

Die Presse: Interview with High Representative Christian Schmidt

By Wieland Schneider

Die Presse: Milorad Dodik, who plays a strongman among the Bosnian Serbs, has threatened to expel you, saying that he will no longer allow you to enter the other part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republika Srpska, which is under his control. How can you carry out your duties under those circumstances?

Christian Schmidt: By stubbornly sticking to my tasks and mandate. I attribute part of Mr. Dodik's behavior to the Balkan rhetoric. Then there is another part that has a serious background. With my last visits to the RS, I have shown that I go where I think it is right place to go. It must be clear to Dodik that he is throwing himself out of the game by this behavior. There is nothing much left of all his tirades from two or three weeks ago. However, a clear message remains and that is the one of challenging the Dayton Peace Agreement, and no one has the right to do that.

Die Presse: What will you do about it?

Christian Schmidt: Basically, Dodik needs to be protected from himself. Anyone who questions Dayton will get a clear answer. I do not want to go into details as to all the instruments that are at my disposal. But I will repeat what I said before: all options are open – everything that is possible under the Dayton Agreement and the Bonn Powers (author's remark: broad powers that the High Representative has, from passing laws to expelling politicians).

Die Presse: A court in Bosnia and Herzegovina has confirmed an indictment against Dodik for abuse of office, as he refuses to

publish your decisions in the RS Official Gazette from now on. Is that leading to an aggravation of the situation?

Christian Schmidt: My friendly advice is that the RS should not be taken as a hostage to ensure some personal interests. I know that even those in the RS who sometimes have to publicly applaud as a sign of approval, do not support what Dodik is doing. He is now playing with the idea of passing a rigid law on non-governmental organizations in the RS. This is where it becomes clear: someone wants to go in the direction of autocracy. It is our responsibility to protect civil and human rights in the Republika Srpska.

Die Presse: What role has Russia played in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the attack on Ukraine? And what is Dodik's role here?

Christian Schmidt: With the war in Ukraine, the Western Balkans has gained a geostrategic importance that, in essence, does not correspond at all to the political and economic size of that region. It is a potential area for Russian intervention. Dodik is trying to do his business with Russia. Truth be told, Russian President Vladimir Putin sometimes receives him for a visit. I think that Dodik has very narrow abilities to do something strategic. The only thing he can do is to cause problems, whenever they want it in Moscow.

Die Presse: Bosnian intellectuals and multi-ethnic forces have criticized that the Election Law imposed by you favors nationalist parties.

Christian Schmidt: My intention is neither to favor nationalist groups nor to block multi-ethnic parties. When I arrived, the Federation (author's remark: the other part of the country, besides the Republika Srpska) had a non-functional Constitutional Court and a care-taker Government that had been in power for more than four years. My task was to break those blockages.

Die Presse: You could act on the basis of the so-called Bonn powers. But are these powers, as well as your High Representative's mandate, still up to date? Are the activities of the High Representative undemocratic?

Christian Schmidt: Things the Dayton Agreement envisages with its control instruments are, ultimately, undemocratic. However, it was created under the impression of the genocide in Srebrenica and with the idea that something like that must never happen again. This is something that is often happily hidden. Every time I check whether or not I will use the Bonn powers. It is always better if you do not have to use them. But, if there is no more functionality, then something must be done. Previously, there were proposals for changes to the Election Law for the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina. And what came of it? Zero comma zero, zero. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, blocking is a parading sport discipline. However, if the Dayton institutions should still be effective, and in order to ensure the country's transition to democracy, the following question arises: Have we, in the International Community, and as those who have responsibility in Bosnia and Herzegovina, done the right thing over the recent years?

Die Presse: But what does this mean for the future of the country – and in relation to Dodik's constant threats to separate the RS from BiH?

Christian Schmidt: Can we allow that? That someone like Dodik wants to turn a part of the country into the Transnistria of the Balkans? Bosnia and Herzegovina without the International Community, without the EU and the USA, would not strengthen people's feeling of security. Let's go through an experiment, just in our minds: We say that the times of the High Representative and other international control bodies should have ended up a long time ago. We pack up and leave. So where would we be in two years? Many, many people in Bosnia and Herzegovina would then also pack their bags. The exodus from this country has already taken on dramatic proportions, tens

of thousands of people leave every year. Although, in principle, I do understand the criticism directed at my mandate, I must say at the same time: it is the brutal reality that the reconciliation process has not been completed in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Die Presse: But how long should international institutions remain in place?

Christian Schmidt: Of course, things cannot stay like this for the next 20 years. However, we still need them for the transition to the European integrations. It is also not enough to say: in a few years all the countries of the Western Balkans will be part of the EU. We must offer intermediate steps. If nothing significant happens for young people in the next five years, a better rule of law or the transition to the EU, we will lose a part of the population that brings dynamics to the society. And this will happen to such an extent that it will become even more difficult to overcome the traditional narratives of nationalism.