

*Manja Nickel/Danijela Cenan*

## The OSCE's Slow Withdrawal from Croatia<sup>1</sup>

Eleven years after the OSCE established a presence in Croatia, it is now foreseeable that the mission could close its remaining field offices and Zagreb headquarters within the next twelve months. For mission members in the field, developments in Croatia since 1996 justify the OSCE's withdrawal in the near future. Although Croatia, in terms of its state and non-state institutions, may not be a perfectly consolidated democracy, it is a functioning and self-sustaining one – that is the OSCE's view.<sup>2</sup> Whether this accurately represents conditions on the ground is the subject of the current contribution. At its heart is the question of the extent to which socio-political change in Croatia has been influenced by the presence and activities of the OSCE. Because the transformation of internal political structures also led to changes in the OSCE mission, the article shall begin with an overview of the structural development of the mission.

### *The Structural Evolution of the Mission*

A brief look back: The OSCE Mission to Croatia opened its doors in July 1996, barely a year after the end of the war in the Balkans. Seven international members and a handful of Croatians commenced activities in Zagreb, Vukovar, and Knin. In subsequent years, the mission grew and established an extensive field presence in the parts of Croatia that had been most badly affected by war. The mission reached its greatest physical extent in 1999 with 286 international and 500 Croatian staff, distributed between the Zagreb headquarters, the co-ordination centres in Vukovar, Sisak, and Daruvar, and in 15 field offices and other smaller offices, known as sub-offices. This distributed field presence has always been typical of the OSCE Mission to Croatia. The OSCE began to withdraw from the regions as early as 2001, gradually dismantling its network of field offices in response to the election of Croatia's first democratic government. The first step was to eliminate the level of co-ordination offices. The offices themselves were redesignated field offices, although they retained very similar functions to before. The mission continued to downsize its field presence in the following years by closing individual sub-offices. The first field offices – in Osijek und Karlovac – were closed in the first half of 2007. The field office in Gospić and the sub-office

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1 The opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the authors alone.

2 The current article is based on interviews with twelve OSCE mission members, conducted by the authors in early April at the headquarters in Zagreb, the field office in Vukovar, and the OSCE office in Knin.

in Pakrac had followed them by September 2007. It can be assumed that the field offices in Knin und Vukovar will be the last to be closed, reflecting the particular problems that those regions face.

The specific division of responsibilities among the different levels of the OSCE presence in Croatia – between the field offices, the co-ordination offices, and the headquarters in Zagreb – developed in the first few years following 1996. At first, internal working processes were not precisely defined, particularly in areas of the mandate that were new for the OSCE. In many areas of work, the mission grew more professional as a result of its activities in the field.

Refugee return was one of the new fields of activity. The OSCE shared key tasks in this area with the UNHCR. The latter co-ordinated and financed the work of the local partner organizations that performed humanitarian work on the ground. While the UNHCR undertook humanitarian and logistical assistance, the OSCE supported Croatian institutions with questions of policy and the creation of the legal framework for return. Both the OSCE and the UNHCR offered independent expert advice to returnees, an offer that has been taken up by many and remains popular. As well as refugee return, the mandate of the OSCE mission assigned it tasks in several other areas. These included media development, the promotion of an active civil society, police education and training, the establishment of human and minority rights, and the reform of Croatia's justice system.

On the whole, the OSCE used the "agenda setting" method in its work: Problems identified by OSCE members in the field were raised continuously at local, regional, national, and international levels.

We raised an issue at every possible occasion when there was a delegation coming including the representatives of the international community. We raised the issue at the ministry level and all the time with the local interlocutors.<sup>3</sup>

The field offices played a particularly crucial role in this work. They served as the eyes and ears of the mission, and the problems they identified would be documented and data gathered in support. The reports of the field offices were collected at the headquarters in Zagreb and the extent of the problem analysed: Is the phenomenon restricted to a specific region or does it affect all of Croatia? What are the consequences for those it affects? What would need to be done to solve it?

