Article about Carlos Westendorp, High Representative:”Our Man in Sarajevo”

Carlos Westendorp

This diplomat is fighting for returning the peace to Bosnia for nine months. He is re-inventing a State from the ashes of the war and of ethnic hate. Seventy-two frenetic hours with the Spanish mediator who can bring back hope to the Balkans.

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Photography: Tino Soriano

"Alpha Tango for Double Pope: start preparing activity. "Gold" is heading towards the car. All the teams alert." The civil clad "Guardia Civil" transmits an incomprehensible litany through their transmitter next to their wrist watch. A short barrel of their sub-assault MP5 rifles can be seen beneath their coats, a sophisticated weapon used by the Spanish security forces in the assaults on ETA terrorist organisation hideouts. "It is ideal for short ranges", jokes a sergeant.

Half a dozen agents enter a state of maximum tension. The scarce number of passers-by in the Sarajevo morning move away from the scene. An armored Audi waits with the engine on. In seconds, everything is action. "Gold" appears ignoring the Protection Team. That carnival has been a part of his life during these nine months. Impeccable gray suit, blue shirt, an Hermčs tie: 61 youthful years, falling hair, an acceptable sun-tan. "Gold" is the code name of Carlos Westendorp, Spanish diplomat who is trying to transform the Bosnian smashed territory into a state which would be "secure, democratic and in good economic condition", according to his definition. In the Foreign Ministries, they say it is an impossible mission. He prefers to think that it is "almost impossible; if it were downright impossible I would not be here. I am not stupid." Nevertheless, the weight of the 44 months of war, 250,000 dead, 60,000 raped women and three million displaced persons is sometimes unbearable.

What is behind one of the most delicate positions, most contested by the powerful of the planet, and with one of the longest titles (High Representative of the International Community for the Application of the Dayton Peace Agreement in Bosnia)?

On paper, the High Representative is the person in charge of coordinating the civilian aspects of the application of the peace plan signed on 21 of November, 1995 in Dayton (USA). An agreement that outlined a unique Bosnian state made up of two entities with a high self-governing capacity: The Croat-Muslim Federation (with the 51% of the territory) and the Republika Srpska (49%).

The High Representative
(11Kb)

In the day to day activities, Westendorp is a kind of conjurer that has to be capable of supervising the fulfillment of the peace agreement; being an interlocutor between the Bosnian authorities; being the West's policeman, with 34,000 soldiers ready to make his law be carried out (1,300 Spanish soldiers); the transmission belt between the necessities of a broken country and the generosity of the richest institutions. The mediator for the return of the refugees. The re-inventor of a State unwanted by a 90% of its population. With powers for deciding upon laws and removing officials from office. "A small dictator", according to the ultra-nationalists of any colour. "You do not want power handed to you on a platter. You just seize it if you use this power, well, no-one will contest it. I have already achieved this." For Javier Solana, the NATO Secretary-General and his boss when Westendorp occupied the job of State Secretary for the European Community, "the civil aspect of Dayton is indispensable for peace and security in Europe, and no one could do it better than him. For the civilian structure to take off, a leader is needed. That is Carlos."

A Socialist “in no hurry” and against the Franco regime, the man behind the position is a diplomat; very diplomatic. And politician; very political. These two elements combined make him the perfect mediator. The facilitator of the entrance of Spain into the European Union, he was “king for a day” when he was named Foreign Affairs Minister in December 1995, after the election of Javier Solana as the NATO Secretary-General and before the socialists’ defeat. “I knew about the appointment the night before and I could not say no.” He managed the Spanish diplomacy during six months. With the PP’s arrival to power, he was transferred to a comfortable destination: Ambassador of Spain to the United Nations. Had Charlie West’s dusk already come? “Being an ambassador to the United Nations is really boring if you are not in the Security Council. And when you have had a life full of action, it is impossible to aspire for less. I thought that a quiet family life would compensate for the professional losses. But it was not so. I am sorry. I like action.” On May 30th, 1997, he was named High Representative. His predecessor’s task, the former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt, had ended with a definite failure. It was not a good legacy. Carlos Westendorp landed on the tortured Sarajevo airport on June 19th, 1997. The show was just beginning.

18:00 Star Salad.

