

**Peter Semneby, Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, about the return of the tenancy rights to refugees**

**Serb refugees should be given state apartments**

The head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, Peter Semneby commented for *Slobodna Dalmacija* the failed attempt by the presidents of Croatia, BiH and Serbia and Montenegro to sign a joint declaration on faster refugee return in Salzburg.

**Are you disappointed by that fact? Do you believe that it could have facilitated the whole return process?**

We have welcomed and supported the initiative by President Stjepan Mesic from the beginning and will continue to do so. We hope a trilateral declaration will be signed as soon as possible. We are concerned with the fact that it continues to be difficult to find a common frame of reference for the return of refugee in the region.

**The declaration was not signed because the Croatian side did not agree with the return of tenancy rights to the Serb refugees.**

This is probably the greatest outstanding problem. We have been advocating for a long time that a solution be found that would alleviate the termination of tenancy rights. We continue to discuss with the Government possible solutions.

**Could you comment on the fact that president Mesic had launched an initiative for faster refugee return, but the Croatian government was neither ready to return the property to Croatian Serbs, nor to compensate the loss of their property?**

I do not want to comment on the internal relations among Croatian authorities. I could just hope that this process would lead to fair and adequate proposal that would provide a redress for all those people who have had their tenancy rights terminated. We appreciate the efforts by president Mesic to initiate greater debate and analysis on this issue in the regional context.

**Could that problem affect the Croatian ambition to join the EU?**

The latest EC Report points to that issue as one of the priority areas for the next 12 months, and requests the Government to design a system for compensation of lost

tenancy rights. Return of refugees is no doubt one of the key political conditions for EU integration which implies also creating a climate for the acceptance of returnees, after they come home.

**How could the Croatian government solve this problem? By what means and at what cost?**

The Government needs to put in place a transparent and legally secure solution for the compensation of lost tenancy rights and give the possibility to those people have lost them to apply for the return of property, without additional costs and in a relatively short timeframe.

Such a solution should satisfy all those who had lost tenancy rights, although priority should be given to those who wish to return, irrespective of whether in the Areas of Special State Concern or outside it. Their status should be prioritized in the list of persons applying for the state-provided housing. One should not discuss the cost of such an arrangement until the exact numbers become clear.

**Bosnia gave their refugees the tenancy rights back without any special cost. Why Croatia could not do the same?**

It is not up to me to answer this question. The OSCE Mission to Croatia has regularly pointed out that the issue was not about returning tenancy rights to their former holders, but on providing an adequate compensation for those who had lost such a rights.

(Under the photo: “Semneby: Refugees should get an appropriate compensation for tenancy rights”)