



## Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

### Mission to Croatia

#### Headquarters

20 January 2004

### Background Report

## **The new HDZ-led Government pursuing a policy of ethnic reconciliation which will impact on the Mission's work**

### **Ethnic Minority Support for the Government**

The Mission's activities are likely to be affected by the inauguration of a new government led by HDZ. The Prime Minister has made several statements and gestures directly related to issues included in the Mission's mandate, generally in support of refugee return, minority aspects and regional cooperation. The Mission will follow up with the Government in order to support and structure Government measures.

On 23 December 2003 Parliament approved (88 out of 152 voted in favour) the composition of the new Government as presented to it by HDZ leader Ivo Sanader. The new Prime Minister has agreed a formal coalition with the Democratic Centre (DC) and the Social Liberal Party (HSLP), both parties represented in the Government at cabinet minister level, while a number of other parties and representatives in Parliament have committed themselves, though at various degrees, to support the Government.

Most significant in this regard is the co-operation, which the Prime Minister has secured with the minority representatives in Parliament. Following intensive negotiations, HDZ concluded cooperation agreements with the three MPs of the Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS) and the MP of the Italian minority before the first session of the new Parliament on 22 December 2003. The remaining four ethnic minority MPs also demonstrated support of the Government by voting in favour of it when it was presented in Parliament by Sanader.

### **Initiatives**

The Government has been in office just four weeks, but still a number of important initiatives have been taken. They are aimed at demonstrating the HDZ-led Government's preparedness to depart from the policies of the party in the previous decade. Notably, the Prime Minister has involved himself personally in most, if not all, the initiatives.

The cooperation agreements signed with the SDSS MPs and the Italian minority MP contain a number of points essential to each of these ethnic groups, reflecting the different concerns that they have. In both agreements Croatia's accession to the EU is highlighted as a common goal.

The SDSS agreement, which is the most comprehensive of the two, lists many essential points and deadlines which have been agreed on the issues of concern to the Serb minority. This includes return of refugees, implementation of the Constitutional Law on the Rights of

National Minorities, repossession of Serb property, development of the Areas of Special State Concern, reform of the judiciary, and cooperation with neighbouring states.

The agreement with SDSS followed the call by Sanader during the election campaign on non-returned Serbs to return to Croatia and was followed by the Prime Minister's surprise visit to the Serbian Orthodox Christmas reception in January 2004 where he even greeted the hosts in the traditional orthodox manner. The Speaker of Parliament, Vladimir Seks, who was also a prominent HDZ figure during the Tudjman era, continued with words of tolerance and respect for human and minority rights.

The Prime Minister also visited the Italian minority in Istria around New Year and earned a similar respect on this occasion, both for showing up, for speaking Italian and for demonstrating a convincing attitude.

In line with the good and seemingly constructive relations, which the Government - and the Prime Minister personally - have established with the ethnic minorities, a will to establish improved relations with neighbouring countries, notably Serbia-Montenegro, has been expressed. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister both emphasize the aim of obtaining a normalization of bilateral relations and stress that all authorities in Belgrade, irrespective of their political views, will find openness in Zagreb when it comes to the resolution of all remaining issues. At present, the formation of a new government in Belgrade is awaited before concrete steps can be taken in this regard.

On the ICTY issue, another key point in relations with the EU, Sanader has moved to streamline cooperation by transferring the field of competence to the Ministry of Justice. In the Prime Minister's words, the issue is a legal, not a political one and should be treated accordingly.

At a meeting last week between the Prime Minister and HoM the intention of Sanader to pursue a policy of reconciliation between the ethnic groupings in the country was confirmed. A number of joint initiatives to this effect between the Government and the OSCE Mission were discussed at this meeting.

### **Reactions**

Reactions to Prime Minister Sanader's conciliatory tone, gestures and the cooperative mode vis-à-vis the ethnic minorities reflect that the HDZ leader has exceeded the expectations of many in this field.

Commentators known for their skepticism or even criticism with regard to HDZ have published columns in which they express their acknowledgement of the scene set by the Prime Minister. Like many observers, they now await the crucial stage of implementation to take shape before a more consolidated opinion on the Government's policies can be elaborated.

END