

President Mesic calls for parliamentary elections on 23 November 2003

Following the formal dissolution of the Croatian Parliament on 17 October and upon a formal request by Prime Minister Ivica Racan on 20 October, President Stjepan Mesic officially announced that the next Croatian parliamentary elections will be held on 23 November 2003.

The President urged all citizens to go to the polls on election day. In addition to representatives of the ruling coalition, the President also met with representatives of the main opposition party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). The President stated that he wanted to ensure that all parties would be in an equal position to begin launching their election campaigns and promoting their policy platforms.

In anticipation of the upcoming elections, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) announced on 13 October that it plans to observe the elections. Its Election Observation Mission (EOM) would consist of a small core team and 14 long-term observers. The EOM will be mandated to observe the election campaign, the administrative preparations, and the media.

The Head of Mission (HoM) met on 17 October with the Minister of Justice, Administration and Local Self-Government to discuss measures to facilitate voting for Croatian citizens who are refugees outside the country. The HoM pointed at the need for the Government to undertake a comprehensive voter awareness campaign both in and out of the country. The Mission has also signed an agreement with the Media Council of the Croatian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights (HHO) and the findings from the monitoring of Croatian media will be presented at two-week intervals during the election campaign, while financing a component of the election awareness activities being undertaken by Croatia's leading election-support NGO, GONG.

Prime Minister Racan delivers answers to European Commission questionnaire

On 9 October Prime Minister Ivica Racan presented to the President of the European Commission (EC) Croatia's answers to the EC questionnaire on the suitability of Croatia's EU membership bid. The EC President noted the "responsibility and commitment" to EU membership as demonstrated by the Government's answers to the questionnaire. The Parliament adopted on 15 October a report endorsing the work of the Government on the EC questionnaire.

The answers detail the Government's efforts and achievements to date in bringing the country into line with relevant EU standards and criteria. Among the core political criteria related to the Mission's mandate, the Government provided answers to questions on the return of refugees, the reform of the judicial system, the protection of minority rights, freedom of the media, and co-operation with the ICTY. The Government's submission focused primarily on detailing legislative measures and the adoption of government decisions and programmes designed to address the relevant issues in these fields.

Parliament adopts media-related legislation and appoints members to Council for Radio and Television

On 15 October, the Parliament adopted a new Law on Access to Information. The Council of Europe (CoE) provided its advice on this law, which had not previously existed in Croatia. The Parliament also adopted a Law on Media on 1 October. The Mission co-ordinated the three expert reviews with the CoE of consecutive drafts of the media law to the Ministry of Culture, who in turn incorporated a number of recommendations. An assessment of the final version of the two laws will be made after further reviews are prepared by the CoE.

On 17 October, the Parliament also passed a decision on the nomination of an eleven-member Croatian Radio-Television (HRT) Programme Council, the first step in the implementation of the Law on Croatian Radio-Television (HRT)]. The parliamentary majority and the Opposition agreed on a system of nominations whereby six Council members were nominated by the majority and five by the Opposition. Once the Council is formally established, it should appoint the HRT management, programme editors and directors.

The Parliament also discussed amendments to the Penal Code, including a Government proposal from 9 July 2003 to change provisions that had criminalized libel which had caused both internal and international actors to voice their concern. The Government proposed changes in early September that would amend the controversial changes and decriminalize libel in many cases, except when intentional. The Parliament did not, however, adopt the changes by the end of parliamentary procedure on 17 October. As a result, the changes originally proposed on 9 July will now come into force on 1 December 2003. Reports indicate that the latest proposals for changes would be the priority of the new Parliament and the Government after the parliamentary elections. The Mission and the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media have stated that libel should be decriminalized altogether and be dealt with only in civil procedures.

Mission hosts round-table seminar on the Croatian Ombudsman institution

In co-operation with the Croatian Ombudsman, the Mission organized a round-table seminar on 7 October on the role and function of the Ombudsman institution in Croatia. The purpose of the day-long seminar was to discuss the findings and recommendations in expert report on the Croatian Ombudsman institution, which was completed in June 2003 by Professor John Hucker, a former Secretary General of the Canadian Human Rights Commission.

The report recommends that the human rights mandate of the Ombudsman be strengthened through legislation, and that the current budget of the institution be increased. It also notes some of the administrative and logistical obstacles to the Ombudsman's work, such as lack of suitable office space, while also encouraging the Ombudsman to develop a strategic operational plan and be more active with regard to contact with the Parliament and the media. There was general agreement among the seminar's participants that the Ombudsman played a key role in the protection of human rights in Croatia.

Croatia's community policing strategies shared with Police Service of Northern Ireland

As part of an OSCE assisted research programme, Mission staff and a representative of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) recently met with the Spokesperson of the Sisak Police Administration and Croatian community policing supervisors in central Croatia as well as Croatian police officials in Vukovar and Osijek in Eastern Slavonia. The focus of the research programme is to compare community policing 'partnership activities' by a number of police services. The PSNI representative is concentrating specifically on comparing partnership initiatives in parts of Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Serbia and Montenegro, and those being undertaken in Northern Ireland.

Mission and UNHCR release periodical report on property repossession

The Mission and the UNHCR in Croatia recently released their fourth joint monitoring report on property repossession. The report retraces the causes of the slow rate of property repossession. It notes primarily the flaws and delays in the process of physical allocation of alternative housing to temporary occupants of private property, which is the legal precondition for vacating occupied property. The Ministry for Public Works, Reconstruction

and Construction subsequently announced that its goal of returning all occupied properties to their rightful owners before the end of 2003 will not be attained.

The report illustrates *inter alia* a visible regional imbalance in the resolution of cases throughout the country. While the process has advanced in central Croatia during the last three months, a regress in the repossession rate was recorded in southern Croatia over the same period of time. Cases which require the involvement of the judiciary also continue to be resolved extremely slowly at all stages of processing. Relevant courts still experience delays in conducting proceedings and rarely apply an accelerated procedure which is explicitly foreseen for cases of property repossession in the Law on Areas of Special State Concern. The execution of final verdicts is sometimes delayed when temporary occupants are successful in postponing evictions at the last minute. The report offers several recommendations to the Government, including a review of the overall legal regime governing property repossession.

At a session held on 16 October, the Government adopted measures aimed at accelerating the property repossession process by increasing the pace of delivery of building material, as well as the rate of purchasing housing units as alternative housing to eligible temporary occupants of private property. During the same session the Minister for Public Works, Reconstruction and Construction announced in a periodical report that his Ministry foresees a threefold increase in the monthly rate of repossession cases beginning in October.