The background reports from the field were vital for communicating with the relevant Croatian ministries and the government and for negotiating solutions. They enabled the OSCE to discuss, criticize, and – after a compromise was successfully reached – play a role in formulating draft laws and proposed amendments. The duration of negotiations between representatives

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3 Interview conducted with staff at the Vukovar field office.

of the international community (OSCE, EU, UN) and the Croatian government depended in every case on how much it would cost to solve the problem in question. Following the adoption of a law or decree or the amendment of an existing law, Croatian institutions would then take steps to implement the changes. At the same time, the OSCE began the task of follow-up observation. Only thanks to the OSCE field presence in the regions and localities was it possible to examine whether and how a law passed in Zagreb was actually implemented.

In 2006, the mission's work in four areas of responsibility was brought to a close. The OSCE decided that Croatia could best take charge of its own future progress in the areas of media and civil society development, the reform of police structures, and the quality of human and minority rights. The OSCE believes that international observation and advice remains necessary in the area of judicial reform and in relation to the refugee return issue. The Croatian government has set ambitious targets to achieve by 2008. It aims to make significant progress in the remaining fields of activity, in order to bring international supervision to an end once and for all.

### *The Mission's Exit Strategy*

The extent to which the OSCE is following a plan for the closure of its mission to Croatia is unclear. Some mission members at the headquarters in Zagreb were not even aware of a plan for closure, while others presented and explained the OSCE's exit strategy to us there. Members of several mission offices told us that no such strategy existed.

In actual fact, the closure of the mission may not require an explicit strategy at all, as one is contained implicitly in the work of the mission to fulfil its mandate: By conducting training events, seminars and workshops, and other educational activities for NGOs, organs of state, and other institutions over the years, the OSCE has already been working towards the time when the latter are able to take over its responsibilities. Consequently then, the exit strategy consists in closing and dismantling the mission's units and offices and withdrawing OSCE personnel. For the mission offices in practical terms, closure means intensifying the handover of responsibilities to the Croatian authorities. For instance, the OSCE asked the local Offices for Displaced Persons and Refugees (ODPRs) in the administrative districts of Osijek-Baranja and Vukovar-Sirmium to continue to organize the regular coordination meetings between NGOs and the local authorities following the OSCE's pull-out. The aim here was to ensure that this exchange of information would become permanent. At ministerial level, the OSCE, in cooperation with the delegation of the European Commission, UNHCR, ICTY, and the US embassy, initiated a consultative process for the conclusion of cooperation simply known as the "Platform".

With the aim of resolving the issues remaining on the mission's mandate, the Platform was agreed upon by Croatia's prime minister, Ivo Sanader, and the head of the OSCE mission, Jorge Fuentes Vilallonga. This consultation mechanism consists in plenary meetings between the OSCE mission and various ministries, in which mandate-relevant activities are addressed systematically.<sup>4</sup>

Although sometimes presented as a novel departure, the Platform meetings are in fact nothing new. Meetings have long been held between the Ministry of the Sea, Tourism, Transport, and Development and the OSCE's refugee return unit. The only novelty is their expansion to include the OSCE's rule of law unit, which has held monthly meetings with the Croatian Ministry of Justice since the start of 2007. Another novelty is meetings involving several ministries (justice; the sea, tourism, transport, and development; and foreign affairs) and the OSCE's remaining units for refugee return and rule of law. The declared intention of the Platform is to accelerate the withdrawal of the OSCE mission via intensified communication at the highest political level.

