

Nacional: Interview with HR Christian Schmidt

By Zrinka Vrabcic Mojzeš

Nacional: You came to an official visit to Croatia, how do you assess your conversation with Prime Minister Plenković, who was your host?

Christian Schmidt: I think the conversation with the Prime Minister was very constructive. It was not a meeting open to the public, but we talked about the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the impact it has on the whole region.

Nacional: Are you satisfied with what you heard in Zagreb?

Christian Schmidt: For now, I am just gathering information, getting to know the positions and different views on the situation in BiH. Namely, I understand that without, I would say, the good will of the environment in the region, and that includes Croatia as a reasonable partner, of course Serbia and other countries, such as Slovenia, where I also had a conversation with the President, it will not be possible to make progress in BiH. I think that is a good foundation for future cooperation.

Nacional: There is a general belief that both Serbia and Croatia interfere too much in the internal affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and that, due to their national interests, they are preventing progress of that country, primarily politically.

Christian Schmidt: I think it is very important to involve all countries in the region in resolving this situation. I recently talked with Serbian President Vučić on that. I had a good conversation. I see that President Vučić's intention is to bring Serbia closer to EU membership. And the European Union is based on European values. They include the rule of law.

Nacional: Some in BiH did not like it and criticized you for that meeting...

Christian Schmidt: I would say that if you are not criticized in BiH, something is wrong. It is very interesting that you get comments about everything from each side. I came here as a neutral mediator, but not without the intention to improve the situation, not for politicians, but for the people. Isn't it worrying that 70% of young people want to move out of BiH? Is that healthy? Of course not. Sometimes I wonder what kind of topics are being discussed at all, shouldn't we sit down and agree on how to improve living conditions in BiH. In that sense, I see the possibility of a positive influence of both Zagreb and Belgrade.

Nacional: When you were appointed to the position of the High Representative in BiH, you announced that you would advocate a civil state, which caused negative reactions in Serbia and Croatia and among the leaders of national parties. The Croatian Foreign Minister also reacted sharply, saying that the function of the High Representative was a thing of the past and that BiH was not a place for experiments. Milorad Dodik thinks similarly. Were you offended by those reactions?

Christian Schmidt: I wasn't offended. I've been in politics for over 30 years and I've learned to distinguish debates about some old issues from what's fundamentally important. And it is important, I repeat, that the people feel comfortable in their own country, and that neither the international community nor politicians in BiH can determine that. It is up to the citizens to decide on that, primarily by the way they vote. When I read the non-paper sent by the Croatian Government to the EU Council of Ministers, with reference to the position of High Representative, I was not too worried about it.

Nacional: Do you stick to that thesis of building a civil state, or has something changed in the meantime? Namely, both countries - Serbia and Croatia - insist that this is still not possible. That the time isn't right.

Christian Schmidt: I don't think you can define BiH as a civil state without taking into account the 3 constituent peoples, as defined by Dayton, as well as those who declare themselves as Others.

Nacional: Well, that's exactly the problem. What about Others?

Christian Schmidt: As for Others, there is a clear judgment of the European Court of Human Rights, not only in the Sejdić-Finci case but in several of them, which needs to be implemented. As we have seen, the Venice Commission as well as the Council of Europe invokes this decision. I also think that it is important that all BiH citizens can vote for their own representatives, regardless of their ethnicity. I think we have a lot of work ahead of us, to avoid any possibility of electoral fraud or vote abuse. This is an important part of the debate we are having and I am convinced that the reasonable people of BiH will focus on it and they will have my support in it.

Nacional: Both the US and EU insist on Dayton, as the constitutional foundation of the state. Do you think the time has come for Dayton to change, in line with the new circumstances and in what way?

Christian Schmidt: If you look at the time when Dayton was signed, and my political memory dates back to those times, and if you take into account the circumstances – Dayton's first intention was to stop the war. That happened and Dayton's greatest success was precisely the cessation of the armed conflict. The idea of sitting down now and considering what can be done better than that is not politically feasible. And that is why I am convinced that now we need to work on improving the organization of the state based on the structures of Dayton, and the best way to achieve this is for BiH to move on the path of European integration. I think that those who claim to have "ownership" over the political situation in BiH, namely the people, should use that ownership. And those who are blocking the institutions at the moment are not doing so. They are just proving their weakness. Political progress cannot be achieved by expecting people from outside to bring something new and change things, it is the citizens of BiH themselves who should work on that. This is a very important message, as people expect much more from the international community than from their own representatives. And one should make them wonder – are they doing the job they were elected to do successfully.

Nacional: Are you disappointed because Milorad Dodik did not attend the first meeting with all three members of the Presidency, which you organized following your takeover of office?

Christian Schmidt: Disappointment is not a political category. Dodik does not need to please me, and I will not try to please him, but all of us together have a responsibility and we have to fulfill our obligations. In the end, it is not the High Representative who decides, it is the people who decide. And people want to see a peaceful future.

