

Večernji list: Interview with High Representative Christian Schmidt

Interviewed by: Jozo Pavković

Večernji list: You made the decision on election night, when the polls were closed and the votes had not yet been counted. I understand the timing. You did not influence the pre-election campaign with it, nor the formation of the new governments. How do you comment the fact that the very same individuals who brought the people to the streets because of such decision a month ago are now mostly keeping quiet?

Christian Schmidt : I made an effort to communicate with the important decision-makers in this country immediately before the announcement of the decision, and to invite them to a dialog. I spoke with several non-governmental organizations and I think that this practice should continue, that such approach pays off.

Večernji list: How do you comment claims that you favored the Croats? And in fact, in the decision, for example, you maintained the rule that the Bosnian- Podrinje Canton, which has 24 Croats, has a single seat which is the same as, for example, the number of seats for the Posavina County, which has more than 30 thousand Croats. Is it favoring Croats or discriminating against them?

Christian Schmidt : I am a rational German. First, it should be clear to us that we will not create a paradise in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Second, Croats are not totally pushed out. Third, Bosniaks also live here and should live here. I would be happy if all those who see some advantages or disadvantages would discuss those issues. In this country, there is simply a lot of talk and a very few decisions. I can tell you that from my experience here. Emperor Francis Joseph who ruled here once said: "I am a good ruler, if all my people are equally dissatisfied".

Večernji list: Croats may now come into power. But in the Federation Government, decisions are made by a simple majority and each of their decisions can be overridden. In a multi-ethnic state, the opinion of at least one member of the Government from another ethnicity should be respected, as is the case in the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example?

Christian Schmidt : I said that I am taking away the possibilities for blockades, and this also applies to the possibilities that would be used by the Croat side. And I think that when reaching a consensus, we must move away from the principle of imposing a veto and focus more on reaching agreements. Therefore, issues in which there is a possibility to make a joint decision should be decided jointly, and only issues that really concern a matter of national interest must be decided according to special rules. We must define those interests, maybe sometimes they are not interests that concern the entire ethnic group, but some completely different interest.

Večernji list: I have often written in my columns that the key to solving problems in Bosnia and Herzegovina lies in relaxing relations between Croats and Bosniaks. What do you think?

Christian Schmidt : I can agree with that thesis. There need to be a willingness to reach a solution together, and that is close to what you have just mentioned. If nothing works, a mechanism must be identified to resolve it. But I think that reaching agreement would be the best way, to look beyond all differences and search for links that bind people together, and one of them is the path to the European Union.

Večernji list: I am under impression that you took office in BiH at the worst possible moment in terms of damaged inter-ethnic relations. How do you explain the anti-Croatian hysteria and the strong desire to oust legitimate Croats from power, to outvote them? How can society be cured from this disease?

Christian Schmidt : In the meantime, I have gained some experiences of my own. I think that every Bosniak who comments on a topic that also concerns Croats should not be immediately criticized. Likewise, not everything that comes from the Croat side is *a priori* bad. It is important to see how political positions can be brought closer together. But when we see that additional destructive elements are coming from the Republika Srpska, the situation becomes critical. You see, we Germans were in a difficult conflict with the French, but we learned a lot

about each other. Today, that conflict is no longer an issue because we have the common responsibility in the EU; and I think that the EU project can help because borders are losing their importance. But I see that we still have to do a lot together in this project. In the coming months, I would certainly like us to ask the EU to grant BiH the status of a membership candidate. I know that things are not the best in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but I think that we need a political signal for young people as well, we need to give them the prospects so they want to stay here. I think that message is very important.

Večernji list: How do you comment the fact that Bosniaks elect representatives for Croats?

Christian Schmidt : I do not know how things turned out in these elections. Everyone has a right to vote and we must take one thing into account. On the one hand, in the Federation everyone votes together, and on the other hand, we have to take into account the positive discrimination, to some extent, against Croats in the institutions. I would say again that it is not necessarily bad if a Bosniak votes for a Croat if he is good and vice versa, if a Croat votes for a Bosniak. If someone is running for election, he must be a representative of all citizens. Now, the question is how we will treat the issue of numerosity of ethnic groups. Croats most often have dual citizenship and because of this their number is decreasing. We have to take this into account as well, and it is important that there is a certain political balance between the constituent peoples. This time we had a very interesting result on the Croat side with the election of the BiH Presidency members, so even the candidate who did not get elected had a good result. I would not say that this Croat adjective is always predetermined. I would leave much of these issue to the political parties. We do not want to make this issue unsolvable, everything is too complicated already anyway .

Večernji list: When other peoples elect representatives for Croats, it is a destruction of the spirit and letter of the Dayton. In addition, there are attempt to turn Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Dayton multi-ethnic state into a civic state. Do not you think that this has already happened? For example, municipal, cantonal, Entity and State assemblies are elected according to the principle of “one man - one vote”. Only the Presidency (and it is almost organized in accordance with the civic model too) and the two upper Chambers - in the Federation and at the State level - as well as the Council of Peoples in the RS are elected according to the ethnic model. In fact, 97.2 percent of representatives in BiH are elected according to the civic concept. Has the spirit of the Dayton Agreement been lost in multi-ethnic BiH?