The simultaneous closure of the field offices, already described here as the eyes and ears of the mission, raises the question of the Platform's effectiveness. Staff in the field offices are already complaining that decisions taken centrally in Zagreb do not reach the local and regional levels rapidly or effectively enough. This is particularly the case with respect to efforts to protect the rights of national minorities and certain issues relevant to refugee return.<sup>5</sup> It has also been noted that documentation of observations in the field only reaches the international negotiating table in a shortened and fragmentary form after field reports have been sorted for relevance, summarized, and shortened in Zagreb. By closing its field offices, the OSCE mission is diminishing its significance for the reform process in Croatia, because "the OSCE Mission to Croatia drew its strength from its field presence".<sup>6</sup>

### *Time to Go?*

Both Croatian officials and the OSCE mission members interviewed agreed that 2007 was an appropriate moment for the OSCE to end its mission in the country. Not because all problems relevant to the mandate have been solved, but rather in the expectation that a model of how to solve all the outstanding issues without the OSCE will be found by the end of the year.

On the other hand, opinions differ as to what condition the country will be in when the OSCE leaves. The assertion has repeatedly been made that

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4 Cf. Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe, Mission in Croatia, *Report on Croatia's Progress in Meeting International Commitments since 2001*, 9 June 2006.

5 Cf. *ibid.*

6 Interview conducted with staff at OSZE headquarters, Zagreb.

Croatia is now a democratic country. The fact that the European Union officially opened membership negotiations with Croatia in October 2005 is cited as clear evidence of this. Nonetheless, doubts remain as to whether Croatian democracy is functional, especially given the serious need for judicial reform. The authorities lay a great deal of weight on legislative measures, yet there is a lack of progress in implementing them, which the Croatian side says will of necessity take many years. This clearly reflects a belief that Croatian law merely needs to be adapted to conform to international standards in order to enable the latter's application. It also reveals the one-sidedness – because merely formal – of the activities being undertaken by the Croatian government to fulfil the EU's accession criteria. The following aims to demonstrate this with reference to refugee return and human and minority rights by highlighting what Croatia has accomplished in collaboration with the OSCE in over ten years.

### *Mission Accomplished?*

The tragedy of the civil wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina for many people was that they were forced to flee. In Croatia alone, over half a million people were driven to seek temporary accommodation either within or beyond the country's frontiers. The governments of the signatory states of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement swore to enable the refugees to return. In Croatia, the first refugee return programme was initiated by the Tudman government three years later. This, however, could not even begin to keep the promise it had made: to guarantee the return of *all* refugees. Since the arrival of the OSCE in 1996, the Organization has considered the introduction of legal and administrative regulations that would allow the return of Serbian and Croatian refugees in equal measure to be one of its most important tasks. During the 1990s, the background situation meant that the prospects of achieving this were very poor. Unlike the leadership of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Croatian government enjoyed unrestricted autonomy. Under the nationalist HDZ government of Franjo Tudman, the return and integration of refugees remained an ethnically one-sided affair. While Croatian refugees were assisted in returning to their former homes, Serbian refugees found their efforts to return were hampered. This was generally achieved by means of legal instruments that caused delays in both the transfer of property and in the state-financed reconstruction of Serbian houses. Only with Ivica Račan's accession to power in 2000 were the first efforts made to improve the ethnic balance of those returning. From this point on, Croatia increased its endeavours to integrate into European and international structures. The EU's close co-operation with the OSCE meant that the Croatian government could not go on ignoring the OSCE's demands and proposals. The EU accession process created new opportunities for the OSCE to draw attention to urgent

problems and to present the Croatian partner institutions with suitable means of solving them.

Despite all international efforts, the demographic consequences of the displacement of Croatia's population could not be undone. Although nearly all houses were returned to their rightful owners, many Serbian-owned properties that had been destroyed were not rebuilt. Moreover, the majority of Serbian owners did not return permanently, but rather sold their houses and land or opted to return to their former homes only in the summer months. There is still no solution to extreme cases, which remain problematic, such as those of Serbs who, on asserting their rights to a property, receive demands from the legally legitimated Croatian "occupiers" for financial restitution for investments the latter have made in the property. The sums demanded are often so high as to make it impossible for the legal owners to buy back their property.

