

**JORGE FUENTES MONZONIS-VILALLONGA, THE NEW HEAD OF THE OSCE MISSION TO CROATIA, TALKS ABOUT HIS EXPERIENCE FROM THE TIME OF FRANCO'S TOTALITARIAN REGIME AND THE RETURN OF SERB REFUGEES**

## **WE ARE NOT SATISFIED WITH THE NUMBER OF RETURNEES**

*By Hrvoje Prnjak*

**Mr. Fuentes, as far as I am aware of, you have been involved in politics and diplomacy already for decades, however, this is the first time that you hold some position in Croatia?**

Precisely, although I have to mention that I do know Croatia from before. Namely, I have been a part of the Spanish diplomacy for 33 years already, which is a synonym for an experienced, but also an old politician. I worked as a diplomat in various countries, whereby I would like to single out examples such as the USA, Bulgaria, Macedonia, participation in the work of different organizations of the European political community... At the beginning of my career I was sent to Belgrade tasked to open the first Spanish embassy in the former Yugoslavia. I recall my diplomatic identity card having No. 1 on it. It was already at that time when I became familiar with the beautiful scenery of Croatia along with my family members while travelling to Zagreb and other parts of this country. I am therefore glad to be here again.

**An interesting fact is that your political career began already during the totalitarian reign of General Francisco Franco in Spain. Was that, in a way, a type of preparation for facing non-democratic governments in Southeast Europe at some later point?**

I joined diplomacy while General Franco was still alive, whom I also met several times. More accurately, that was the period of the last three years of his life. I have to mention that during that time the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had already been working hard on opening Spain towards the world, thus creating the future of the country after **Franco**. You should not think that due to the totalitarian regime back then we were inclined towards countries with communist authorities. On the contrary, **Franco** was very suspicious about communist regimes and he only accepted the establishment of some kind of diplomatic relations. As he used to say, in a pragmatic manner, this is a world of pluralism and should be accepted as such. I left for Belgrade after his death.

### **Croatia – a special case**

**Let us return into present times: the presence of the OSCE Mission in a country is always an indicator of the existence of problems, primarily related to human rights and functioning of the democratic system. Therefore, Croatia is still a problematic country in many ways?**

I will not deny that the presence of our mission at the same time confirms the existence of the aforementioned problems. Namely, the OSCE does not have an OSCE Mission to France. However, one should not exclude the possibility of opening missions in western

countries. For instance, our observers were present at the last US elections. The OSCE has eighteen missions around the world and they are all indicators of a certain problematic character of the countries in which we are active; beginning with Caucasus, through East Europe, and all the way to the Balkans. Missions in Estonia and Latvia have been closed in the meanwhile... Croatia is a special case and it is actually very difficult to compare it with the neighbouring countries in the Balkans. Namely, the situation in Croatia is in many areas better and, for that matter, the fact that ten million tourists visit the country annually is also a good indicator of progress. Croatia is however still facing quite a few problems – and that is what your question is all about – due to which the OSCE is still here.

**Given that the OSCE, with its field work, has been present in Croatia since 1996, how satisfied is it in general with the co-operation with the Croatian authorities to date? In other words, can you disclose what recommendations related to Croatia were you given by your predecessors?**

To date I have spoken with the President of the State and the Prime Minister and I am of the opinion that we achieved perfect understanding. We identified problems, on the existence of which we agree, and the modes of their resolution. The Prime Minister showed his good will by visiting our Mission, which was the first example ever that a prime minister visited an OSCE mission anywhere. As a matter of fact, when we look back over the past nine years, we have to acknowledge tremendous progress in our relations with the Croatian authorities. This I was also told by my predecessors. There are six content related topics which we have to implement in practice; out of which, three have proven easier to implement roughly speaking – police reform, democratization of the media, and civil society. Naturally, each of these areas is a separate and complex topic but reforms in these areas are more tangible than the ones in the area of complete establishment of the rule of law, reform of the electoral system, and the return and integration of refugees.

**Does it not appear slightly ambiguous that immediately after you heard nice words and promises during your meeting with Prime Minister Sanader, you should continue your mission by visiting two beaten Serb returnees in Ostrovica, a village in the Benkovac area of the former Krajina?**

I went there with the purpose of meeting those people and condemning violence. The Head of Benkovac Police also condemned that act in my presence. In spite of that act, which is highly reprehensible, since even a single case like that is one case too many, Croatia generally still shows a certain progress in relation to minority issues. However, the fact that cases like that are isolated is an indicator of the rising degree of tolerance.

