

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Western Balkans, HC 1094

Monday 30 January 2023

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Members present: Alicia Kearns (Chair); Sir Chris Bryant; Drew Hendry; Henry Smith; Royston Smith.

Questions 1 - 22

Witness

I: Christian Schmidt, International High Representative to Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Examination of witness

Witness: Christian Schmidt.

Q1 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to this session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Today we will be looking at the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We are joined by the High Representative, Herr Schmidt. Thank you ever so much for joining us. I do not know whether you want to open by introducing yourself briefly before we go into questions.

Christian Schmidt: Thank you very much for the opportunity, dear colleagues, especially as I had the opportunity last year to attend your meeting and your Committee has made a visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina. What has changed in between? I am glad to say that things have moved in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are some dynamics that we, unfortunately, did not have last year, especially because we had the blockade of the Republika Srpska representatives in the person of Milorad Dodik, the then member of the presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, now the President of the entity Republika Srpska. They came back to the institutions, so it was possible to have the elections in October 2022 somehow successfully.

We have not seen as much electoral fraud as we have seen. I am not quite sure that we—"we" means Central Electoral Commission—and others could detect all of these cases, but overall we see that this has led to functional Parliaments and now to an Executive, especially on the state level. They have engaged in intense coalition negotiations and agreed on coalition platforms. On 25 January, just last week, the BH House of Representatives approved the new Council of Ministers. This is a coalition including the troika, the so-called reform parties, SDP, NiP, Naša stranka, and others, Osmorka, eight parties, HDZ and SNSD.

The formation of the governing coalition on a federation level remains challenging. This is because the right to present a slate for the Government refers to the three members of the presidency, which are elected at the House of Peoples at federation level. One of those, the Bosnian representative, seems to be expected to be a member of SDA. As this is a non-governing party now, in opposition, it is to be expected that the slate takes some time to be dissolved.

We will wait and see, but they have just passed forward the first decision, a good budget, at federation level and at state level as well. The federation and state have improved very much in terms of functionality.

Regarding candidate status to the European Union, I do not know how I should refer to this. I do not think that this is actually under discussion in your Parliament. They were granted the candidate status to the European Union last December. This is a political appointment. This is not starting the negotiations and there remains a lot to be done on legislative issues, but we hope that this brings some switch in the commitment towards European integration. That is similar somehow to opening them up for



better welfare and assistance in the region, especially because people are in fear of war after 21 February last year. They have the experience of war, so, in their mind, as it was only 27 years ago, they want to get some security. They feel that this is a part of their security.

Chair: I might move us away from the EU and allow Chris to come in on that point about cohesion and moving forward from the last 27 years.

Q2 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Hello, High Commissioner. It is good to welcome you, spiritually as it were, to the Palace of Westminster. It is a delight to think that Bosnia will be going through all the chapters of the acquis communautaire, but, as you say, it might take a while. Can I take you to a simple question about how optimistic you feel? I remember being in Sarajevo in 2003 and then again in 2015. My anxiety between those two years was that more people now lived in their separate silos, ethnically and religiously. They went to the same school, university, supermarket—everything—and that was making it more difficult to see a progress towards nirvana.

Christian Schmidt: This is the challenge and the problem. In recent years, with some deficiencies of the Dayton constitution, we could not manage to bring this joint community together, creating and favouring having a joint position on political integration with the European Union, or on security, or whatever you want. I would not say that there is a division of the people, the constituent people and the others, but of the political class. Many in the political class have played the easy game of narratives that are ethnic nationalist. I think that this can be opened somehow with European integration.

I agree that the experiences of getting negotiations chapter by chapter will not be that encouraging, so we need some developments in between, so the people see that there is progress. This includes, I hope, the promise that they have given themselves on the political level, on 12 June last year, to the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, that they would go for reform of electoral law and the constitution, and that this will happen.

