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INTERVIEW

JORGE FUENTES

DIPLOMAT, WRITER, PAINTER AND FIGHTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

JORGE FUENTES MONZONÍS-VILALLONGA, a doyen of Spanish diplomacy, who is, as the Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, one of the most important ambassadors accredited to Zagreb, is the author of numerous books who also practices painting

JORGE FUENTES MONZONÍS-VILALLONGA graduated from three faculties and received a Master's Degree in International Studies

Interviewed by: Robert Bajrusi

“Journalists in this country recently proclaimed me the second most important diplomat among all ambassadors accredited to Zagreb. I think that they overstated it a little and unnecessarily gave me too much significance”, said Jorge Fuentes Monzonís-Vilallonga, Ambassador and the Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia. Although the media hold him to be even more important than the representatives of the U.S., Great Britain or Russia in this country, Jorge Fuentes does not like to be assigned such significance. After all, this is no news to him. He has been a diplomat for 38 years and held a number of important duties during that time, from participation in the CSCE Helsinki Conference, through the work in Spanish embassies and missions in Belgrade, Tunisia, New York, Washington, Sofia and Brussels, and since 2005 he has represented the OSCE Mission in Zagreb. His reports on the political situation, electoral legislation, authorities' attitude towards minorities and the media have also greatly influenced the policy of the European Union and the entire international community towards Croatia.

Situation in Croatia

Apart from the diplomatic career, Fuentes is also an interesting person in private life. He was born in 1940 in Valencia, in Madrid he received his bachelor's degrees in Law and Political and Economic Sciences and, after that, earned his Master's degree in International Studies. He is a passionate painter and wherever he stayed he held exhibitions of his works. He is also a prolific writer, having published more than twenty books, ranging from political notes on Islamic countries, East-West relations or Spanish foreign policy to the novel covering events that took place in Helsinki. In addition, he is publishing essays on painting. Jorge Fuentes is married and has three children. Even if he is not the second most important diplomat in Croatia, he is indisputably one of the two leading Spaniards in Zagreb. For the interview with *Nacional* he arrived from lunch with the Apostolic Nuncio to Croatia, Lozano, who is another exceptionally influential Spanish citizen temporarily appointed to Croatia.

How would you assess the situation in Croatia?

- I am of the opinion that significant improvements have been made. You have good electoral legislation, and the attitude towards national minorities is also of good

quality, which shows the stability of important aspects that determine the political situation. The accession to the European Union is also a confirmation of stability and this is noticeable in certain economic indicators, as well. Croatia's per capita income amounts to about 65 per cent of the average per capita income of the Union, and we had such a situation in Spain, as well, at the time of our negotiations with the EU.

How do you assess the attitude of the majority population towards members of national minorities?

- When a state with 4.5 million inhabitants recognizes in its Constitution the existence of as many as 22 minorities, then it is a big thing. Personally, I consider this to be a great achievement, because minorities represent a significant asset in each country, while the fact that your Government recognises as many as 22 such minority communities shows that they are aware of their contribution to the cultural and economic development of Croatia. Naturally, the war left certain consequences, but I deem that the Croatian Government now conducts a positive policy towards the Serb community.

Impressions from Vukovar

You yourself know, as a Spaniard, how complex it is to conduct reconciliation in societies which have been affected by civil wars.

- It is no longer a problem in Spain, because the civil war ended long ago and people are not burdened by that topic at all. However, the media carry discussions about certain issues although the civil war ended 68 years ago, which is not so strange after all. In such circumstances, no one expects from people in Croatia to forget the 1991-1995 conflict, but one has to turn towards the positive side, because, without reconciliation, it is difficult to expect progress.

You often go to Vukovar and I believe that you carry strong impressions from that city.

- The situation is better than before, because the city is being reconstructed and plenty of inhabitants have returned. Naturally, thousands of them have not returned yet, but this is understandable when taking into account the extent of destruction. However, there is something with which we are not satisfied, and these are ethnically separate school classes. Such a situation is unacceptable for us in the OSCE. It is understandable that the local Serb community is fully entitled to protection of its national and cultural rights. We are trying to influence the children not to agree with the segregation of young Croats and Serbs. It is exceptionally important that all of them go to school together, regardless of ethnic differences, because it is the only way to avoid mutual separation. The OSCE provides great contribution to joint programmes, and there are some noticeable results. For instance, in my office I have a Calendar for 2007 depicting paintings made by local children of different ethnicities.

Level of corruption

How do you explain the high level of corruption in Croatia?

