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Interview with Jorge Fuentes Monzonis-Vilallonga, head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, on the Mission's current activities and recent events in Croatia

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The Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, Jorge Fuentes Monzonis-Vilallonga, visited Vukovar on Wednesday where he met with city authorities and representatives of the Serb minority community, as well as open the OSCE's new field office in Vukovar. The visit was an excellent opportunity to talk to this experienced Spanish diplomat about the Mission's current activities as well as recent events in Croatia.

Since taking over as Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia a year ago, what major changes have you noticed in Croatia, and to what extent has our country progressed towards EU membership?

I came here a year ago, which to a certain extent is the final stage of the Mission's presence in Croatia. Upon my arrival, I noted that there was room for additional improvement in relations between the Mission and the Croatian government. Likewise, my first impression of the Mission was the great amount of work accomplished, both at the Mission's HQ in Zagreb and at the various field offices. After a while, I noted that the Mission's many tasks needed to be directed towards a specific goal for easier orientation.

Good relations [with the Croatian government] were established at the first meeting with Prime Minister Ivo Sanader in May last year. I respect our friendship and the fact that I can contact him whenever I need to. We have now reached a point where the Government no longer perceives us as a threat, but as a tool to assist in the resolution of certain issues. As the result of numerous talks, we have created a platform, or strategy, that will assist [Croatia] in overcoming specific problems. This platform consists of three sets of plenary meetings – one with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, another with the Justice Minister, and the third with Development Minister, Bozidar Kalmeta. These plenary meetings are held once a month. Alongside this, various working groups have also been set up.

However, it must be pointed out that these good relations existed before two of the most important events for Croatia, which occurred last year. The first was the start of EU entry talks, and the second was the arrest and transfer of General Ante Gotovina to The Hague Tribunal. This is proof that Mr Sanader is a bold and courageous person - he established good relations with the Mission even before he knew what was going to happen, specifically with the EU. He realized early on that we can assist in the resolution of certain issues.

How would you assess the situation in Croatia regarding the status of national minorities? Do you have data on ethnically-motivated incidents, particularly relations between majority Croats and minority Serbs?

I always emphasise the fact that Croatia is a country with 4.5 million inhabitants and as many as 22 minorities. Thus, one could say that what you have here is the microcosm of Central Europe. [Such diversity] is good for the country. The Deputy Prime Minister, Jadranka Kosor, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, always emphasise that minorities are Croatia's national treasure and that the treatment of national minorities reflects the maturity of a democracy.

Croatia has adopted a Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities that is very good, although its implementation sometimes faces minor problems. There are various aspects of the law that have not yet been fully implemented, such as the employment of minorities in local administration and self-government units, in the police force, judiciary etc. Minorities are on the whole satisfied with their political representation but there are always those other problems as well.

Another important aspect in this area is education. In some areas, a separate school system has been set up for Croats and Serbs. The Mission is working hard to ensure that this separation does not lead to a separation in society.

It is also worth noting that the issue of minorities can be very dynamic. Although there are currently 22 recognised minorities in Croatia, this may vary in the future. For example, Spain is now being populated by hundreds of thousands of newly-arrived emigrants. The question is what will happen when Croatia joins the EU. Minorities link [Croatia] with neighbouring countries.

When can we expect the completion of the process of refugee return? How many people still wish to return to Croatia and are they provided with the basic preconditions for return, such as the reconstruction of war-damaged houses and repossession of property occupied after the war?

It is difficult to come up with an exact number, but we are talking about 300,000 ethnic Serbs that left Croatia. Approximately 120,000 have returned and we assume that the rest have either integrated in Serbia or in some other host country. There are around 80,000 ethnic Serbs still registered as refugees and we try to inform those who wish to return that they are welcome in Croatia and that the Government supports their return. Personally, I am of the opinion that there will be no mass return unless something changes drastically. I primarily refer to the fact that Croatia will become a member of the EU, which in turn will affect its economy. Thus, some people might return to Croatia looking for a job, bearing in mind that Serbia will become a member of the EU at least several years after Croatia. We try to encourage the Government to facilitate refugee return and the Government is doing everything in its power: it is offering information to them, reporting on their rights, issuing documents, attempting to resolve issues pertaining to former occupancy/tenancy rights holders and reconstruction of war-damaged property, assisting them in finding work, resolving issues related to pensions, etc. But one should not forget the impact the social atmosphere has on this process. It would be ideal if there were no [ethnically-related] incidents.

Do you follow the Croatia's media scene and how would you assess media freedoms in Croatia?

Of course we are following that area as well. I feel that the media in Croatia is very good - journalists are professional and enjoy freedom in their work. Some international reports indicate that Croatia's media scene is freer than that of countries already in the EU. There are, however, some problems with local media. It is easier to be independent in Zagreb. In some areas, the media is "under the umbrella" of certain institutions. We have also recently noticed several problems at the public broadcaster. Here I am specifically referring to two current affairs programmes recently aired on Croatian Television – the *Latinica* programme on the legacy of the first Croatian president Franjo Tudjman; and the *Otvoreno* program on the alleged shelling of Sarajevo by Croats in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The reaction to both these programmes was harsh and we would like to know the reason for this was and what, if any, were the consequences. I meet frequently with the director general of the public broadcaster, Mirko Galic, and I can say that he insists on the independence of journalists and does not want the work for a television station that is under the influence of politics.

You mentioned previously the issue of ethnically separated schools in Vukovar. Recently, calls to end such separation have become increasingly louder, with opponents stressing that Croatian and Serbian children should not be separated from pre-school onwards. What is your opinion?

Although the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities provides for the right to minority education, I do not believe this means that minorities have to exercise this right by creating separate communities. We are trying to come up with a solution to this issue. One proposal is that children attend classes in the same building, albeit in different shifts, in order for the children to get to know one another. Another proposal is to organize competitions among the students that are not based on the principle of Serbs against Croats and vice versa. They should be "mixed" so that the students can participate in the games together. Anything resembling apartheid should be avoided.

When the OSCE Mission came to Croatia, many thought that its mandate would not last for long. Are there any indications as to when the OSCE will leave Croatia and what still needs to be done in order for that to happen?

You are right, the mandate of the OSCE Mission to Croatia is renewed every year and we always think that each new year will be the last one. However, the circumstances are such that even the Government has realized that we are here to help and not stand in Croatia's way. We think that we have also contributed to the beginning of Croatia's negotiations with the European Union. The Government is putting no pressure on the Mission to leave and it is not insisting that we go. We are here in good faith; we want what is best for Croatia. We will not stay a day longer than is necessary, but we will also not leave before we complete our mandate.

In the last couple of days, there has been much debate over the so-called "Glavas case". The fact that Independent MP Branimir Glavas was stripped of his parliamentary immunity has divided the public. What is your opinion on the case and how do you assess war crime trials in Croatia judiciary?

Of course we are aware of the situation and we are currently following all information related to the "Glavas case". We will follow the case as we do all other war crimes

cases, that is of course if Glavas is indicted. If he is brought to trial, we will monitor as we do all other war crime trials in Croatia. However, the case is still up in the air and we shall wait to see what happens. To a certain extent there is also a political dimension to this problem that must also be resolved. I, however, cannot interfere in Croatia's internal politics nor is it my job to do so. One of our tasks is the monitoring of war crimes trials, which we have been doing over the last year quite intensely following an agreement with Carla del Ponte, the chief prosecutor of the Hague Tribunal.