March 2nd. Franco-German military base in Ilidza, a suburb of Sarajevo. In the outside of the building where the meeting will take place there are several armored vehicles. Inside, the man in the blue coat almost does not stand out within the half a dozen uniforms that surround him. The president of the NATO Military Committee, the General Klaus Naumann, has just arrived in Bosnia to have a meeting with the High Representative. Next to him, the US General Eric Shinseki, commander of the international Stabilisation Forces in Bosnia (SFOR). The diplomat, a son of a Spanish aviation pioneer, knows how to deal with army officials with dexterity. The army officials have been his every day interlocutors for the past nine months. “Nothing of what I am doing could possibly be done without the support of the Americans and the international military presence. For how long will our forces have to remain here? We have to create the conditions so the war does not happen again. I calculate between three and five years is the necessary time to create the irreversible critical mass of the peace process. After that, only a certain military presence will be required, like the one in other parts of Europe, with bases either inside or outside of the State’s territory, but not a massive force. We are going to impede another war in Bosnia ever again.”

07:45 Home alone.

March 3rd. The High Representative's shave is meticulous. First, the razor crosses mechanically his face. Then, with his glasses on and in front of a magnifying mirror, the diplomat eliminates any rebel hair that could betray its master. After a sixteen hour working day, Carlos Westendorp will still appear well-ironed, his tie tied with the same pressure as that morning.

His house is not a home. The drawers are empty. There are no books. The refrigerator is a bleak plateau. The only signs that it is inhabited are the photos of a blonde child and a young lady. They are Amaya and Lucas: his spouse and his three year old son. "They are the ones that cannot stand easily my mission in Bosnia. And I have a horrible time when Lucas tells me "don't go daaaaaddy" every time I leave Madrid for Sarajevo."

The building, a small house situated in the Muslim neighborhood, is rented from an industrial of that religion that had to flee when the war started. Today it is shared by the High Representative, two bodyguards surrounded by closed circuit monitors and a maid. Westendorp shows pen markings and dates on the wall paper in his bedroom: "These were the markings that the owners made which indicated how tall their son was every year. The last one is dated 1992, exactly when the war started. When I arrive at night and I see it, it fills me with great sorrow. In Bosnia you learn to see your problems as small things…."

10:00 Mission in Brcko.

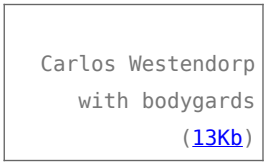
Sergeant Schmidt, of the Bundeswehr (The German army), stands to attention in front of the Representative. The Sikorsky GH 53G helicopter is heating up its engines in the Rajlovac base in order to take Westendorp to the North of Bosnia, to Brcko. A hot spot left to the hand of fate according to Dayton. According to the peace agreement, an arbiter will have to decide upon the future control of this town (of Muslim majority before the war) that dominates the Posavina corridor: the nexus of union of the Bosnian Serb territories.

The continuous plane journeys around Bosnia are the best moments for thinking for the High Representative. Far away from the continuous meetings of his office (a Babel tower of 212 employees, full of technocrats, with almost no practised politicians), and the ringing of the telephones, the air is a good place for balancing the situation.

“On our arrival we had a double success: we managed to quarter the specialist police that intimidated the population, and we seized, with military force, the television transmitters of this country in order to make them stop emitting the radical consigns that predisposed the Bosnian Serbs against their neighbours. These were two crucial acts for ending the fear. In December, the Bonn Conference reinforced my powers. And I was able to make several decisions upon which the two entities could not decide together: insert a new, unique currency, design a flag and draft a citizenship law. That has been an incentive for them to fix other issues by themselves, like the common license plates: an unthinkable consensus just a couple of months ago.”

13:00 The Serbian chess

“Carlos has the virtue of winning you over when he is showing you his best smile”, is the definition of the High Representative’s mood by Victoria Garcia, his right hand in Sarajevo. It is true. Westendorp’s figure does not break down in times of crisis. He can reprimand a police chief with a cordial gesture. Javier Solana emphasizes his “relaxed style and humour in the complicated moments.”



Carlos Westendorp with bodygards (13Kb)

In Brcko, Westendorp has the opportunity to practice that ability with the local Bosnian Serb authorities. He asks them for information. As always. >From what are their salaries to the conditions of the roads. And he listens. And he jumps in the least expected moment. In the middle of a sleep inducing meeting, he can let a question out and surprise his rival. The information is his weapon: with it he puts pressure on the politicians or he asks for funds for the international agencies.

Poverty is felt in Srpska. It still smells like war. Next to the Mayoral building, the bridge over the river Sava that connects (or separates) this territory with Croatia shows artillery impacts. A poster forbids vehicles weighing over 60 tons to cross it. There is not a soul around. An all-terrain vehicle of the Spanish Army shows itself. Two uniformed mayors make photos. Having been discovered, they give no explanations to the journalists.

