

## **Special Attention to Refugee Return**

**It is in the interests of the Republic of Croatia for its immediate neighbourhood to be a bridge towards the East, said Peter Semneby**

**(From our permanent correspondent)**

Zagreb, November

A Swedish diplomat, Ambassador Peter Semneby, is the Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, to which he arrived from a similar position in Latvia. This indicates that he knows the problems of Eastern countries in transition well, and, in Croatia, he also augmented his rich experience with the specific issues occurring as a consequence of the recent bloody war in which the former Yugoslavia disappeared. In an interview for our newspaper, Semneby talked about activities of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, which [country] is currently undergoing a stormy period before the parliamentary elections and awaiting the EU response to its application to join this European community of states.

- The return of refugees is among the priorities in the assessment of Croatia's qualification for Euro-Atlantic integration. In its recent regular report, the OSCE noted progress in legislative solutions, but not in their implementation, especially with regard to property repossession. Could you tell us something more about this?

### **Housing issue the priority**

“The return of refugees remains one of the most important tasks of the OSCE Mission, as well as one of the most important political foundations for Croatia's membership in the European Union. Therefore we have close co-operation not only with the UNHCR, but also with the European Commission and the EU Presidency. This is a very big and important issue and there are actually several aspects in which we have to achieve improvement, on several fronts almost simultaneously. The greatest priority in this is the housing issue. Because, people who do not have a place to live, have virtually no possibility to return.

We have noticed certain progress with regard to the housing issue, in relation to legislative solutions and governmental programmes in the course of the last year. For example, the Amendments to the Law on the Areas of Special State Concern were passed, whereby the Government promised that all owners of occupied property would repossess their property. Moreover, we received an announcement by the Government about its programme for the provision of housing care to the former holders of occupancy/tenancy rights. However, there are still certain problems. I would put it like this: that programme is not comprehensive when it comes to occupancy/tenancy rights, it covers those former holders of occupancy/tenancy rights who intend to return. However, I consider this to be a significant step, because, last year, the Government was not even

considering some kind of compensation to those people, that is, a correction of that problem.

There is still a lot to be done. We are certainly not satisfied with the pace of repossession of property by its owners. All that property should have been returned to its owners under the programme which the Government itself passed. Not only that a large number of people in Serbia and Montenegro still awaits repossession of their property in order to be able to return, but a large number of returnees to Croatia also live in very inadequate, simply unacceptable conditions, possibly with their relatives or friends.”

- The compensation for apartments which were taken away, over which apartments Serb refugees held occupancy/tenancy rights, is still somehow the ‘hardest nut to crack’?

“The issue of occupancy/tenancy rights, that is, of the programme currently under elaboration, does not, in fact, quite cover those basic legal issues, such as, for example, the cancellation of occupancy/tenancy rights themselves – was it justified or not? On the other hand, it still provides a possibility for those who want to return. When that programme is elaborated, and once we have application forms, I would encourage all refugees in Serbia and Montenegro who want and are able to return to Croatia, to do so.”

- This is not the only problem preventing or hindering the return of Serb refugees to Croatia?

“The housing issue is one of the most important [*issues*], because people who do not have that issue resolved cannot return, but there are also economic issues which have to be addressed. There are other issues which we continually raise before the Government of the Republic of Croatia, such as the return of agricultural land and other agricultural property.

It is also essential to work on the attitude towards minorities and refugee return among the Croatian population. Thus, we encourage the Government and work towards being included into joint efforts to inform and educate the communities receiving refugees, not to see the return only as some danger, but also as a possibility for the re-establishment of multicultural society in those areas, which is also a very important aspect in Croatia’s accession to the EU. There is progress there – e.g., the physical safety of returnees is no longer such a problem – but, on the other hand, in many municipalities we still note administrative and other problems being placed before returnees.”

Our interlocutor especially emphasised the importance of European integration and the consequent benefit for small countries as well, because, through it, they “belong to a larger whole”. With that regard, talking specifically about Croatia, which also applies to the rest of the countries in this region which want to join the EU, Ambassador Semneby said the following:

“With regard to the perspective of Croatia, which undertook the first steps towards its membership in the EU, there are several important benefits it can gain from this. First of all, solely Croatia’s perspective of becoming a part of the European Union will positively affect the Croatian society as a whole, because it will provide a vision which is attractive

for all to accomplish – Croats, Italians, Serbs and all other communities in Croatia. Membership will provide for easier solutions of issues which are still pending. In addition, since Croatia has received assurances by the EU that its membership in it is a realistic possibility, which will happen in the not so distant future, it therefore becomes much easier to resolve some issues of co-operation with neighbouring countries in the South Eastern Europe, including Serbia and Montenegro. Also, through the continuation of undertaking intensified steps in the reconciliation itself, some of which are important symbolic steps undertaken recently, not the least of which is the one when the two Presidents exchanged mutual apologies (in Belgrade).”

## **Advancement towards the EU**

Ambassador Semneby expressed his belief and hope that “Croatia and its neighbours to the south and east will also support mutual endeavours towards EU membership” and he added: “I hope that, in all that has been said, Serbia and Montenegro will see Croatia’s advancement towards the EU also as an asset for themselves, and other countries in the region likewise, which will see Croatia paving that way. Even if Croatia is accepted into the EU membership before Serbia and Montenegro, this should still be seen as a good thing for Serbia and Montenegro, a significant, positive event. Likewise, I hope that Croatia will see and experience itself – now when it is undertaking important steps towards joining the Union – as a guide for other countries. In the same way as other EU countries championed interests of their neighbours when they were becoming members, e.g. as Germany provided support to Poland, Sweden to the Baltic countries etc. An essential interest for Croatia, in the long-term perspective, is for its immediate neighbourhood to be stable and that it does not see itself as some kind of a border towards the east, but as a bridge instead.”

The OSCE also closely monitors the elections in the European countries in transition, because [*the elections*] are also a kind of litmus [*test*] for assessing real democratic accomplishments in those environments. This is also a case with Croatia, where parliamentary elections are scheduled to be held in late November, so Peter Semneby told us at the end of the conversation: “It is important that all citizens exercise their democratic rights and, therefore, I consider it very important that Croatian citizens who are in Serbia and Montenegro make that effort and participate in the elections. Especially if they want to return to Croatia, it is important that they show active interest in the Croatian political situation. We recommended to the Croatian authorities to facilitate the voting of refugees in Serbia and Montenegro.”

## **Radoje Arsenic**