## **Worrying reconstruction**

**The return of Serb refugees and the repossession of property appear to be the biggest problems that the OSCE is facing in Croatia. Data on the number of returnees differ, depending whether you collect information from humanitarian organizations and non-governmental organizations in Croatia or in Serbia. What data on the number of returnees are currently available to the OSCE?**

To the best of my knowledge, there were approximately 700,000 Serbs living in Croatia before the war. Half of them left Croatia during or after the war. Out of the 350,000 Serbs who fled, 120,000 or a little less have returned so far. Out of that number, 60 percent stayed while it appears that about 40 percent of those left the country again after they

visited their former homes and assessed the living conditions. Roughly speaking, this would mean that approximately 230,000 Serbs still live abroad; they are assessing whether they should return and are actually waiting for some sort of a signal to do so. My message to the Croatian authorities is that we will not force anyone to return, but we will try to offer them the possibility to freely decide about their return; of course, return to Croatia in which safety, a house, and a job would be waiting for them. That is also a goal of our public campaigns and our guides for returnees, in relation to which we enjoy the support of the Croatian Government. However, I have to mention that I am not quite satisfied with the final effects. Regarding potential returnees who wish to return, a public opinion poll commissioned by the OSCE Mission in 2004 showed that approximately 15 percent of displaced Croatian Serbs are thinking about returning to Croatia in the following years with different nuances of determination. In spite of that, that percentage would increase if the returning population would be offered adequate access to housing.

**Are you familiar with how well returnees' applications seeking state reconstruction is being resolved and how many houses are still to be returned to the actual owners? Namely, the deadline for the repossession of houses expired at the end of last year and yet, this issue has not been fully resolved.**

I deem that the re-opening of the reconstruction issue is very positive. In the course of 2004 more than 16,000 reconstruction applications were received, mainly from Serb refugees. Eight thousand of them will be processed by the administration by the end of this year. However, it is disturbing that we still have a large number of applications which received negative decisions in the first instance assessment. There are also a large number of applications containing complaints related to mistakes in the first assessment of war damage. Concerning the quality of reconstruction, the Mission is aware of the flaws on the field: some settlements have water supply, some have electricity, but we have to continue insisting on that. Living conditions in villages are still hard.

Regarding occupied houses, only 724 private houses owned by Croatian Serbs were still occupied by illegal tenants on 1 June. I say "only" because we had a problem of more than 19,000 occupied houses. The majority of those 19,000 houses have been returned, a number of owners sold their houses to the state and approximately 3,000 of them are vacant, often also devastated. The positive thing is that the Government adopted a conclusion this Friday regarding the resolution of the issue of houses that were devastated while administered by the State.

Likewise, the provision of housing care for the former holders of occupancy/tenancy rights is a separate story, which is one of the major challenges that Croatia is facing.

**Bozidar Kalmeta, Minister in the Government of Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, announced that by 10 August Serbs would repurchase all their property, and that there are approximately 4,000 houses still awaiting reconstruction, 3,000 of which will be reconstructed this year and a thousand next year. We are already tired of listening to similar promises but the problems related to return still continue?**

I fear that the numbers presented by Minister **Kalmeta** are too optimistic after all. However, I am familiar with the working plan which representatives of the Croatian state authorities presented to their colleagues from the European Commission and UNHCR, which deals with the resolution of that problem by the end of 2006. Naturally, the OSCE will send some amendments to that state plan, simply not to forget certain aspects related to refugee return.

## **The Gotovina case**

**Apart from refugee return, the OSCE in Croatia is also involved in the issues of strengthening democracy, media freedoms, judicial reform and civil society building. What do you intend to do and demand from Croatia in the forthcoming period in relation to the aforementioned areas?**

Although progress is evident in many of those sectors, that under no circumstances means that problems in those spheres do not exist. Democratization of media has not been completed; nevertheless there is the issue of monopoly over newspapers in some parts of the country. Transparency and depoliticizing of the police is also something which needs to be worked on. It is necessary to work on civil society development as well. We are also not content with the fact that non-governmental organizations still have to pay special taxes, and that the current political milieu still considers representatives of non-governmental organizations to be “troublemakers” ... These are all aspects that need to be worked on. Prime Minister **Sanader** also announced reforms of the electoral legislation by the end of the year, which pleases us. Needless to say, there is also an important issue of the rule of law, war crimes and the **Gotovina** case, which is actually the crucial one. I think that the Government understands very well that without the resolution of the **Gotovina** case there will be no negotiations with the European Union. Naturally, that does not mean that the Government is obliged to bring him before The Hague Tribunal, but the Croatian authorities have to show that they are indeed doing everything in that direction. All of that is an indicator that there is still work to be done here by the OSCE, but also that the situation is better than it was six months ago, for example. Still, I do hope that it is worse than it will be after the following six months!

**Tonino Picula, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Head of the Delegation of the Croatian Parliament in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, recently stated that the OSCE Mission to Croatia should be closed in two or three years at latest? How do you comment on that? Could this deadline be even shorter?**

I am familiar with Mr. **Picula**'s statements. However, the closure of the OSCE Mission in a certain country, meaning in Croatia as well, does not depend on me. There is a belief that Croatia faces progress in many spheres, yet it is impossible to say when the Mission will be closed. It is simply impossible to say how long some things would last – beginning with the reform of the educational system to, say, the judiciary. Naturally, the OSCE will leave Croatia before the completion of all those processes, but at this point it is indeed impossible to predict when that would actually happen.