

The OSCE Mission to Croatia: The View from Zagreb

In this essay, we look at the relationship between Croatia and the OSCE Mission to Croatia from the Croatian point of view. The relationship between Zagreb and the Mission can be divided into three periods based on each side's understanding of the role of the Mission. The first period, from 1996 to the end of 1999, was characterized by a frosty political climate. Although, the change of government in January 2000 abruptly improved this atmosphere, there was no essential convergence as the two sides had a different understanding of their mutual relationship. The fair weather period did not last very long and relations worsened again. It has only been since the beginning of 2002 that the government and the Mission have been able to bring their expectations about the role of the Mission into line. Thus a new chapter was opened in their relationship. In this article, we will describe these three phases in detail from the Croatian point of view. Moreover, we pose the question whether the Mission should not have conducted more active public relations work to reach out to the population and the political authorities at the national and local level in order to win over their support for its activities as well as whether this would have facilitated the OSCE Mission's efforts to contribute to the socio-political normalization of Croatia.

The Mandate and the Mission's Performance Record

After the armed conflict between Croats and Serbs from 1991 to 1995, the OSCE sent a fact-finding mission to the country in October 1995. This was followed in July 1996 by the establishment of a small field mission consisting of 14 international staff members. It was mandated to promote reconciliation, assist Croatia in the protection of human rights and the rights of persons belonging to national minorities and advise on the development of democratic institutions and processes. Initially, the Mission was comprised of the headquarters in Zagreb and two regional offices in Knin and Vukovar, which were transformed into co-ordination centres a year later.

In the summer of 1997, the mandate was broadened in the areas of the protection of persons belonging to national minorities and the return of refugees. It was agreed that the Mission would be increased to a maximum number of 250 international members.¹ Another amendment of the mandate was agreed upon in the summer of 1998 when the OSCE Permanent Council decided to create a Police Monitoring Group and to deploy a maximum of 120 civilian

1 Upon the request of the then Polish Chairman-in-Office this ceiling was increased to 280.

police monitors in order to replace the United Nations Civilian Police Support Group (UNCPSG) whose mandate expired in the autumn of 1998.

Apart from the Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM), which had to be withdrawn in the spring of 1999, the Mission to Croatia was at that time the second-largest of all OSCE missions.² Alongside its headquarters, it included three co-ordination centres and 20 field offices. Since 2000, both the offices and the Mission staff have been continually reduced. By the middle of 2002, the Mission had about 80 international staff members.

As far as the Mission's performance record is concerned, it seems to have underestimated the difficulties in carrying out its mandate: According to the Mission's most recent Status Report, principal issues affecting the administration of justice, legal certainty, the restitution of property and the reconstruction and establishment of conditions that promote the return of Serb refugees have not yet been fully resolved. Decisions must be taken and implementation deficits addressed, notably in the areas of refugee return and property repossession.³

The OSCE and the "Normalization" of the Participating States

To examine the question of why the Mission was not more successful in carrying out its mandate, we draw on the toolbox of the Copenhagen School of Security Studies.⁴ One of its central arguments is that there are no objective criteria to determine what a security threat is. Instead, threat scenarios are constructed discursively based on particular configurations of assumptions, categories, logic and assertions. When the grid of intelligibility which the parties to the conflict use to interpret reality is characterized by a reference to a security threat - i.e. by *securitization* - then the relationship of the parties is uprooted from routine daily life and filled with existential fear: namely, the fear of the dangerous other. This has practical political consequences. The rupture of normalcy creates a state of emergency and from this point on, politics no longer primarily deals with the normal bargaining processes but shifts to an emergency mode.

From the perspective of the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, the OSCE can be conceptualized as an international institution that seeks to prevent or reverse the process of the transformation of political affairs into security issues. It contributes to political *normalization* in the participating States, which in OSCE space means, *inter alia*, democratization, the (re)introduction of the rule of law and the building of a sustainable civil society. The Organization employs a number of techniques in its efforts to normalize states. For

2 The largest Mission was the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

3 Cf. Status Report No. 10, SEC.FR/287/02, 22 May 2002.

4 Cf. Barry Buzan/Ole Waever/Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, London 1998.

example, it promotes structures for dialogue and participation or subsidiarity aimed at giving conflict parties, notably ethnic minorities, a voice in government.