Up to now, we have a series of decisions of the European Court of Human Rights going against discrimination against parts of and minorities in the community and the society that have not been implemented. They need a majority in the political and parliamentary bodies. This is only for them. This cannot be implemented by me or by the Peace Implementation Council. I hope that the momentum of bringing it into European integration as a goal could improve the situation.

Having received the last figures from the United Nations about the decrease of the population, this is the key problem in this country, which unfortunately has not yet been politically addressed. The politicians like to talk about some different positions about electoral law and so on, but they do not address what we are doing to keep the young people in. We have such a dramatic brain drain out of this country. Referring to United



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Nations findings, it ranks on top all over the world. We need attractive measures in between, so that young people decide to stay in their country and keep the dynamics that we slightly see today.

Q3 Chair: You touched there on progress. Your electoral reforms were controversial at the time, because people went to the voting ballot under one system and then their votes were counted in a different way. Can you talk us through how the electoral reforms you brought in helped further the Dayton peace agreement?

Christian Schmidt: De lege ferenda and de lege lata—what one should do and what we have done. What we have not done, due to the constitutional situation and decisions of the constitutional court, is what I would have understood to have worked better, given the Sejdić Finci case. This is the most famous case. The head of the Jewish community, Mr Finci, and the head of the Roma community, Mr Sejdić, are both not able to run for candidate of presidency. They do not belong to the constituent people. This has to be over then. Fortunately, the constitutional court has decided that this has to be done first at state level and then at entity level.

I tried three things. The first is to make elections happen, because they were taken as part of the negotiations as a tool of tactical advantage for any party. They ended in May without having a budget foreseen for the election, so that they could not do the simple thing of tendering to produce ballot papers. It was on me to make an executive decision about the budget for the elections. This worked out. Everybody accepted this, to have more transparency, as part of the OSCE/Council of Europe proposals at the Venice Commission, but it did not come to electronic counting. Some regret this. I would be in this line, because it was too late.

We had no constitutional court working at the level of the federation. Why? For three years, no new judge was appointed. They need to decide about the so-called national vital interest panel of seven judges. If you only have five judges overall, it is difficult to get seven out of them. I ordered, with a very short timeframe, that they should now do it, and this has worked out and has been implemented.

I also answered an open discussion about the House of Peoples composition. No proportionality is being seen. This is, in extremis, 23 people voting for one out of 17, and 80,000. It needs to be lowered and more weight needs to be given to the caucus. This is not a decision of the Parliament, of the delegated people in the House of Peoples. They are not directly elected. They are delegated in a complicated and fairly democratic way. There should be a national way to rethink the future of the function of this House of Peoples. I would have liked to think about a more important role of the so-called others.

Q4 Chair: It is quite clear how the others have now been given more voice. That is absolutely right. It is wrong that anyone of any other religious background or ethnic group was unable to have that. How have the



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reforms that you brought in on that election night moved us away from ethnonationalism? Why did they only affect the federation and not Republika Srpska?

Christian Schmidt: One should not over-describe the decision. This was a decision about functionality. You cannot expect that the High Representative solves all the problems of the last 27 years, especially because annex 4 of the Dayton accords is out of my reach. This is beyond reach. One could say, "Why did you not include the entity of the Republika Srpska?" It is precisely because of the dysfunctionality that occurred in the federation and meant that, in the last legislative period, no Government was elected. No presidency was elected. Nothing was there. This is the fiercest disregard for democracy. I looked to bring back functionality and this happened.

Now we have, in the shortest time ever, or close to the shortest time ever, a functioning Parliament and we are on the way to get a presidency. They have to go about a Government. This is not answering this key problem you refer to, which is indeed the most important problem beyond the brain drain, about getting the composition of the parliamentary structures closer to non-ethnic, if you will.

I have done one thing. I have reduced the possibility of going for a national vital interest. There was a general clause that is only at the federation level. I put this off. There is now a list of cases where a judge decided and it was brought to the court, but we have to reduce the overall influence of national vital interests, because it is key that development goes in that direction politically. So far, I have just increased the number of delegates to this House of Peoples from 17, 17, 17, seven, to 23, 23, 23, 11, with a slightly proportionally higher increase in the others.

