we made studies on the electrification of war-devastated areas and that issue is being resolved. Another problem is that the majority of refugees are returning to rural areas and very few to towns, but we are still working on this. The housing care programme for former occupancy/tenancy rights holders who want to return is now being implemented and, for the first time, it will offer housing care to more skilled and better educated people who had left towns.

How do you view the situation in the Danube Region?

What concerns us is the fact that people there are still living completely separate lives, in separate communities. By doing so it becomes impossible to face real challenges, the re-establishment of the community, economy, which should unite them and which can only be achieved by joint efforts, not by division. It is not natural that children are separated already at the pre-school age, to celebrate different holidays, learn different subjects... The only opportunity for those children to meet is on the street which has proven itself to be very dangerous.

Did not international policy also contribute to that division?

True, that was a part of peace agreements and efforts made by the international community to reconcile two parties at war. At the beginning it indeed seemed like the only solution, but now we have to move from that point and turn towards the future. In the future, we must have an integral society in Vukovar and in the region, not two separate ones. And those changes need to be initiated precisely in the field of education, so that those children would learn to live in a more tolerant manner than their parents.

CONTINUE WITH THE RETURN OF REFUGEES

How much does the issue of return of refugees and reconciliation affect the accession to the European Union?

Those processes must go on concurrently and they must support each other. Those are the two legs that will make the final step in the construction of the Croatian nation. After the independence and the re-establishment of territorial integrity, the last step is the creation of identity of a multi-ethnic society which is a part of the broader European context. When reconciliation is concerned, it must take place not only within the country, but also between the country and its neighbours. Therefore I hope that Croatia will continue with the resolution of the refugee return issue; That it will look forward, towards EU integration and reconciliation.