

Politika: Interview with HR Christian Schmidt

By Jelena Cerovina

"I insist that everyone return to the institutions, but that is not my obligation. Return is the obligation of those who were elected to work for the benefit of the people. Boycott is a sign of political weakness, not a sign of political contribution," - Christian Schmidt, the new High Representative of the International Community for Bosnia and Herzegovina, told Politika, commenting on Banja Luka's decision not to take part in BiH institutions until the decision of Valentin Inzko, who imposed changes to the Criminal Code and introduced the denial of genocide and war crimes as a criminal offense, is withdrawn.

Politika: How do you plan to resolve this issue?

Christian Schmidt: I am sure that they will join, that is, that they will return to the institutions and express their political position there. If not - whom would they take as political hostage? The people, young and old ones, those expecting improvement of their conditions of life. I think that there are some possibilities for us to cooperate, not through public statements, but by working on issues that need to be resolved.

Politika: Your predecessor practically caused this crisis by imposing the Law. Could it be withdrawn because it was not a step towards the reconciliation of people in BiH?

Christian Schmidt: I don't think any of us want genocide or war crimes to be praised. We all need to know the past in order to work for a better future. No legislation in the world will and shall blame a people, only individuals.

I would suggest that we all sit down together and think about what our task is, how to lead the younger generations on the path of reconciliation. So that the past remains in the past, not in the future.

Politika: Srpska does not accept you as the High Representative because, as they say, you do not exist for them since you do not have mandate a United Nations. On what do you base your belief in success if Banja Luka maintains that position?

Christian Schmidt: I cannot prevent people from having a strange interpretation. But, of course, I am very confident, and certain, that I will have a successful mandate. I just had talks in Belgrade and I saw that there is a willingness to work and cooperate with the international community here. I was appointed by the international community and will act within my competencies.

Politika: How do you see the growing economic cooperation between Serbia and Republika Srpska. Why is it perceived in Sarajevo as a threat?

Christian Schmidt: I would suggest that Bosnia-Herzegovina as a whole has close economic cooperation with its neighbours. But also that Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as other parts of the Balkan six, cooperate economically. My idea is that the Open Balkans initiative can in a way be integrated into the economic cooperation that exists within the Western Balkan six on their way to open Europe. Bosnia-Herzegovina shall not be excluded.

Politika: But Sarajevo is reluctant to join the Open Balkans initiative.

Christian Schmidt: Being a part of the Open Balkans initiative does not mean denying the possibilities of cooperation within the Western Balkans six, indeed it is a way to reconcile both initiatives. But this is a decision of its own. Regional Integration includes all six; EU and Chancellor Merkel has put a lot of work and ideas into it.

If there is a rejection due to an expected Serbian dominance in the regional cooperation, this could be seen as an invitation to proactively make initiatives a broader issue to the whelth of all.

Politika: So you are more inclined towards the Western Balkan six?

Christian Schmidt: Yes, I would prefer to have the Western Balkans 6. I see that the Open Balkans initiative is accelerating the cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkans. So, if we could somehow extend it from three to six countries, by adding Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. That would be the best. I

would suggest that we do not see this ideologically, but that we work together to prepare for the membership of all these countries in the European Union. Well instrumentalized initiatives could open paths of economical success for all.

Politika: The Constitutional Court of Bosnia-Herzegovina has disputed the right of Republika Srpska to regulate the ownership of agricultural land and forests in its territory, with regard to the construction of the Buk Bijela hydroelectric power plant. Such a decision caused dissatisfaction in Banja Luka.

Christian Schmidt: I am dissatisfied because the state-level legislation, which was called upon to regulate this area, failed to do that. As someone who worked on reforming forest-related legislation in Germany, I know how complicated this issue is.

However, this position of Bosnia and Herzegovina requires the activity of the state, and after that we can talk about the integration of the interests of the entities, cantons and municipalities. But it is essential to have the state-level law. In the meantime, everyone should respect this decision of the Constitutional Court.

So, we should not complain, but work on finding a legal solution. So, let's sit down together at the state level and in the state parliament and institutions and find a practical and reasonable solution.

Politika: Your ambition, like that of your predecessors, is to bring Bosnia-Herzegovina closer to the European Union. Do you think that, for the path of Bosnia-Herzegovina towards the EU, it is necessary to reduce the competencies of Republika Srpska, which is what they claim in Banja Luka?

Christian Schmidt: Honestly, I feel that there is too much talk in the sense "I am not being treated well and that is your problem". A state consists of compromises and I think there should be an equally balanced approach, including the competencies of the entities. For now, I do not see any pressure when it comes to the competencies of the entities. I personally come from a federal state, Germany, and the sixteen states have different opinions on certain issues all the time. As a Bavarian, I can tell you that there is a constant discussion about that.

I would ask and call upon everyone not to complain about this, but to define it and try to work on it. But the challenge during accession will certainly be the competencies of the state and the competencies of the entities. For now, the blockade of the state institutions also means that the entities cannot function normally. And this is the problem. We sit and work, and we don't complain. By the way, for now, when it comes to EU accession, there are 14 priorities. So this is the place for hard work.

Politika: Do you believe that Bosnia and Herzegovina will get the status of an EU candidate, for which it has been waiting for several years?

Christian Schmidt: What has been worrying the European Union so far is the approach to these 14 priorities. So, it is not up to the European Union, but to the BiH institutions to show that they are ready for such negotiations, which I see as feasible. I agree with those who said during Ursula von der Leyen's visit that they would work on it. I see a good opportunity.