

*Vjesnik*

Weekend edition, 1 April 2006

Journalist: Bruno Lopandic

## **Media in Croatia is freer than in many EU member states**

Jorge Fuentes Villalonga is an experienced Spanish diplomat who was appointed head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia a year ago.

After his first year in office, we spoke with the Ambassador to discuss progress made to date and on issues Brussels wants the OSCE Mission to remain in Croatia for.

### **How would you describe your first year in Croatia?**

Croatia made two great steps forward this year. One is the arrest of General Ante Gotovina and the other is the beginning of negotiations with the EU. Membership talks have begun and they are advancing quite well. This, I would say, is the background to changes that have occurred.

When I first arrived, relations between the OSCE Mission and the Croatian government were correct, but not excellent. The OSCE Secretary General entrusted me with the task of reviving relations with the Government and to work together as partners.

This is a Mission in a friendly country which is a fully-fledged member of the OSCE and we have to act accordingly. Immediately upon my arrival, I visited Prime Minister Ivo Sanader and invited him to visit the Mission, which he did. We have since established very good working relations. We have also established excellent dialogue with the relevant ministries and maintain regular contact. I think we have accomplished a lot and I hope we will continue to do so.

### **What would you single out as the most important issue that needs to be resolved?**

The most important problem at the moment is the problem of refugees – their return and reintegration. More than 300,000 people left Croatia during the war and more than 300,000 Croats were displaced. Fortunately, the majority of displaced Croats have returned but this is not the case with refugees. Over 200,000 continue to reside outside Croatia, of which, 80,000 have not integrated anywhere and are in a sort of limbo. We have to assist them, not by forcing them to return, but by enabling them to freely make a decision.

### **The issue of occupancy/tenancy rights has not yet been resolved because Croatia does not consider this a legal right. How will this be resolved?**

Croatia has come up with an alternative solution to this problem in the form of housing care. Such a model exists in other European countries and it effectively means that people live in houses under the protection of the state. In Sarajevo recently, Development Minister Bozidar Kalmeta met with his colleagues from the region to discuss this issue and in Croatia, we have established a working group together with the relevant ministries.

I can tell you openly that Croatia is investing a lot of effort on this issue. A total of 2.5 billion HRK has been allocated and Prime Minister Sanader has given clear

instructions to his ministers that this issue needs to be resolved. Other issues are important as well, but I think Croatia has made significant progress in areas such as democratization, the freedom of the media and democratization of the police force.

Truth be told, the media in Croatia enjoys more freedom than the media in many EU member states. However, this is not only my opinion, but also the opinion of the international community.

### **How will the OSCE assist the reform of the judiciary?**

There are two aspects to this. The first is the monitoring of trials transferred from The Hague Tribunal to Croatia. We have to monitor them in order to establish whether they were conducted in compliance with international standards. The fact that the Tribunal decided to transfer cases to Croatia is in itself a very positive sign.

The second aspect is the reform of the justice system in Croatia, with its 1.5 million backlogged cases. I hope this issue will be resolved. The intention is to get rid of all backlogged cases by the end of this year, which is very important as it will, to a large extent, resolve the issue of corruption as well. People will be able to approach judges knowing that their case will be resolved within a reasonable timeframe.

### **If the Mission continues to work this hard, it may face closing down soon...**

I have to admit that I have not enjoyed much success when broaching this topic, particularly in Vienna. There, they do not want to talk about closure. Instead, I think we must talk about “fulfilling the mandate”. Once the mandate has been fulfilled, the Mission will be gone. This can be achieved through work, which will enable Croatian authorities to see what still needs to be done and the way in which to approach ending the Mission. We will stay here as long as Croatia needs. I believe that the excellent relations we have established with the Government has mainly been due to their realization that we are here to help. It must be pointed out, however, that the fact that we have good relations with the Croatian authorities does not mean we have forgotten about our mandate. Only friends can tell one another the truth. Enemies cannot. This is the principle I am trying to implement in Croatia.

### **You have a rich diplomatic career. What does your duty as a diplomat mean to you?**

I have had an interesting and attractive career. I worked in the United States twice; followed developments within the OSCE; was appointed ambassador to this region - in Bulgaria, Macedonia – and opened the Spanish embassy in Belgrade in 1977. I have always been in Europe and in the U.S., and was never a so-called “exotic diplomat”. I have never been to “exotic” destinations such as Latin America or Asia. But I have to say that, despite having such a rich career, I have never been to such an interesting mission as the one here. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, I really do have an opportunity to influence the democratic processes of such an important country as Croatia and, secondly, I have never had such a good team as the one I have here. I can assure you that I am happy and feel very good in your country.