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JORGE FUENTES MONZONIS-VILALLONGA, HEAD OF THE OSCE MISSION TO CROATIA

A LOT OF TIME IS NEEDED FOR RECONCILIATION

By Marin Smolcic

GOSPIC –Spanish national Jorge Fuentes Monzonís-Vilallonga was in May appointed the Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia. He succeeded Peter Semneby, whose mandate, characterised by great progress in the resolution of numerous difficulties in the field, was assessed as excellent by the Republic of Croatia and the OSCE. In diplomatic circles Jorge Fuentes is reputed as a very successful and tactful man, a person who, with his great life and work experience, can overcome challenges he will face in this new position. We seized the opportunity during his first official visit to Lika-Senj County and the town of Gospić to ask him to provide us with a general presentation of the manner in which he will operate through the OSCE, particularly in the area of Lika, where the war was manifested in its most horrible form.

How familiar are you with the entire political atmosphere in this area?

In this short time I believe I learned quite a lot about the situation in your country. And the more I find out, the more I realise the complexity of the situation. Croatia has been through a very cruel war. It will require a lot of effort and good will to overcome the problems and everything the war has left behind. In terms of time, I think that nine years is little time to heal war traumas, it may take twenty or more years. The reality in which Croatia finds itself today is that it is increasingly getting closer to the European Union and a new prosperity. I sincerely hope that before the end of this year Croatia will begin negotiations for accession to the EU. This would mean that Croatia could become a full member of the Union around 2009.

Gospić still in ruins

Specifically about Lika-Senj County, I am familiar with the fact that almost 80,000 people lived in this area before the Homeland War and now there are about 55,000. The County Prefect and Mayor of Gospić both were of the opinion that the current economic situation deteriorated in relation to the situation before the war. There was enormous devastation; since then however many economic facilities were reconstructed, as were infrastructure, schools and hospitals. However there are still problems which could not have been resolved so far. I visited a part of Gospić which was mainly populated by Serbs before the war. That part of town is still mostly in ruins. The orthodox cemetery is neglected and damaged as well. The cemetery's reconstruction would not require large funds and it would represent a very humane and symbolic gesture. Representatives of the local authorities agree that problems still exist, and we from the OSCE are here to assist as much as possible.

Which issues will you place emphasis on during your mandate?

The main focus to which I will pay attention is to assist Croatia in achieving the economic and political Copenhagen Criteria. In that sense, I will focus on the provision of overall

assistance to Croatia in the accession to the EU. We will be very proud to give our contribution in the achievement of that goal. I have already told the President of the Republic of Croatia, Prime Minister, and Minister of Foreign Affairs that we would not remain in Croatia a single day after the fulfilment of those goals. One of the main problems on which we are concentrating here can be resolved quite fast. I will mention, for example, the democratisation of the media and police, and the development of civil society. Some problems are more demanding and they will require more time to be resolved, for instance, the problem of refugees, the reconstruction of houses, war crimes trials, and the Electoral Law.

In what way will the OSCE act in the wider Lika area in the future?

Lika is probably the most attractive area of Croatia. I spent a day in the beautiful Plitvice Lakes National Park and I honestly think that it is hard to find such a place in the world. At the same time, it is the largest county in Croatia and I am glad to hear that as of recently it is seventh placed according to gross income. In these parts of Croatia the war was particularly cruel. The devastation was enormous, many people were killed. A significant part of war crimes trials pertains precisely to this area. The OSCE office in Gospić is very active and it is trying to assist in every possible way, as well as in this regard. As I hear, the County authorities are extremely receptive and ready for activity and co-operation with the OSCE and it is an honour for me to be able to commend them on this occasion.

Facilitating co-existence

To what extent is sincere co-existence possible in this area?

I have always considered that reconciliation is a task which requires a lot of time. One needs to start with forgiveness and tolerance. I think that it is to Croatia's advantage that it is a civilised country with a civilised population where, despite the cruel war, there is still communication with returnees. It sounds incredible that people used to kill each other here about ten years ago, while today they can talk to each other. Complete reconciliation takes time. Wars have been waged throughout the world. There was a civil war in Spain about 70 years ago, and we still talk about that war today. EU and NATO integration will certainly help in the resolution of the problem of co-existence.

What do you expect within your scope of work from the local authorities in the field?

I expect almost everything because I cannot do my job without the co-operation of the authorities. That is why I said to both the President and the Prime Minister: help me in order for me to help you. I deem that your authorities at all levels are ready for good co-operation and they welcome us, they are satisfied with our work, which constitutes sound basis for very successful co-operation. I am proud to be able to say that Prime Minister Dr. Ivo Sanader is my friend and that I feel comfortable in this country wherever I go. Namely, the recent visit to the Mission by Prime Minister Sanader was the first visit ever of a prime minister to an OSCE mission in Europe. My colleagues, ambassadors in other countries, were quite jealous when they heard this and now they are quickly inviting prime ministers to visit them. My friend Dr. Ivo Sanader is very glad that we are here, because he knows that we want to help. Likewise, it is a mutual wish that the OSCE Mission would finish its work as soon as possible.