

Closure and completion

Mission to Croatia, 1996-2007



OSCE/IVOR BRICKETT

BY TODD BECKER

When I was asked to become Senior Deputy Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia in September 2000, I was told that the Mission would be closing down, probably within a year, maybe in nine months. By the time I left Zagreb, almost eight years later, a small OSCE presence still remained, wrapping up the last issues. So much for crystal ball gazing!

Closing the Mission, as it turned out, involved much more than getting the Government to sign up to a whole series of commitments and agreements. These needed to be implemented — which in turn required preparation of Croatia's

laws, institutions and practices and a reshaping of how Croatians would go about building a transparent, democratic society based on the rule of law.

For some reason, delegations and capitals thought that this could be done overnight. Those of us in the field, Croatian and international staff alike, know from hard experience that such changes involve complex processes, and processes by definition take time. I had the pleasure and the honour to be able to support Croatia and its citizens at this crucial time in its history.

Initially, when I started work under then Head of Mission Bernard Poncet, I soon discovered that the Mission and the Government were

Rnjak, south of Karlovac. Mirko L. (shown above in 2006) and his family are now enjoying the comforts of their restored house. With the help of the OSCE field office in Karlovac, they managed to secure funding for reconstruction from the State.



OSCE/CHRISTA E. KALINSKI-BECKER

Zagreb, 8 December 2007. Prime Minister Ivo Sanader (right) confers the Croatian Helsinki Committee Human Rights Award on Ambassador Becker (left) for having “consistently worked as an official, for seven full years, on the protection of human rights in Croatia”.

at loggerheads over what exactly had to be done. It took time to build trust between the “outsiders” — as most Croatians perceived us — and the Government, which wanted to do it all by itself, although it didn’t always appreciate what “it” involved.

Months of quiet discussions with reform-minded officials in the Foreign Ministry and in the Prime Minister’s office, with strong support from the Belgian and Spanish EU presidencies, the UN Office and one key bilateral embassy in Zagreb, helped the Mission to prepare a document defining six areas in which both the Government and the Mission felt they *could* and *should* take joint action.

That was at the end of 2001. At that point, the Mission had about 500 national and 128 international staff in some 15 locations.

From that moment on, there was no turning back progress towards fulfilling the mandate, which, though slow at first, and halting at times, was steady in any case. Only then did the Mission actually start “closing.” First we consolidated OSCE sub-offices and field offices and terminated activities as soon as tasks were completed. Then we reduced staff and, on my recommendation, began promoting national professionals to assume greater responsibility in the Mission’s work.

Under Peter Semneby, Head of Mission from 2002 to 2005, we developed a results-oriented action plan to meet our goals. This proved invaluable in winning over the Government’s future leaders to the Mission’s ideas.

Following the parliamentary elections in 2003, co-operation between the Government and the Mission was transformed into an active “partnership”. The “way of thinking” that I felt had been inadequate in 2000 had begun to change. Each year, at the hearings in Vienna on our status report and on the budget, the Head of Mission and I could point to satisfactory progress in implementing our mandate. The “downsizing”, which was really the ongoing process towards

closing, was reflected in less money for fewer staff and fewer offices.

With the coming of the present Head of Mission, Jorge Fuentes, in mid-2005, the partnership became institutionalized. The organized, systematic process of problem-solving that we had proposed to the Government in late 2001 had become a reality. The Mission’s doors were opened to the country’s main political personalities, with the President and the Prime Minister participating in the morning meetings with OSCE staff.

In parallel, the Mission and the Government set up a political consultative mechanism involving the Prime Minister and — in monthly meetings — the Foreign Minister, the Justice Minister and the minister responsible for refugee return. In 2006, the work of the “Platform”, as the mechanism came to be known, led to the completion of the electoral, media, police and civil society aspects of the Mission’s mandate and significantly reduced our tasks related to the return and integration of refugees and the rule of law.

All these developments made possible the formal closure of the Mission at the end of 2007, and the creation of an “OSCE Office in Zagreb” in 2008 to deal with remaining issues concerning refugee housing and the monitoring of war crimes trials. But reaching this positive turning point had required time — time for the Government and the OSCE to better understand and appreciate each other’s needs and perspectives, time for the political climate to develop, and time for the democratic process to bring about improved laws and procedures and new institutions necessary to achieve the shared objectives of the Government and the OSCE.

Winding up the Mission to Croatia, I have found, has not been about “closing”, but about “completing”. As the country approached the completion of the tasks it had set out to perform, so also did the Mission move forward towards the completion of its role.

When I left Zagreb in January 2008, the Office still had important work to do. I have no doubt, however, that if both the OSCE and the Government continue to work as diligently as they have in the past, the rest of the issues on their joint agenda can be resolved to their mutual satisfaction. Only then can the job of the OSCE in Croatia be said to have been successfully completed.

Ambassador Todd Becker served as a United States diplomat for 34 years before being seconded to the OSCE Mission in 2000. He is currently on a short-term assignment at the office of the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine. He plans to teach at and work with conflict resolution organizations in the United States.

