



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

Mission to Croatia

Field Centre Vukovar

Public Affairs Unit

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**Interview with Alessandro Fracassetti, OSCE Mission to Croatia
Spokesperson**

Croatia is a stable democracy

The visit by Alessandro Fracassetti, Head of the Public Affairs Unit of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, to Osijek and Glas Slavonije newsroom yesterday was used as an opportunity to discuss Croatia's democratic progress, the return of Serb refugees, respect of minority rights and Croatia's prospects in joining the European Union.

Q: OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Salomon Passy, recently expressed his satisfaction with the work of the OSCE Mission to Croatia. How much has Croatia progressed since the last parliamentary elections, in terms of democratisation and EU integration? Which areas showed the greatest progress?

A: I believe that the greatest achievement since the last parliamentary elections was the creation of a positive atmosphere for the return of refugees and dialogue with national minorities. I believe that in so doing, several taboos were overcome. Also, we believe that the government has shown its determination to deal with issues that are also related to our mandate in Croatia.

Q: In every step, the Croatian Government has declaratively refused all displays of extremism. Has this policy impacted on the areas monitored by the OSCE, in particular regarding the respect of minority rights?

A: One of the most positive outcomes of this policy is the fact that issues concerning national minorities have been brought into the political mainstream, something which was unthinkable only a short while ago. These issues are now widely talked and written about, which to date was not the case, at least not to this

extent. The fact that Prime Minister, Ivo Sanader, alongside Serb MP, Milorad Pupovac, visited Serb returnees in the Zadar hinterland was a good sign for these people, as well as an important one for the overall relations between the majority and minority in Croatia. When we talk about the effects on the local level, it is important to stress the importance of the implementation of the Constitutional Law on National Minorities. This law provides the framework for minority representation in the administration and judiciary.

Q: You claim then that this government has a more determined approach to problems faced by the Serb minority, compared to the previous government?

A: This government has clearly and decisively taken a stand on questions related to reconciliation, the return of refugees and rights of national minorities. We are encouraged by this. Now that preconditions have been met, we expect that the hard work of realising obligations undertaken will be done through concrete measures.

Positive Environment

Q: How would you evaluate Croatia's present level of stability?

A: I think that Croatia has proven its democratic maturity during the last elections. This was confirmed by the fact that Croatia recently received firm perspectives for European Integration. We believe there should be no doubt that Croatia is a stable democracy.

Q: Two years ago, the return of Serb refugees was seen as the biggest problem in Croatia. Recently, however, Mr Passy stated that he was impressed with the progress achieved.

A: I have already said that a clear indicator of progress has been the creation of a positive environment for the return of refugees, which the OSCE CiO reiterated during his visit to the Zadar hinterland, where this problem is most acute. The reconstruction of property belonging to refugees is going well, while for other aspects there is still room for improvement.

Q: Are there any indications that the return of occupied Serb houses and the return of tenancy rights could be solved in a quick and efficient manner?

A: I welcome the announcement by the government to return occupied private property to its rightful owners by the end of this year. As for former occupancy/tenancy rights (OTR) holders, the incumbent government has taken over a program adopted by the former government. However, this program, which

provides housing solutions for former OTR holders wishing to return, has not yet begun to be implemented. In fact, we are expecting the beginning of an information campaign which will be launched by the Government and UNHCR.

Q: How do you assess the co-existence of Croats and Serbs in Vukovar?

A: We hope that signals coming from the highest of levels will also have a positive impact on the local level, including Vukovar which has suffered a lot. The issue of coexistence is a daily reality there, much more than in other parts of Croatia. I hope that the message by Prime Minister Sanader that the war should be put behind us and to turn towards the future, helps in overcoming the difficult legacy of the war.

Key Role of Justice Reform

Q: One of the key preconditions for Croatia's EU integration is judicial reform. Is there any visible progress in this area?

A: So far there have not been many visible results. It is obvious that a lot of work awaits. It is encouraging however that there is a clear awareness of what needs to be done, beginning from the Minister of Justice. Judicial reform is a key concern as it also impacts on property issues and other important aspects, from refugee return to domestic prosecution of war crimes. Croatia will have to pay more and more attention to this, taking into consideration that within the framework of ICTY's completion strategy many more cases may be transferred to domestic Croatian courts.

Q: Does this then explain recent announcements that the trials of Generals Norac and Ademi will be transferred to Croatian courts?

A: This confirms the importance of the work of the Croatian judiciary. Here, experiences to date are mixed. There have been positive examples, such as the case of the so-called 'Gospic Group' in Rijeka, and negative examples, such as the 'Lora' case, which was questionable. I think this will be a great challenge for Croatian courts. The OSCE is also involved in preparing the Croatian legal system for war crime trials. Last week, the ICTY and Croatian Ministry of Justice held a seminar aimed at preparing judges for this challenge. This seminar was also partly financed by the OSCE.

Q: In the new Media Law there is a provision limiting the concentration of media ownership. Do you think the legally specified limit of 40% is also potentially dangerous for media freedoms?

A: We recommended that the law include an anti-concentration clause. As for the exact upper limit, it is up to member-countries to determine this for themselves.

Q: The Media Law also contains a provision stipulating that sources of information must be revealed in the “protection of public interest”. Is this provision potentially dangerous for the freedom of information?

A: We are still evaluating the final text of this law, but I can say that the majority of recommendations by the OSCE, Council of Europe and European Commission were taken into account, which is positive. This does not mean that the law was written by our experts. The provision on the protection of sources is still being analysed by our experts and we shall publish our results as soon as they are completed.