

I HAVE TO WALK A THIN LINE ABOUT THE NAME

A career diplomat who has been in the region for 16 years, and who made a decision to come to Macedonia. He is the first diplomat sent by Brussels with a joint mandate of the cabinets of the presidents of the European Council and the European Commission, Herman Van Rompuy and Jose Barroso and who has the authority to speak on behalf of everyone and for everyone in the Union. This is how the Danish diplomat, Ambassador Peter Sorensen describes himself. In the interview for Dnevnik,, his first interview for a Macedonian media after he took over his new position, he says that his task is to be a link between the EU institutions and the authorities in Skopje and Brussels. He sees himself as a small wheel (cog?) in the machinery that makes this communication possible.

- "It is my personal goal for you to start the membership negotiations with the EU before I leave. This is a chance for a successful story and that is why I took this job," Sorensen says.

- Do you have a problem to use the name Macedonia?

No, I don't have a problem to use the name Macedonia privately. I use it all the time. But, as a representative of the EU, when there is a clear policy on the name, I am trying not to make the things difficult for the Union, because I represent all its members. At the same time, the name "former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" is a lengthy name, I know its connotation here and I fully understand that it is problematic for the people. That is what I am trying to overcome, not to offend the people, to help as much as I can, but at the same time to make sure that those whom I represent are pleased with me and to feel that I represent the joint position. So, I must walk a thin line and please everyone, but my goal is to be efficient as an EU representative. And in order to achieve this it wouldn't help me much if I keep on saying "Macedonia" all the time. So, there is a difference between me as an official and me as a private person.

The opposition SDSM will participate in the elections, but it is not coming back to the Parliament and will not negotiate with the ruling VMRO-DPMNE. Does this mean end of the political crisis in the country and can the elections be a solution to the problems?

We will have to wait and see. But, one must be aware that the elections are important for achieving the political criteria, which, as the last EC Progress Report says, call for continuation of the political dialogue. That is why the elections are so important. We will monitor how these elections take place and whether they are in accordance with the international standards and criteria. OSCE/ODIHR will monitor the elections. Of course, I cannot predict the outcome of the elections, but I can say that for us it does not matter who wins and who loses. We will work with whoever is in the government, but what is important is for the elections to be democratic. When it comes to the statement of Branko Crvenkovski that they are not returning to Parliament and that they will not negotiate with Prime Minister Gruevski, I must say that the political

dialogue can also continue after the elections. When we prepare the Progress Report, we take into consideration everything that has been happening in the past 12 months, including how the political dialogue took place. For us, a fundamental principle is that the political dialogue exists and that it ought to be present everywhere.

How will the elections influence on the EU integration process, having in mind that a lot of time will be spent on campaign, elections, constituting of the parliament and the new government?

There is always that risk when elections are taking place in a year with crowded, tight agenda of activities and when you have to deliver plenty, so one may say that some time will be lost. However, it all depends on how the administration will deal with this situation, before, during and after the elections. This, on the other hand, depends on the government. But, for us it is clear that 2011 is a very important year for the entire region and we do not want to lose the momentum in the EU agenda.

This year the Progress Report will be published somewhat sooner, which means that it is already under preparation. Can we have the job done in such a short period?

We will see, but I think it is possible. From the preliminary talks I had with the political representatives, it seems that despite the elections they have a plan how to fulfil the tasks defined in the last Progress Report. The final assessment will come in October, although you know that we continuously monitor what is happening, what the Government is doing, the civil society, the parliament and everyone else and then we will send our input in May.

Commissioner Stefan Füle said that the country ought to maintain its reform agenda, to achieve further progress with regard to the political dialogue, the reforms in the judiciary and the public administration, as well as in the field of fight against corruption and the media freedom. Do you think that, having in mind these messages, we are still on the European path?

Your problems are no different from the problems of the other applicant countries. We always say that the work on these issues must continue, even after a date for negotiations is given. And whether you are on the European path, we cannot assess now, this assessment will come in the final conclusions. I can say that the authorities are aware and they are working on it, so let us see the result first. All these issues are mentioned in the reports for the other countries as well, which means that the political dialogue is not an exclusive issue for you only. The question is whether the elections will stop this entire process, and that we will have to see.

There is an impression that the EU enthusiasm towards us is declining. To which extend the attitude of the government towards the western diplomats, including Erwan Fouéré, Simone Filippini and Philip Reeker influences the impressions about our country?

I do not think that you are dropping down on the EU agenda because you are doing something you are not supposed to be doing. But, the fact is that the Western Balkan

region is in fact competing with the rest of the world and at this moment the attention is focused elsewhere. First, we had the financial crisis, then the Euro crisis, and now the situation in North Africa. I would not say that the interest in enlargement is declining, but it is clear that when the region produces good news it is easier to put it higher up on the agenda than it is when it is not moving or when there are negative impressions. I have no doubt whatsoever that the Commissioner is committed to the region. And about the attitude towards the diplomats, what can I say? It is true that I have not heard something along this line happening elsewhere.

Macedonia has had a candidate status for over five years now, and for two years it has had a recommendation for opening of membership negotiations. Some European envoys have said unofficially that the recommendation is not given once and for all. Can we lose the recommendation if we do not have progress in the reforms?

I do not want to comment on unofficial statements. It is a unique situation when you have a recommendation, which puts you in a good position, but at the same time you have a bilateral issue that you are dealing with now. It is important that no matter what happens with the politics here, the attention to remain focused on the political criteria. The implementation of the political criteria is a condition for a recommendation for opening of negotiations and it is crucial for these criteria to be implemented.

After the meeting with Prime Minister Gruevski, Commissioner Füle said that it is of crucial importance for the name issue to be solved. On the contrary, there is a risk for the country to stay behind in the integration process. What does this mean?

It means that one of the key things for the EU when it comes to the countries that want to join our family is to maintain good neighbourly relations. For Macedonia it involves finding a mutually acceptable solution to the name issue. That is what it means, that the name issue ought to be solved, and for the staying behind, it is clear that the process will not go as fast as we want it to if this issue is not solved.

Box one:

The name issue is a bilateral issue. And if this is the EU official position, it is clear that we do not plan to get involved. And, I do not see a role for the EU institutions in this. For the time being, the EU position is that the name issue talks are led under the UN auspices.

Box two:

I see you in the next group of negotiating countries

You have been working in this region for a longer period and you know the circumstances very well. You know where is Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia. Where do you see Macedonia?

I see you in the next group of countries to start the membership negotiations. Indeed, I see you there because we monitor the readiness, the capacity on all levels, our interest. The Croats perhaps are moving faster, but I expect that you are in the same group with Belgrade and Podgorica.