The success of securitization depends on whether the audience addressed accepts the threat scenario. This argument illustrates the importance of anchoring securitizing actors institutionally. Actors, who are to speak credibly on security in public, must be furnished with the necessary authority from a relevant institution. Only then can they expect to successfully transfer a factual issue from the area of normal negotiating processes into that of state-of-emergency measures.⁵ This conferring of authority in turn, depends, among other things, on whether decision-makers and citizens attribute expert knowledge to the institution concerned and consider it trustworthy. The same line of argumentation applies to successful socio-political normalization. From the vantage point of the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, the success of OSCE field missions is dependent on whether they have sufficient symbolic capital, that is, a reputation for expertise and - perhaps even more importantly - whether they can develop a relationship of trust with political actors and the public at large. Only if the missions acquire and maintain symbolic capital in the host country over and above the formal legitimacy conferred upon them by the mandate can they hope that their interventions aimed at normalization, notably their role as a normative intermediary, will be accepted by a sufficiently large audience. In short, the success of any mission depends - this is our hypothesis - on its ability to gain, through public relations work, especially its communication policy, political and public support for its activities.

In the following, we examine whether until the beginning of 2002, the Mission to Croatia relied too much on the formal legitimacy bestowed on it by its mandate adopted by the OSCE participating States and whether it failed to do enough to earn the respect of and be granted authority by national and local governments and citizens.

1996-1999: Frosty Relations

The “Homeland War” (*Domovinski rat*) caused great material destruction and loss of life. Moreover, it left its mark on the psyche of the people, not least because of the brutality with which the Croats and Serbs fought with one another: Massacres of the civilian population, inhumane treatment of prisoners and ethnic cleansing were prevalent. In the eyes of many Croats, the international community had abandoned them in their struggle for national survival against the Yugoslav army and the local Serb units. This experience was interwoven with much older memories of Croatian suffering: “A battle for their

5 Cf. Michael C. Williams, *The Institutions of Security. Elements of a Theory of Security Organizations*, in: *Cooperation and Conflict* 3/1997, pp. 287-307.

own country for centuries, occupation and foreign domination for centuries, the diaspora of millions of people all over the world.”⁶

The Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), playing the ethnic card, skilfully exploited these sentiments to their own political advantage. This injected a xenophobic and authoritarian note into public life and, especially, into the media.⁷ The party used nationalist war rhetoric and the refugee problem to keep alive images of war and destruction and the related categorization of the Serbs as enemies of the Croats. The HDZ tightened its grip on the country’s economic, political and cultural life.

In this situation, the Mission was set up to implement post-conflict rehabilitation. For the government, the decision to accept the OSCE presence in the country was easy. Due to the fact that the OSCE generally makes decisions by consensus, Croatia - like all the other participating States - has a quasi-veto right in the Organization and there was hope that the Mission would not remain in the country for long. Moreover, the government felt that the OSCE presence was needed to help “Croatia be recognized as a full international partner”.⁸ However, soon the relationship between the two sides soured. The government thought that the Mission had adopted an “antagonistic, a zealous approach”.⁹ It began to accuse it of being partial, unprofessional, untrustworthy and lacking expertise. The Mission headquarters, in turn, failed to design an effective public relations strategy to counter these attacks, despite the intervention of some of the field officers who suggested more should be done to reach out to local authorities and citizens.¹⁰ The upshot of this was that the Mission’s ability in fulfilling a large part of its tasks and contributing to the normalization of Croatia, namely by defusing ethnic tensions between Croats and Serbs, the protection of human rights and guaranteeing the rule of law, was severely hampered.

