Interview: Carlos Westendorp, the High Representative”The Nationalism is Insatiable”

Carlos Westendorp is, together with Javier Solana, one of the best “positioned” Spaniards in Europe. But Westendorp, civilian High Representative in Bosnia, has a job that many describe as impossible: achieve reconciliation between, Muslims, Croats and Serbs after three years of civil war.

In the Republika Srpska headquarters, in Banja Luka, the civilian High Representative wants to go to the rest room. Ramón, the head of security, has to mobilize four guardias that have stuck to him during the last year like chewing gum to a shoe sole. One in front, another one behind. The rest of them, at the door. That is how things are in this small Balkan state, destroyed by three years of civil war and ethnic cleansing. “Dictator, you will not finish your mandate,” is what the pamphlets of the Serb extremists claim, sent to the office of Carlos Westendorp in Sarajevo.

Since little more than a year ago, when he landed in Bosnia, each of his journeys seems pulled out of an American action movie. There are the sub-assault rifles, the pistols, the armored cars, the all-terrain vehicles, the portable radio transmitters, and these young men, tall like towers, and well-built. Almost all of them are working “in the North”, that is in the Basque Country. They are 20 guys that are in the elite of the Guardia Civil, the Rural Antiterrorist Groups, (GAR). They rotate every six or nine months due to the, as they say, “tension.”

In this warlike environment works Westendorp, 61 years old, more low than high, impeccably dressed, with an air of strange fragility in the midst of so much muscle. If there is a

Spaniard who in these moments knows something about the resolution of conflicts among brothers, what we are beginning to envision in Spain, then that is “Charlie West”. A career diplomat, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the last government of Felipe González, Westendorp is the man of the United States and of the European Union within Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this mountainous country, born three years ago by the hand of a document signed in Dayton, Ohio, Serbs, Croats and Muslims are obliged to live together. They are three Slav peoples unified by the same language and separated by the fanaticism of religion.

Eleven years ago, a Serb named Slobodan Milosevic lit the fire of the ancestral hate between the three ethnic groups after four decades of narcotizing communism. The international community inflamed it with its clumsiness. The exacerbated nationalism did the rest: 200,000 dead and the most horrible crimes committed since World War II. Presently, 3.6 million persons live in Bosnia. Another two million still do not dare to come back to their homes.

The worst is that after three years and 27.000 million dollars (about 3.5 billion pesetas), according to various estimates, about 48 hours ago the ultra-nationalist Nikola Poplasen won the elections in the Republika Srpska.

“Nationalists are insatiable,” affirms Westendorp while he sips lemonade in a Muslim restaurant in the Turkish neighborhood in Sarajevo, where the consumption of alcohol is strictly forbidden. “Until they reach their objective, which is the independence, the separation, the annihilation of the other. Basically, extreme nationalism, when it excludes the other’s ideas, through this exclusion seeks to destroy its enemy. Moderate nationalism is something else, it wants to confirm its identity while coexisting with the other.”

“The essence of nationalism is a permanent dissatisfaction,” he continues, while he establishes a comparison between the

three types of European nationalist ideologies; the Irish, the Basque, and the Balkans. He does it borrowing a statement from the successful book by Jon Juarasti, “Everybody has the same motivation: the famous melancholic curl, that is the opposite of sadness. It seems very clear to me. The sadness is when you cry for something you have really lost. The melancholy is when you cry over something that you believe you have lost, which is a very different thing, and that may be your old independence, for example. They all have the same pattern.”

What is the difference between nationalism in this part of Europe and the Spaniards?

I see a difference, thankfully in our favor: in Catalonia and in the Basque Country, supposing they had a level of self-government as high as the one here, there would be no distinction between the citizens, wherever you were born, whatever your blood type, although recently I have seen some Basque nationalist sectors in which the ethnic cleansing vein is starting to peek out.” Westendorp also believes that dialogue “is the only solution for these kind of problems.” “Fortunately it seems that signs can be seen in Spain for disposition towards dialogue, although we could be skeptical about it, because the truce is being held in a suspicious moment, a month before the elections.”

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, broken in half by the Dayton Agreement, the Republika Srpska, on one side, and the Croat-Muslim federation on the other, this dialogue is still not “spontaneous.” “I have perceived hate and fear here. In Spain, after the war, I remember that in some neighborhoods they were calling the children that had lost reds (communists) . But the reds were not in Spain. Here we are making them live together only two years after the war,” he affirms. Immediately after he declares himself, “like (Francisco) Umbral, an off-shoot kid from the right wing” belonging to a “traditional family.”

That was until Enrique Tierno Galván fascinated him at the

University. After the PSP disappeared, the party of the old professor, he tries to remember, and he thinks he has been affiliated to the PSOE since 1977. From his “good boy” years, he still has a good British accent. For the rest of his life, a passion for moderation: “The moderate’s acts can be seen in the attitudes, especially in the ones that have more contact with society. Above what you define yourself as, people identify very well who is where through your actions, through the day to day.”

He thinks that the Spaniards, the majority, are supporters of this moderation. From there comes the positive evaluation from the Foreign Affairs Minister, Abel Matutes: “He is a non-sectarian man. In Spain, people like it.”