Nacional: Many Bosniak media, as well as BiH Presidency Chairman Zeljko Komsic, resented your statement at a recently held Conference in Germany, where you said that representatives in the BiH Presidency should be elected by the constituent peoples, i.e. that Zeljko Komsic was "elected more by Bosniaks than by Croats", and that Croats "must be given an opportunity to feel represented, so that everything does not end in some form of a boycott." Many saw this statement as your support to the policies of the Croatian Government and Dragan Covic. How do you comment on that?

Can I answer that with just a single comment? I have never been to a region in the world where every single sentence, or just a situation report, or a comment, is being interpreted in so many different ways. I am surprised with so many different interpretations of things that I did not say at all. So, I learned that there are people in BiH who have a better insight into what is in my head and in my thoughts than me. Sometimes I read things I did not even know about myself. My friendly suggestion is – sit down, do your job and do not play with my words. These people are only giving suggestions on how to maintain the status quo. On the other hand, there are those who block the work of the institutions and do not want to take the responsibility for the State, which originates from the Dayton Agreement. This is the issue we need to discuss. Personally, I prefer to participate in a discussion than to be the subject of comments that have nothing to do with reality.

Nacional: Both the Croatian Government and the Croatian President believe that Željko Komšić is not a legitimate representative of the Croat people in BiH, because he was elected by the Bosniak votes. How do you comment?

Christian Schmidt: This is related to the election situation in BiH, and it is not up to me to comment on it. However, I believe that a future legislative solution should be discussed among those who play important roles in BiH. You will not hear from me that I am advocating for this or that side. I am not the one who will impose the new election law. Let's be honest – 26 years after Dayton, there are those who criticize the fact that the international community is still present in BiH. At the same time, the very same people are saying – please implement the new election law. I get so many suggestions about what I should do with the Bonn powers, sometimes from the same

people who claim that we do not need the Bonn powers. I believe that you need to look at yourself first sometimes, before you comment on someone else. Many people expect a lot more from other people than from themselves. This is perhaps one of the key issues in BiH. The ownership over political processes does not only mean that you decide for yourself, but that you also stand firmly behind what you have decided. And not only to wait for the international community, that is, the European Union, to arrive and solve your problems. I am not the only one who has to be asked for something to be done – I also ask others to do something.

Nacional: The Croatian Government and the President insist on changes to the Election Law, and in line with such changes, only representatives of the constituent peoples could elect their member of the Presidency of BiH. Is there a chance for the Law to be changed? For whom should those who declare themselves as Others vote? They do not have a representative in the Presidency...

Christian Schmidt: Am I right in saying that this topic has been discussed for many years? Personally, I have not been involved in these processes so far. I know that the European Union is trying to help, as well as the United States and other international institutions, and that there have been various proposals. As I said, I have not participated in those conversations. Let's wait and see what is going to happen. It is certain is that the next parliamentary elections are going to take place in October 2022, and it would be good for people to find out in the meantime what is the way in which they can vote and what is the system like. As for the Others, as you know, it is not technically or intellectually easy to square a circle. That is why I think it is necessary to follow the verdict of the European Court of Human Rights, in the case of Sejdić-Finci. I must note that nothing changed during the last 12 years. Why? I am not addressing this question to the former High Representatives, but to those who were supposed to negotiate. All in all, it is a little embarrassing for me, because I think that the people and their representatives should decide on this issue.

Nacional: You mentioned the boycott. Namely, the Serb member of the BiH Presidency, Milorad Dodik, has been blocking the work of the BiH institutions for months, and will continue to do so until such time as the decision of your predecessor, Valentin Inzko, to imprison all those who deny the genocide in Srebrenica, which was also confirmed by the Hague Tribunal, is revoked. How do you comment on that?

Christian Schmidt: What country do I come from? I come from the country which has a lot of experience with war criminals. I was personally involved in the process of establishing the International Nuremberg Principles Academy and the construction of a memorial center. So, I have some personal experience there too. Some ethnic groups view this decision as a verdict against their people. Which is not true. It is a verdict against an individual, an individual war criminal. But those individuals who committed crimes must be sanctioned and have been sanctioned. I am not personally surprised by the Law itself but I am more surprised by the way in which this issue is being discussed and debated. This shows that the society as a whole has not yet begun a discussion, perhaps there are only just a few people who have started this discussion, about a way to build a better future knowing the truth about the past. I doubt you will find anyone who will tell you they lived a good life in the last decades. Almost everyone wants to have a better life. I watch and listen, and I expect suggestions from all these people about what needs to be done to avoid violence in the future. This is the work that needs to be done during our times, and not looking back.

Nacional: How do you intend to resolve this blockade?

Christian Schmidt: Is it up to me to solve it? I expect from those who have an obligation to work for the State to do their job. My advantage is that I now have a very clear position supported by all elements of the International Community. I think one or the other can exert pressure.

Nacional: Can Vučić help it that and influence Dodik?