- I know that corruption exists in Croatia and that is no secret, however, corruption is nowadays a world problem. In some countries, such as Finland and Iceland, there are very few such cases, in other countries they are more frequent, but no one can say that their country managed to resolve that problem completely. Croatia is somewhere in the middle but, what is important is to establish zero tolerance towards corruption. I

believe that recent measures introduced by the Ministry of Justice would bring positive results. According to the Transparency International's report, Croatia now holds 69th position according to the perception of citizens that they are living in a corrupt country, which is a poor result. I do not expect that you will jump to the first or second place, but I believe that Croatia can be where other EU countries are, which is somewhere up to 35th place on the list of countries with the lowest corruption rate.

Last week the issue of secret services following members of non-governmental organizations and some opposition politicians was opened. Have you discussed this issue with Prime Minister Sanader or some of the members of the Government?

- Intelligence services in all countries perform very important tasks, thus I feel a great amount of respect for their Croatian colleagues as well. A year ago you underwent a quality transformation of the intelligence community and that is something I support. Taking into account the polemics that was initiated with regard to supervision conducted by intelligence services, I would like to remind you that approximately 20 years ago, non-governmental organizations throughout the world were in a rather marginal position. Luckily, the situation has changed and now they play an extremely important role and enjoy a tremendous reputation in public. I have not discussed this issue with Prime Minister Sanader or other members of the Government.

Unification of Europe

Is there a danger for de-stabilisation of the region taking into account the fact that the Radical Party won the majority of votes in the elections in Serbia?

- That is a fact, but I hope that parties of the moderate political option in Serbia will be able to form a Government there. Personally, I would like to see Serbia playing a constructive role in the region and to compose a quality Government, primarily to resolve the issue of Kosovo. Europe cannot allow black spots to remain in the Balkans. Slovenia is a member of the EU, Croatia will join the EU soon, followed by Macedonia, BiH and Montenegro and we must not allow this process to bypass Serbia. We are all willing to assist them because it is in the interest of both the EU and Serbia.

You started your diplomatic career at the beginning of 70's at the meetings of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe which took place in Helsinki, Belgrade, Geneva and Madrid. Back then, at the time of division into blocks, were you able to imagine that Europe would be united during your active career?

- I fought for this 35 years ago and there was hope in me that one day Europe would be united. I wanted the cold war to end, as well as ideological and block divisions. But, to be completely honest, not in my sweetest dreams did I expect that everything would happen so fast. No one believed in such a quick disintegration of the Eastern Block, the demolition of the Berlin Wall or re-unification of Germany. The difference between today's Europe and the one that existed in 1975 when we signed the document on the establishment of the CSCE in Helsinki is tremendous. Sometimes there is criticism about the quick enlargement of the EU, especially following the fifth enlargement but, while you travel throughout East Europe, you will see that those countries have achieved progress.

Meetings with important statesmen

Why did you become a diplomat?

- It is difficult to explain why you make certain decisions in life. There were no diplomats in my family. My father was a successful engineer and the manager of the Spanish electrical company, while my brothers are also engaged in different activities and work as engineers and lawyers. I would lie if I said that I entered diplomacy because I wanted to contribute to peace in the world. When you are young, you want to meet different people and different countries, to see how peace is constructed and important events take place and then, little by little, you start to realize that the things that you do also represent a path towards peace.

It is stated in your biography that you met important statesmen in Helsinki, such as Tito or Valery Giscard d'Estaing?

- It is a huge experience for a young diplomat. The Spanish delegation was seated close to the French, British and Yugoslav delegations and I was able to see all of their statesmen of that time quite well. For example, the British Prime Minister was sitting several meters away from me and then you turn your head and two meters to the right there is Josip Broz Tito. Helsinki represented something new and that is why everything that was happening looked fascinating. Summits are constantly held nowadays, where a hundred politicians get together, but Helsinki was the first time that all leading statesmen of the developed world gathered at the same place. Gerald Ford was there, who was just leaving the position of the US President, then Leonid Brezhnev, who led the USSR, Giscard d'Estaing, Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro or heads of East European countries, Nicolae Ceausescu, Todor Zivkov and Edward Gierek.

You are familiar with the fact that some people in Croatia consider Tito to be the most important historical figure, while others think of him as a communist dictator. What do you think?

- In 1976, I was sent to serve in Belgrade, where Spain had just opened its embassy. That is when I met him, and I also lived at Dedinje near the President of Yugoslavia. I remember him as being the leader of a country that had good economic prosperity and as a communist leader he managed to turn Yugoslavia into a country that had better standard than the rest of the socialist block. Naturally, he was a communist all of his life, that is a fact. Today, the situation in Croatia is far better than during his time, but I understand that many Croats still respect him. After all, one of the main squares in Zagreb still bears the name of Josip Broz Tito. In today's democratic Croatia, it is possible to express any stance or a historical assessment on the person of Josip Broz Tito.

• How do you explain the tremendous turnaround and changes in Spain? Your country has transformed itself in the course of three decades from a Francoist country with a strong influence of the Catholic Church into an extremely liberal country in which same-sex marriages were recently legalized?

