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THE FINAL YEAR OF THE OSCE MISSION IN CROATIA

Serbs will cost you dearly

JORGE FUENTES VILALLONGA, Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, speaks about the huge costs the Croatian government will have to bear in order to finally resolve one of its largest post-war problems and announces the Mission's completion in 2007

Interviewed by: Slavica Lukic

Jorge Fuentes Vilallonga has been the Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia for ten months already, taking over from Swedish-born Peter Semneby in May last year. He is of Spanish origin and has spent a large part of his professional life in Spanish diplomacy.

Upon assuming your present post last year, you said that you were preparing an exit strategy for the OSCE Mission to Croatia and that this year could be the last year of the Mission. Does this announcement still stand?

The scope of issues covered by the Mission includes the return of refugees, the reform of the judiciary and police, freedom of the media, civil society and political issues in general. We are now preparing our mid-term review, which we will be presented to the 55-member states at OSCE Headquarters in Vienna in June. That is also when we will propose a reduction in the number of employees at the Mission. The process will commence in June, while a significant decrease in the number of staff is planned for December. Thus, it can be expected that 2007 could be the year of the exit strategy of the OSCE Mission to Croatia. Naturally, the 55-member states will play a key role in this, Croatia being one of them.

Eight years since its peaceful re-integration, Croat and Serb children still attend separate elementary and high schools in Vukovar. Do you consider such a situation normal and sustainable?

This issue causes me great concern. During my visit to the Croatian Danube Region, I talked to different officials, from the Mayor of Vukovar to Serb minority representatives, students, school principals, and none of them advocated the separation of children along ethnic lines. I spoke with Independent Serb Democratic Party (SDSS) representatives in Vukovar and they told me that, naturally, Serbs in Vukovar did not want apartheid, they did not want their children separated from Croat children, but they did request that their right to education in Serb language and script be respected, a right also exercised by Italian or other minorities in Croatia. I presented my belief that it was necessary to avoid a system of parallel education of children of Croat and Serb nationality, because such a system could create a divided society. Today, children in Vukovar go to different kindergartens and, after that, to different schools. This parallel system could lead to the creation of two separate identities - two separate histories are taught and children are taught to have two separate visions of the world that surrounds them. Serbs and Croats do not want

mixed marriages, they frequent separate Croat and Serb cafes, restaurants and clubs. We consider this situation unsustainable.

Does the OSCE intend to launch initiatives that would mark the beginning of the end of ethnic separation within the education system?

Yes, we do. In co-operation with the Ministry of Education we intend to organize a cultural and sporting competition in Vukovar, the participants of which will be both Serb and Croatian pupils. We believe this could present an initial contribution to their joint work and co-operation.

Mixed classes

Will you in some way influence them to stop this practice of separate classes for Croatian and Serb pupils?

Yes, we thought of that as well. We plan to establish ethnically mixed classes. Certain minor steps have already been taken, such as joint textbooks on modern Croatian history, which are important in overcoming existing separation.

When can we expect the establishment of the first ethnically mixed class in Vukovar?

In agreement with representatives of the Croatian government, it was decided that in the course of this month a working group would be formed to come up with proposals and suggestions, so that by the end of this school year, a specific plan for the following school year would be in place. Another activity we are planning with Serb minority MPs is to visit various regions in Croatia in order to acquaint ourselves with the various problems found in those areas.

According to the Sarajevo Agreement signed by government representatives from Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina last year, the process of refugee return in all three countries should be completed by the end of this year. Do you consider this a realistic deadline?

The return of refugees is a very deep and complex problem. We are talking about 300,000 Croatian Serbs who left Croatia either before or during the war; 200,000 of which are still living outside of Croatia. The Croatian authorities are aware that if they truly want these people to return they have to invite them and provide them with secure living conditions and work.

I am convinced that the Croatian Government is truly determined to send a message to refugees of Serb ethnicity that they are welcome to return to Croatia. As you know, we recently initiated a public awareness campaign on the possibilities of return, which was successful in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. True, there were certain difficulties in Serbia, but this was expected.

In order to complete the process of refugee return a lot of money is required. It is estimated that the Croatian Government would need 1.2 billion HRK to complete the process. It is unrealistic to expect that this can be done within one or two financial years. Three years is more likely how long it will take to come up with that sort of

money from the state budget. Of course, this does not mean that the OSCE has to be in Croatia until the last war-damaged house has been reconstructed.

Symbolic figures

A large number of people who wish to return had occupancy/tenancy rights in Croatia and lost them. By the end of 2005, the Government had not resolved a single request for housing care from this group of refugees even though state funds were set aside for this purpose. Are you sure that the current Government honestly wants them to return?

