

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Despite some belated movement on Serb returns to Croatia, the returns record has to date been disappointing. The experience of the past three years raises concerns about the political will of the Croatian authorities to implement the programme. The inescapable conclusion is that the Croatian authorities do not really want to see large-scale Serb returns and that they will only implement the returns programme under continued, intense international pressure. That said, some politicians in positions of responsibility have suggested that the political situation in Croatia is changing as memories of the war recede. In these circumstances, peacetime concerns, such as economic and social issues, are becoming more important. Whereas only a year ago the returns programme would have been met with outrage and resistance among much of the population, there is now a possibility that it could be implemented. Moreover, the return of as many Serb refugees to Croatia as wish to go back, based on a genuinely free choice, could benefit all parties, the Serbs themselves, the international community and Croatia in the following ways:

- On a practical level, enabling the return of Serb refugees who are currently in Bosnia would facilitate the return of Bosniac and Croat DPs to homes currently occupied by those Serb refugees. This would in turn contribute to the rebuilding of a multi-ethnic society in Bosnia, without which the chances for long-term stability in that country appear bleak.
- The return of Serb refugees to Croatia would provide a valuable contribution to the post-war normalisation of relations between Croatia and Serbia. The presence of a large number of Serb refugees from Croatia in Serbia would continue to poison relations between Zagreb and Belgrade for a long time to come (witness recent tensions between the Czech Republic and Germany, for example, as well as the constant state of tension in relations between Greece and Turkey, nearly 80 years after their mutual population exchanges, which would appear to give the lie to notions that population exchanges can solve disputes over minorities). The return of refugees would thus contribute to regional stability over the longer term.
- The return of Serb refugees would be of benefit to Croatia itself, removing a blemish on the country's record in building an independent state and a healthy democracy (a process which in the latter case is still far from complete). Respect of the rights of minorities is a key criterion upon which a country's democratic credentials can be judged. This includes both the individual rights of members of minority groups and the right of a minority as a community to express its national and cultural individuality within the state of which its members are citizens. Croatia's reconciliation with its Serb community would represent the best possible demonstration of confidence by a country at ease with itself after the tragedies of war are put behind. To be sure, this is a two-way process, which also includes the need for Croatia's Serbs to come to terms with their wartime record, but the principle of individual guilt for individual actions must be upheld, as opposed to the collective guilt of the Serb people in Croatia, and reconciliation has to proceed on that basis.