One of the main criticisms voiced by the government and parts of the media was that the Mission was biased in favour of the Serbs.¹¹ After Prime Minister Zlatko Matesa had made a critical statement to this effect, the daily *Vjesnik* published a series of articles that dealt with the citizens’, the politicians’ and the media’s perception of the OSCE. The thrust of the criticism was that the Mission was not aware of what its effect on the public was. It was argued that this had less to do with whether the Mission was actually pro-Serbian, but more with the interpretation of the Croatian general public of what the

6 Ilija Zirdum, OESS bih htijela da Hrvati zaborave [OSCE Would Like the Croats to Forget], in: *Velebit* of 26 June 1998 (this and all other quotes from foreign language sources are the authors’ translation).

7 Cf. Marcus Tanner, *Croatia: A Nation Forged in War*, New Haven/Conn. 1997, p. 302.

8 Interview with a senior staff member of the Governmental Office for Co-operation with International Institutions, Zagreb, 13 April 2002.

9 Interview with a senior official of the Croatian Foreign Ministry, Vienna, 7 June 2002.

10 Source: Interview with an OSCE Mission Member at a field office, Sisak, 6 June 2002.

11 Cf. Marinko Bobanović, Guldemann: Nismo ovdje zbog nacionalnih manjina, nego zbog Hrvatske [Guldemann: We Are not here because of the National Minorities, but because of Croatia], in: *Vjesnik* of 27 March 1998.

Mission did. "When the Croatian Prime Minister Matesa asserts that the international community, or to be more precise the OSCE, is neither treating all refugees equally nor fighting for their rights with the same vigour, the matter is about impressions, and not facts."¹² Another criticism was that the Mission did not treat Croatia with the respect due to a sovereign country. "The public has the impression that some of the international representatives behave as if they were in their own protectorate."¹³

Both the government and parts of the media were thus actively undermining the authority of the Mission. They described the OSCE in denigrating terms as "a young organization which does not have much experience in the co-operation with states"; everything it does "is a precedent".¹⁴ It aspired to playing the role of "the European UN", but it was "without instruments, institutions and experts, everything (was) an improvisation".¹⁵ Tim Guldemann, the Swiss Head of Mission from 1996 to 1999, was even accused by governmental officials of being "malicious, tendentious and ill-informed".¹⁶ Although the nationalist stance of the government and its successful centralization of power would have made it very difficult for the Mission to win over the central and local authorities and the public at large, we believe that more active public relations work aimed at co-operation would have contributed to breaking through the vicious cycle of mutual recriminations. However, the Head of Mission ignored the advice from the field offices to follow a more assertive public relations strategy. Although, the OSCE held biweekly press conferences from 1998 till the end of 1999, these alone proved inadequate to develop a reputation for expertise and trustworthiness. In short, from 1996 to the end of 1999, the Mission failed to successfully counter the attacks by the government and parts of the media, undermining its authority. As a result, it did not enjoy enough public support to effectively contribute to normalization in the country.

12 Goranka Jureško, Uvrijedeni OESS [Offended OSCE], Vjesnik of 28 March 1998.

13 Aleksa Crnjaković, Guldemann nepoželjan i u Hrvatskoj? [Guldemann Unwelcome in Croatia as well?], in: Vjesnik of 15 May 1998. See also the criticism of the Presiding Judge of the Supreme Court of the Republic of Croatia, Milan Vuković, Vuković: OESS je pokušao nadzirati hrvatske sudove [Vuković: OSCE Attempts to Control Croatian Courts of Justice] in: Vjesnik of 6 May 1998.

14 Anonymous governmental official, quoted in Marinko Bobanović, Zloupotrebljava li OESS "specifične ovlasti"? [Does the OSCE Abuse "Specific Competences"?], in: Vjesnik of 24 April 1998.

15 Marinko Bobanović, OESS - europski presedan preko hrvatskih leđa? [OSCE - Has Croatia Been Burdened with a European Precedent?], in: Vjesnik of 2 May 1998.

16 Igor Alborghetti, OESS optužuje: Ljerka Mintas-Hodak i Jure Radić su jedini ministari koji neće suraditi [OSCE Accuses: Ljerka Mintas-Hodak and Jure Radić are the Only Ministers Who Are not Interested in Co-operation], in: Globus of 26 May 1999.

