

Ten million tourists is confirmation that Croatia is open and safe

The Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, Ambassador Jorge Fuentes, recently returned from Vienna where he presented a report on Croatia at the heart of the Organization. In the report, the Mission confirmed that significant progress had been made in a wide range of areas, and emphasized that Croatia had become a normal European country with a clear perspective of successfully completing the process of Euro-Atlantic integration. We spoke with Ambassador Fuentes immediately following his return from the Austrian capital.

How was your report received in Vienna?

Vienna was beautiful as always but, unfortunately, not as beautiful for the Head of the OSCE Mission who had to present the report on Croatia no less than six times in six different contexts in only two days. You are well aware that decisions regarding certain countries are not being made every day at the OSCE nor is Croatia a topic of conversation that comes up every day. It is mostly discussed when the head of the Mission to Croatia is there. The Mission Head acts as a catalyst by initiating and informing the representatives of the 55 member states of certain ideas. Hence, my visit was an excellent pretext to talk about Croatia for an entire two days.

What were the conclusions from such talks?

Little-by-little we have created an atmosphere in Vienna in which it is evident that Croatia has entered a normal stage of its life - it is a country that is negotiating membership with the European Union and will soon join NATO. I explained this to my interlocutors in a very simple manner. We, diplomats and politicians, can claim whatever we want but the reality is ahead of us. In a given moment nobody wanted to come to Croatia where there was war and catastrophe. However, all of a sudden, there are now 10 million tourists, proof that Croatia is an open and safe country. Of course, there are still problems from its war-time legacy that need to be resolved. Ten years is not a lot and Croatia needs more time. What is important, and that was my message to Vienna, is that Croatia's institutions are capable of functioning on their own.

Do you believe that you were successful in sending such messages?

I think I was, although there were some countries that opposed such ideas. Gradually, however, my message did reach the Permanent Council and now it remains to be seen how it will proceed.

What is the situation with progress in the police force, which you also emphasized?

At one point, the police administration was indeed modest. Five years ago, we had 200 people here working with the police to help them achieve progress in their work and they did a good job. After a year-and-a-half of work, we now have only a few people in the OSCE working on this field and not a team that follows serious police operations and democratization. I believe this part will be closed next year.

What is the situation with civil society in Croatia?

Can you believe that Croatia has 30,000 registered associations? Of course, not all are non-governmental organizations (NGOs) but the number is proof of how important such work is on social and political life. That is good.

How will the OSCE follow war crimes trials?

That remains to be seen. In Vienna I heard several proposals of how to monitor trials differently to how it was done in the past. To retain a team of 20 to 30 lawyers in Croatia is extremely expensive. Perhaps, as was proposed by the Americans, monitoring could be organized from Vienna. For instance, an ad hoc team of attorneys would be sent to monitor specific trials. That would definitely be less expensive.

Is refugee return still the most difficult issue?

This is a complex issue because it is also very expensive. I do, however, consider this the most important issue as it requires the country to face its responsibilities, both politically and morally. Many people may question why Croatia should finance the return and reconstruction of homes belonging to those that participated in the aggression against Croatia. Although it is human to think this way, it is not elevated to the philosophical and political level. I know the Croatian government is aware of its international commitments and that this problem must be resolved. After all, those people are Croatian citizens and members of a minority. The fact that Croatia must provide for the return of refugees is known to every major party in this country. You have the moral obligation to bring them back or, at least, to provide them with the possibility of deciding whether to return or not. Once this task is finished, a good atmosphere for reconciliation needs to be created. This is a slow process. In the meanwhile, [inter-ethnic] incidents continue to occur and we fear they are not decreasing. On average, they occur once a week and this trend appears to be on the rise.

You stated previously that the Serb minority was not integrating as easily as other minorities. How can this be overcome?

Croatia has 22 national minorities and most have integrated well into Croatian society. The majority of problems, however, lie with those minorities that were not considered a minority before. Serbs do not yet know how to conduct themselves and take a stand as a minority. Naturally, another problem they face are the stereotypes created from the war. This will require time - for reconciliation and forgiveness. The Spanish civil war took place 70 years ago and you can still find articles about it in the newspapers every day. There is even a feeling that attempts are being made to change the results and outcome of the war. Some people are saying that the war was won by those who had lost it... The war in the U.S. ended over 200 years ago, but they still talk about it. Therefore, you will talk about this war for many years to come. Not only was it so forceful, but also full of sense, because it was the mechanism that led to gaining your independence. However, it is necessary to avoid a situation whereby the consequences of the war create an atmosphere which makes it difficult to live together.

Do you read Croatian newspapers?

I read *Vjesnik* on a regular basis. I think they are one of the two or three serious newspapers in Croatia. Your paper is trying to take a neutral position considering its reasonably close relations with the Government. I am happy to talk to *Vjesnik* and whenever you need me, I am at your disposal.

You mentioned the judiciary as an area where efforts are still needed.

There are three areas, which coincide with three units within the OSCE Mission. I believe one can be closed next year, i.e. the unit dealing with elections and electoral legislation. With the personal engagement of Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, which is

exceptionally important, I hope that electoral legislation will improve this year, so that it is on par with the European Union.

We highlighted the problems of refugee return and the judiciary, which includes the issue of war crimes trial monitoring. I believe that the situation in the judiciary is neither better nor worse than the situation in the media or police. Maybe the judiciary requires more extensive efforts because of the over 1.5 million backlogged court cases, the result of which is corruption. Serious efforts have been made to resolve this backlog and I believe that it could be done next year after all.

Your report states very precisely which areas progress has been achieved, but also where there is still work to be done. What is specific about this analysis?

Due to various reasons, some parts of the Mission's mandate have progressed much faster than the others. This is probably partly due to the fact that the situation was not so bad even before we came, and also, because society is developing faster in some areas than in others.

The media is one such example. Regardless of the problems we are all very aware about, the media in Croatia is doing quite well. The level and etiquette of media freedom in Croatia is comparable to many member states of the European Union and is surely better than some. Of course, we are also aware of its limitations and the problems that are occurring. On the whole, however, the situation in the media is good, particularly in Zagreb and in the Split area. This is not the case in other parts of Croatia, because the media is in the hands of local authorities and their independence is questionable. Still, when we decide to stop monitoring the media in Croatia, perhaps even next year, I do not think anything bad will happen.