



NIN: Interview with High Representative Christian Schmidt

By Zoran Preradovic

NIN: On your arrival, you emphasized three priorities - bringing the country closer to EU integration, preventing the drain of young, educated people and preventing nepotism and corruption. What can be done here? For decades, neither the international institutions nor the local authorities have done anything in that respect.

Christian Schmidt: The reason is that the IC thought too early that things could sort themselves out on their own. Now, we have better access to EU integration. I visited Sarajevo in 2015, at the request of Angela Merkel, to make the SAA more effective, and back then, it appeared to be more difficult than now. But, we have made no progress when it comes to the young and the economy.

NIN: And, when it comes to corruption and nepotism?

Christian Schmidt: There have been some steps in the right direction, but the main problem still exists. I am not thinking about eradicating corruption totally, this is nearly impossible, but, if we reduced it even, it would already be good. The IC is currently helping prepare anti-corruption legislation. Nobody is saying that this is not necessary, but nobody is working on it, either, and we are going to see whether something will change with the EU integration impulse.

If you are young and educated and you apply for a job in the public sector, you must align yourself with the interests of those who offer you the job. The overly large public sector is one of the problems. It will be challenging, but I think we must talk about reducing it. I would not say that the problem is only in the salaries, but also in the opportunity for people to have merit-based work, not because they are friends with someone. I am not promising a paradise, but I think we have to work towards having more private companies, perhaps more European investment, too. This will be a key question for the years to come. I am not saying this to flatter Serbia, but Serbia is better in this respect. I think about 75,000 jobs in Serbia are in German companies. People in BiH are not different, they are willing to work, to contribute, but this should not only be in the public sector, where the numbers are inflated because, sometimes, a Serb, a Bosniak and a Croat are doing the same job.

NIN: How can you expect local politicians to fight corruption if we know that a good number of them are steeped in corruption?

Christian Schmidt: I know the fight will be difficult and we are not going to make many friends in this. We can prop it up with an argument that it will improve the conditions for people already working in the public sector. That

is why I am upholding the private sector. It will be very challenging to reform the public sector, but we need competition and, therefore, I think European openness and the common market have advantages. We could, for instance, offer financial assistance for infrastructure, but under certain conditions. The wallet is the most sensitive part of the body, the most sensitive organ, for politicians and others. We could say that the state will get some money for its development, but we must demonstrate that we comply with the regulations. We are under time constraints, because if there are no major changes within the next ten years, we will lose a good share of the young generation.

NIN: Many claim that BiH is a nonfunctional state and that that can be seen in the fact that its authorities are not functional, and that, as such, it cannot survive. What is your position?

Christian Schmidt: It must survive and it will survive. Why? Because any change would mean new problems for people. Dissolution would not be a solution. You would merely replace a bigger minority with a smaller one. Minorities would remain. Former Slovene President Borut Pahor once told me that whoever thinks about dissolution must know that in this region there can be dissolutions, but by no means peaceful ones. That is why the European experience is the best chance. How did European integration look after the Second World War? It was basically about reconciliation, about making the borders less important. In the nineties or early two 2000s it was not easy to talk about that in BiH, but now is the time to think about such cooperation. For me, the best example is the German minority in Belgium, which is the consequence of a referendum held after the First World War. The idea that peoples have their states, that they vote about it, was great, but it ended by leaving 60,000 or 80,000 Germans within Belgium. Today that is one of the minorities which lives the best in Europe. They are not divided from Germany by any borders because they are in the EU, but they have special rights, including the fact that the Belgian king has to use ten per cent of the German language in his speeches. Of course, those are ideal circumstances, and I know that in the Western Balkans it will not be easy to get that far, but you have to have a vision.

NIN: What are really the chances of BiH and other countries of the Western Balkans to become EU members, because it seems that in the Union itself there is currently no will for enlargement?