The parliamentary and presidential elections at the beginning of 2000 brought a political change. The nationalist HDZ was voted out of office and a new coalition government comprising six parties took office.¹⁷ The OSCE euphorically welcomed the change of government, hailing it as “remarkable progress *per se* in the strengthening of democracy in Croatia”.¹⁸ The new government initiated reforms in the areas of democratization, privatization, freedom of the media and minority issues. For instance, Croatia started co-operating with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Laws regarding the written and oral use of the language of the Serbian minority in public were adopted and the process of privatizing the state-owned Croatian radio and television broadcaster HRT was set in motion. These positive developments induced the OSCE to reduce the number of field offices to 14 and the number of international Mission members to around 175 by the end of 2000 and around 120 by the autumn of 2001.

The government believed that the end of the Tujman regime would be sufficient reason for the OSCE to quickly end its Mission to Croatia. It tried to persuade Vienna that the country was a mature democracy which no longer needed international observers.¹⁹ The new Foreign Minister Tonino Picula expected to “solve all problems by the end of the year (2000, the authors) and thus to remove all reasons for an extension of the mandate in the following year”.²⁰ As it became clear that this hope was overly optimistic, tensions re-emerged between the government and the Mission. Zagreb criticized that the mission had a “360 degree mandate”, as a result of which “there was always something more to do”. For instance, the government did not understand why the Mission considered media issues to be part of its core mandate. “The media is not related to security. The United Nations, the Council of Europe and Mr Duve should deal with this issue, not the Mission. It is only a minor matter, at best.”²¹

The new government agreed with other participating States such as Russia that OSCE activities were geographically unbalanced. Missions are “aggressive mechanisms” that tackle problems such as trafficking in human beings, drug trafficking or the proliferation of small arms. Countries where problems of this sort do exist but in which there are no missions get off the hook while

17 After the elections in January 2000, a government coalition was formed comprising the following six parties: The Social Democratic Party (SDP), the liberal-conservative Croatian Social Liberal Party (HSL), the middle-of-the-road/left-wing Liberal Party (LS), the conservative Croatian Peasant Party (HSS), the middle-of-the-road/right-wing Croatian National Party (HNS) and the regional Istrian Democratic Congress (IDS).

18 SEC.FR/156/01, 14 March 2001.

19 Cf. Bruno Lopandić, OESS će produžiti svoju misiju u Hrvatskoj [The OSCE Will Extend Its Mission to Croatia], in: Nacional of 13 November 2001.

20 HRT-News, Minister Picula u Beču, 22 March 2000.

21 Interview with a senior official of the Croatian Foreign Ministry, cited above (Note 9).

countries in which there are missions are “unjustly singled out”.²² Moreover, “the OSCE is perceived (by Croatia, the authors) as a stigma, as a negative mark, because one is identified as being a part of the Balkans”.²³ Yet another complaint was that “OSCE monitoring is an obstacle to foreign investment”.²⁴ In October 2001, Croatia signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the European Union. Zagreb hoped in the wake of this that the OSCE would primarily “act as facilitator for EU integration”,²⁵ thus speeding up the process of accession. Yet the expected reorientation of the Mission’s activities did not materialize leading to further frustration on the part of the government.

These tensions notwithstanding, the climate between the government and the Mission during 2000 and 2001 was, on the whole, satisfactory. This changed towards the end of 2001, when it became clear that the mandate would again be renewed as a result of the Mission’s assessment that key issues covered by the mandate had remained unresolved. Just as was the case during the Tudjman regime, the OSCE was criticized by the government and parts of the media for “treating Croatia as a country with a high risk of political insecurity and instability”.²⁶ The Mission was once again accused of lacking professionalism and expertise: It was said to be “a frivolous organization using frivolous data, because it does not enter into the merit of the problem”.²⁷

The point is that the change of government in January 2000 had opened up a window of opportunity for the Mission to correct its negative public image and to build up its authority as an institution contributing to normalization. Through a more active and dialogue-oriented communication strategy targeted at both political and civil-society actors at the national and regional level, the Mission could have built up trust and its reputation as a competent institution with expertise. However, the Mission acted as if authority was a formal attribute bestowed on it by its mandate and not dependent on socio-political recognition which must be actively obtained. In the end, this misjudgement limited its effectiveness and contributed to the negative reaction by the general public at the end of 2001.