Q5 **Drew Hendry:** Guten tag. I am interested to question a little bit further on the electoral reforms. You will be aware that the initial electoral reforms leaked in July 2022 were very widely criticised. On what basis did you formulate them?

Christian Schmidt: If I want to stay here and not be criticised, it is better I look for another job. This is one of the most complicated jobs. If you will just hear me on this, to be very clear, I got criticism comparing this to apartheid. Friends, colleagues, that is impossible. I take personal offence at this. This is not the case. I said that to them. This is about bringing everybody back on stage, and I delivered. They got back on stage. They have to go on their way. In this country, if you wait for consent—for 15 years in this country, all groups, facilitators of the international community, the European Union and the US, have worked to get electoral reform. The last meeting was in March up to May, shortly before the elections. There are those criticising. I have some understanding that they are saying, "How could you do this on the eve of the elections?"



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Q6 **Drew Hendry:** Let me ask you about timing. Given what you have said, notwithstanding that there was widespread criticism that some people would have said was justified—I have heard what you have said—why did you choose to press ahead in October?

Christian Schmidt: You accept that I would absolutely refuse any acceptance of such a criticism. Let us play fair in this country as well. What I have done is referring to the constitution. This is what I wanted to say. You said 22 July and 2 October.

Q7 **Drew Hendry:** No, I just said that the initial proposals of the electoral reforms were leaked in July 2022 and that started the criticism. The question I have just asked you is why you pressed ahead in October, notwithstanding what you have said, in the face of such criticism.

Christian Schmidt: Like all drafts, these drafts are not the final decisions. It was composed of four different approaches. The fourth was the most disputed. This is about how to regain functionality of the House of Peoples and electing the presidency of the federation. I felt myself committed to this position, by the way. SBA and the Peace Implementation Council have encouraged me to broker this.

I come back to this 17 and 23. With 23, you have a little bit more possibility, with 10 cantons and one/one/one, with the rule of one Croat, one Serb, one Bosniak, one other from each canton. They have a very different size, so this is also one of the problems that I see that I could not fully answer. I would invite us to answer this. A small canton, such as Goražde, has a population of 25,000. Out of them, there are 23 Croats.

Q8 **Drew Hendry:** What do you intend to do to deblock the Government formation process at federation level?

Christian Schmidt: I have deblocked it.

Q9 **Drew Hendry:** You have deblocked it.

Christian Schmidt: Yes. Are you asking which Government are coming now?

Q10 **Drew Hendry:** Yes. The question was about the formation.

Christian Schmidt: It is not on me to form the Government. This is an experience you have sometimes in this country. In the first part of the sentence, people in Sarajevo were saying, "Do not interfere with Bonn powers, but, if you interfere, please extend your Bonn powers". I would say that this is not on me.

We now have a situation where the Osmorka holds the majority in the House of Representatives, which is directly elected. In the House of Peoples, the caucus—we are talking about the federation—of the Bosniak, SDA has managed to get a majority with some coalition partners, one that changed camp very surprisingly. There were two wins—two times is a lot—that went in favour of the SDA. This is the situation. Properly, they



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have three people in the presidency and they have to decide on a joint slate for the Government.

Q11 **Drew Hendry:** Will you have to amend any of your own amendments to see this process move forward?

Christian Schmidt: Coming exactly to this issue, "Why should you not have done more?" I agree that one could have thought that, because this tiebreak is not answered in the constitution of the federation. It is answered in the constitution of the state, in the Dayton constitution. If two of the three agree, like we had now, in the Government building, it is sufficient for the legal status. This is not the case for the federation, and I would think this has to come to negotiations between the parties and probably to the court.