Moving on

Knin: A microcosm of the OSCE's challenges in Croatia

BY MOMIR VUKMIROVIĆ

I can't think of a better way to trace the 12-year history of the OSCE in Croatia than to focus on my old hometown, Knin, host to one of the Organization's 17 field operations in the country at the peak of its activities in the late 1990s. Along with Vukovar and Sisak, the office in Knin also served as a key regional centre until 2004, which involved co-ordinating several other smaller offices.

Like it or not, despite its picturesque beauty, Knin will forever serve as a haunting reminder of my country's tragic past. A small, charming town in the Dalmatian hinterland close to the Bosnian border some 50 kilometres from the coast, it was the administrative centre and capital of the rebellious, self-proclaimed "Republika Srpska Krajina" from 1991 to 1995.

Serbs used to make up 90 per cent of Knin's 40,000 inhabitants. Today, the proportion of Serbs is 20 per cent, and the remaining 80 per cent are Croats. About 70 per cent of the Croats are refugees from Bosnia's own conflict next door or were displaced from other parts of Croatia, while 10 per cent are Croat returnees.

When the OSCE opened a field centre in Knin in 1996, shortly after the Mission opened its headquarters in Zagreb early in the year, the resettlement process was in full swing. In a few years, I would be part of these efforts and would join the most significant and visible international organization in town.

One of our main responsibilities was to help local authorities to foster conditions that would ease the repatriation of former Serb residents. This involved the complex issue of restitution of Serb-owned properties that were occupied by refugees and returnees, most of them Bosnian Croats. Not surprisingly, neither the townspeople nor the local officials welcomed the OSCE's efforts to return about a thousand private residences to their rightful owners. In fact, the officials simply refused any contact with the OSCE.

We also encountered a world of difference in the way authorities approached the implementation of the OSCE's mandate: Those from the central government were willing to proceed rapidly, while their local or regional counterparts often appeared to drag their feet.

This left us with no choice but to devote most of our initial energies to building a positive relationship with our hosts and to laying the most fundamental groundwork on which to proceed. For quite some time, monitoring and reporting on the human rights situation in Knin were the only major activities we could carry out.



To help feed his family, Slaven K. grows fruit and vegetables in their backyard in Knin. The family returned from Serbia a few years ago.
Photo: OSCE/Ivor Prickett

But other constraints stood in our way as well, some of which were of our own making. OSCE officers would often neglect, or would forget, an essential principle in monitoring work — that is, publicly welcoming positive developments and giving credit where credit is due.

The successful repossession of one house, for example, or the reintroduction of electricity to one hamlet were often deemed to be too insignificant to earn even a passing acknowledgement to our local partners. Far from valuing these triumphs, no matter how seemingly modest, we would assess everything with a critical eye.

Eventually, we did learn. As soon as we stopped being judgmental towards local officials, their unco-operative attitude started changing too, and our relationship improved — slowly at first, but at an increasing tempo. This was obviously a missing link that was necessary to enable us to make a much-needed contribution to our mandate.

Reforms in the media and police sectors were the first to register progress. Eventually, local officials also came around to the view that there was merit in having civil society on their side; they started financing a well-established network of NGOs to draw them closer as partners in governance.

Armed with new legislation supporting the resettlement of refugees and displaced persons, the work of the Government Regional Offices for Returnees and Refugees was set in motion. This improved the situation of minority groups. In fact, I recall that, in early 2006, a Serb was elected third deputy mayor in a town that had been completely abandoned by the Serbs just ten years earlier.

As our work in Knin entered its final phase, we found it interesting to get varying reactions. While most of the minority returnees and legal and human rights NGOs wanted us to stay on, politicians considered our impending departure to be the logical result of our mutual

co-operation and it was therefore a source of pride and satisfaction.

Because of the spirit of partnership that had been patiently forged on both sides, the actual closing of the Field Office in Knin, on 31 December 2007, turned out to be a pleasant event, with the Mayor and other officials publicly expressing appreciation for the OSCE's crucial role in the town's healing and reconciliation.

And what of the OSCE Mission's greatest resource — its national and international staff? Some moved on to other OSCE missions and other international organizations, while others simply decided the time was right to return home. Most of the Croatian staff — Serb and Croat alike — have chosen to continue making a contribution right in their own country and are gainfully employed in various sectors.

Wherever we are, we can all be secure in the knowledge that we have helped Croatia's cities, towns and villages become better places to live in, where respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law reign supreme, and where the OSCE's comprehensive concept of security has helped the country edge closer to becoming the 28th member State of the European Union.

Born in Knin, Momir Vukmirović joined the OSCE in 1999, and served as Head of the Field Office in Knin from 2005 until its closure in 2007. As a National Programme Officer in the OSCE Office in Zagreb, he is now responsible for reporting on the progress of the housing care programme for former tenancy right holders.



OSCE/DORJAN KLJASNIC



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OSCE Office in Zagreb

Ambassador Jorge Fuentes (centre left), Head of the OSCE Office in Zagreb, and Enrique Horcajada, Head of the Executive Unit, with some of the 34-member team (nine international and 25 national personnel). The Office comprises two operational units that work on outstanding issues related to the prosecution of war crimes and housing care programmes.

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