The question of tenants' rights abrogated by Serbian tenants who fled also remains unresolved. It took years of hard negotiations with the Croatian government before an arrangement was reached that granted the claimants a formal right to housing but no claim on specific former residences. Here, too, there have been significant problems with implementation. Pre-war tenants in parts of Croatia that were not badly damaged by the war are forced to make use of a government programme for which there is no formal legal basis. They are therefore reliant on the government's willingness to uphold its promises and have no means of asserting their claim to a home in law. OSCE mission members working in these areas report that the programme to build new homes is progressing only slowly if at all. According to the government, building work on the homes of a majority of the 4,425 applicants should be completed between 2007 and 2010.

In regions affected particularly badly by the war (known as the Areas of Special State Concern), there is a legal basis for claims to living space. Here, however, the pre-war tenants are in the difficult situation of being merely one of several groups seeking allocation of homes by the state. In the hierarchy of allocation, they come after Croat settlers who have recently arrived from other parts of Croatia or from other countries, and who are granted accommodation before them. For returning displaced persons and refugees who were formerly tenants, there is no guarantee even after 15 years that they will have somewhere to live in Croatia in the foreseeable future.

If you want to hear the truth at this point we still do not register any practical progress regarding finding a final solution for tenancy rights holders.<sup>7</sup>

In all likelihood, the OSCE will be unable to observe the completion of the home-building programme, as it is due to conclude its withdrawal from the

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<sup>7</sup> Interview conducted with staff at the Knin field office.

country in 2007. Whether Zagreb-based EU officials or representatives of Croatian civil society based in the field will be able to fill the gap left by the withdrawing OSCE observers remains an open question.

In the Balkan area, it is very easy to sign a commitment. Full implementation is always a long-lasting process, which needs to be monitored. So this is why the question of who will keep an eye on the situation when the OSCE leaves is a logical question.<sup>8</sup>

OSCE mission members make contradictory estimations of the potential of Croatian civil society to ensure the fulfilment of state obligations, but they tend towards pessimism. For instance, it has been quite clearly shown that local NGOs are incapable of continuing the OSCE's work of observing Croatia's war-crime trials, as they lack the necessary legal basis, expertise, and independence, which the OSCE as an international organization possesses. Even a largely independent local organization would have been in a difficult position and always open to accusations of a lack of objectivity and impartiality.<sup>9</sup>

A further observation made by OSCE staff is that the dismantling of the OSCE mission is being accompanied by a reduction in NGO activity. The future of the NGOs, and hence the continuation of work on mandate-relevant cases, is not secure. It remains uncertain whether local partners will receive the financing necessary to fund their work.

Finally, a vital institution for the detection of abuse is the ombudsman. The OSCE was working hard to expand the ombudsman's capacities and financed the field visits of this institution. Despite this, his capabilities and the extent of his impact remain very limited, according to OSCE staff.

In sum, and particularly with regard to the current reduction of NGO activity, the OSCE's exit strategy, i.e. the handover of monitoring activities to civil society organizations, appears flawed. The OSCE is therefore concentrating above all on the improvement of unclear or inadequate legal provisions, such as those concerning the granting of accommodation to returnees, to enable people with mandate-relevant problems to go to the Croatian or European courts to demand that the law be upheld and the government keep its promises.

Judging by the pace of implementation, it won't be finished this year, it won't be completed the next year and not even the year after. That is why it is very important that remedies are in place for citizens to appeal.<sup>10</sup>

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8 Ibid.

