

Additional elections for national minorities to take place on 15 February

The Government confirmed on 5 January that two different sets of elections for minority voters across the country will take place on 15 February. Both sets of elections constitute important implementing measures of the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities (CLNM) which was adopted in December 2002.

One set of elections is required to elect 291 of the 469 county, town and municipal Councils for National Minorities (CNMs) that must still be elected for the first time or those whose membership slates remain incomplete following the first elections for the CNMs on 18 May 2003. In addition, 101 of the 140 individual minority representatives must also be elected for those minorities whose populations were too small to meet the CLNM criteria for a CNM. Sixteen of Croatia's 21 official national minorities were entitled to elect CNMs or individual representatives following adoption of the CLNM. Overall, only approximately one third of the slates for the remaining 291 CNMs (i.e. 115) and 101 individual representatives (i.e. 27) were submitted by the recent deadline; in many places only partial lists were again submitted.

The other set of elections is required to correct nearly three years of minority under-representation in local and regional self-government units since nation-wide elections in May 2001. Under-representation was found to exist in five county and 83 town and municipal self-government units in line with thresholds laid out in the CLNM and other legislation. Numerous deadlines to correct the under-representation since 2001 were ignored by the Government and local authorities, but most minority representatives were added over time on the basis of party slate results from the 2001 elections. By-elections must now be held to correct the remaining under-representation of Serbs and Roma in 19 self-government units. Elections will also take place to elect individual Croat councillors in two municipalities in Eastern Slavonia where Croats constitute a minority.

Many minority representatives have again predicted a very low voter turnout on 15 February, stating that the difficulties in finding candidates and raising interest among minority voters are a result of general apathy and a lack of interest in addition to the ongoing lack of awareness of the role and functioning of CNMs. In partnership with the Delegation of the EC in Croatia, the Mission is financing a number of election-support and awareness activities by Croatia's lead election-support NGO, *GONG*, including television and radio advertising and the deployment of domestic election observers on election day.

HoM meets new Minister of the Interior to discuss police issues

On 23 January 2004 the Head of Mission (HoM) met with the new Minister of the Interior. The HoM presented the idea of possibly working with the Ministry on the elaboration of a so-called 'Road Map' for the Croatian Police which would outline in detail the process for creating a modern police service in Croatia in line with European standards. The HoM emphasized the work of the Police should be transparent to allow regular observation from external actors. Both parties discussed the activities of the International Donor's Group on police assistance, which the Mission chairs. The HoM stressed the need for the further development of Community Policing initiatives emphasizing and the importance that the Mission places on regional police co-operation and harmonization.

The Minister expressed his appreciation for OSCE police assistance. He stated that he intends to continue with many of the projects that were previously initiated by the former authorities and that all efforts will be made in the police field to prepare Croatia for EU membership. Among others, the Minister also emphasised that he intends to undertake initiatives designed

to improve co-operation between the Police, prosecutors and courts, in particular in the areas of organized crime and ethnically motivated crime.

Constitutional Court rejects legal reasoning of Administrative Court in dissolution of Osijek-Baranja County Assembly

The Constitutional Court found recently that the constitutional rights to equality before the law and to local and regional self-government were violated by the Administrative Court when it accepted the claims of lack of majority quorum by 26 members of the Osijek Baranja County Assembly in Eastern Slavonia who resigned from their positions in April 2003.

The councillors, from the opposition Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) and the Croatian Social Liberal Party (HSLs), resigned and left the Assembly with an insufficient quorum of 25 members in the 51-member body. The ruling coalition continued to function thereafter by appointing another councillor from the Croatian Peasants Party (HSS) to fill the seat of the renegade HSS councillor who had joined the HDZ. The Administrative Court ruled, however, that such an appointment was illegal and thus the Assembly did not comprise 26 members and subsequently was not authorized to perform its functions. The Constitutional Court found this to be an invalid legal reasoning and held that the law was improperly applied by the Administrative Court.

On 13 November 2003, the Government of Croatia decided to dissolve the Osijek-Baranja County Assembly since it had not held a session for over three months and thus the conditions for dissolution in the law had been met. The decision came into force the next day and a special government agent was appointed to prepare for new elections, which were held on 18 January 2004. The Constitutional Court discussed the issue on the 22 January and found that it was, however, not necessary to invalidate the Administrative Court decisions since the assembly had already been dissolved, new elections were held in the meantime and that the decisions under review no longer produced any further legal deliberations or effects. The HDZ won a resounding victory in the county elections on 18 January, forcing the former coalition of the SDP, the Liberal Party (LS) and the HSS from office.

Croatian authorities respond to reports of security incidents in Vojvodina region

At several recent high-level talks in Zagreb with the Ambassador of Serbia and Montenegro to Croatia, senior Croatian functionaries have referred to reports of a worsened security situation in the Vojvodina region of Serbia and Montenegro and alleged threats against members of the Croat minority living in the region.

Croatian media have been reporting on regular basis that, following the parliamentary elections in the Republic of Serbia in December 2003, targeted incidents against Croats and their property have been on the increase in the Vojvodina region. The Consul General of Croatia in Subotica stated to Croatian media that she and some Croat minority representatives have received a number of threats over the telephone in addition to a number of other incidents. She warned that the increased frequency of the incidents and their gravity were becoming a growing security concern for the Croat minority in the region.

On 29 January the Croatian Minister of Foreign Affairs summoned the Ambassador of Serbia and Montenegro to Croatia and conveyed concerns on behalf of the Government of Croatia. Similar concerns were raised by the President of the Croatian Parliament in a meeting on 2 February. According to press reports, both parties agreed that dialogue between the two

Governments was essential to promoting overall security in the region and enhanced regional co-operation