Q12 **Henry Smith:** It was an honour to meet you a year ago and thank you for appearing before us today. Quite a few members of the Republika Srpska Government are under both US and British sanctions for anti-constitutional acts that threaten the integrity of the Bosnian state. Have you considered using your Bonn powers to remove any of these individuals from office?

Christian Schmidt: Sometimes, I would like to be like Paddy Ashdown. He did it in quite another environment. This environment included a very strong presence of the SFOR. It included an international police structure. This is not only about implementation but about the political environment. I would not exclude it, but I have not done this yet.

By the way, thank you to the UK for having the sanctions. I would prefer that we should think about more financial conditionality. The Republika Srpska is not the richest part of the country. It needs money and support. Instead of Dodik's decision to award an order to Mr Putin, Sberbank has closed its branches in Sarajevo and Banja Luka. The European Union has blocked the money, as has Germany, and we are working and talking with the International Monetary Fund and others to think about how they could go on. This has more far-reaching consequences, instead of just removing one person.

I have to say that 9 January was incredible. They performed a kind of parade. This was a parade where it was a kind of demonstration of the Serb identity. The Republika Srpska is not a Serb entity. This is a multi-ethnic entity. 9 January derives from Mr Karadžić and his announcement in 1992. This is a case and this is what I said. Next year, 9 January will not happen in this way and take place as it has done, with all that we have to think about, including those who are going there to organise this.

Q13 **Chair:** That is very reassuring to hear. A number of us were gravely concerned about the scenes we saw on 9 January, particularly the proximity to Sarajevo. There is no question that the singing of genocidal songs and celebrating mass murderers is absolutely vile and contemptuous. I was relieved that no European politicians chose this year



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to attend to provide their support. It is very encouraging to hear that we will not see that sort of activity again next year. It is vital that any of those who organise them are removed from any positions of authority they have, given the meaning, the context and the reason for why they are doing that. The next question I wanted to ask you was about exactly that, so it is a relief to hear that.

I would be interested in hearing your view of how severe Russian influence is in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the moment. Do you believe that any specific political parties are particularly prone to Russian influence or are sympathetic to the Russian regime? I am sure that you can think of the comments to which I am referring to that give me concern about the influence of Russia within the country.

Christian Schmidt: Absolutely, and there are a lot of reasons for this. The SNSD, the party of Mr Dodik, shows a lot of relations to Russia, including himself. I would like to distinguish this from the cultural, historical references that are made among the people, but they all share the fear of being involved somehow in the Ukrainian war of Russia. My concern is that there could be some easing the way of the Russians, and they have a Russian influence, for example as we have seen now in Belgrade. The Wagner Group has a recruiting office in Belgrade, not with the acceptance of President Vučić, which I very much appreciate.

I made very clear last week that, if there is any indication that Wagner or others are trying to pull young people of Bosnia and Herzegovina into the conflict, this is a case where the international community should stop this. I have not seen that there is a lot of actual influence. The financial means of Russia are limited. I would take this for the moment, because I expect that they want to keep the relations, in the sense of using those potentially in the future, so we have to be very aware that there is not anything developing that causes insecurity for the people here. So far, it is especially the Wagner case.

Q14 **Chair:** When you say that the international community would have to take action if the Wagner Group tried to recruit actively or build a presence within Bosnia and Herzegovina, as we have seen take place in Serbia, where there is no question that the Wagner Group has established an enormous base, what sort of actions would you expect the international community to take to protect the population from the Wagner Group?

Christian Schmidt: We have no evidence that this is the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There is the framework of awarding an order to Mr Putin then declaring that one would not follow the decision of the General Assembly of the United Nations and what the Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina has done in supporting the decisions of condemning the war. There is more and more distance coming, and the last decision came to abstention of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This could prepare the political ground for getting more flexibility for those people like Wagner and political representatives from Russia.



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Q15 **Chair:** When we were in Bosnia, I remember us talking about the significant Russian disinformation efforts taking place in Bosnia. I am concerned that the activities of Russia within the Balkans have not reduced since the renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine. They seem to be able to successfully recruit actors to their cause. Dodik awarded Putin Republika Srpska's highest honour only back in January.

