



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

Mission to Croatia

Headquarters

News in Brief

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Croatian Government and OSCE Mission launch the Public Awareness Campaign for Reconciliation and Sustainable Return

At a joint press conference on 15 September, the Government of Croatia and the Mission announced a Public Awareness Campaign (PAC) on Reconciliation and Sustainable Return. Minister of Foreign Affairs Miomir Zuzul and Minister of Sea, Tourism, Transport and Development Bozidar Kalmeta, who is also responsible for refugee affairs, hosted the press conference together with the OSCE Head of Mission. The EC Delegation to Croatia, USAID, UNHCR and other international donors and partners attended the event. PAC is a joint initiative by the Government, the OSCE and other international partners.

The purposes of the Campaign are to enable refugees and internally displaced persons to make an informed decision on whether they want to return; to promote the importance of multiculturalism and tolerance for building an integrated thriving society in the spirit of European integration, both among refugees and Croat receiving communities; and to support Croatian authorities in the policy of empowering those who wish to return. The Mission has opened a tender to select a public relations firm to design the campaign.

During the press conference, the Ministers and OSCE introduced the research report *“Motivational and Emotional Factors for the Return of Refugees to their Homes and the Acceptance of their Return by the Local Population”*, which the Campaign is based on. The Mission commissioned this report and US Agency for International Development (USAID) funded it. The report includes the findings of a survey conducted by the *Puls* Agency on the attitudes towards return amongst Croatian Serb refugees residing in Serbia and Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croat refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina residing in Croatia, and the Croatian population in the areas of Serb minority return.

The report demonstrates that there remains a potential for return, and that this potential is particularly significant if certain preconditions for return are realized, access to housing and economic opportunities being the most important ones. Around 14% of Serbs show an interest in returning to Croatia, that percentage rising to 42% if their homes would be adequately restored. The report underlines the need to provide accurate and precise information to refugees on what they can expect if they decide to return since many refugees rely on second-hand information. Finally, it finds that many people affected by the war – both refugees and Croats living in war-affected areas – maintain war-time mentalities. Therefore, it follows from the report that there is a need to make a joint commitment to the future instead of looking to the past.

Extensive press coverage focused on the statistic that only 14% of refugees intend to return, and some newspapers carried out headlines like “Serbs do not want to return”. In subsequent

interviews HoM stated that even 14% represents a large absolute number; that the survey also indicates greater interest in return if there is access to housing; and that the number is not the most important thing but rather the creation of possibilities for refugees to make a choice on their future and support in the realization of that desire.

Serb MPs concerned with the Government implementation of the Cooperation Agreement with SDSS representatives

Media outlets have recently echoed the concerns of the Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS) leadership as to the Government's implementation of the Cooperation Agreement signed by the three Serb parliamentary representatives and Prime Minister Sanader in December 2003. Serb Minority MPs argue that Croatian Serbs are not sufficiently represented in the police and judiciary in the areas of return, and have expressed some concern as to the pace of repossession of property, and the remaining political and administrative obstacles towards the return of refugees. SDSS President Vojislav Stanimirovic stated: "[SDSS] party would however continue to support the Government as long as it continues to honour most of the Agreement."

In two meetings with the Mission on 16 and 23 September, the last of them with HoM, SDSS Vice-president Milorad Pupovac also voiced concern about the uncertainty surrounding the number of war-crime indictments of Serbs, which could reach, depending on the sources, "2000, 4000 or more." He considered that this blurry situation regarding the number of indictments would only deter many refugees from returning. Serbia and Montenegro's Ambassador to Croatia concurred with this observation in an interview with Novi Sad-based daily Dnevnik on 19 September: "the existence of Croatian police arrest warrants for Serbs who fled Croatia and the non-transparent and unavailable list of amnestied persons are strong discouraging factors when it comes to even thinking about returning or applying for property repossession."

Croatian Radio and Television complains about political interference

Croatian Parliament Speaker Vladimir Seks' call for changes to the Law on Croatian Radio and Television (HRT), Croatia's public broadcaster, due to unsatisfactory coverage of the work of Parliament, has resulted in a heated debate between HRT officials and MPs. Both Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and opposition MPs supported the stand of the Parliament Speaker. Media representatives argue that the Speaker's criticism represents unacceptable political interference in the editorial policy of HRT. Additionally, the media reported that HRT senior management was threatened with the abolition of subscription fees, the major financing source for HRT, in a meeting with the Parliament Presidency. On 15 September, the HRT Programme Council "condemn[ed] any pressure or interference of any political option or institution on the content or editorial policy of HRT", as this was contrary to legal regulations and democratic standards. The Croatian Journalists Association and the Croatian Helsinki Committee Media Council supported this communiqué.

The Mission has reiterated the recommendations and conclusions previously made by experts commissioned by the OSCE, the EC and Council of Europe to assess the Law on HRT. The Media has largely supported the Mission's standpoint that HRT and the Broadcasting Council should be protected from political interference. In an interview published by Vecernji list on 14 September, OSCE Head of Mission recalled that "in the recommendations [to the Government], ...made by the group of experts comprised of the OSCE, the European Commission and the Council of Europe, it was stated, *inter alia*, that the Law on the Croatian

Radio-Television should be revised, and that the procedure for the appointment of HRT Council members should be changed in such a manner as to depoliticize that procedure.”

Mission sponsors series of seminars to encourage effective minority representation

On 22 September, the third of a series of 20 seminars for local and regional level Councils and Representatives of National Minorities was held in Dubrovnik. The Government Office for National Minorities in co-operation with the Ministry of Justice and the state level Council for National Minorities (CNM) are organizing the seminars. The seminars are intended to facilitate the councils’ and representatives’ ability to fulfil their role as effective advocates for national minorities, as foreseen in the Constitutional Law on National Minorities. The Law envisages the councils and representatives as a means through which minorities can participate more fully in “the public life and management of local affairs...in order to improve, preserve and protect the position of national minorities in society.”

The seminars are designed to provide a better understanding of the practical application of minority rights, the role of the national-level CNM in Zagreb and use of the media. Additionally, they bring together CNMs and minority representatives with members of local authorities, with whom they co-operate at local level and who are responsible for providing the necessary practical conditions for their work, e.g., premises, equipment and financial means.

The utility of the seminars is particularly evident in that they provide a forum for exchanges on effective working practices and relationships. Results so far indicate that the seminars will be effective in improving the participation of minorities at the local and regional level. The Mission is contributing actively to the seminar series.

Zagreb Police experiences extensive replacements

On 17 September, Zagreb Police Spokesperson announced the appointment of 13 new Heads of police precincts in the city of Zagreb. Taken together with the replacements of 15 further senior police officers, the re-shuffle represents the most extensive change of staff in one Police Administration in Croatia to date. Zagreb Police Spokesperson listed three reasons for the new appointments: first, the new Head of Zagreb Police had the right to choose his associates; second, the rise in Zagreb’s crime rate, approximately 17 % during the first seven months of 2004; and third, the lack of necessary qualifications on the part of the recalled officers. Former Minister of Interior Sime Lucin sharply criticized the explanation, calling the replacement politically motivated.