9 Source: Interview conducted with staff at the Vukovar field office.

10 Ibid.

In completing our consideration of the process of refugee return in Croatia, it is necessary to mention that, since 2000, no longer only Croatian but also increasingly Serbian refugees have been able to return to their houses in Croatia. From a historical perspective, the legal recognition of the expulsions as an injustice represents a decisive paradigm shift. The flight of the civilian population from their homes had until then been “tolerated” as an unavoidable consequence of war. However, in the case of Croatia, this revolutionary change remained very much a limited success. The Croatian government succeeded, under the eyes of international observers, in implementing a policy of giving administrative preference to the ethnic majority over the ethnic minority. In this way, the return of the “national enemy” was put back for years. A serious opportunity to return came too late for many families. In ten to fifteen years, they had given up their plans to move back. It is understandable that they opted to live their lives in their new homes – even if they did not choose them – over an uncertain future.

As a consequence, while nearly all the Croatian refugee families have returned to their pre-war homes, of the 350,000 Serbian refugees, only 120,000 have officially returned. Moreover, many of these official returnees have only formally registered at their former place of residence, in order, for instance, not to lose the right to property, a place to live, citizenship, or reconstruction subsidies. The official count of Serbian returnees is therefore misleading: After subtracting all the pseudo-returnees, international organizations calculated that there were only some 80,000 permanent Serbian returnees.

#### *Human and Minority Rights in Croatia*

A further area of OSCE activity concerned ensuring the observance of human and minority rights. The focus here lay on establishing group rights for ethnic minorities in Croatia.<sup>11</sup> Since 2002, Croatia has had an exemplary minority protection law (The Constitutional Law on National Minorities). Croatia’s national minorities enjoy correspondingly comprehensive political and cultural rights that aim to strengthen their position relative to the Croatian majority. External pressure brought by the international community has proved decisive in bringing about a change of direction in the legal treatment of the minorities. However, the implementation of the minority protection laws has been less exemplary. So far, there has been no success in efforts to counteract discrimination against minorities in the public sector. It is still necessary to belong to the “right” ethnic group if one is seeking a position in a school,

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11 According to the 2001 census, the population of Croatia consists of 90 per cent ethnic Croats, 4.5 per cent Serbs, and five per cent other minority groups: Bosniaks, Italians, Hungarians, Albanians, Slovenians, Czech, Roma, Montenegrins, Slovaks, and Macedonians.



hospital, in an administrative position, or even in the local fire service. In the private sector, by contrast, there are positive developments towards ethnicity playing less of a role in recruitment.

Considerable concern has also been voiced regarding the Croatian courts. Reports by the OSCE, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International all criticize the courts as tainted by prejudice and bias, with court decisions and penalties often disadvantaging members of the Serbian minority.<sup>12</sup>

#### *From Watchdog to Partner*

Both the Croatian side and the OSCE see their co-operation as having evolved through three phases. The start and end of these phases are closely linked to changes of government in Croatia.

The Croatians tend to stress that the various OSCE heads of mission have decisively influenced the relationship. The current head of mission, Ambassador Jorge Fuentes Vilallonga, is viewed positively in Croatia as a result of the diplomatic way he has led discussions that have made it possible to reach compromises on controversial questions in negotiations conducted between parties that see each other as equals.<sup>13</sup>

For its part, the OSCE states that the opportunity for constructive co-operation was considerably restricted between 1996 and 2000. The willingness of Croatian institutions to co-operate with the OSCE was minimal during the regime of Franjo Tuđman, when the OSCE was trapped in the role of a passive observer. Only with the formation of Ivica Račan's government did a period begin in which the OSCE advanced from being merely a watchdog to providing advice. However, although Račan's government made the right noises, little was achieved during his period in office. This was a consequence of the difficult coalition that dominated his period in office, hampering the government's room to manoeuvre. Ironically, it was Tuđman's party, the HDZ, now under the leadership of Ivo Sanader, which enabled the decisive reforms and dramatically improved the quality of co-operation with the OSCE. All the OSCE staff we have questioned as well as those on the Croatian side we have interviewed report a significant shift in co-operation between the OSCE and the Croatian authorities as of 2003.

