

Article about Carlos Westendorp, High Representative: "After the failure of his predecessors, Westendorp puts the Bosnian unity on the right path"

While the press attention is focused on the new "hot spots", Bosnia is moving on. In a much less spectacular way, but, nevertheless, effective. There has been a turn of the situation in the last four months, comparable only to the cessation of hostilities imposed by the NATO bombers in August 1995. The work of a Spaniard, Carlos Westendorp, High Representative of the International Community in the ex-Yugoslav Republic, turns out to be, at least, very important, and in a number of cases decisive.

In the windows of a shop situated in the Muslim neighbourhood of Sarajevo, the passers-by can contemplate a caricature that represents Mr. Westendorp as Don Quixote, with his spear high and riding a horse, ready to charge against invisible giants or mills, which most definitely represent the obstinacy of the Balkans politicians. If the Spanish diplomat showed that he had a good dose of idealism when he accepted a mission like this one, he has now also shown a pragmatism worthy of a Sancho and a tenacity that has let him advance step by step, without losing his final objective.

When he accepted his position, the panorama offered to Westendorp could not possibly be more discouraging. All the analysts noted that there were almost non-existent advances in the implementation of the civil aspects of the Dayton

agreement. Bosnia was everything but a state. The two entities that it is made up of, the Croat-Bosniak Federation and the Republika Srpska (serbian), functioned on their own in almost every way. In the Republika Srpska, the power was still under control of the ultra-nationalists led by Radovan Karadzic, accused of crimes against humanity. Many people considered that the Dayton Agreement was really a recipe for the division of Bosnia, and that Croatia and Serbia would soon absorb their respective spheres of influence. Although not completely resolved, the scenery, six months later, has clearly improved. The Republika Srpska now has a moderate President and a moderate Government, ready to cooperate with the international community. The radicals are more isolated and divided than ever, and the external aspects of the Bosnian state are starting to make a whole – a common passport, common citizenship, flag. It is true that there is still a lot to be done. The Bosnian Central Government, with almost no power, still has to assume its attributes; the freedom of movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina is more rhetorical than real, and the refugee drama persists. Nevertheless, only a couple of months ago, no one would have thought that an advance like this would take place. The radical turn in the situation has happened after the conference of the Peace Implementation Council held in Bonn on the 10th of December, where it was decided that the powers of the High Representative should be extended so as to allow him to impose his decisions when the different parts fail to reach an agreement. The new Westendorp's powers have turned out to be an effective antidote against the preferred radicals' tactic, the prolonging ad eternum of the negotiations, as they have deadlines now. The Spanish diplomat has had recourse to his new powers in order to impose the common currency and the Bosnian Citizenship Law. The three parts have come to their own agreement on the vehicle license plates, under the threat of a new imposition. The license plates issue is essential for ensuring the freedom of movement, because the radicals perpetrate acts of violence against the vehicles which they recognize as belonging to the

other entity. The new license plates will not include any identification of your origins, only numbers.

“The truth is that the new powers are not as big as it is thought”, the High Representative told the ABC, “but the important thing is that the people imagine that they are large, and that impression makes them such. The politicians believe that I can appoint and dismiss as I wish, and they even ask me to impose decisions. The significant fact is not the power that is on paper, but the power than one exercises in a specific moment”. A very recent example is when the radical Parliament Speaker, Dragan Kalinic, asked Westendorp for a letter in order to justify himself in front of his companions by showing how his hands were tied.

The Bosnian flag

The new powers have also been of use in the case of the Bosnian flag, an issue of maximum “sensibility” . The Serb member of the common Bosnian Presidency, and Karadzic’s number two, Momcilo Krajisnik, offered as a maximum concession a flag that represents Bosnia on one of its sides and the Republika Srpska on the other, so it would be, in Westendorp’s words, “one flag or the other depending of the way in which the wind blows”. Finally, Westendorp imposed a commission of intellectuals made up of representatives of the three communities tasked with the designing of three possible flags that would not offend any of the sides. The President of the Republika Srpska, Biljana Plavsic, and the Prime Minister, Milorad Dodik, gave their support for the insignia, which left the radicals isolated when the Parliament made the final decision.

