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INTERVIEW

JORGE FUENTES MONZONÍS-VILALLONGA, HEAD OF THE OSCE MISSION TO CROATIA:

Serbia and Montenegro will enter the EU five years after Croatia

SIX REASONS TO STAY

The OSCE is here due to the return of refugees, judicial reform, electoral legislation and the education of minorities. Apart from those, there exist three more reasons for our presence: reform of media legislation and the police, and the role and position of non-governmental organizations.

By Šenol SELIMOVIĆ

The presence of the OSCE in Croatia means that this country is still not capable of resolving important issues on its own. What are the reasons today for the OSCE monitoring in Croatia?

In the course of the last decade, Croatia achieved tremendous progress on its path to becoming a country of complete democracy and the rule of law. There still are however some problems such as the issue of refugee return, including reconstruction and repossession of their property. Then there is judicial reform in Croatia and its harmonization with European standards, as well as the issue of political reform that includes the reform of electoral legislation, and reform of the education of minorities, which is a very delicate topic.

The most developed in the region

There are several other reasons for our presence in Croatia, although these are less complex than the three aforementioned. For example, the reform of media legislation, whereby we refer to the problem of libel and the fact that journalists are sometimes found guilty and sent to prison due to such accusations. Additionally, there is the police reform and, finally, the issue of civil society, that is, the role and position of non-governmental organizations, foundations, etc. I am convinced, following the talks I have had with Croatian officials that progress in these areas will accelerate, especially after the beginning of negotiations on the country's accession to the European Union.

Does that mean that this year would be the last year of the OSCE mandate to Croatia or is it going to be extended again?

I would have liked that this would be the final year, in spite of the fact that I arrived to Croatia only two months ago. I made a joke during my meeting with Prime Minister Sanader that if I manage to close down the OSCE Mission to Croatia in one year, that the Government should provide me with another year of paid leave in Croatia. However, joking aside, I will indeed do everything in my power to assist the Croatian authorities in the accomplishment of their tasks. Still, even if I were the fastest diplomat in the world, it would be truly impossible to resolve all aforementioned issues and close down the Mission within a year.

The advancement of Croatia towards the EU has been delayed because of a single case – General Gotovina, whom the Croatian authorities cannot locate or arrest. How do you assess that situation?

International laws and institutions need to be respected. It is the task of the Hague Tribunal to execute justice. We all know how horrible the war in these areas was and that so many atrocious things, contrary to all civilized standards and customs we know of, were committed. We also have to be conscious of the fact that sometimes it is more important to bring to justice three or four persons from among the prominent ones rather than a hundred of others who also participated in the war crimes. The Croatian authorities are aware of this problem and I believe that they possess the sincere political will to overcome it.

Combination of the big bang and regatta in the Western Balkans

Is it a realistic possibility that Croatia will alone become an EU member in the next wave of enlargement, or will that enlargement still take place in the so-called Balkan package?

In the history of the EU enlargement we have had different examples. For example, Greece entered the EU alone, then we have the example of enlargement with two countries – Spain and Portugal, then with three countries – Great Britain, Ireland, and Denmark and, eventually, the enlargement with no less than ten countries last year. In the case of five countries from the Western Balkans, I think this will be a combination of the big bang and the regatta. This combination means that all countries of this region will be candidates for EU accession, in fact they are already candidates; however, each one of these countries is at a different stage. I think Croatia, by far the most advanced country in the region, will be the first country to reach that goal. In my opinion, Croatia could start negotiations this fall, in September or October, and the negotiations could be completed sometime in 2009 or 2010. Other countries should accelerate their reforms so that the gap between the first and the last country in the regatta would decrease as much as possible. That means, if Croatia joins the EU in 2009, Serbia and Montenegro could achieve that goal five years later.

How can the current crisis in the EU influence that process?

One must admit that this is a bad moment for the European Union, but we should not worry too much about it because such crises have been repeating since the EU was established. I think that every ten years we are going through a period of Europhoria, a

big optimism, and after that there is a period of Euro pessimism and a certain resignation. Nevertheless, as a whole, this process is advancing, not deteriorating.

Heaven on Earth

You have been in Croatia for about two months. What were you pleasantly surprised with and what were you perhaps disappointed by in this country, taking into account the information and expectations you had prior to the arrival?

Croatia is truly a beautiful country. I dare say that, according to the criteria of its geographical location and natural beauties, it is a heaven on Earth. You can rarely find such a place in Europe. Croatia, with its 4.5 million inhabitants has about ten million tourists annually. Such a proportion cannot be recorded even in the most developed tourist countries in Europe. For example, Spain has 40 million inhabitants and about 55 million tourists, while Italy with 60 million inhabitants has about 50 million tourists annually. Even according to the economic indicators Croatia stands out, so that its GDP per capita is bigger even in comparison with some of the countries that joined the EU. In case of things that I might be disappointed with, then I could simply repeat the problems I mentioned at the beginning of this conversation. As a whole, Croatia has left a much better impression on me from what I had expected before I arrived. One must not forget that the war in this country finished only ten years ago and that reconciliation in Croatia is going on in a quite good and successful manner. Finland participated in a war 100 years ago and people there still talk about that war almost on a daily basis. Civil war in the USA occurred 200 years ago but it still makes a topic of many current discussions in the American society.

Have you talked with Serb representatives in Croatia? How do you assess their present position?

I have talked with representatives of Serb parties and it is clear, judging by their opinions, that tolerance and reconciliation are possible in Croatia. There are, unfortunately, a smaller number of cases spoiling that picture but, taking into account the fact that the war ended relatively recently, I consider that the increasingly lower number of remaining cases reflects steady progress toward a satisfactory resolution of the problem. I am of the opinion that to be a Serb today in Croatia is becoming something completely ordinary and that the Croatian society is evidently progressing in the direction of tolerance and developed democracy.

So far, the OSCE has been quite critical about the situation in the Croatian judiciary. Is it completely ready, at this moment, to take over war crime trials?

There is an agreement between the OSCE and the Hague Tribunal according to which the OSCE would monitor those cases that would be taken over by the Croatian judiciary. On the other hand, there are programmes for the improvement of capacities of the entire judicial process in Croatia in order to successfully take over and conduct war crime trials here. I am convinced that it will be possible to successfully process one or several such cases before the Croatian courts. However, I consider that one should not overdo it with the number of those cases, because it could only render the present situation more difficult.

Sixth wave of enlargement

How do you assess present-day Serbia and Montenegro and their reforms for accession to the EU? What is the essential difference between present-day Croatia and Serbia and Montenegro?

I consider that all countries of this region should be a part of the same wave of enlargement, but that does not mean that they have to join the EU at the same time. Thus, Bulgaria and Romania, whose accession is expected in 2007, were a part of the fifth wave of enlargement in which ten countries became EU members, but these two countries still did not manage to become members in May 2004. In the next, sixth wave of enlargement, Croatia will most certainly enter as the first one; maybe Macedonia will be the second, then Serbia and Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania. Serbia and Montenegro began the progress only in April this year when the EU and Serbia and Montenegro signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA). However, this country also received a guarantee from the EU that there is a place for it in this organization providing that it carries out all necessary reforms and fulfils all criteria.