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INTERVIEW: AMBASSADOR BERNARD PONCET, HEAD OF THE OSCE MISSION TO CROATIA

CROATIA FAR AWAY FROM FULFILLING THE UNDERTAKEN OBLIGATIONS

There is no electricity in Velika Popina, although there is a donor, concretely USAID, which would finance the repair of the power-supply network in the village, but the local authorities do not want to co-operate

By Stojan Obradovic

Intensive presence of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, also visible in the last days by the visits of the Head of the Mission, Bernard Poncet, to Vukovar, Osijek, Knin areas and to Lika, is a cause for discussion with the OSCE representative about the job the Mission performs in Croatia, as well as about his views on the current situation in Croatia through the prism of the Mission goals. We spoke with the ambassador Poncet in the OSCE Co-ordination Center in Knin.

After the political changes in January 2000, one expected that it would also be the last year of the OSCE Mission to Croatia. However, the OSCE Mission remained, what are the reasons for the extension of the Mission?

- I believe that there is a certain lack of understanding with regard to that problem. Our task is not to assess whether the Government consists of good or bad "guys" in, nor to assess the moves of the Government. We are only implementing the mandate, the content of which was also accepted by Croatia. Croatia undertook certain international commitments, first of all those relating to the return of refugees, repossession of their property, protection of minorities. According to what we see in the field, Croatia is still far from fulfilling the undertaken commitments when the return is concerned. In other words, the conditions for the normal return of refugees have still not been accomplished. This fact already sufficiently explains the reasons for our further stay in Croatia.

In some places the law is not respected, at all

Can you explain more precisely how is Croatia still far from the undertaken international commitments when the return is concerned?

- I would not go into great detail, but I had an opportunity to visit areas such as, for example, the area of Gracac, where returnees are living in unacceptable conditions. I would like you to see the situation in Velika Popina near Gracac, or, for example, in Raskovici near Knin. Maybe you are not aware of it, but in some places, the law is not respected, at all. In Raskovici, you have a case of a person who was offered, after the "Storm" operation, to take 56 plots of other people, which belonged to 32 owners. The

majority of those owners already returned several years ago, but they have not at all been able to repossess their property. Therefore, 32 families have been deprived of their rights and possible conditions for existence, so that one person or family can profit, which does not have the right to that. This case is not unknown to the authorities, but, unfortunately, as far as I am aware, nothing has been done. There is no electricity in Velika Popina, although there is a donor, precisely USAID, which would finance the repair of the electric supply in the settlement, however, the local authorities do not wish to co-operate. Or, should I mention to you one more piece of information. On the route between Udbina and Knin, as you know, there are numerous restaurants along the road, but, according to our information, the majority is inaccessible to the legal owners, and in some cases there is a problem of double or multiple occupancy of facilities.

Who is responsible for such problems, the local or the central authorities? Namely, one gets the impression that they are often trying to pass the ball of responsibility to one another?

- Yes, unfortunately there is a lot of ping-pong. We cannot go from case to case in order to determine who is responsible and where, but the fact remains that there is avoidance of responsibility for the problems at all levels of authority. This is a shameful thing and it creates a very bad picture about Croatia. We especially insist on the resolution of dual or multiple occupancy of the housing facilities, since no financial means are required for that and many problems are being resolved.

President of the Serb National Council, Milorad Pupovac, claims that only in the Sibenik-Knin County there is 30 to 50 per cent of occupied property cases which is not being used, and therefore its repossession could be resolved quickly?

- In principle, we agree with that.

Aware of the problems of Bosnian Croats

Recently, the OSCE Mission was a target of serious attacks by the associations of Bosnian Croats who have settled in Croatia. They are emphasising that, by providing assistance and care, you display favouritism towards Serb returnees and ignore the problems of Bosnian Croats?

- Such attacks and formulations were often heard since the beginning of our Mission to Croatia. There is an attempt to manipulate by spreading lies. Our good relations with the Union of Associations of Settlers in Croatia confirm that these accusations are false. On the contrary, we are very well aware of the problems Bosnian Croats are faced with and every person with good intentions can easily understand and see that. Therefore, I am really of the opinion that every further polemics about that is excessive.

How large is, according to your knowledge, the actual interest of Serbs in the return to Croatia, and how large is the interest of Croats from BIH, who have found their accommodation in Croatia, to return to BIH?

- A recent research showed that around 60 per cent of Serb refugees from Croatia who are now living in BiH or Yugoslavia, do not wish to return to Croatia under the current return conditions. Many problems and obstacles are preventing them from having the actual freedom of choice whether they will return or not. When all the administrative problems for the return have been removed, and when the conditions for the return have been made transparent, only then will we be able to say that the returnees have the possibility to freely decide whether or not to return, and then we will be able to see how big is the actual interest in the return.

As far as the Bosnian Croats, who are currently in Croatia, are concerned, it is true that a minimal number of them is interested in the return to BiH. Their possible return to BiH is linked with almost identical problems as the return of Serbs to Croatia. With an exception that upon their return they are able to request the return of their occupancy right while the resolution of this problem in Croatia is still awaiting.

Membership in a party is not a decisive point

Have you clarified the problems with the Croatian Government after your last report and the Government's estimations that this report was partially an expression of unacceptable political pressures on Croatia?

- We are in constant contacts, formal or informal, during which we are resolving also the possible misunderstandings. It is true that our last report was not welcomed by the Government. But one should say that it is difficult to accept the estimation that it is some sort of pressure by OSCE. These pressures are coming exactly from the aspirations of your Government to accept European democratic standards and faster inclusion into Euro-Atlantic integration.

On the subject of return, a lot was expected from the local elections, in other words from the change of authorities at the local levels. How do you, in that regard, assess the results of the local elections?

- Personally, I am very pragmatic and I think one should not observe in a dogmatic manner who came or remained in power at the local elections. We have to see what type of actions will follow by individual local authorities, what will be undertaken by who. Even with regard to that, our experience also shows that formal political orientation and party structure of local authorities are not always crucial, but the understanding of problems and the willingness of the people who participate in the authority to do something.

OSCE is giving recommendations, authorities are finding solutions

Recently, during your visit to Vukovar and Osijek area, you expressed your dissatisfaction with the reconstruction of Serb houses, and announced that OSCE will change that in the future. What do you intend to do?

- A part of my statement in relation the reconstruction of Serb houses has been misunderstood. Namely, I did express dissatisfaction with the pace of reconstruction of Serb houses, but I did not say that OSCE would guarantee the reconstruction in the future as it was broadcast by some media. It should be clear that we are willing to offer assistance and give recommendations, but it is up to the authorities to change the situation and find solutions. What OSCE stands for, is the non-discriminatory approach in the reconstruction and we are of the opinion that no-one should enjoy special treatment, but the conditions for the reconstruction should be equal for all. And this has not been the case until now, and not only in Vukovar area, but also in other parts of Croatia.