

## One Step Forward, One Step Back

*The main problem we are dealing with here is the return of Serbs to Croatia and a political message that the return of refugees is not a threat to the majority nation. Out of a total number of Serbs who left Croatia, 89,000 of them have returned, but, at the same time, 170,000 Croats from BiH have come to the country and have acquired Croatian citizenship in the meantime*

*By Zorica Stanivukovic*

When the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) decided to extend the mandate of its Mission to Croatia, many domestic politicians were explaining that this was not a particularly bad sign for a country which had only stepped out of a one-party regime and which had won its state and political independence by war. In such a historical context, nationalism, xenophobia, cultural and religious exclusiveness, even ethnic resettlement of the population, are deemed, if not natural, then at least expected, even necessary occurrences. Precisely because of that, the current political nomenclature in Croatia concludes that the OSCE deals with their country only sporadically. Unfortunately, not because everything is OK in Croatia, but because there are countries in which the situation is even worse. The interview with Ambassador Peter Semneby, Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, revealed something else. That 'foreigners', even when they are coming from 'role-model countries' such as Sweden, as is the case with Ambassador Semneby, are very well aware of what the situation here is actually all about, why is the situation the way it is and in which manner it has to change if Croatia really wants to become a part of the association of European nations, which respect certain general principles of human rights and freedoms. In the OSCE Mission in Zagreb, they do not hide that they are very interested in reading the Belgrade press and it is unclear to them why it does not legally come to Croatia yet. They are very well aware of the 'regional conflicts', but also of the common problems of small communities, from freedom of press to violation of human rights. The experiences from Banja Luka, Sarajevo, Zagreb, Vukovar, Knin and many other neuralgic spots of the broader domestic region, leave an impression that, when things start moving in a bad direction, everything is actually very similar. And when things start moving in a good direction, their path is quickly blocked by what one could cynically call the 'narcissism of small differences'.

- **“Mr. Semneby, according to your first impressions, what are the differences or similarities between the Republic of Croatia and other European countries in transition, which abandoned the communist or socialist system approximately ten years ago?”**

“One of the specific attributes of Croatia is that it is a country which is at this moment facing a double challenge. One is the repair of damage caused during the war, and the other is the accession to what is referred to as the 'exclusive circle' in Europe. I would say that Croatia also has some advantages here, in relation to other countries in Central

and South-East Europe. Many local people lived and worked in Europe, which by itself makes the perspective of the European integration for Croatia better.”

- **“As the Head of the OSCE Mission, you previously worked in Latvia. Do you bring some positive experience from that country which could be of assistance to Croatia?”**

“I see some similarities. The main problem of the OSCE in Latvia was the acquisition of citizenship through naturalisation of a large Russian population. As you know, the main problem here, which our Mission is also dealing with, is the return of Serbs to Croatia. One of our primary tasks in Latvia was to transmit a message to the local population that naturalisation of the Russian population is not a threat to the people of Latvia at all. I think it is very important to do something similar here, as well. A message needs to be sent that the return of refugees is not a threat to the majority nation. On the contrary, it is the only way towards creating a unified, integrated society. Many issues we dealt with in Latvia actually related to the abstract political level, but at the everyday, basic level, the situation was much better. Namely, I cannot say that, during my stay there, I noticed some real inter-ethnic problems, especially not at the lowest, local levels of that community. There was not a single case of real ethnic violence. I would not want to say that everything was all right, but I would still say that one can learn a lot about co-existence in multi-ethnic communities from Latvian experience.”

- **“The OSCE Mandate to the Republic of Croatia has been extended until the end of the year. The majority of domestic politicians in power, and especially in the opposition, deem that it was not necessary. Do you share their opinion?”**

“There are still some very important tasks, for the resolution of which the presence of the OSCE in Croatia is very welcome and useful. Our presence was already justified by the fact that Croatia signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union. Many issues in that Agreement need to be resolved before the moment Croatia joins the European Union, and many of them fall within our scope of activities, as well. Due to that reason, our presence here, apart from the humanitarian aspect we are dealing with, can also be very useful as support to Croatia in the process of its accession to the European Union.”

- **“How far have your Mission in Zagreb and the Government in Zagreb go in the attempt to at least alleviate, if not resolve, the problems of people of different nationalities, who were forced to leave the Republic of Croatia since the beginning of the war or to accept it as a temporary residence?”**

“The Government’s statistics show that out of a total number of Serbs who left Croatia, 89,000 of them have returned to the former permanent residences, and that trend continues. At the same time, approximately 170,000 people came to Croatia. The majority of them are Croats from Bosnia, who became Croatian citizens in the meantime. What is especially important here is the principle that everyone, regardless of nationality, should have the right to return to their former permanent residence, if they opt for that. Everyone should be provided with an unconditional possibility to return to their permanent residence. That is, of course, a principle from that abstract political and humanitarian level. However, that right also has to be substantiated by the right to repossess one’s previous property. Since the major part of that property has been

destroyed, the right to return must also include the right to reconstruction. Those are the principles which should apply to all countries in the region which were affected by the war. Here, in the OSCE Mission to Croatia, we are satisfied with the fact that the Governments of Croatia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, welcomed the initiative of the OSCE Mission in those countries which specifies the models of return of expellees, refugees and displaced persons. A lot remains to be done here. It is very positive that the Government of Croatia has adopted a programme of repossession of property of Serb refugees, but the programme also must be substantiated by certain funds from the Croatian budget. It is very important to return the property located in the areas which were not encompassed by the war. That primarily pertains to the people who lived in the apartments with the so-called occupancy/tenancy right.”

- **“Do you think that the Serbs, who left the Republic of Croatia during the war and did not participate in war operations nor were responsible for war crimes, have reasons to be afraid to return to the country?”**

“I think that there are no reasons for that. I have not noticed any so far. What I have seen, are positive steps forward in relations between two ethnic communities. The period of war and of war wounds must be seen as a part of the past, and all ethnic groups in this area must realise that. Normal life must go on. Naturally, this tendency will be more evident and easier to implement if there are common goals, acceptable for both ethnic communities. I think that one should admit that the economic situation in parts of the entire region, which were affected by the war, is still terrible, but, on the other hand, I think that progress will not fail to take place if all ethnic communities also focus their efforts on the improvement of the relations in everyday life, and not only on the integration of each of them into Europe. The situation is, of course, very different in different parts of the country, but, globally speaking, I do not see any reason why someone should be afraid of the return.”

- **“How satisfied are you with the freedom of press in Croatia?”**

“As far as the print media in Croatia are concerned, the situation is quite in order. The press is diverse, and there is a tradition of publication of opposition newspapers. I consider that to be very healthy for public and political life of the country. A part, which requires the most attention, is the electronic media. A lot has been done. Especially in the prevention of direct political influence on the creation of television and radio programmes. But, one still has to continue working on that. I would also like to mention a very strong reaction of the public to certain problems related to the freedom of press in Croatia, which is an indicator that there are strong forces here which will defend the freedom of press and which care what the situation in the media will be like. However, in any case, things are moving in the right direction.”

- **“You are coming from a country that sits at the top of civilization achievements of modern Europe with regard to respect of rights of an individual. How close, or how far, is the Republic of Croatia from such a political ideal?”**

“I would rather not compare my country with the country I am working in. But it is positive that Croatia has set goals for itself, which correspond to higher European standards.”