Christian Schmidt: What is the spirit of the Dayton Agreement? In my opinion, BiH should be flexible and open. I really don't know how many percentages there are. I am starting from the assumption that reasonable decisions will be made in those upper houses that you mentioned. But now I see something else. In those big differences that arose from the Dayton Agreement, some things were not answered. We constantly talk about Goražde, and you also mentioned it in relation to the representation of Croats. I tried to find another way and it was highly criticized, so now I have created a certain proportionality. What interests those coming from Goražde more is probably the tunnel that is being built between Goražde and Sarajevo, in order to ensure better economy. And that is not an ethnic issue at all. If we think that the regional interest of any part of Bosnia and Herzegovina must be represented, then there is no need to pay attention to the ethnic aspect, but when it comes to cultural and other ethnic issues, then an appropriate way should be found to satisfy that aspect as well.

Večernji list: They probably want to convince you, especially here in Sarajevo, that there are more Croats in the institutions than there should be. Do you know that two years ago the ombudsmen presented shocking information that the percentage of Croats in state and federal institutions is lower than even according to the census? After all, they are a constituent people, shouldn't they be represented in the institutions as well?

Christian Schmidt: If it is against the rules, then the ombudsmen should say that it cannot be so. However, I know that each ethnic community will try to get the most out of it. But there should be a little more sensibility on all sides, that's what I feel is missing here. I am ready to help with that. Does everything really have to be determined, right down to the last cleaning job?! If we accepted each other as we are, there would be a shift.

Večernji list: Is it possible to regulate all these things we talked about more precisely with Dayton 2? To motivate people to engage more, be more competitive and compete in positive things?

Christian Schmidt: I am not a supporter of Dayton 2, of a meeting at an airbase where some people meet who think they know the specific interests of the population in question. I hope and advocate that people here should be more willing to take care of each other, even in terms of constitutional position. I believe that this is not enough

now, but we need to see what can be simplified. We have rules so complicated that they simply invite you to disobey them. We need to sit down and discuss the problems, solve them within Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition, Dayton 2 would reflect the interests of the participating countries more than of BiH itself. The Dayton Agreement was necessary because there was a war and it had to be stopped, but Dayton no longer provides all the answers to the questions of the new generation in this country. We have to do something for this and the next generations.

Večernji list: For the European Union, the Western Balkans is an insecure and conflict-ridden area. There are two schools of opinions on possible solutions. What do you think, how can the problem of Bosnia and Herzegovina be solved?

Christian Schmidt: I would tell my colleagues in the EU not to talk about a problematic area or country, but to say quite clearly that the Western Balkans is a part of Europe. And that means we shouldn't put that question on hold for a long time. Politically speaking, I am in favor of all the former republics of Yugoslavia being admitted to the EU. What we in Western Europe have to take into account is that this is not a region where people don't know each other. The former Yugoslavia had a strong economy, but it is, in comparison, the size of a third of the Federal Republic of Germany. I am an advocate of regional economic cooperation. We must bring BiH as close as possible to the EU. If we look at Slovenia, which has a GDP higher than some Western European countries, and if we look at Croatia, we see success. We have to pull other countries from this region in that direction as well. That has somehow been lost in today's Europe. If we want a secure and economically and energetically stable Europe, we must cooperate with this region too. And it is in our interest to have these countries within the EU. Countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina needs a little more help in that, but I cannot agree to leave some empty space here to be filled by someone else from outside Europe. This is not a game of whether BiH will join the EU. This has become a geostrategic issue, and many have overlooked it.

Večernji list: Who do you see the role of Croatia? Why is its advocating for fellow Croats seems as meddling in the internal affairs of BiH? Can the same be said for your Germany?

Christian Schmidt: Croatia has indeed made a good step forward, it is a member of the EU, it will soon introduce the euro, it will be part of the Schengen area, it is prosperous. I remember the period after the war when we had refugees in Dalmatia, there were many difficulties. Croatia overcame it well, but Croatia is not BiH. It is a neighboring country. As a German, I know something about what it means to have ethnically similar neighbors. Austrians are Austrians even though we speak the same language and have a common culture. There are also Belgians of German origin, about whom little is known. They are considered Belgian even though they have a German cultural heritage and connection with Germany. I believe that such an understanding will develop in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well.

Večernji list: You mention Belgium. It is very often said that it could be a model for BiH.

Christian Schmidt: Each model is a model in itself. We can also think about the Swiss model. I would like to move away from the fact that we have to regulate everything by law, there should be a framework and some things should be understood by themselves. I am a minority myself because we became a minority in Bavaria during Napoleon's time. In other words, I am a Bavarian even though I am a Lutheran by faith, and members of the Protestant faith from Franconia in Bavaria do not feel exclusively Bavarians, and their specificities should be taken into account. It does not exist anywhere in the laws in Bavaria, but it is respected. Indeed, not everything has to be regulated by law, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina some things should take place by themselves.

Večernji list: What would be your message to Croatia when it comes to its attitude towards BiH?

Christian Schmidt: Croatia needs to lobby for Bosnia and Herzegovina within the EU, sometimes it is necessary to explain what Bosnia and Herzegovina is. However, Croatian domestic political issues should not be connected with foreign political issues. When there was talk of NATO expansion a few months ago, people from Berlin and other European capitals called me and asked what Croatia wanted and why the BiH Election Law should be discussed if we are going to admit Sweden or Finland to NATO. That not the way it should be done.