22 Ibid.

23 Interview with a Mission Member at a field office, Sisak, 10 April 2002. The same point was made by one of our Croatian interviewees, cited above (Note 9).

24 Interview with a staff member of the Governmental Office for Co-operation with International Institutions, Sisak, 11 April 2002.

25 Interview with a senior official of the Croatian Foreign Ministry, cited above (Note 9).

26 Vinka Drežga, I dalje pod prismotrom? [And Further under Observation?], in: *Vjesnik* of 16 November 2001.

27 Lovre Pejkoć, Deputy Minister for Public Works, Reconstruction and Construction, quoted in V. Resković, OSCE Is a Frivolous Organization Which Confuses the Public with Flat-rate Numbers, in: *Jutarnji list*, 21 November 2001, at: <http://www.osce.org/croatia/documents/articles/page3.php3>.

Since the beginning of 2002, the relationship between the Croatian government and the Mission has clearly changed. A new page was turned in the relations between the two sides due to a great deal more convergence on their expectations about Mission work.²⁸ Henceforth, the Mission gave priority to co-operation with the national authorities. Thus it offered the government a regular dialogue on the implementation of its mandate. Among other things, the Mission declared it would be prepared to disseminate its internal reports to the Croatian government. Moreover, it was agreed that both sides would look for effective ways to reach a solution to outstanding problems. The government, in turn, signalled that it would be prepared to consult the Mission regularly on issues such as the revision of media legislation and the preparation of a new law on minority rights at the constitutional level.²⁹

In the meantime, the government has come to regard the presence of the Mission as a positive influence. At the same time, it believes the OSCE is continually losing importance. First, the EU delegation in Zagreb is a more important contact for the national authorities than the OSCE as accession to the EU is the highest priority for Croatian decision-makers.³⁰ Nevertheless the government is aware that "the road from Zagreb to Brussels goes via Vienna".³¹ On this point, too, the views of Croatian decision-makers and the OSCE Mission converge. According to the new Head of Mission, Peter Semneby, "the unique experience and knowledge that the Mission has accumulated will give Croatia and its future EU partners essential inputs in preparing Croatia for eventual EU membership".³² Second, in the opinion of the government, the important political items on the agenda related to the Mission mandate were "off the desk".³³ Thus, in this view, the problem of the return of refugees had already been solved politically in 1998. Only administrative and technical problems remained, mainly at the local level. In addition, extensive OSCE monitoring of the legal system no longer had any justification - the government no longer saw any indications of a biased judiciary. The remaining problems were limited to the dispensation of justice at the regional level.³⁴ In addition, the government actively promoted co-operation

28 Cf. interview with a senior official of the Croatian Foreign Ministry, cited above (Note 9). See also the article by Deputy Head-of-Mission Robert Becker in: *Courier. The Newsletter of the OSCE Mission to Croatia* 102/2002, pp. 2-3.

29 Cf. Status Report No. 10, cited above (Note 3).

30 Cf. interview with a senior staff member of the Governmental Office for Co-operation with International Institutions, cited above (Note 8).

31 Interview with a senior official of the Croatian Foreign Ministry, cited above (Note 9). Another strategic goal of Croatia's foreign policy is admission to NATO.

