



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe  
OSCE Mission to Croatia**

**News in brief  
21 December – 10 January 2006**

**President Mesić argues for further democratization and socio-economic progress in 2006**

Just prior to the end of 2005, President Stipe Mesić took several opportunities to call for further democratization and socio-economic progress in 2006. At a 22 December session of the Government dedicated to the economy and Croatia's EU accession, he urged the Government to remain firm in its commitment to full normalization in the region and publicly define its strategy for Croatia's economic development.

President Mesić expressed satisfaction with Croatia's success in restoring its credibility in the international community. However, referring to Croatia's relations with Serbia and Montenegro and the ICTY, he added that the Government's political commitments must not be jeopardized by internal political wrangling. In the wake of Ante Gotovina's recent arrest, he stressed that the ICTY was not trying Croats, Serbs or Bosniaks but "people indicted as perpetrators of war crimes."

Discussing EU negotiations, President Mesić highlighted the importance of the public as the "silent partner" in accession negotiations. He called on the Government to adopt a public communication strategy in relation to the negotiations, including a clear analysis of costs and benefits. Illustrating his point, the President said the majority of Croatians did not understand the importance of EU pre-accession funds. President Mesić was also careful to stress that a modernized public administration was a crucial factor in successfully implementing the reforms required by EU accession.

In the face of several negative economic indicators, the President criticized the Government's lack of a comprehensive and long-term development strategy. He called on the Government to complete a "socially sensitive" programme of economic development and present it to the public as soon as possible.

On 24 December 2005, President Mesić signed a petition organized by the Croatian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, protesting against violence and political pressure exerted on the media. He stated that "a free media is a pre-requisite for a free society." On 28 December, at a roundtable discussion on media liberties in Croatia, the President followed this up with strong criticisms of the recent Parliamentary debate on HRT. He said that, in a developed democracy, it is inappropriate for parliamentarians to discuss a TV broadcast, concluding that, "[this] is why our democracy is still defective and not developing in the way it should."

**Government promptly reacts to appeal by IC Principals in Zabrdac case**

Swiftly following a joint appeal by International Community (IC) Principals from the OSCE, UNHCR and EC, the Ministry for Maritime Affairs, Tourism, Transport and Development (MMATTD) successfully intervened to block the public auction of a house owned by Stevo Zabrdac, a Croatian Serb.

As previously reported, Stevo Zabrdac faced the loss of his property in Daruvar, Western Slavonia, due to his inability to abide by a court order to reimburse unsolicited investments made by a former temporary user.

In an attempt to prevent the sale of Mr. Zabrdac's house via public auction, IC Principals sent a letter to the Minister for MMATTD on 16 December requesting intervention. On 30 December, the MMATTD initiated trilateral consultations between the owner, the temporary occupant and the State, resulting in a settlement agreeable to all, with the Ministry taking over the financial obligations assigned to the owner by the court. As a consequence, Mr. Zabrdac and the former temporary user then signed an out-of-court settlement withdrawing their respective court requests.

The Mission welcomes the Ministry's initiative, although a legal remedy preventing the emergence of similar cases in the future would be preferable. According to the MMATTD, similar *ad hoc* trilateral settlements will be used to deal with the 24 reimbursement claims currently pending before various Croatian courts.

### **Continued political upheaval in local government seven months after elections**

More than seven months after the May 2005 local elections, political upheavals continue to disrupt local government, most notably in Požega-Slavonia County in Western Slavonia and in the central Croatian city of Sisak. This again highlights the lack of normative and legal guarantees safeguarding the stability and transparent functioning of local government.

On 30 December 2005, the contentious 2006 budget for Požega-Slavonia County was finally passed by a slim majority of councillors from the ruling coalition, led by the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). However, most of the opposition, led by the Social Democratic Party (SDP), were not present at the session, claiming that, along with local journalists, they were physically prevented from attending the session by security guards. Failure to pass the budget for a third time would have led to early elections and a possible win for the opposition.

In Sisak, the defection of two councillors from the SDP to the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) saw an HDZ-led coalition return to power on 30 December 2005. The SDP Mayor, Davorko Vidović, elected in May 2005 after 15 years of HDZ rule in the city, has therefore been replaced by the former HDZ Mayor. Vidović has announced that he will file complaints against this decision with both the Administrative and Constitutional Courts.

At a press conference held on 3 January, SDP President Ivica Račan expressed support for his party branches in Sisak and Požega-Slavonia County and was critical of what he termed, the "illegal behaviour" of local HDZ and HSP branches. He added that the State Secretary of the Central State Administration Office, Antun Palarić, had compromised himself so much in relation to these events that he should resign.

Events in Požega and Sisak, as well as similar situations in Velika Gorica and Dubrovnik in late 2005, confirm the need to address the problem of extended political manoeuvrings which have plagued the formation of local governments ever since the May 2005 local elections. The Government has expressed its desire to address this issue through a draft law on the direct election of mayors and county prefects. The draft law passed its first reading in Parliament on 23 September. In addition, a current debate in the media is bringing the problem of a lack of morality in Croatian politics to the fore.