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Interview with Antonella Cerasino, newly appointed Spokesperson and Head of the Media and Public Affairs Unit of the OSCE Mission to the Republic of Croatia, on the occasion of her visit to Sisak

Return of refugees still not complete

by Danijel Prerad

Earlier this month, we talked with Antonella Cerasino, the newly appointed Spokesperson of the OSCE Mission to the Republic of Croatia, on the occasion of her visit to the town of Sisak where she met with media active in the area. During a brief conversation, we inquired about the situation regarding media in Croatia, as well as about developments regarding the process of return in the area of Banovina and Croatia as a whole.

How long have you been with the OSCE Mission to Croatia?

I arrived at the Mission in January this year but, before that, I worked on a project for the European Commission which dealt with the provision of information in the Western Balkans. I was in Sarajevo from 2002 to 2004, where I worked on the abovementioned project which also included Croatia.

What insight have you gained into the situation regarding media in Croatia within the past month?

On the whole, it seems that Croatian media are quite independent in the manner of reporting. But I am also under the impression that there is a difference between what is happening in Zagreb and what is happening in the rest of the country. There are radio and TV stations as well as print media in Croatia which are owned by local politicians or local entrepreneurs, so that journalists are sometimes subjected to pressure by owners of media outlets while performing their job.

Do you consider that the situation can change in the near future?

I do not consider that the situation can change in a short time. It is necessary to do two things in order to improve the situation with regard to freedom of the media. The first step is to carry out a legislative reform in order to provide journalists with a possibility to work without political pressure, as well as to separate political and economic control from the media. The second step is to change people's mentality, which is, naturally, a long-term process.

Journalists quite independent in Croatia

What is the OSCE opinion about the way Croatia has defined its media laws?

After this short time I have spent in the country, I consider that the current Media Law provides journalists with a rather high level of independence. The OSCE has worked on

the revision of the Law on Croatian Radio and Television (HRT), as well as the revision of the Law on Electronic Media. Some of the Mission's recommendations were taken into account, but not all. For instance, the Mission is particularly concerned about depoliticisation of the HRT Program Council. Moreover, the existence of laws which would prevent conflicts of interests with political authorities and entrepreneurs who own media outlets is also very important.

The Republic of Croatia has been through one transition. In the OSCE's opinion, to what should Croatia pay particular attention at this moment?

There are two main areas within the scope of the OSCE Mission's mandate, the return of refugees and reconciliation, as well as issues concerning improvement of the situation in the justice system.

Regarding the return of refugees and reconciliation, a lot still remains to be done. The Mission considers it extremely important that those people who want to return to their homes are provided with the possibility to return. There are a number of reasons for that. One of them is, naturally, of a humanitarian character: people who used to live in Croatia and who want to return to their homes, to their country, have the right to do so. There is also a political reason why. In the future, the issue of refugee return should no longer be on the political agenda in Croatia and the neighbouring countries of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia and Montenegro. A conference attended by representatives of the competent ministries for refugees from Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, together with representatives of the OSCE, UNHCR, and the European Commission was held in Sarajevo on the last day of January this year. The governments of those three countries agreed on the proposal of the Road Map for closing the chapter on refugees by the end of 2006, when that problem should be resolved.

Another aspect of refugee return concerns reconciliation and integration. The mere physical return of people who previously lived in Croatia is not sufficient. Their reintegration into society is just as important. This requires equal representation of members of national minorities in the judiciary, police, public administration, etc.

Another important area of Mission activity relates to the work of the judicial system. The OSCE Mission provides support to all steps leading to strengthening that system. Moreover, one of the main activities of the OSCE Mission is to monitor the processing of war crimes in Croatia. The Mission has reported there has been bias according to ethnicity in the issuance of indictments and in trials before Croatian courts.

Return to urban areas is still going on

How would you comment on the statements by a number of mayors from Banovina, of both Serb and Croat ethnicity, saying that the return process has been completed and claiming that all those who wanted to return to their homes returned so far? They say that there is maybe a hundred or so of those who will return, but that the return process is practically completed?

It may be the situation in their area, but the return process has not been completed in Croatia as a whole. The problem of return is of extreme importance for the former

holders of occupancy/tenancy rights who have not returned because they have nowhere to return to. Those people could not return to apartments in which they previously lived and they have not been offered adequate housing care so far. According to statistics, about 33,000 occupancy/tenancy rights holders currently live in Serbia and Montenegro. The Croatian Government plans to build 600 apartments for accommodation of this category of refugees this year. On the whole, the largest number of people, specifically the older generation, has returned to smaller towns and villages, while the return process in urban areas is still far from being completed.