

Interview: Hanns H. Schumacher, Senior Deputy HR “Nationalist Parties are not offering anything good their people”

The current situation in terms of the implementation of the DA, along with the time ahead of us, including the period before and after the elections, was the main topic discussed during our interview with Hanns Schumacher, a Deputy High Representative for BiH.

The following was noted down during the interview:

Mr. Schumacher, at the most recent session of the UN Security Council, the High Representative for BiH, Carlos Westendorp, submitted a report on the current situation in BiH stressing that the DA had only been partly implemented there, especially its Annex 7. Could you please comment on such an assessment by the High Representative?

The report by Mr. Westendorp is a very realistic one and it contains correct assessments on the current situation in BiH. In his report, Westendorp referred to several areas in which progress has been made, including progress in the work of common institutions. However, Westendorp also mentioned a number of things that have obstructed quick implementation of the DA. I wish to stress that the report puts a special emphasis on the fact the RS has a government which is viewed as a responsible and good government. Nevertheless, we just need to be honest and say that the contribution by the RS in the implementation of Annex 7, which is one of the main priorities of the Peace Agreement, was negligible. The International Crisis Group, which is a neutral observer here, also came to the same conclusion. We fully agree with this. But, let me make an observation here. The Government of the SDS led this country during the first two years after the DA. This Government refused to have any contacts with the international community. This fact was an impediment to any progress. The new Government is now trying to fix this stalemate. I think that they have managed to make certain progress. However, if you start counting people who have been able to return to their pre-war homes in the RS, you have a big minus as the final result.

Similar remarks have been made towards the BH Federation authorities. This especially goes for the implementation of the Sarajevo Declaration. Is this directly connected with the return of refugees to the Republic of Srpska?

I can give an example here in figures for the sake of better understanding of the issue. The objective laid down in the Sarajevo Declaration says that 20,000 people should be able to return to the town by the end of this year. Generously speaking, only about 1,000 have so far returned, which is about 5% of the planned number. The return to Banja Luka is equal to zero, and we have an additional problem here which is that of local authorities not being prepared or willing to get involved in resolving the problem. If I am to make a sort of assessment on the matter, I would describe the return to Sarajevo as hardly satisfactory, and that to Banja Luka, together with the behaviour of municipal authorities, as unsatisfactory again.

Mr. Schumacher, there has recently been a number of arguments regarding your statement that there are necks in the RS that should be broken?

I think that it is really funny that people have been asking me the same question. I even find it silly that the lead politicians still continue spreading the impression that I have said such things. This is irresponsible on their part. I have explained that there has been a mistake made by this journalist, non-deliberately. This time I will repeat my statement which was misinterpreted. Speaking about the return of refugees, I stressed that there were tough nuts within respective municipal authorities in the RS and that those should be cracked. I also said that the international community was good at cracking nuts. It is, therefore, not about necks, and the difference is drastic.

Aside from return-related issues, one of the burning issues in the RS is the status of the town of Brcko?

I do not want to comment on Brcko. This issue is of utmost importance for the RS, the BiH Federation and the entire implementation of the DA. At the beginning of this year, and last December too, we set clear conditions related to this town, and we will assess the new situation in the way laid down in Mr. Owen's arbitration. Until that time, I can only appeal to all sides to refrain from making public statements and to get personally involved in moving the situation in Brcko forward, instead.

Mr. Schumacher, how would you comment on the recent events in Banja Luka, related to the burial of Banja Luka Mufti Halilovic?

I have to say first that the municipal authorities in Banja Luka, the Serb Party of Krajina and Posavina tried to misuse the burial for their short-term election purposes. They actually have lost the opportunity to prove to the world around us that Banja Luka was turning into a pluralist town. We heard certain signals from Banja Luka that no burial would be allowed at the site of former Ferhadija mosque, and that a protest rally was being organized. This clearly indicates that it was an action triggered by certain local politicians, rather than a spontaneous action by people.