While saying positive things of the current head of the Foreign service, Westendorp refuses flatly to evaluate the current Spanish Foreign policy. “I will not criticize a government that is my partner. I depend on all the PIC (Peace Implementation Council) Governments. Spain is a shareholder. Also, for example, is the German government. At this moment I will put my ideologies within parenthesis.”

He does underline that the Government should fully exploit its presence and “take advantage of the fact that I am here.” Westendorp says he is convinced that the popular executive branch will provide all the help to organize, on the 12th and 13th of December, in Madrid, the next PIC meeting. “Spain does these things very well,” points out Westendorp, who has achieved that the 28 Foreign Affairs ministers that build up this Council for monitoring the Dayton Agreement should come to Madrid although Spain does not belong to the Contact Group for Bosnia.

Westendorp has many motives in order to be prudent. The Spanish executive branch is more than just a member. If all the rumors that circulate around the European gossip shops happen, the Government of José María Aznar will also have to

be a protector of Westendorp. His name is on all the lists that are being drawn in order to name the mysterious Mister X or Monsieur PESC (Foreign Policy and Common Security). That is, the person that will represent the foreign policy of the whole European Union. Something like the first Foreign Affairs Minister of Europe.

The community lobby has still not begun, awaiting the results of the German elections today. The Amsterdam Treaty foresees that this appointment will have to be made in the next European Council, which will be held in Vienna in December. The main Westendorp competitors will be the ex-president of the French Republic, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Carl Bildt, who has just lost the elections in Sweden. The role of Spain in the defense of Westendorp's name will be fundamental. Aware of the fact that the names that appear too soon finally wear out, Westendorp does not think too much about the possibility of reaching this post: "Until December I have lots of things to do here."

Against this plays the presence of two persons, to whom he, curiously enough, feels very close: Javier Solana and Felipe González. The first one, like Secretary General of NATO, the second one, like a possible candidate for the presidency of the European Commission. Too many Spanish socialists on posts of huge visibility. Westendorp discards, however, the presidency of González: "He thinks that the Commission thing is something where you have a very limited operating capacity. You do not have the clear chain of command that you have in your own country."

What does this group of Euro-lucky Spaniards, of which Miguel Angel Moratinos, the envoy for Middle East is part, have in common? "We belong to a country sufficiently big, so as not to be representatives of a country that counts little and that, at the same time, does not have its own agenda. The members trust us," Westendorp points out, diplomat since 1966, when he requested a post in the consulate in order "to have nothing to

do with the regime."

"We belong to a nation that has surpassed a terrible historical complex that Spain is different, and we are proud to represent our country which is worthy of being represented," continues he who has dedicated that larger part of his professional life to building Europe.

So, Westendorp regrets now the absence of great leaders, like in the United States today, or in the European Union or in Russia. He predicts, however, that it is just a temporary phenomenon.

Statesmen with "prophetic vision", like Helmut Kohl, will return, Westendorp believes, thanks to whose effort we now have the Euro. "We can see it today. All of us inside the Euro are much more protected from the crisis. At that moment, it was a huge sacrifice for Germany."

There is photographic proof of his 32 year long diplomatic career in his office in the OHR (Office of the High Representative), very nearby the center of Sarajevo. Here we see his images with numerous world leaders. The most plentiful are, however, the photos of Lucas, 3 years old, the third of his children, born from his second marriage. And also, one affectionately dedicated: from Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State of the United States, that wishes him "the best of luck" in a job that many qualify as "impossible."

If not impossible, it is definitely the most "stressful" one that he has had in his professional life, points out Westendorp, whom the British weekly "The Economist" calls Viceroy in its last issue: "As we solve problems, you see that you have more to do."

Certainly, Westendorp carries out a mission similar to being a governor of a protectorate or a false Prime Minister. He has had to impose the flag, the passport, and even the vehicle license plates. With difficulty, sometimes with very much

difficulty. A common flag now exists for eight months in Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, on the official buildings of the Republika Srpska that we visited this week it was impossible to find one that was not Serbian.

But he prefers to turn a blind eye to what he considers a trifle and concentrate on the important things. “When I was going to accept this job, they asked me if I was tough. I answered that it depends of what they consider tough. If it was being bad-mannered, than no. But if tough means defending your convictions to the maximum and being able to be flexible when you find a common ground, than yes.” Now he is tied up with the coins. He comes and goes to the OHR with a copy in his hand asking for the opinions of the varied international team that assists him. It consists of more than 200 persons, among them Spaniards, Americans, Japanese, Bosniaks, Germans and British. Westendorp has two deputies: Paul Klein, an American diplomat, and Hanns Schumacher, German. When he arrived, the press foresaw that they would eat the Spaniard alive. That has not happened, on the contrary. The people that hired him do not question his toughness any more.

This week he has had to run around the country in order to meet the most extremist people and to remind them that the international community will not allow them to go backward.

But, for how long will West be on a mission that has already surpassed the Marshall Plan by ten times?

“We are not ready to put up with this for much more time, but we are going to put up with it for much more time. The peace is cheaper than the war,” he concludes. “We are condemned to be here until the minimal reconciliation conditions are reached. How long is that? I do not know. It is very difficult today.”

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