



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

**News in brief
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President Mesic stresses the importance of mutual respect of rights of national minorities in both countries during his three-day official visit to Serbia and Montenegro

Croatian media extensively commented the visit of President Mesic to the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro from 6 till 9 July, which aimed at giving new impetus to the normalisation of bilateral relations. His visit followed the visit of Prime Minister Sanader to Belgrade in November 2004, the first ever visit to Serbia and Montenegro by a Croatian Head of Government.

President Stjepan Mesic and the President of Serbia and Montenegro, Svetozar Marovic, agreed that the two countries must solve outstanding issues as soon as possible and close the "book of war". Mesic stated, that what happened must not be forgotten, and that the individual responsibility of those accountable for war crimes should be established by local courts and the ICTY.

After meeting with President of Serbia Boris Tadic, Mesic reiterated that Croatia and Serbia share the strategic goal of European integration, which calls for meeting certain terms, in particular the return of refugees.

The two presidents also met the leaders of the umbrella organisation of Croats in Serbia, the "Croatian National Council", and were briefed about the problems of the Croatian national minority related to education, information and the use of the official language. Visiting a house near Subotica where several families of Croatian Serb refugees live, both Presidents committed to monitor the return of Serbs to Croatia and the exercise of the respective minority rights in Croatia and Serbia.

In an address to the 15th anniversary of the Democratic Alliance of Croats in Vojvodina, President Mesic stated that he had not forgotten Croatia's constitutional duty to provide for Croats living abroad and added "your position won't and can't improve through confrontation but only through the good relations between the two states."

President Mesic also met with Croats living in Janjevo (south of Pristina) during his visit to Kosovo on 7 July. On that occasion, he declared that he would encourage ethnic Croats who left Kosovo to return to the province, because Kosovo today was different, more peaceful and prosperous.

Following a meeting with President of Montenegro Filip Vujanovic in Podgorica, both Presidents reaffirmed in a press conference their readiness to continue intensive cooperation. They added that an agreement had been reached under which Croatia would be partly compensated for the war damage caused by Yugoslav armed forces operating from Montenegrin territory during the 1991-1995 conflict. President Mesic said that Croatia strives

for the return of refugees and for the reconstruction of their houses, in addition to providing for their safety and economic opportunities. Responding to a question on the status of the Croatian minority abroad, Mesic declared that Croatia wanted to help Croats living outside Croatia, but that at the same time it wanted them to be loyal citizens of Montenegro.

President Mesic was also widely reported to have said in an interview for the 9 July issue of *Vijesti*, a Montenegrin daily, that Croatia would recognize the independence of Montenegro if that would be the result of a referendum, without waiting for major powers to do so first.

Government shares draft Road Map on refugee return with International Community partners

On 6 July, the Government presented a copy of the draft Croatian “Road Map” on refugee return to the International Community Principals, i.e. the Heads of Mission of the European Commission Delegation, the OSCE and the UNHCR, and to the American Ambassador. This took place in the course of the regular monthly meeting with the Minister of Maritime Affairs, Tourism, Transport and Development Bozidar Kalmeta.

On 31 January, the Ministers responsible for refugee issues from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia and Montenegro signed a joint declaration committing their countries to undertake the necessary measures to complete the process of return by the end of 2006. The national “Road Maps” should contain a comprehensive list of the remaining tasks and precise benchmarks to be fulfilled either by the governments themselves, or through a joint effort with the other two countries in the region.

The draft Croatian Road Map presents issues and benchmarks which have been the subject of exchanges between the Government and the International Community Principals for several years. The representatives of the International Community will now review the Government’s draft proposal, make proposals for strengthening it and raise some issues not clearly addressed in it thus far. These include questions of looted/devastated properties while under State administration, compensation claims for unsolicited investments filed in courts by occupants against owners, repossession of occupied non-residential properties (agricultural land, business premises) and the issue of validation of working years spent in the Serb-controlled areas during the conflict.

On 12 July, in a meeting with the Heads of Mission of the European Commission Delegation, the OSCE and the UNHCR, the Head of the inter-ministerial Commission of the Croatian Government for the implementation of the Sarajevo Declaration, State Secretary Hidajet Biscevic emphasized the will of the Government to advance the process. He also announced that the Government would call a meeting of the intergovernmental Task Force before the Summer recess, in order to address the respective draft Roadmaps of the three Governments.

Progress in cooperation between civil society organizations and local authorities is perceptible in the Lika-Senj County, a heavily war affected area in Central Croatia

On 11 July, at a Mission organized roundtable in Gospic, local authorities for the first time joined with NGOs to discuss means of coordinating and enhancing cooperation between the civil sector and administration officials. The roundtable focused on coordination and enhancement of NGO capacities, and institutional support for the development of the civil society sector in Lika-Senj County. Officials in Lika-Senj County, an isolated region of Central Croatia, have been traditionally quite hesitant in their dealings with the civil society. Some 30 representatives from civil society, the City of Gospic and the County Administration participated.

The civil society representatives outlined their major problems in Lika-Senj County, including poor financial resources and equipment, the lack of appropriate office premises and insufficient information and coordination. A representative of the National Foundation for Civil Society Development, a national public body responsible since its establishment in June 2004 for the promotion and development of civil society in Croatia and for the allocation of public funding, presented its activities in Lika-Senj and Primorsko-Goranska Counties, particularly in terms of its forthcoming regionalization strategy. The Mission is providing its support to the Foundation at the field level.