

INTERVIEW Peter Semneby, Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia

CROATIA CAN CHAIR THE OSCE

By Davorka Blazevic

Immediately after PULS conducted a survey on the (un)willingness of Serb refugees to return to Croatia, the OSCE Mission announced a new, high-impact campaign aimed at accelerating and stimulating the return process. We spoke with the Head of the OSCE Mission in our country, **Peter Semneby**, on this issue, as well as Croatia's chances of taking over the chairmanship of the OSCE in 2007, the border incident between Croatia and Slovenia, and non-diplomatic statements by politicians from Slovenia that they can no longer support Croatia's accession to the EU.

13,000 reconstructed Serb houses

According to the PULS survey, almost 85 percent of Serb refugees are not considering returning to Croatia. How do you intend on using the campaign to influence a change in their decision?

- It needs to be said that the survey indicates still a significant desire for return. Because, if you ask people if their return depends on the provision of housing, you can see that in 42 per cent of cases their reply is positive. Even if we take into consideration only 15 percent of those who will return, that is still 30 thousand people, which is a considerable number. More important than the numbers are conditions for sustainable return and they are still not in place. It is our priority to make housing available to all those who wish to return.

Your campaign, which is slightly aggressive, is perceived by many as pushing for return, even if that is not a dominant mood among refugees.

- It is our basic principle that all refugees and displaced persons should be given the possibility to choose and create conditions, regardless of whether they want to return or stay where they are now. People have to be informed, housing has to be available to them, certain administrative obstacles that they face must be eliminated and they have to come to a favourable environment upon their return. The atmosphere in Croatia has changed in a positive manner but it should not be understood as the final situation, but as a possibility in which conditions are created for conducting this type of campaign, in order to build a tolerant multiethnic society in Croatia that would be a part of an integrated Europe.

Do you have data on how many facilities owned by Serb citizens have been reconstructed?

- The issue of reconstruction was reopened as a result of the Agreement between the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS). The

reconstruction is going on quite well now, and in the last two years one could notice that approximately three quarters of beneficiaries who acquired the right to reconstruction - are Serbs. Only by the end of this month, when the deadline for the submission of the request expires, will we be able to provide a more precise assessment. However, it is a fact that approximately 13,000 Serb beneficiaries had their houses reconstructed. Recently we noticed a large number of negative decisions to reconstruction requests, thus at this moment there is a larger number of complaints than the requests themselves, but we do not know what is the reason behind this.

Many returnees use their right to reconstruction primarily to sell their real-estate, which implies that return is not their motive?

- Firstly, beneficiaries are not allowed to sell their reconstructed property for 10 years. Generally speaking, all beneficiaries of such kind of assistance are in some way war victims and as such should be enabled to create conditions for a dignified future. If the sale of a house can make them overcome the consequences of war and ensure a more dignified life for their family, why would not they make such a decision.

What is going on with exercising occupancy/tenancy rights, which seems to be the most difficult one, in the process of return?

- The right of former holders of occupancy/tenancy rights to state-owned housing is one of the most important issues that we are currently dealing with as they are the last major category of refugees among those who have opted for return that have not yet been provided with housing. In the areas which were under the control of Croatian authorities we have approximately 24,000 court cases dealing with the termination of occupancy/tenancy rights on the basis of unjustified absence from apartments. In the Areas of Special State Concern, where that right was terminated by law, we are not sure about the exact number of cases, but it has been estimated that there are 5-6 thousand such cases. These are, of course, households, which means that the number of people concerned is quite large. The deadline for former holders of occupancy/tenancy rights outside the Areas of Special State Concern should have expired by the end of this year and the Government's plan was to complete its implementation by the end of 2006. We agreed with Minister **Kalmeta** that the deadline should be extended since it is important that refugees have enough time to apply.

HRT needs stability

The new Law on HRT has not been passed yet and strong pressures of state officials on the HRT management, as a public television, had been noticed recently. How do you comment on the obstruction of the freedom of the media?

- One of the major recommendations of the OSCE, the European Commission and the Council of Europe are changes to the Law on Croatian Radio and Television (HRT) which would provide safeguards that the procedure of appointment is not politicized, wherewith we would avoid a situation from the last time when the appointment of Council members lasted for as long as eight months. It is also very important that rules are not changed too often as HRT needs certain stability, especially in relation to the forthcoming competition.

Croatia's candidacy for taking over the chairmanship of the OSCE in 2007 is apparently blocked by the USA due to the Government's refusal to send Croatian soldiers to Iraq. There are also problems with Slovenia...

- I would not like to second-guess on behalf of member states. I welcome Croatia's readiness to take over the chairmanship of the OSCE, which is the reflection of a more serious taking over of responsibilities and I hope that this would contribute to the concentration of energy also on the resolution of issues with which the OSCE Mission to Croatia is dealing. That is a challenging task also in relation to certain available funds and it will require the engagement of a large number of the most skilled diplomats that Croatia has.

Can Slovenia, which will take over the chairmanship of the OSCE next year, be impartial after the recent border incident with Croatia whereupon its politicians explicitly stated that they can no longer support Croatian candidacy for the EU?

- I would not like to over dramatize what I consider to be isolated cases which, I believe, have more to do with the Slovenian electoral campaign. I am deeply convinced that, ultimately, the fact that a neighbouring country is chairing over the OSCE would be beneficial for Croatia and that Slovenia will support Croatia in relation to those very important issues for you. We had a chance to see that Germany was the strongest advocate of Polish and Czech accession to the EU regardless of the fact that it still might have some outstanding issues with those countries. It is also in Croatia's interest to create good relations with its neighbours in order to contribute to the creation of conditions for the accession of those countries to the EU as well.

Conflict of interest

Does the possibility of Croatia's chairing over the OSCE exclude the presence of your Mission in this country?

- The sole presence of the Mission in Croatia is not related to the fact which country holds the chairmanship at that point, but to the Mission's mandate which will cease when the tasks are fulfilled. If Croatia takes over the OSCE chairmanship in 2007, and the Mission is still here, modes of avoiding a possible conflict of interest between Croatia as the chairing country and a host country for the OSCE Mission need to be found.