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Interview with the Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, Ambassador Bernard Poncet

OSCE Remains in Croatia until Further Notice

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After the political changes in January 2000, one wished for and expected that it would also probably be the last year of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, since it was experienced as some sort of control because of the political and democratic deviations of the former authorities. However, the OSCE Mission remained this year as well, and, as things are, this Mission will be extended into the next year as well. What are the reasons, according to you, that the extension of the OSCE Mission is still required, even necessary?

I believe that there is a certain lack of understanding with regard to that issue. Our task is not to assess whether the Government consists of good or bad “guys”, nor to assess the moves of the Government. We are only implementing the mandate, the content of which was also accepted by Croatia. Croatia undertook certain international commitments, first of all those relating to the return of refugees, repossession of their property, protection of minorities. According to what we see in the field, Croatia is still far from fulfilling the undertaken commitments when the return is concerned, that is, the conditions for the normal return of refugees have still not been accomplished. This fact already sufficiently explains the reasons for our further stay in Croatia.

Can you explain more precisely how is Croatia still far from the undertaken international commitments when the return is concerned?

I would not go into great detail, but I had an opportunity to visit areas, such as, for example, the area of Gracac, where returnees live in unacceptable conditions. I would like you to see the situation in Velika Popina near Gracac, or, for example, in Raskovici near Knin. Maybe you are not aware of it, but in some places, the law is not honoured at all. In Raskovici, you have a case of a person who was offered after the “Storm” action, to take 56 plots of other people, which belonged to 32 owners. The majority of those owners returned several years ago already, but they have not at all been able to repossess their property. Therefore, 32 families have been deprived of their rights and possible conditions for existence, so that one person or family can profit, which does not have the right to that. This case is not unknown to the authority, but, unfortunately, as far as I am aware, nothing has been done. There is no electricity in Velika Popina, although there is a donor, precisely USAID, which would finance the repair of the electric supply in the settlement, however, the local authorities do not wish to co-operate. Or, should I mention to you one more piece of information. On the route between Udbina and Knin, as you know, there are numerous restaurants along the road, but according to our information, the majority is inaccessible to the legal owners, and in some cases there is a problem of double occupancy or multiple occupancy of facilities.

Who is, in your opinion, responsible for such problems, the local or the central authorities? Namely, one gets the impression that they are often trying to pass the ball of responsibility to one another, thus the central authorities play on the inefficiency of the local authorities, and the local authorities, on the other hand, claim that they cannot implement the requirements of the central authorities due to the lack of funds or due to similar problems, etc. How do you see those problems?

Yes, unfortunately, there is a lot of ping-pong. We cannot go from case to case in order to determine who is responsible and where, but the fact remains that there is avoidance of responsibility for the problems at all levels of authority. That is a shameful thing and it creates a very bad picture about Croatia. For example, we especially insist on the resolution of dual or multiple occupancy of the housing facilities, since no financial means are required for that and plenty of problems are being resolved.

President of the Serb National Council, Milorad Pupovac, stated these days during the conversation with the President Mesic that, for instance, only in the Sibenik-Knin County there are 30 to 50 per cent of occupied property cases which is not being used and therefore its repossession could be resolved quickly. What are your estimations with regard to that?

In principle, we agree with that.

Recently, the OSCE Mission was a target of serious attacks by the Associations of Bosnian Croats, who have settled in Croatia. They are emphasizing that, by providing assistance and care, you display favoritism towards Serb returnees, and ignore the problems of Bosnian Croats, and that such a politics of the OSCE causes tensions and conflicts. How would you like to comment on that?

Such attacks and formulations were often heard since the beginning of our Mission to Croatia. There is an attempt to manipulate by spreading lies. Our good relations with the Union of Associations of Settlers in Croatia also confirm that these accusations are false. On the contrary, we are very well aware of the problems Bosnian Croats are faced with and every person with good intentions can easily understand and see that. Therefore, I am really of the opinion that every further polemics about that is excessive.

At the same time, recently, during your visit to Vukovar and Osijek areas you expressed your dissatisfaction with the reconstruction of Serb houses and announced that OSCE will change that in the future. What do you intend to do?

A part of my statement with regard to the reconstruction of Serb houses has been misunderstood. Namely, I did express dissatisfaction with the pace of reconstruction of Serb houses, but I did not say that the OSCE would guarantee the reconstruction in the future, as it was broadcast by some media. It should be clear that we are willing to offer assistance and give recommendations but it is up to the authorities to change the situation and find solutions. The thing, which OSCE is interceding for, is a non-discriminatory approach in the reconstruction and we are of the opinion that no one

should enjoy special treatment, but the conditions for the reconstruction should be equal for all. And this has not been the case until now, not only in Vukovar area but also in other parts of Croatia.

The potential interest of Serbs for the return is sometimes exaggerated and sometimes downplayed in the public, and, on the other hand, it is claimed that the Croat refugees from B-H wish to remain in Croatia almost without exception. How large is, according to your knowledge, the real interest of Serbs for the return to Croatia and how large is the interest of the Croats from B-H, who are accommodated in Croatia, for the return to B-H?

A recent research showed that about 60% of the Serb refugees from Croatia, currently living in B-H or Yugoslavia, do not want to return to Croatia under the current return conditions. Many problems and obstacles prevent them from having then actual freedom of choice whether to return or not. When all the administrative problems for the return have been removed, and when the conditions for the return have been made transparent, only then will we be able to say that the returnees have a possibility to freely decide whether or not to return, and then we will be able to see what is the actual interest for the return. As far as the Bosnian Croats currently in Croatia are concerned, it is true that a very minimal number of them is interested in the return to B-H. Their possible return to B-H is linked with the problems almost identical to those of the return of Serbs to Croatia. With one exception, in the process of return to B-H they can ask for the return of their occupancy right, while in Croatia we are still awaiting the resolution of this problem.

Have you clarified the problems with the Croatian Government after your last report and the Government's estimations that this report was partially an expression of the unacceptable political pressures on Croatia?

We are in constant contacts, formal or informal, during which we are also resolving possible misunderstandings. It is true that our last report was not welcomed by the Government. But, it needs to be said that it is hard to accept the estimation that the OSCE has been putting some sort of pressure. Those pressures are stemming exactly from your Government's aspiration to accept the European democratic standards and faster inclusion into the Euro-Atlantic integration.

On the subject of return, a lot was expected from the local elections, as well, i.e. the change of authorities at local levels. How do you assess the results of local elections in that regard?

Personally, I am very pragmatic and I think that one should not dogmatically look at who came to power or remained in power at the local elections. We have to see what kind of actions will follow from particular local authorities, who is going to do what. And in that regard, our experience also shows that the formal political orientation and party structure of local authorities is not always crucial, but the understanding of problems and the willingness of the people who participate in these authorities to do something.