As late as early 2003, he [the administrative head of the ODPB branch office in Vukovar-Sirmium county] would openly refuse to meet us, would find excuses or assign an employee to meet us who

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12 Cf., e.g. Amnesty International, *AI Report 2006*, at: <http://web.amnesty.org/report2006/hrv-summary-eng#2>; Human Rights Watch, *Human Rights Watch Report 2006*, London 2006.

13 Source: Interview at the Foreign Ministry in Zagreb with the Co-ordinator for Co-operation with Organizations of the International Community.

was not empowered to give any information. It changed through a bit of insistence from our side and through ministerial mediation, which we asked for. After being forced to meet us, he was at first not co-operative but finally understood that there was nothing to fear and that it was more convenient to share the information we were asking for.<sup>14</sup>

The handover of power from Ivica Račan to Ivo Sanader brought about a clean break in terms of both the quality and the quantity of contact. OSCE staff were greeted with more openness. They found they could pursue their work more actively. Meetings between the two sides – both local and national – became regular occurrences, allowing the formation of common interests.

We remember times when some mayors or some community's representatives refused to meet us. Basically the OSCE mission in its very beginning was mostly a monitoring mission due to the intransigent attitude of the politicians. As soon as the mission managed to create an atmosphere, in which apart from the monitoring role it became an assistant and almost a partner, the situation changed.<sup>15</sup>

As of 2003, it was no longer utopian to demand concessions from the Croatian government in areas that had previously lain outside the discussion.

There has been a lot of change, though whether it is just a change of rhetoric is another question. But even so called right wing parties were changing their approach.<sup>16</sup>

The OSCE succeeded in building up a relationship of trust with both the political elites and the population and in communicating that the Organization's work and the implementation of the necessary reforms are in Croatia's interest. The Organization changed from being an unpopular spy into a mentor within the EU accession process and a partner in discussions on key domestic reforms. These included refugee return and justice-related issues. A number of OSCE mission members link the shift in attitude towards the OSCE with the progress of the EU accession process.

EU accession is certainly a means that helps one to develop a different view, even if it is only on the surface.<sup>17</sup>

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14 Interview conducted with staff at the Vukovar field office.

15 Interview conducted with staff at the Knin field office.

16 Interview conducted with staff at the Vukovar field office.

17 Interview with the head of the Vukovar field office.

In recent years, ever since Croatia has become a serious candidate for EU membership, we have immediately registered a change of attitude towards the OSCE on all levels.<sup>18</sup>

Although Croatia had already made its application to join the EU in early 2003, official accession negotiations did not begin until October 2005. The negotiations had been due to commence in March of that year, but were delayed for several months due to criticism of Croatia's lack of co-operation with the ICTY. In December 2005, just a few months after the start of the negotiations, former general Ante Gotovina was extradited to the Hague.<sup>19</sup> Ten years after August 1995's Operation Storm (*Oluja* in Croatian), Croatia thus conceded to a longstanding demand of the ICTY, which was seen as a decisive step forward in relations with the Croatian government. The improvement in co-operation with the ICTY is being reinforced by the return of the first war crime cases to Croatian courts, such as, in November 2005, those of Mirko Norac and Rahim Ademi, both of whom were indicted for war crimes against the Serbian population. War crime proceedings nonetheless remain a very sensitive issue and the greatest challenge for Croatia. In the meantime, the Croatian justice system has also taken the initiative in the area of war-crime trials by bringing proceedings itself in several cases. By handing responsibility for key cases to the Croatian courts, the ICTY and the international community have demonstrated their faith in the local judiciary, despite complaints at the slow pace of judicial reform. International observers of the Croatian domestic war-crimes trials are strongly critical of the alleged application of double standards, claiming that members of different ethnic groups receive different punishments, and that Croatian service personnel accused of crimes frequently escape without punishment.<sup>20</sup>

In summary, the initial delays to the EU accession negotiations in Croatia had less to do with socio-economic factors than with political issues. As well as the long-lamented lack of co-operation with the ICTY, these included the delays in the return of the Serbs and the incomplete implementation of minority rights.