Christian Schmidt: My answer is yes, they will be full members, but in the meantime, I am in favour of the regional opening of borders. Young people in particular have to see some tangible use. Last year the Western Balkans agreed in the Berlin process on mutual recognition of diplomas, two years ago about roaming, etc. To put aside relations between Serbia and Kosovo, but the basic steps have been made. If we only tell young people that in twenty years they will have a bright European future, they will not listen to us. They will make their decisions without us. That is why in the next ten years we must ensure exceptional development, regional cooperation, some sort of common market.

As for your question about whether all EU members really want that – progress has been made on that front. Passionate love is not necessary, rationality is sufficient, like when two people in a marriage decide that it is good for the family to stay together. Countries that are geographically far from the region used to consider the Western Balkans a German problem, but I see that changing, especially in Paris, thanks to Angela Merkel's Berlin Process. She managed to win over Emmanuel Macron, and his advantage is that France traditionally has good relations with Serbia. I would not go into too much detail, but Serbia is a country that must be involved in this endeavor. The size of Serbia means that the integration and future of the region are only possible with it included. It is necessary for Europe to make it clear that in the 21st century Serbia is an integral part of the European way of thinking. The success of the region, and of BiH in particular, depends on this comprehensive approach.

NIN: Your arrival to the position of the High Representative was marked by controversies. Two permanent members of the UN Security Council, China and Russia, do not recognize your appointment because you did not go through the UN procedure. You are also not recognized by the RS officials and they refuse to meet with you, at least officially. How do you see that?

Christian Schmidt: It makes everything more complicated than it needs to be. It seems to me that Russia did not think much about it, because I see no reason for their opposition – my predecessors were appointed in the same way. However, I see a possibility for working contacts with Republika Srpska, and I also have the advantage of the unanimous support of the international community, if we exclude Russia. My predecessor, Valentin Inzko, did not have that privilege. He was left to himself. If someone doesn't want to talk to me, they can talk to the EU or the US. Besides, I am happy that in reality everything is going well, and that Belgrade and Banja Luka look at the situation differently.

NIN: How does Belgrade view that?

Christian Schmidt: In Belgrade, they welcome me with all honours. Honours are not important, of course, it is nothing personal, but what is important is that my function and my duty is recognised. Let me add that I use the fact that I have been in this region for 30 years, in one position or another, so it is also an advantage for me that I know many people.

NIN: In one interview, you said that there were signals that the RS officials want to meet and talk to you. Who contacted you, when, and on which occasion? Maybe Milorad Dodik?

Christian Schmidt: There were moments in previous years when Dodik and I occasionally met. We have known each other for a long time. Two years ago we spoke on the phone about my appointment, and then he offered to meet, but it seems that in the meantime his courage has left him. Sometimes it is better not to talk, but to let the story develop itself. Sometimes people contact me or someone on my team, but they don't want their name mentioned publicly, and I respect that.

NIN: Can you understand that the people in the RS fear that the autonomies they got by the Dayton Agreement could be drowned in centralized BiH? You can from a country which is made of provinces and some of them have strong competencies, like Bavaria, and special characteristics, which nobody disputes at the federal level. Is it possible to carry out something like that in BiH?

Christian Schmidt: It is necessary to give the entities and Brcko, as well as the constituent peoples, a way to organize themselves. Yes, there are 16 federal states in Germany, you mentioned Bavaria, where I belong to a minority. I belong to Franks, it was Napoleon who made me a Bavarian, and I am a Protestant, not a Catholic. There is a clause in the German Constitution that would make things easier if it were understood that it is part of the Dayton Constitution – you can decide on regional problems alone, but you should decide on key ones together. I know that the Dayton Constitution is very complicated, that it is an American-style separation of powers. If we could see that we need some simpler solutions in order to ensure functionality, if we could say “we do this, you do that, and we do the third one together”, I would be ready to support it. That way, for example, it would be possible to agree on finances.

NIN: So, it is clear to you that ordinary people in the RS do care about autonomy, and that they fear centralization?