Christian Schmidt: As I said, I had a good conversation with President Vučić. Whether or not he can influence something – I do not know, and I do not know if he has discussed it with Dodik.

Nacional: Milorad Dodik does not hide his ambitions to separate the Republika Srpska from BiH, which the international community is opposing. Are you afraid of some new conflict, in the wake of Vučić's idea of the "Serbian world", and is there a way to stop it?

Christian Schmidt: The "Serbian world" does not refer to the idea of "peaceful separation" that Dodik is talking

about. I have traveled all over the region and have not come across anyone, among my high-ranking interlocutors, who supports this idea. The comment I heard most often was: there is no "peaceful dissolution". As for my mandate in BiH, I am here to oversee the existence of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a single state, in its territorial integrity. Experienced people here say: be careful. The dissolution in this region means a new war. We do not want new conflicts, we want to loosen up the borders as much as possible, because that is the European concept. This European slowness is perhaps irritating and angers people sometimes, because those complicated Europeans do this and that, but in the end, our continent experienced the dramatic 20th century, and afterwards it experienced the dramatic post-Tito's times in this area, but we have still managed to ensure more than 70 years of peace within the European Union. That's why I say - give me your suggestion. We don't live on the Moon, but in a specific region that is a part of Europe. And therefore, don't speak about a separation, that is, a dissolution of BiH.

Nacional: The problem is that Milorad Dodik feels that Belgrade is the capital for the Serbs in BiH, and, likewise, Dragan Čović thinks that Zagreb is the capital for Croats. With such political leaders, how can we talk at all about the existence and unity of BiH as a state and Sarajevo as the capital of the state?

Christian Schmidt: You mentioned that the ethnic leaders feel something or think, but we must speak about the reality. And the reality is that Sarajevo is the capital of BiH, which consists of 2 entities. And that's all there is to it.

Nacional: You said you would do everything for BiH to go on the road of European integration and that you would work towards the goal that young generations do not see an enemy in everyone who belongs to a different ethnicity. How are you going to achieve this if political representatives in BiH do not accept you personally?

Christian Schmidt: We are talking about young generations, not politicians. I visited Sarajevo and the region in very dramatic times, which I remember well. I would like to return again to my experience in my own country - when we worked a lot on reconciliation and regulation of relations between France and Germany, or, for example, between the Czech Republic and Germany. My parents belonged to the generation that survived WWII. Of course, we asked questions about the past, but it was more important to turn to the future. From my personal experience I know you have to go among the young people and talk to them. Young people must know what happened, but, at the same time, build a future without hatred and prejudice against others, who are not guilty of anything, just like them. I think this is the way we need to work in BiH, but, I must admit I am not too happy with what I've seen. Namely, different curricula for schools attended by children from the three constituent peoples, and different narratives, are not good. Of course, it's not within my powers to change this, but the EU, UN and others are working on it. Recently, I visited a school in Sarajevo and I was pleasantly surprised by the fact that there are better examples of school curricula. The most important thing is that nobody should be taught that they are better than the other ones.

Nacional: The young mayor of Sarajevo, from the SDP, Benjamina Karić, tries to work on reconciliation and cooperation between the politicians of the young generation. She declares herself as Others. Have you had an opportunity to meet her?

Christian Schmidt: Yes, I have spoken with her. Those are ideas that should be developed further. I am very pleased to have her as a partner in BiH. I think this is the direction in which we need to go and that it is necessary that young generations of politicians should take responsibility. That's why I hope that the young generations, who live in an open society, in particular those who can go to the EU, will familiarize themselves with new ideas and take them to their country when they return, instead of the continuation of the existing state. Therefore, BiH must be made a better place for living, so that young people will return. Anyway, what about the rule of law in BiH? Are there guarantees that the majority of judicial or administrative decisions were made without political influence? If this is not the case, and most frequently, it is not, we must change this. This is one of my duties in my mandate, and I will surely not only get friendly support for this but also criticism, to which I am used. But, we must work on this.

Nacional: Željko Komšić participates in the work of the UN General Assembly, but Dodik denies his right to represent the state there. Who is it then that Komšić represents?

Christian Schmidt: Željko Komšić is the current Chair of the Presidency of BiH, i.e. head of state. It is really a pretty rare occurrence that the UN SG is criticized by someone for inviting a state to the General Assembly of the UN. Please call the UN SG and check the answer to this question.

Nacional: You announced you would use the Bonn Powers - when and in what situations?

Christian Schmidt: I did not say I would use them, I just said they are a part of my tools. Do you know the saying of the well-known German football player Franz Beckenbauer? He always said: „We will see what happens“.

Nacional: Have you seen the film Quo Vadis Aida?

Christian Schmidt: Yes, I have had an opportunity to see the film and talk to the director Jasmila Žbanić. The film is pretty impressive, and for me, the last sequence - which shows life after the war - is the most important. In it, you can see a school with a multiethnic group of children and this is the key for me. What these young people will take into the future and what tools we need to give them so that they can behave differently from what we were watching before in the film, when former school mates shot at one another.