#### *The Minimum or the Maximum of the Politically Possible?*

Given the initial situation, the OSCE's overall prospects of achieving the results it desired were hardly promising. However, this weak position also con-

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18 Interview conducted with staff at the Knin field office.

19 Ante Gotovina, a former member of the French Foreign Legion, was commander of the Split Operative Zone during Operation Storm in August 1995. Hence, it was he who ordered the advance of Croatian troops to Knin, at the centre of the self-proclaimed "Republic of Serbian Krajina". Within the area under his control – between Split and Knin – many war crimes were committed against the Serbs who remained.

20 Cf. Amnesty International, cited above (Note 12).

tained a hidden advantage: If the OSCE had been provided with greater powers, there would have been significantly less acceptance on the part of the Croats.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, only with the developing EU accession process did the OSCE's work gain power and the ability to influence the domestic political situation in Croatia, ultimately stimulating necessary reforms.

The fact that it was the foreign ministry and not the interior ministry that co-ordinated communication between the OSCE's headquarters and the Croatian ministries points to the Organization's significance in Croatia, which is considered in the overall context of international relations and EU integration. Joining the EU is one of the key goals of Croatia's political leadership, as it is in other South-Eastern European countries. In examining how far Croatia has met the political preconditions necessary for accession, the EU relies on the wealth of information gathered by the OSCE. Without the presence and activity of the OSCE, the reform process in Croatia would have moved more slowly, and the results in sensitive areas would have been even more one-sided. The process of returning property is as good as completed, and the reconstruction of private houses is considerably advanced. The mission did prove successful in placing contentious issues on the agenda. It considers one of its key results to have been to encourage the former conflict parties to enter into dialogue rather than forcing them into premature reconciliation.

These results were only possible in the second half of the mission's existence and were very closely linked with the prospect of EU membership. They would certainly not have been achievable if there had been no cooperation between the EU and the OSCE.

One constraint that should be mentioned is the generally difficult situation within which the OSCE's field missions are required to operate, which makes it hard for the Organization to operate effectively. For instance, the planning horizon for the mission is generally only a year in advance, and it is unclear whether the work being performed in a given year will be continued into the next. The high turnover rate of international mission members also slows things down. In this regard, Croatia actually suffers less than other countries that host OSCE missions, and international staff generally serve longer there than in the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, for instance. Being able to rely on staff members remaining for more than a year is of great benefit for the mission's work. Nonetheless, in 2007, the year of the intended withdrawal, new international personnel are still frequently arriving in Croatia poorly prepared by the countries that have sent them. Instead there is a policy of "training on the job". OSCE staff have themselves criticized the lack of a programme to help them learn the local language.<sup>22</sup> With regard to the question of whether and how more could have been achieved, however, we re-

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21 Interview conducted with staff at the Vukovar field office.

22 Interview conducted with staff at Zagreb headquarters.

ceived only hesitant answers that were only rarely constructive, let alone self critical.

### *Summary*

Evaluating the work of the mission is certainly not unproblematic. Mission members explain that whatever criteria we use, they need to take account of what was politically possible.

It is difficult to say we could have achieved more. Without the OSCE we would not even have the 13 per cent of minority return in the area of Knin. It always depends on the aspect from which you judge or estimate a success or a failure.<sup>23</sup>

Even though it took years for the Croatian government to agree to even discuss the topic of refugees' lost tenancy rights, the level of – ethnically one-sided – refugee return achieved can still not really be considered a success. While the government has declared that the OSCE Mission to Croatia achieved the maximum possible, OSCE staff state that frequently achieving a minimum of success was accepted, and that often too late. According to mission headquarters, the passing on of experience gathered by the mission members in the course of their work was left entirely to the individual. There is no mechanism for self evaluation – let alone independent evaluation – of the OSCE's international work.

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23 Interview conducted with staff at the Knin field office.