Christian Schmidt: I guess that ordinary people in the RS just want to have good living conditions, so their children can grow up in peace; they want to feel safe and have social security. If we are successful in achieving this, it will be a good way to establish the regional identity. Last year, the RS National Assembly decided to establish its own pharmaceutical agency. Medicaments for the heart or stomach are similar in the RS and the Federation of BiH and anywhere else in Europe. In the EU, one such agency covers 450 million people and there is no sense in having such agency for the RS, which has 900,000 or one million inhabitants. We have to differentiate between necessary and unnecessary, and that kind of solution would be expensive. It seems that someone is only trying to create more jobs in the public sector, just to distribute them afterwards.

NIN: You referred to the regional identity. What exactly do you have in mind?

Christian Schmidt: I am speaking about infrastructure, education, security and problems that are particularly important in the region – for example, a place where a company is going to be located. We must not forget that Serbs are in the absolute majority in the RS, but there are Croats and Bosniaks and others living there too, who also have to be seen as an integral part. This does not stop us from thinking about identity.

NIN: The latest misunderstanding with the RS leaders happened, however, when the RS marked its Day on the 9th of January, and the BiH Constitutional Court declared this event unconstitutional. You said that State holidays and Entity holidays can be celebrated but in a different way. What was disputable for you there, was it a medal awarded to Putin or something else?

Christian Schmidt: The medal awarded to Putin is a separate issue, and I would advise Dodik not to do it. The fact that Putin is a Russian does not matter, what matters is that he has brought war to Europe. The way in which the 9th of January is celebrated is burdening others. The times of pseudo-military parades are over. A cultural and integrative approach would be fine. One has to ask what is Dodik trying to achieve with this type of performance. I

think that political tolerance is necessary if we think about European or regional integrations, and in his younger days Dodik seemed open to exactly this kind of thing. I believe he would have agreed with me in 2008 or 2009, when I met him for the first time.

NIN: BiH is in an unusual situation in relation to the war in Ukraine. The State has introduced sanctions against Russia because of its aggression and, at the same time, Dodik is not hiding his closeness with Putin. What is your view on this?

Christian Schmidt: I think that the majority of the population in BiH, regardless of their ethnicity, does not want to be involved, in any way, into that war, because they had enough of that. BiH is too small to play with world powers. It is not necessary to deny connections with Russia, with the Russian culture. Sometimes, however, you need to be clear. You must tell your friend he is wrong. Vladimir Vladimirovich, you are wrong. This is what I do not understand in Dodik's behavior.

NIN: What is Dodik trying to demonstrate by his closeness to Putin?

Christian Schmidt: It is hard for me to imagine that Putin depends on Dodik. I hope that it does not mean that Dodik believes that he depends on Putin. If he does not depend on him, it would be better for him to show an independent position. I do not see that anybody behaves in that way. If Dodik owes something to Putin, and I do not know what it could be, then we have a problem.

NIN: What is your view of the fact that Dodik frequently speaks about the referendum and independence of the RS?

Christian Schmidt: He started speaking about the referendum way back in 2014, but it is clear – Dodik does not have the right to organize the referendum on the RS independence; it would not be constitutional under the Dayton Constitution. I would offer him the following – if you have precise ideas on future cooperation within the State, let us please sit together and speak about the Constitution, not about the referendum. I would also like to add that those times when he could count on the majority are gone.

NIN: Is this issue important for his voters?

Christian Schmidt: According to our knowledge, it is not. The majority does not care about it, but it cares about better living conditions. A referendum is a populist instrument that removes other topics from the public eye. I would suggest to him to work for the benefit of the people and to speak about the real issues. He should probably also think about the fact that the Serbian President has clearly stated that he recognizes the territorial integrity of BiH.

NIN: Speaking about the war in Ukraine, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock has recently stated in the European Parliament that Europe should not have internal arguments because it is fighting against Russia. Does it mean that Europe and Germany are really in war with Russia?

Christian Schmidt: No, we are not at war with Russia, but we believe that Russia and Putin must not get out of the aggression as winners. He disappointed people in my country when he refused peace negotiations. I hope the peace negotiations are going to happen. In a long run, Russia will certainly not disappear, and we therefore have to figure out how to live with Russians.

NIN: Are you afraid that the war in Ukraine could spill over to BiH, considering that the RS and the Federation have different views about the war and in view of Dodik's closeness with the Kremlin?