The issue of occupancy/tenancy rights is indeed one of the most complex issues. All three countries in the region have resolved it differently. Croatia, unlike other countries in the region, never recognized occupancy/tenancy rights as ownership rights. Croatia opted for another solution for former occupancy/tenancy rights holders, i.e. the provision of alternative accommodation in the form of apartments or houses. Some cases have been resolved recently, more precisely those that needed urgent housing care. For the time being, this is a symbolic, yet very important number. A total of 41 former occupancy/tenancy rights holders were provided with housing care. In my opinion, it is possible to resolve most requests for housing care by former occupancy/tenancy rights holders by the end of this year.

Approximately half of the requests for the reconstruction of homes belonging to people who wish to return to Croatia have been rejected. If they lodge an appeal against such decision, it takes months, sometimes even years for them to receive a decision on their appeal. Have you discussed this obstacle to return with Development Minister, Bozidar Kalmeta?

Yes, I am aware of this. There is a certain weakness related to criteria determining who is eligible for reconstruction. We are also aware of complaints regarding the state's conduct in certain cases, and this is something we have also been discussing with the competent ministry. Likewise, people whose request for reconstruction has been denied are sometimes offered an alternative - the state allocates building material enabling them to reconstruct their houses themselves. I know this is not an ideal solution, particularly for the old and helpless. However, we are constantly in touch with the relevant ministries in order to resolve issues related to refugee return and attempts are being made to resolve such problems.

Croatian Television must not punish editors with salary cuts

Political pressure by the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) on the public broadcaster, Croatian Television (HTV), escalated at the end of last year. What do you think about this political pressure and the manner in which cases involving HTV editors, Tihomir Ladisic and Denis Latin, were resolved?

I have spoken to the Director General of the public broadcaster, Mirko Galic, as well as to editors Denis Latin, Tihomir Ladisic and HTV journalist Branimir Farkas. My opinion is that Mr. Galic wants to do what is best for HTV. We warned him that certain procedures within HTV needed to change as they do not fit into a European media perspective. I am referring to situations whereby an editor or journalist receives

a one-month pay cut of 10 percent when their superior is not happy with a particular piece of work and are also warned not to do it again. This is an old way of thinking that needs to be eliminated. One needs to become more market-oriented. Perhaps the problem lies in the fact that the media in Croatia is developing faster than Croatian society itself. The media warns about problems and facts the Croatian government and Croatian society is not yet prepared to face. I am convinced, however, that Croatia has an established media system which can identify shortcomings on its own and also has the strength to correct them.

The Church lost its battle for Sunday

The Catholic Church in Croatia has continually insisted that work be banned on Sundays and the Government has proposed a law in line with this request. Catholic bishops are also insisting that crucifixes be displayed in public buildings. Do you think that the Catholic Church intervening too much in the social and economic life in Croatia?

You have asked me a tricky question since I myself am Catholic and as a Catholic I have to believe that the Catholic Church is always right in all matters. However, we recently witnessed in France the removal of crucifixes from schools and public institutions, which was the result of an increasing number of other faiths and religions represented in schools. I am of the opinion that something similar, i.e. a process of secularization, will take place in Croatia as well, which is inevitable. As far as working on Sundays is concerned, I, myself, would be happy if I did not have to work on Sunday, Saturday, sometimes even Friday. I am, however, aware of how unrealistic this is since there are economic demands. As long as people want to do their shopping on a Sunday and large shopping centres facilitate this, the situation will remain as is. I am of the opinion that this is a lost battle for the Catholic Church in Croatia.

There is an increasing impression that Sanader's HDZ is in a silent coalition with the controversial Croatian Party of Rights (HSP). What do you think? Do you believe that HSP has distanced itself enough from its previous hard-line, right-wing position?

I think it is safe to say that Anto Djapic, the president of HSP, has made an effort to be accepted by the international community as a partner and head of a centre-right party, although personally, I do believe that HSP still leans to the far right. Some people believe that Mr. Djapic was indeed successful in achieving this, from his visit to Israel to distancing himself from Croatia's WWII past. Nevertheless, rhetoric and actions in certain areas point to negative tendencies, such as the time when he and his party declined to support the return of refugees in Dubrovnik. All in all, there appear to be many inconsistencies surrounding Mr. Djapic and his party. I think he needs to invest further efforts in the party's transformation but, regardless of this; he without a doubt has a place in Croatia's political system. One should respect the fact that HSP is the third strongest political party in Croatia. Regarding its "silent coalition" with HDZ, I think it is obvious in some cases that it indeed exists. However, the convictions and roots of the ruling HDZ are somewhat different. It is a party with a strong position and accepted by the EU, in which it enjoys a firm position.