

NOVI LIST, 2 May 2003, By Boris Pavelic

HEAD OF THE OSCE MISSION TO CROATIA, AMBASSADOR PETER SEMNEBY, REPLIES TO CRITICISMS MADE BY THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Due to the legacy of war, criteria for Croatia are stricter

The return of refugees needs to become a national strategic goal, just as is EU accession

Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, Ambassador Peter Semneby, speaks about the fulfillment of Croatian obligations and replies to the recent strong criticism made by Deputy Prime Minister Goran Granic, who addressed a part of the diplomatic corps in Zagreb.

Could you give a general assessment on how Croatia fulfills its obligations for accession to the EU?

Croatian candidacy for EU membership, as well the European Commission (EC) task to make an *avis* and assess the capability of Croatia, has created a whole new situation. The procedure of assessment will now determine its own pace. There is absolutely no more room available for delays. The obligation of Croatia to respond to the EC's questions will now have to be fulfilled and Croatia has until the *avis* has been completed, which is about another year. There are several key political criteria that must be fulfilled: co-operation with The Hague Tribunal is one of the first, but the most important tasks remain the problems associated with refugee returns.

Does the country implement this obligation well?

What is needed is a qualitative change in political relations towards this problem. This issue should become a national strategic goal exactly like EU accession is a national strategic goal. Since refugee return is a condition for EU accession, it is logical that it should also become a strategic goal. This requires strong dedication from all parts of the political spectrum for that problem to be resolved in order for the message to reach all refugees in their current residences outside the country.

"Welcome back"

Who should send this message? How? Are you referring to the well-known idea that the Prime Minister should publicly invite refugees to return?

All high political officials should send a clear message to the refugees: "Welcome back!" But it should be emphasized: I am not saying that someone should be forced to return. There are frequent misconceptions when it is incorrectly stated that the international community wishes to recreate the pre-war situation. It is probably true that many refugees wish to stay where they are now. However, a

realistic possibility has to be given for all to freely choose whether to stay or return to Croatia. For this to be possible some conditions need to be fulfilled: a clear political message is perhaps the most important among those conditions. Administrative and legal obstacles for return need to be eliminated and all returnees should be provided adequate accommodation within reasonable deadlines. And this is still not the case.

How can the process of property repossession be accelerated?

With a clear message by the political establishment - that the stalling and obstructions, which are still present, shall no longer be tolerated. About 6,000 houses have still not been returned and decisions in almost 40,000 requests for reconstruction have not yet been made. Apart from this, the question of occupancy/tenancy rights remains. On the entire territory of the country, an effective, fast and clear system is needed to ensure that people are compensated for the loss of those rights and those who wish to return should be allocated appropriate accommodation within a reasonable deadline, without any additional economic burden.

How do you assess co-operation with The Hague Tribunal?

As far as I am aware, co-operation has been improved, but that can best be assessed by The Hague Tribunal itself.

For the first time, elections will be held for minority self-government in Croatia.

The adoption of the Constitutional Law on National Minorities was a great step and an example of fruitful co-operation between the international community, Government, and Parliament on this difficult and controversial issue. As a result, Croatia now has a good minority law, the implementation of which should be a priority for the Government. The OSCE considers that the forthcoming elections are a great challenge for minority communities since they have to nominate thousands of candidates and conduct a pre-electoral campaign. The authorities have to assist the minorities to perform that in an adequate manner. The OSCE is sponsoring a public information campaign which is being implemented by GONG.

Encouragement to minorities

Are you of the opinion that the preparations are conducted in a proper manner?

It is too early to make conclusions. I have contacts with the Government and with the minorities. Minorities are very concerned with the attitude of the Government. I told the Government that they should assist the minorities but I also warned minorities that the entire process will inevitably be very difficult since these are the first elections for minority self-governments. Therefore, I encouraged them to participate in the elections by all means.

Parliamentary elections will be held in Croatia in several months. Could the change of authorities slow down Croatia on its way to the EU?

I hope that we are moving towards the point in which the results of elections will no longer be a reason for concern about the strategic direction of the country.

Does that mean that you are not of the opinion that a case similar to the one in Slovakia could transpire, when the international community, the night before the elections, sent a message that the return of Meciar to power would block the accession of the country to the EU and NATO?

I would not comment on that. It is important that all key political parties embrace the strategic goal of membership to the EU. The next step, of course, is to implement such policy.

In the course of the last ten days misunderstandings occurred between the Government and the international community, especially after strong criticism by Deputy Prime Minister Goran Granic directed at some diplomats in Zagreb. How do you comment on those misunderstandings?

Representatives of the international community are here to assist Croatia. It is their fundamental interest that Croatia joins the community to which they themselves belong. They are assisting Croatia to fulfill the conditions for European and Euro-Atlantic integration. That task requires that diplomats participate in the resolution of very difficult political issues, issues which are not at all easy. That could be different from the manner in which diplomacy is practiced in other places, but then Croatia is in a different position, in fact in a unique transitional situation. It is regrettable if the attention is directed to the style of conduct of an international community representative, rather than to the content which needs to be resolved, particularly since these representatives are those who are most dedicated to the resolution of problems in Croatia. It is logical that those who work most and assist in the resolution of problems are also the ones most exposed to the public. I will also say that there are many positive results given the engagement of Croatia's international partners: the adoption of the Constitutional Law on National Minorities, for example, as I already mentioned. The international community wishes to reinforce the awareness that the resolution of national minority problems is a condition for joining European integration, and that problem, as I said, must become a national strategic goal. Croatia cannot allow itself to lose the pace since the truth will come out sooner or later. Discussions about the style, instead of about the content, carry the risk of such pace being lost. Therefore, all of us together need to concentrate on the content of the problem.

The need for reconciliation

A part of the public, however, agreed with the standpoints of the Deputy Prime Minister when he stated that some international representatives act according to double standards.

One should be aware that Croatia is in a specific transitional situation and faces challenges which are not known to other countries. The transition from a totalitarian into a democratic society is ongoing; economic transition creates free market; there are problems related to the establishment of an independent state which most Eastern Europe countries did not have to resolve, along with the issue of reconstruction and reconciliation after a devastating war. Finally, it is necessary that the conditions for joining the most exclusive international associations known to the world today be fulfilled. All these are very difficult tasks and require great efforts. Croatia made an arbitrary choice with its candidacy for the EU and NATO. Its choice means that Croatia alone set higher standards for itself than those countries which did not progress as Croatia did. It should also be mentioned that the war legacy and the need for reconciliation set for Croatia higher requirements in some spheres, e.g. as for the issue of minorities. Croatia must reassure that it is capable of providing and guaranteeing minority rights up to European standards. For instance, members of the Serb minority must be given the opportunity to integrate painlessly into society and be able to feel fully as citizens of this country. This requirement would not have been necessary in a country which did not experience difficulties such as Croatia. The situation here is specific and therefore specific solutions are sought.

Would you comment on the refusal of the Parliament Speaker to visit Canada because of the questions on the visa application form?

No. The information I have are insufficient.

In the EU in 2007

The Government claims that Croatia could enter the EU in 2007. Do you think this is realistic?

It depends on the diligence and energy which the Government and the political establishment will invest in fulfilling the conditions. It is not the task of the OSCE to assess Croatia's capability to join the EU, but I can say that it is good that Croatia obligated itself to such ambitious task. We will do everything to assist the country to fulfill the political criteria.