Christian Schmidt: I see one kind of danger – BiH becoming a part of the political war theatre. That would not be good. The experience of Serbia with "Wagners" must not happen again and will not be repeated in Bosnia.

NIN: Which experience, there is no reliable evidence about the actions of Wagner?

Christian Schmidt: I am speaking about conscriptions. We see how difficult it is for Putin to secure a sufficient number of soldiers, that he is already emptying prisons in Russia and trying to win over the youth in this region. That kind of bloodshed is unacceptable.

NIN: How much was your position aggravated at the very start by a move of your predecessor

Valentin Inzko and his imposition of the decision banning the genocide denial that Serbs view as an attack on the RS?

Christian Schmidt: It was notable to me that Serbs considered this law as directed against them and not against war criminals. It means that we must talk more and educate more. Too many were killed in BiH for us to leave it out of the discussion. I suggested that we should sit together, we and the Parliament; I thought about a joint initial step, but that has also failed.

NIN: You come from a country that has experience with genocide and war crimes. How did Germany manage to overcome that?

Christian Schmidt: You have to ask yourself what you can do so that it does not happen ever again. However, you need an open confrontation with the past in order to do that. Germany would not have succeeded, had it not ensured that everyone faced the past after 1945, but honestly, what was needed was a change from one generation to the next. I therefore think this is a long-term process but it has to be started. In BiH, this process has started but only partly. Patriarch of the Serb Orthodox Church Porfirije said that we are accustomed to respecting our own victims first before we show respect to the victims of others, but that we actually have to respect the victims of others in order to be able to respect the victims of our own.

NIN: During the election night, you amended some electoral regulations and some parts of the Constitution of the Federation of BiH, which is most certainly an unusual precedent. Why did you do it and what was your idea behind it?

Christian Schmidt: The negotiations on a broader electoral reform unfortunately failed. We had meetings in Neum and Sarajevo in May, elections were scheduled for October and we lost time. I wanted to restore the functionality of the Federation because it had the four-year caretaker Government and the Constitutional Court was blocked. I did not intend to implement all electoral reforms on my own. I think I was right for doing that immediately after the elections and before the election results, but such measures must remain extraordinary.

NIN: In London, you have suggested recently that there should be financial conditionality for the RS, instead of sanctions against politicians. What was the reason for such proposal and are you aware that such a measure would have a greater impact on citizens than on politicians?

Christian Schmidt: We have already spoken about the financial conditionality. Germany and the EU believe that the conditionality is going to force politicians to act rationally, which will increase chances for the money to really reach the people.

NIN: The Vienna-based daily newspaper *Standard* wrote, prior to your arrival to the office in BiH, about your close connections with the HDZ and that Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic had awarded you with the Order of Ante Starcevic. Is that true, and if yes, why did you get this award?

Christian Schmidt: I would not speak about myself too much, but I am also a recipient of Hungarian, Austrian, Estonian and Latvian awards. The Croatian President at the time, Mr. Ivo Josipovic, who is not an HDZ member, gave this award to me in 2013. I did not take the award at that time, but it was handed out to me by Plenkovic years later, when Croatia took over the EU Presidency. I have just re-read the announcement of the Croatian President, which reads that I was awarded on the grounds of my contribution to Croatian independence. A colleague of mine from the Bundestag and myself received the award for establishing, for example, parliamentary groups of friendship with the region – with Croatia, Slovenia and BiH. Those are the merits from the past, not the merits from the present.

NIN: You said that you wish to be the last High Representative of the international community in BiH. Is that possible and how do you see the future of BiH?

Christian Schmidt: You know that my mandate is not termed and it depends on success. A key issue is whether or not the genuine integration of BiH into the EU is going to happen. If the 5 plus 2 Agenda gets fulfilled – the mandate will be fulfilled and everything goes back to the people's hands. I may disappoint some people, but I am under the impression that people in BiH rely on the assistance of international institutions because they do not have great confidence in their own institutions. My institution, however, is an *ad hoc* one – it is not eternal.