There is no question that Dodik is Putin's puppet in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but even the HDZ, the Croat-aligned party, has voted twice against sanctions against Russia, making it the only country in Europe that is not joining the sanctions regime. We have the Night Wolves, the Russian motorcycle gang, on the streets of Bosnia and present at the Republika Srpska march. I am concerned that there seems to be a significant amount of relationship-building between Putin and political forces on the ground.

Christian Schmidt: It is not only on me, but it is as well on me to make very clear to the new Government that we expect another position and a clear position on behalf of the people in this country. A joint international position is needed on this. So far, I hear reasonable voices—for example the member of the presidency Bećirović, who has recently been in Brussels with NATO as well. It is an endeavour where we have to tell them that they have to deliver.

In all seriousness, I share the concerns and I am prepared to act in preventing this. I need support. This is European, UK and US support. So far, I see that we are performing not that badly.

Q16 **Royston Smith:** I want to pick up a small point. There has been some criticism against you that you have favoured Croat parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In fact, you received an award from the Croatian Prime Minister. How would you answer those criticisms?

Christian Schmidt: The award of the Croatian Prime Minister was given to me years ago. This referred to the time when I, as Member of Parliament in Germany in 1991, publicly supported the independence of Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This should not matter in anything.

There are those who are thinking that I have not taken a balanced approach simply to bring them out of their place and to functionality. I did not interfere in the elections. By the way, I did not fully answer the 2 October question. I decided, as I have seen that some are making a political campaign issue out of my envisaged decisions, that it is better to have those after the closure of the polling stations and before counting. All these decisions of the voters have been as they are.

HDZ remains dominant in the Croat caucus. SNSD, unfortunately, as the opposition thinks, in the Serb caucus and the SDA have a split situation, as they have lost their participation in the presidency, Bakir Izetbegović, and performed normally at the elections. Honestly, with all the checking,



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I cannot see where I have given an advantage to anybody, because the figures remain exactly in the same proportion as they have been before.

One could say, "You have not solved the problem of the differentiation ethnically". Yes, this is right, but this would need us to come to a reform of the whole system of the House of Peoples, which I suggested. In my recommendations, I suggested that we should think about having a more regionally oriented chamber and not composition of ethnic people only. There is no answer to where the cantons, for example, can contribute to decision-making in the federation.

Yes, the constitution is complicated. No, I have not changed everything. No, in my understanding it is not the case that I have given preference to anybody. I have to see that these slight changes in this moment, by the way supported by a lot of people—there is not only criticism—mean that the functionality is back. This is good news. There remains a lot to do, and I am absolutely with those who say we have to go for a more non-ethnically differentiated structure.

This whole Dayton structure is a highlight of checks and balances, with a lot of US experience. These checks and balances, where you have a layer, territorially, of two and a half, with Brčko as a condominium, but ethnically not harmonised—they can never be harmonised—are a little bit much. It probably fits in Switzerland, but not in Bosnia and Herzegovina. If you lift this from one moment to the other, this would become more revolutionary than evolutionary. I would not recommend going for revolutionary decisions in this country, because you do not know exactly where it leads to.

Q17 Chair: I want to take you back to the award that you were given. It feels that Bosnia is sometimes built on rumours and destroyed by rumours and gossip. It is really important to give you a platform to cover some of these charges that are laid against you. As politicians, the worst thing is when people talk about you but you do not get given the chance to challenge. The reason why there has been concern, or why the award you were given keeps coming up, is because it was in 2020 and, obviously, you became High Representative in 2021. I think the bigger question is because the award is held by a number of war criminals convicted of crimes against humanity at the international tribunal on Yugoslavia. That is why this comes up time and time again when you have discussions online. When you became High Representative, did you consider giving back the award or did you question taking it in the first place, given some of the people who have received it in the past?