Westendorp meets the authorities. In the meantime, Fernando Mansito, Ambassador to the High Representative, makes a sketch of the “Westendorp method”, a passionate game of chess with the Bosnian territory as a board. (Mansito was his alumnus and he was one of the people that called him Carlos Vistendior because of his elegance). “His work is a complex puzzle of bobbins for which infinite patience is necessary. A slow work in which he threads through contacts, taking advantage of cracks, making consensus, entering the heart itself of the problems. With all the information and the support of the international community, he jumps off. And he does not fail.”

The laboratory design with which the High Representative directed this year the election of a young and pro-western social-democrat politician named Milorad Dodik, the Prime Minister of the Republika Srpska, opposing the ultra-nationalists of the Bosnian Serb Radovan Karadzic, is good proof of his method. He had information, internal support and an international blessing. The operation was a triumph. And with Dodik as Prime Minister and Biljana Plavsic as President, today the Bosnian Serb entity is looking towards the West. And the economic help for the reconstruction and development has started to come.

Another chess move in which Westendorp is immersed today is creating a social-democratic platform of different multiethnic parties as an alternative to the powerful and monolithic ethnic nationalist parties: the Serb SDS, Croat HDZ and Bosniak SDA (name that the Muslim Bosnians are called). A bet for ideologies opposing radical nationalism. September 12, in the crucial general elections in Bosnia, the success or failure of his bet will be seen. He is a gambler.

18:00 The story of a flag

The High Representative holding the new BiH Flag (17Kb)

The protection team sweat copiously while their boss walks through the ruins of the press building of Sarajevo to pose for photos. In Bosnia there are still a million anti-personnel mines that cause 150 deaths every month. The experts advise not to approach ruinous buildings. Today, Westendorp does not listen to them. That night, the journalists find out that the campaign hospital in the base in Rajlovac, has a permanent reserve of his blood type (O+) considering the possibility of an assault on him. The High Representative touches wood.

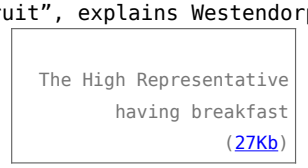
Westendorp poses with the new flag of Bosnia. “Over several months, the Group of Intellectuals debated with no success the new design. They even told me to use the Serb on one side, and the Croat-Muslim on the other. I was fed up and I asked for three designs. And I took this one. But I did not like the colors. And I thought it over and over again. Late that night I asked for a Pantone sampler (a color guide) and I changed them for Europe blue, and a shiny yellow for the triangle, that represents the three entities as the shape of the state. This will be, from now on, our flag.”

Four currencies still circulate in Bosnia: the Kuna, in the Croat sector; the Dinar in the Serb sector; the Muslim Dinar among the Bosniaks. And without forgetting the German Mark, which buys everything, and the recently created coupon (printed and financed by France), which Westendorp believes will consolidate itself as a unique currency. Its creation was another puzzle. In the end, the High Representative did not use the emblems and landscape to avoid suspicions.

12:00 The money tap

Wednesday 4th. The powerful of the world give away millions as they eat lettuce and ham sandwiches. Westendorp has a meeting in Banja Luka (the capital of the Republika Srpska) with the Economic Task Force, the group of institutions that finance the reconstruction in Bosnia. According to the experts, 1.5 billion pesetas are necessary in order to get this country going, a country that used to have 4.366.000,00 inhabitants (43,7% Muslims, 32.4% Serbs, 17,3% Croats). Its GNP is still half of that in 1992. The High Representative informs that the process of democratisation in the Republika is on a good path. And the World Bank and the European Union are giving 20.000 million pesetas. It is only the beginning of donations if the Bosnian Serbs behave.

"In order to have a prosperous economy you have to end corruption. And if you kill that practice, you finish off the war criminals without a single bullet. In order to defeat Karadzic and his mob, and take them to the International Tribunal, their finance sources have to be terminated and these are exclusively corruption sources. If the actual Dodik government consolidates and if it manages to control the ultra-nationalists, Karadzic will fall down like a piece of ripe fruit", explains Westendorp.



The High Representative having breakfast (27Kb)

Radovan Karadzic, ex-leader of the Bosnian Serbs, one of the most eagerly wanted war criminals and the maker of the "ethnic cleansing", controls, through two enterprises, the monopoly of the cigarette, the alcohol and the petrol in the Bosnian Serb entity. That is how he maintains his mercenaries. "But if you take away these financial resources from him with an anti-corruption unit, you take away his tool of power. If not, this country will never look up again. The collective culpability of the nation has to be taken away, identifying the responsible persons for the war crimes."

For now, the International Tribunal of the Hague has had little work and a minimum of infrastructure. A half dozen of war criminals of the Former Yugoslavia war have walked through its halls. More than 70 are now walking freely around Bosnian territory. Even Karadzic still has support. It is not difficult encountering posters in the streets of Republika Srpska with a clear warning to the soldiers of SFOR: "He means peace; don't touch him". "Having the killers free, Bosnia cannot function and even less can the refugees return", explains a European diplomat.