Intervening with the television

One of Westendorp’s decisions that had the largest repercussions, and that was not very well understood by some people in the beginning, was intervening with the local radical media, dedicated to sowing the seeds of hate. The occidental journalists in Sarajevo showed little understanding

for the spectacle of seeing soldiers taking the television transmitters. Nevertheless, this measure was probably the number one factor that explains the loss of the absolute majority of Karadzic's party, the SDS, in the Republika Srpska.

Running the elections on time was not an easy task either. In the case of the municipal elections of the 13th and 14th of September last year, to be boycotted by the radical Bosnian Serbs, Westendorp made a trip to Belgrade and obtained a promise from the Yugoslav president, Slobodan Milosevic, that he would receive help. Afterwards he had a a working lunch with Milosevic and Krajisnik, and then he asked the question. At the negative reply of Krajisnik's, Milosevic "ordered" him to authorize the elections, and he sent him immediately to the telephone to do it. When he came back to the table, he said that the order had already been issued.

But doubtlessly, the most important event in which the mediator had a key role was the drama that occurred on Sunday night, 18th of January, during the thirteenth hour of the legislative session, when the election of a new Bosnian-Serb Government was effected. The radicals dedicated themselves to make their speeches as long as possible in order to stall with the voting, until they eventually left the hall, knowing that the moderate faction would have all the required votes. Westendorp and Plavsic's colleagues saw that they were missing one more delegate, a Croat, who was already on his way back with international protection. The High Representative's protection team contacted the Croat official's protection team by radio, and they managed to make him come back, so the executive session was approved. In a recent meeting in Banja Luka, the gratefulness could be seen on the face of the Bosnian-Serb President while she assured Westendorp saying: "Without you, there would be no Government".

Now, the maximum priority issue for Westendorp is to make the moderate Dodik's Cabinet work, and he needs financial support for that. He has just obtained six million ECU, but at least

fifteen will be necessary. If the impoverished citizens of the Republika Srpska start to receive their late pensions and salaries, the fall down of the radicals in the next elections in September might be definite. For the High Representative, capturing war criminals is not the main priority, because this will happen as soon as Dodik's government gains strength.

A new climate

Maybe even more significant than the specific achievements, but less tangible, is the new atmosphere felt in Bosnia. Changes are perceived in the ambient. The arrogance of the radicals has disappeared, as if they feel that their time is approaching an end. The journalists who have seen Krajisnik recently are positive that they have never seen him like that: pallid, nervous, sweating. Westendorp is even worried that the SDS might disintegrate, making a void that could be filled by the radicals sponsored by the neo-fascist Vojislav Seselj.

Inside Karadzic's SDS there is a "moderate" current, that could eventually break the mob top management – made up by a mere dozen of individuals, according to Westendorp – and play the opposition role, a clue for the democratic normalization of the Republika Srpska. "If the party keeps opposing us, it will disappear," affirms the international mediator. A crucial challenge for the Spanish diplomat is the consolidation of the multi-ethnic parties before the September elections, apart from giving some contents to the Central Government.

An opportunity for peace

In comparison to the last year there is a great difference, taken as a whole, in that, even though there are important obstacles, a "window of opportunity" has been opened for the peace and the year 1998 will be decisive. Westendorp pinpoints the fact that there have been no terrorist acts, when it would have been easy to enter a spiral of repression, in the Northern Ireland style, that would have ruined the process of peace. This dispenses with the theory of the "ancestral hate" which served as an alibi to the international community when

it did not intervene during the three years, and enforces the theory that the war was created artificially by specific individuals, and who are small in numbers.

The ambient in the streets of Sarajevo seems to announce that the normality might not, after all, be a chimera. The caricature of Quixote leading the normalization process is in a lively commercial neighbourhood of picturesque wooden shops, where the burnt down skeletons of the buildings and the parks converted into cemeteries seem to be light years one from the other, although there is scarcely a hundred meters between them. It may be symbolic for the passers-by.

Providing contents to the central Government, consolidating the multiethnic parties and getting the moderate Republika Srpska Government going, are the three big challenges in this decisive year.