Christian Schmidt: I am sorry, the acoustics are not good.

Chair: It is important for you to be able to set the record straight. You received the award in 2020. You became High Representative in 2021.

The reasons why people are so frustrated about this, or use the award of this order so often to attack you, is because previous recipients have



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been war criminals convicted of crimes against humanity at the international tribunal on Yugoslavia. It is really important that you are given the chance to set the record straight. As politicians, there is nothing worse than not being allowed to answer something when it is constantly being said about you. Did you consider giving it back or in the first place not taking it, given those links?

Christian Schmidt: Sorry, I have to say this. This order was awarded, I think, in 2012 or so.

Chair: It was 2020.

Christian Schmidt: No, as a member of the German Government, I am not allowed to take and I did not take this order. This was when I was out of Government, if you want to go into the details of this. This was about the independence of Croatia, like Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I do not use this order and I do not see that this is the key. In this country, I have had a lot of experiences that do not make me very confident that things are taken in a reasonable way—a lot, yes, but also not—bringing me into a situation where I would decide due to any relations. I have been in the chair of the European People's Party. HDZ and SDA are members of the European People's Party, so I have not understood where the arguments of those you are referring to are so easy. I did not find out the reason why, I said that this is apartheid.

Q18 **Chair:** We all get things said to us that are unacceptable—accusations of all sorts—but I was talking about the Order of Ante Starčević. The reason why people draw such attention to the order given is that, in October 2022, the Prime Minister of Croatia, speaking to the Croat Parliament, said that, after years of trying to force through certain decisions, they had been unable to and turned to you as High Representative. Essentially, they say that your delivery of the electoral reforms was a diplomatic victory for Croatia.

Given the sensitivities around electoral reform, it is concerning if one Government, a foreign Government, is trying to claim success for what has taken place within the country. It creates this narrative around the electoral reforms that we do not want to see. I wonder what conversations you have had to challenge that narrative and to challenge a foreign Government claiming that, in essence, you are delivering them diplomatic coups.

Christian Schmidt: I would like to refer to my decisions. I am not here to testify anyhow, but to talk with the Parliament. I can assure you that I have made my decisions on my own. Tomorrow, I am planning to go to Belgrade. I am talking to all member states in this region and I think that it is necessary.

If there is any doubt about my personal reputation, I would take this as not very polite towards me, because those who know me should refrain from things like this. If not, I will think about what I have to do to



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underline that. I have not made use of anything. I have had contact with all in this region, including at the European level, as I am referring to as well, at the level of the Peace Implementation Council, SBA, and with a lot of countries. Yes, there I am. I have made my decisions.

Q19 **Chair:** Sure, but I am asking about how you feel. The frustration is that foreign Governments are trying to suggest that they have influenced your decision making. That is the question.

Christian Schmidt: This is something that I would suggest not to do.

Q20 **Royston Smith:** Have you made any assessment about how much influence the Serbian and Croatian Governments currently have on internal matters in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Christian Schmidt: This is something that is very important. You have several cases of interference with the internal matters of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This refers to their status as signatory states of the Dayton agreement. For example, last year, in 2022, we have experienced a lot of interference from the President of Croatia. That resulted in a situation where, for example, the NATO enlargement of Finland and Sweden was linked by the President of Croatia to the change of electoral law in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These have nothing to do with each other and I was thankful to see that the Parliament in Zagreb did not follow this idea. They agreed in this.

We have close relations with Serbia, especially because there is, like with Croatia, double citizenship. This makes things not very easy. I see that neither Croatia nor Serbia has so far done anything not to accept the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. With 9 January, Mr Vučić has stated that they would respect this. I would really recommend this, because this is a part of the Dayton peace treaty and anything else would be dangerous to the peace. This is very normal.