32 *Courier. The Newsletter of the OSCE Mission to Croatia* 103/2002, p. 1

33 Interview with a senior official of the Croatian Foreign Ministry, cited above (Note 9).

34 Interview with a senior staff member of the Governmental Office for Co-operation with International Institutions, cited above (Note 8).

with the United Nations Criminal Tribunal in The Hague.³⁵ It did not see any danger of ethnically motivated violence in today's Croatia.³⁶

Although Zagreb considers the OSCE as an international partner of secondary importance, the government would like to see the Mission adopt a more forward-looking approach by, for instance, expanding its Democratization Programme, which has been in existence since 1999 and which assists in building a civil society.³⁷ Another important issue, on which the government wants the international community, including the OSCE, to get more involved is the integration of Croat refugees from Bosnia and other parts of the former Yugoslavia. With regard to this, the government complains that it is in a catch-22 situation: On the one hand, international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund are calling for tough budgetary constraints and, on the other, the OSCE is demanding the funding of repossession programmes.³⁸

All in all, the government expects the Mission to pay more attention to the advisory part of the mandate and less to monitoring. In this sense, Zagreb would like the Mission to do more on the economic front, for instance by helping it approach economic and financial organizations in order to support the economic development of the country.³⁹ Although there have been some initiatives in this direction like the organization of an economic forum in the border town of Hrvatska Kostajnica, which had sustained major damages during the war, there are complaints that often the economic role of the Mission is limited to facilitating a few private contacts. Thus there have been occurrences of Mission members that have acquaintances or friends from their home country who are interested in investing in Croatia being helpful in establishing contacts with local businessmen.⁴⁰

As for the political opposition, they are very critical of both the Mission and the government. They highlight in particular that "the Croats need someone to help them financially. In Croatia, much has been destroyed, houses and industry and the country urgently needs active assistance, but not the OSCE."⁴¹ The government has been criticized for giving way too readily to

35 Cf. interview with a senior official of the Croatian Foreign Ministry, cited above (Note 9).

36 Cf. interview with a senior staff member of the Governmental Office for Co-operation with International Institutions, cited above (Note 8).

37 This expectation constitutes a severe problem for the Mission, which already has to deal with the impression that the OSCE as opposed to the Red Cross or the EU "does not have anything to offer". Interview with Stevo Tomic, Serb member of the Municipal Council in Petrinja and a member of the independent list "Petrinja for the Petrinjer", Petrinja, 6 June 2002. The backbone of the Democratization Programme of the Mission to Croatia is the Democratization Project Fund, which is used, *inter alia*, to allocate money to non-governmental organizations. In the last two years, the participating States were not in agreement on the financing for this fund let alone on its enlargement.

38 Cf. interview with a senior official at the Croatian Foreign Ministry, cited above (Note 9).

39 Cf. interview with Andrea Feldmann, International Relations Secretary of the Liberal Party (LS) and advisor to the LS faction in the Croatian Parliament (Sabor), 5 June 2002.

40 Cf. interview with a staff member of the Governmental Office for Co-operation with International Institutions, cited above (Note 24).

41 Interview with Mirko Putric, former HDZ Mayor of Gvozd, Petrinja, 6 June 2002.

the demands of the international community. Croatia should stop “dancing to the music of international organizations like the OSCE”.⁴² Some critics even go as far as claiming that the public perceives the OSCE as “a sign for the protection of *četniks*. People think that the OSCE is bringing the murderers back.”⁴³

In general one could say that the Croatian government believes that Croatia is well on its way towards transforming itself from a potentially unstable country into a guarantor of regional stability and an established democracy that no longer requires monitoring.⁴⁴ With the task of political normalization well under way, economic issues are now prominent for Croatia in its co-operation with international organizations. Promoting investment and creating jobs is now of central importance. In this regard, of course the EU has much more to offer than the OSCE. Although, from the Croatian viewpoint, the OSCE can be of assistance in overcoming future challenges that are above all economic in nature, the government is convinced that “the co-operation with the OSCE belongs to the past, while the co-operation with the EU belongs to the future”.⁴⁵ Although the Mission does not fully share this optimistic assessment of Croatia’s progress, this dissonance does not affect its meanwhile productive co-operation with the government negatively because changes in the way the two sides communicate and interact with each other introduced at the beginning of the year enabled them to finally develop a (stable?) relationship of trust.