19:00 Lights and shadows

The High Representative at SFOR, (20Kb)

“In this job you always step forward, and right after that step back. That puts you under enormous stress. You continuously make decisions, and you continuously receive bad news”. The shadows of this day are several articles in the Croat press criticising acidly the High Representative’s labour. They say he does not want the state; that he wants to make it a protectorate. “The Croatian president, Franjo Tudjman, is getting nervous because he sees an evolution in the Serb part happening and that now we have the Croats in our focal range”, explains Mansito. “They bark at us, then we ride”.

Having recently arrived from Banja Luka, where Robin Cook, the British Foreign Affairs Minister, praises the High Representative in front of the two journalists (“everything that has advanced in Bosnia is thanks to Carlos”), Westendorp has a difficult role in his Sarajevo office: applying, for the first time, the power that has been given to him by the international community to depose state officials that oppose Dayton. The chosen one was Pero Raguz, the Mayor of Stolac, a small town in the limits of the Croat zone, where a pilot program promotes the return of a hundred Muslim families which had to flee during the war. Raguz, a Croat nationalist of the HDZ, has done everything he could in order to make the experiment fail. “The return of thousands of families depends on the success of Stolac”, says the head of an NGO in Mostar.

The vision of the Muslim neighborhood in Stolac explains the fear of the local refugees. Most of their houses have been destroyed; they are all full of shots from the Kalashnikov academy of dramatic and motion picture arts-47. BMR vehicles of the Spanish Army armed with machine guns patrol trying to prevent aggressions. The road shows us the holes where land-mines used to be. The 84 Muslim families from the return program have suffered a relentless pursuit. And the Mayor did not move a finger in order to stop it. “What this guy is doing can not be allowed”, says Westendorp. “But these are isolated acts. If this country gets going, if the elections are a success, the returns will accelerate in one or two years. We have to abandon our fear.”

Walking like a lion in a cage around his big and cold office, Westendorp dictates the destitution letter. The same afternoon, General Wesley Clark, the Supreme NATO Commander in Europe, has promised him all the necessary military support. The Westendorp method starts rolling: he has the information, international support, and a calculation of the options to succeed. “If the mayor refuses to go, we will send the police; if the police refuses, we will de-certify it and we will ask the HDZ, the mayor’s party, to look for a replacement; if it refuses, we will delete it from the lists. Only if everything fails will we use force.”

In the middle of the discussion, horrible news arrive; riots in Kosovo, the Serb region with an Albanian majority. There are dead people. “A civil war could hurt us badly. It could exaggerate the nationalist feelings in Bosnia. That would make our peace process take a step back. And we should take into consideration the huge population movement and displacement that would occur in case of a conflict. But this Milosevic is capable of entering a war now !” The night is full of black omens. Only a couple of hours later Westendorp knows that he has won the match with the Stolac Mayor.

22:00 Farewell in the headquarters

(19Kb)

Westendorp gets sad. He has almost spent a year with four of the Guardia Civil members that go back to Spain. “And who knows if we will see each other again”. They are his family in Sarajevo. Specialists in close protection, special operations, explosives. The 20 “Westendorp’s men” are the elite of the Guardia Civil. Their captain (whose unit freed Ortega Lara, recently kidnapped by the ETA) explains that the security measures of the High Representative are similar to those of the King of Spain or President Aznar. “Differences? The worst thing in Bosnia is that there are a whole lot of weapons around. And our worst enemy are the grenades”. “In every car there is a Kalashnikov”, confirms an American agent of the International Police.

The Spanish protection team made a kind of headquarters in the precarious installations that the Franco-German brigade has lent them in the SFOR base at Rajlovac. That is where they sleep and work. Their sangria and paellas are already mythical in Sarajevo. This farewell night there is tortilla, salad and French wine. “French? We are getting soft”. Westendorp loosens his tie and forgets his mission for a couple of hours. There is an informal awarding of NATO medals to the agents that go back to the Pais Basque. The eyes of the super-men get slightly wet.

For how long will the High Representative stay in Bosnia? “Most people come here for six months or a year. I will, when I think I have given a significant improvement to the process, consider I have ended my mission. The elections are on September 12 and they can set the beginning of a new era. That is where all the focus will be”, describes Carlos Westendorp. The car of the Representative vanishes in the sinister “sniper’s alley” in Sarajevo. On one of these walls you can still discern the mythical graffiti from the times of war: “Welcome to hell”. Westendorp’s work consists of making that sentence a bad dream of the past.