I would suggest that we get more internal co-operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There was a proposal to have this Open Balkan initiative or the western Balkans regional arrangement together. Sometimes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is one part supporting this and one part supporting the other. There is a need to achieve, on state level, better consent of the constituent people—or their representatives, not of the people. This would lead to more internal decisions and leadership and itself prevent some of these not helpful influences that we have from other countries.

There has sometimes been an idea of having some kind of three countries. This includes Turkey as having a special relationship. I would not suggest doing this. This country has to go on its own. To your question of whether I see that they have too much influence, I would say yes.

Q21 **Chair:** As you work with the British Government, which obviously have a historical commitment to Bosnia and Herzegovina, are there any specific



asks you have made of the Government that have not been delivered on, or any asks that you would make now, in terms of making sure that we make progress away from ethnonationalism towards stability and reducing hostile foreign advances? What can the British Government be doing more of?

Christian Schmidt: This gives me an opportunity to thank the United Kingdom for its steady commitment to developing peace and security in this country. There is the diplomatic high-level caring for the western Balkans, and especially Bosnia and Herzegovina. In terms of security, this means the framework of NATO and in looking to sanction some attitudes that are, disturbingly, leading the country in the wrong direction and should be answered. I am thankful for the support on functionality that I have got and I would ask to have this in future more.

There is one thing I would like to add. This is very important. Potočari Srebrenica is the memorial site. We have to go to an extent. Now, after 30 years, we have to make it possible for the younger generation to understand about the genocide and what has happened there. This is not sufficient. I see the educational system and caring for a nationwide legal structure and societal structure promoting commemoration and education for the future. That is important. If the UK could play a role there, because of some renewed flexibility and independence, I would ask and like to have some support. There has been implementation, but I am just on the way to follow the decision of my predecessor, Christian Schwarz-Schilling, who implemented Srebrenica as a state level area. I will contribute to this as well.

Q22 **Chair:** That is perfect. That takes me to one question I meant to ask earlier on Bosnian state properties. There is a lot of discussion in the media about plans to transfer Bosnian state properties, military sensitive state sites, to the secessionist authorities in Republika Srpska. This would breach Bosnian constitutional courts and impede accession to NATO. Are there active discussions on doing this?

Christian Schmidt: I will take the opportunity to state that all these rumours about me making a kind of special deal with Dodik about state property are complete nonsense. I am obliged in Agenda 5+2—this is my mandate—to care for state property and defence property solutions. I am working. Last year, I blocked an illegal RSNA—the assembly of RS—decision. There is now, repeatedly, another legal attempt to put it on to the entity level. Due to a decision of the constitutional court, it has to be on state level.

Unfortunately, Mr Dodik plays the game to say that anything that we are talking about in terms of state property is about the existence of Republika Srpska or others. That is the same complete nonsense. He has indicated that, at the moment I propose state legislation—I can only propose; it is not for me to decide—he will go for autonomy.



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“Cool down”, I say to everybody. After 10 years of non-doing, we are now going to start to solve the problem that, up to now, in this country, you have real estate where nobody knows to whom it belongs after Yugoslavia. This is me coming out of a country that has had the need to re-adjust legal property issues as well. I know about what I am speaking about. Yes, we have to talk with all in this case and get them to sit at a table, but I do not know who has, in a destructive way, made these media stories that I would have been, in a secret way, together with Dodik drinking slivovitz.

I am sorry that I am doing this at this level, but be assured. Sometimes at the political level of discussion one has to answer on this, so this is what I would say to them.

Chair: That is very helpful. As I said, rumours build and destroy Bosnia, so it is very helpful to have clarified that, so thank you. On your point about education, we are all united as a Committee. We would want to be able to support that in some way. Remembering Srebrenica does amazing work. It is about preventing the weaponisation of grief and preventing the undermining of stability for political gain. We have to move away from the ethnonationalism that continues to scar a country that is still healing.

Thank you ever so much for your time today, Herr Schmidt. We are really grateful. It is really good to be able to talk to you. All of us hope to see further progress. We will continue to keep an eye on it in the UK. Thank you ever so much.