Conclusion: Why the Mission Has not Been More Successful

The Mission’s limited success in carrying out its mandate can be explained, to a large degree, by its lack of authority and public awareness in the country. It failed to do enough to reach out to political authorities, notably at the local level, and the population at large in order to develop relationships of trust, just as it was unable to acquire a good reputation through its expertise. As a result, “people do not know much about the mandate (...) neither the government nor the OSCE made enough effort to explain the mandate. The OSCE does not have any presence, for example, on the radio, on television or in the press (...) The problem is that there is an *a priori* negative perception of the Mission. The OSCE is an unwelcome guest. Maybe this is because

42 Ibid.

43 Interview with Gordana Dumbovic, Deputy Mayor of Petrinja and member of the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP), Petrinja, 6 June 2002.

44 Cf. interview with senior staff member of the Governmental Office for Co-operation with International Institutions, cited above (Note 8). However, the government admits “it has fallen behind in the implementation of certain matters that fall under the OSCE mandate”. Interview with a senior official of the Croatian Foreign Ministry, cited above (Note 9).

45 Interview with a senior staff member of the Governmental Office for Co-operation with International Institutions, cited above (Note 8).

there is no proper communication policy.”⁴⁶ One local politician interviewed by us told us that “the OSCE should have organized meetings and seminars for ordinary people, instead of just coming to town halls and talking to the mayors and the presidents of the village-councils (*vijeće*)”.⁴⁷ OSCE field officers’ experiences confirm this criticism: “Local authorities do not even know what the Mission’s intentions are, they do not know what the Mission expects from them.”⁴⁸

Up to now, we have only highlighted the lack of an effective public relations strategy as a major reason for the until recently modest and uneven progress in the normalization of Croatia and the often difficult relationship between, on the one hand, the Mission and, on the other, the government and the public at large. However, another problem is related to the political decision-making level from which measures initiated by the OSCE must be implemented. The Mission waited too long to refocus its activities from the national to the regional and local level, although it was aware of the fact that local authorities are often to blame for the inadequate implementation of mandate tasks.⁴⁹ “Here in the field nothing changed much after 2000. Conservative politicians and the HDZ are still ruling at the local level, even the same persons are in power. They oppose the OSCE and its mandate or in most cases they just ignore it.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, there are complaints that the decision-makers at the municipal level see the OSCE as an Organization that interferes “in their internal affairs”.⁵¹ They say, it merely helps the Serbs and does nothing more.

The point to be made here is that the Mission should have responded more quickly in 2000 to the positive political developments at the national level and devoted its attention to the implementation problems at the sub-national level. This would have been facilitated if the field offices, which were aware of these problems, had had more input into Mission policies.⁵² However, field officers had the impression that their proposals did “not play a role at all in the decision-making process within the OSCE”. Some of the Mission members see this as a key reason why the Mission displayed “a certain lack of engagement”⁵³ when it came to responding to problems at the regional and local level.

In sum, while the Mission operated in an often difficult political environment, our contention is that if it had made internal reforms and adjusted its

46 Interview with Stevo Tomic, cited above (Note 37).

47 Interview with Mirko Putric, cited above (Note 41).

48 Interview with an OSCE Field Officer, cited above (Note 23).

49 Cf. Snježana Herek, *Lokalne vlasti koče povrtak imovine* [Local Authorities Impeding Property Repossession], in: *Večernji list* of 8 December 2000.

50 Interview with Stevo Tomic, cited above (Note 37).

51 *Ibid.*

52 In the meantime, the Mission headquarters has recognized this problem. Field officers have been called upon to “put forth excellent recommendations in their reports on how the remaining post-conflict (...) difficulties can be solved”, in: *Courier. The Newsletter of the OSCE Mission to Croatia* 101/2001. p. 2.

53 Interview with an OSCE Field Officer, cited above (Note 23).

communication strategy earlier, it would have gained greater authority. What is more, a Mission recognized as an authority would with all probability have been able to make demands on national and local decision-makers more effectively on the implementation of measures related to its mandate.