

**INTERVIEW: Jorge Fuentes, Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia**

## **Vienna is considering departure of the OSCE at the end of this year already**

**By Bruno LOPANDIC**

The Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, Ambassador Jorge Fuentes, is one of the most active diplomats in Croatia. At the beginning of this year, the Chairmanship of the OSCE was taken over by Spain and the OSCE in Croatia has less and less work. We spoke with Ambassador Fuentes about the things that still remain to be done.

**The OSCE entered this year with certain changes regarding the Mission's downsizing. What does that exactly mean?**

- From the very beginning, ever since I came to Croatia, my intention was to close the Mission as soon as possible. Having arrived, it became perfectly clear to me that the work is not to be done in an ordinary manner as it is done by any embassy, having in mind that they will be here for another twenty or hundred years. Quite the opposite, we opened a mission here in order for the things to become functional whereupon we would depart.

I have to remind you that we came to Croatia almost eleven years ago. If we do not make a serious effort towards the completion of the mandate, we could stay in Croatia for many years more. Therefore, when I came to Croatia a year and a half ago, I understood that we needed to move on. And that is what we did. Under the Belgian Chairmanship in 2006, we closed four chapters of our mandate out of the total of six, especially the part pertaining to political issues. We have to admit that they are not one hundred per cent fulfilled, but we had three round tables on electoral legislation, many initiatives, thus we can say that the situation in the political arena is good.

**The police training programme is also completed?**

- We completed the police part as well. As you know, we had 200 police officers who were mission staff and who monitored the work of police administration. As a result, we are now in a good development stage. Security in the country is good, thus we closed that part of the mandate as well. We can also qualify our work with the media as satisfactory. Of course, there are still deficiencies in the field of media, but Croatia managed to build institutions that will be capable of correcting mistakes. We closed the part dealing with civil society.

**What is left then?**

- We are talking about two chapters, but those are the most significant ones. Of course, we have the return and integration of refugees, transformation and improvement of the rule of law and, naturally, war crime trials monitoring.

**You are frequently mentioning reality. After almost twelve years of the OSCE in Croatia, your personal experience of a year and a half, what is according to your opinion reality in Croatia?**

- Croatia is a country which is in many aspects politically and economically more developed than some EU member states.

**Which ones?**

- I will not mention any. The only difference between Croats and full-fledged EU member states is that Croatia went through a war. That is not a small difference. The war caused problems, flaws that needed to be corrected and which were more complex than, shall we say, from the usual contents of criteria set for EU membership.

They include problems of refugees, requests for housing care, jobs, reconstruction of houses, provision of apartments, recognition of all rights...Naturally, also the thing which I deem the most important one – achievement of reconciliation. That takes time. It is very difficult to ask forgiveness from someone who lost a wife, son, father, brother... That is the reality of Croatia compared to other member states and, just to mention, the reason why Croatia still has not joined the EU.

Naturally, war crimes that were committed and have to be processed are another thing. Transformation of the judiciary is not as difficult as the other two areas. I am not of the opinion that the transformation of judiciary will be more difficult than the things we managed to achieve in the political field.

**How is the OSCE satisfied with the refugee return process, which you marked as one of the difficult issues?**

- I will make a brief introduction with numbers. Before the war, 700,000 Serbs lived here. They were not a minority then, and Croats and Serbs lived together in a normal way. After the war, the spirits clashed, 350,000 Serbs left and the majority of them are located in Serbia, Vojvodina...

Approximately 130,000 of them returned and they could be considered returnees. Approximately 40% of those left again, because they solved their problems, sold their houses, etc. The rest have integrated themselves. We currently have approximately 89,000 Serbs that are not integrated and did not return. 90% of them are located in Vojvodina and the remaining 10% in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

A year ago we initiated a campaign together with the Croatian Government and I believe that on the Croatian part it was done sincerely. What needs to be done is not only to insist on that idea, but to provide for conditions for that return. Furthermore, assist them with return, transport, prepare houses for them and economic environment, jobs, pensions...And then, the reconciliation. Although the Croatian Government is sincere in its intention, I cannot envisage many returns of those 89,000. It is because the conditions have not improved. Return will not be noticeable, unless something happens.

**What is that something?**

- That is the moment when Croatia becomes an EU member state and economic conditions are spectacularly improved in relation to other countries in the surroundings. For the time being, the Croatian Government does what it must do. It is fully aware that the international community seeks from it a solution to the refugee issue and it is prepared to do that by reconstructing houses. That means the OTR issue will be solved through social housing. We hold meetings with Minister Bozidar Kalmeta on a monthly basis and those meetings are also attended by Mr. Degert, a representative of the UNHCR and US Ambassador Bradke.

## **Modernization of judiciary and war crimes trials**

### **How will you monitor the process of war crimes trials and the judicial reform?**

- Democratization, modernization of judiciary and war crime trials monitoring, are two completely separate things although they are both related to judiciary. When we came to Croatia eleven years ago, judicial reform was one of the six items on the agenda. The second issue came to us two years ago. When Carla del Ponte started to seek a partner which could monitor war crimes trials, and which will be held in Croatia and not in The Hague, or trials which have been like the Norac-Ademi case, transferred from The Hague to Croatia, it turned out that the OSCE was the only organization with enough power to perform the task.

We have people in the field, lawyers, more than 25 of them and we are able to monitor trials with good results. We hold monthly meetings with Minister Ana Lovrin and Chief State Prosecutor Bajic, Thomas Osorio from The Hague Tribunal and Ambassador Degert. We are advancing tremendously in very significant items such as witness protection or exchange of documents. I hope we will strongly advance in 2007.

## **Great efforts**

### **Will the OSCE leave Croatia this year already?**

- I can only tell you that we will close the Mission as soon as possible. In Croatia, as in every country, the mandate is renewed every year. Last December we had the extension of the mandate since the seat in Vienna reached a consensus on that. It remains to be seen what will happen this December. I heard some rumours and opinions in Vienna according to which the OSCE could complete its Mission to Croatia in December this year. The closure of the Mission in 2007 will require great efforts on our part and on the part of the Croatian Government.