- Franco's era was not a democratic one; it was a totalitarian regime although we underwent an accelerated development in the economic sense. Franco died in 1975, only a few months after the signing of the Helsinki Final Act of the CSCE. When we talk about the transformation of traditional Spain, I believe

that impressive economic growth significantly contributed to that. Spain is nowadays one of the most developed countries in the world and that is where one should look for reasons for transformation of the entire society. Spaniards are a hard-working and disciplined nation and it is no wonder that our nickname is Southern Prussians, and I would say that the EU represents a framework within which everybody can express their own capabilities. I would say that the secret of success lies in several factors, understanding that one needs to work hard, forget about siesta and accept the rules of market competition that rule today's world.

Frequent travel

- **Do you like to travel?**

- I do. Since I came to Croatia I visited all its parts several times. Likewise, I have travelled a lot all my life, but I have a feeling that I have not seen many interesting places yet. Here, in the OSCE Mission, I have associates who have travelled much more than I did. Since I spent a lot of time abroad, I was frequently postponing tourist visits thinking that I have time for that and that is why I never visited Egypt or Japan. I do not belong to those diplomats who travel often since I have been stationed in Europe and USA all my life. It is a bit awkward to admit that being a Spaniard, while I was posted in the USA, I never went south of Rio Grande, let alone visited Latin America. For a Spaniard that is a mortal sin.

Favourite painters

- **You are a writer. It was published recently that you wrote three books.**

- No, many more. I think I have published approximately twenty books so far. The three books you are referring to pertain to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, but I also wrote a lot about Europe, the situation and life in this continent. I dealt with relationships between East and West, Arab League and Spanish foreign policy. Only recently I published a novel, "Summit" which is inspired by the events in Helsinki in 1975 and I also regularly contribute essays on art to the Madrid-based magazine Goya. Since I came to Zagreb, I have not had a lot of time for writing due to the scope of work but I still enjoy when I sit down and create.

- **You are even more famous as a painter?**

- Painting is my final resort. Writing is a tiring activity, while I like to paint even when I am completely tired. Since my arrival to Zagreb, I have painted local streets, the Upper Town and passers by. I will hold an exhibition in Zagreb in March.

- **Who are your favourite painters?**

- I have high appreciation for two artists. The first is a Belgian surrealist, Rene Magritte, and the second one is US realist Edward Hopper. I wish I could paint one thousandth part of what they can as they are fantastic. Writing and painting are my only hobbies because I have no time for anything else. My wife and I have two daughters who live in Washington, a son and, for the time being, three grandchildren. We are just expecting the fourth grandchild. That is what our daily family situation looks like. We have a house in Madrid and a smaller one in Valencia. Currently, I am staying with my wife in Zagreb.

NORAC-ADEMI PROCESS

“I respect Croatian judiciary”

Jorge Fuentes recently suffered attacks by the Croatian judges due to pressures on Croatian judiciary in relation to the trial of generals of the Croatian Military Forces, Rahim Ademi and Mirko Norac, on which he stated for NACIONAL:

“The Hague referred this trial to the Croatian judiciary since it deems that it is capable of conducting the trial in a proper manner. I agree with The Hague Tribunal and I am convinced that the Croatian judiciary is prepared to try in processes such as that one. I wish to emphasize that I respect the full independence of the Croatian judiciary.”

The Head of the OSCE Mission in Zagreb does not wish to comment about the court decision allowing Rahim Ademi to defend himself while being out on pre-trial release, and he emphasizes:

“I am convinced that judges are doing their work in the best possible manner. I have an excellent relationship with Branko Hrvatin, President of the Supreme Court and a very high opinion of him, as well as about other judicial officials that I met. They are excellent professionals.”

ZAGREB PANORAMAS BY A SPANISH DIPLOMAT

“Rene Magritte is my role-model”

Jorge Fuentes Monzonis-Vilallonga has painted all places in which he worked as Ambassador, thus he made paintings of Zagreb as well. The well-known parts in the Upper Town or the Octagon, for example, are always empty but there is an image of a lonely walker in a suit with a bowler borrowed from Belgian surrealist Rene Magritte.

JORGE FUENTES

Biography

- **Born on 12 April 1940 in Valencia**

He studied Law and Political and Economic Sciences in Madrid and received a Master's degree in International Studies.

- **1970** Started his diplomatic career
- **1975** Participated in the Helsinki CSCE
- **1976-1978** Deputy Chief of Mission at the Spanish Embassy in Belgrade
- **1978-1982** Spanish Mission at the United Nations in New York
- **1982-1985** Embassy in Tunisia
- **1989-1993** Embassy of Spain in Washington DC
- **1993-1997** Ambassador in Bulgaria
- **1997-2005** Lived and worked in Brussels
- **2005** Became the Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia

Hobbies: painting and writing books

Married, father of two daughters and a son; three grandchildren.