Elections are getting closer and closer and assessments have been increasing that national parties are losing their potential voters. Do you believe in some predictions that such parties are slowly disappearing from the BiH political scene?

One of the achievements of the DA is that people have started to realise that national parties cannot offer any good things. This is why such parties often criticise the international community. There are SDS politicians who should stop making the situation darker than it is, and then accusing the international community of being responsible for their own failures. I will leave it up to RS voters to decide about the significance that the SDS will have in the future. They just need to have a look at their wallets, and they will know whom they will be voting for. As for the HDZ, just three months ago, nobody could foresee that it was going to split into two dominant parties. My personal opinion is that, as a results, those politicians and those political parties which support the processes of democratisation and the establishment of a pluralist society will obtain the trust of the majority of voters. Six months after the elections, we will assess the work of the SDA too.

Many politicians from nationalist parties feel that a revision of the DA is the only way for them to survive?

You should better forget about any revisions of the DA.

The recent developments in Kosovo, can they affect the implementation of the DA?

At this stage, I see no direct connection between the Kosovo crisis and the implementation of the DA. There is no doubt that the IC has learnt its lesson here in Bosnia and that it will be applied in resolving the Kosovo crisis, too. The fact that NATO is already present there and that it considers possible options in terms of military intervention, if necessary, clearly proves this. For as long as the IC is committed to continue to mediate to resolve the crisis there, there is no danger that the implementation of the DA could be obstructed. I cannot, and I do not want to foresee if the Kosovo crisis could possibly spread to neighbouring countries and thus become a de-stabilising factor in the region. This is certainly the worst scenario possible that we will be bent on preventing by using all means available.

However, we have been facing a situation where the number of refugees from this area who currently live in Kosovo and who are prepared to leave that area is increasing?

To the best of my knowledge, the majority of refugees currently living in Kosovo are originally from Croatia. You are aware that we have done our utmost to put pressure on Croatia to design a reasonable return plan. A few weeks ago, Zagreb made the final decision and we are now waiting to see if it is going to fulfil its obligations. It would be a catastrophe for those people who fled twice not to be able to return to their homes now. This is all, I underline, a result of irresponsible behaviour by different politicians towards their own people.

A decision was made recently to suspend the issuing of diplomatic passports, because citizens should be priority here, especially those from the RS?

For the people in the RS, a new passport is a key to neighbouring countries, to Europe and to the rest of the world. More importantly, new passports will put an end to the isolation of the RS which the old nationalist Government should be held directly responsible for. There is sufficient evidence that those supporting nationalist ideology only serve their own interests, the interest of their pockets, rather than the interests of ordinary people. The Luxembourg documents clearly say that the RS people should be regarded as the top priority when it comes to the issuing of passports.

Mr. Schumacher, what would be your comment on the decision by the RS Government removing key people in

local media?

I support the press statement released by the RS Association of Journalists. This is an encouraging statement because we nearly managed to convince people that the media need to be reformed here. I am pleased to see that the local institutions, such as the Association of Journalists, have started to function and to deal with such issues. The SDS is the most responsible for the current media situation in the RS and it does not really have the right to blame others for what is going on in this field. The RS Government might have had good intentions when making such a decision, but they used the wrong instruments. My impression is that the media and the Government are connected and this is exactly one of the situations which we had in mind when we decided to establish the Commission for reforming media.

At the end of our interview, could you please tell us what we can hope for here in the near future?

I expect that the elections will open a door towards a new and brighter future for the people of the RS and that they will be a step forward in creating a pluralist government, i.e. the rule of law. I do not want to give cheap advice to voters in the RS, but if people compare their current situation with one, two, four years ago, and if they are reasonable, they will understand who the best person will be for them to vote for. I am sure that the elections, both in the RS and the BH Federation, will be a step forward in the implementation of the DA, providing a good opportunity for the IC to ensure that this country can be led by local politicians in the future. I do not want to be or to remain a member of any sort of protectorate.