

B. Statements by Ministers

The ministry with primary responsibility for the implementation of the programme is the Ministry of Reconstruction and Development, headed by Jure Radic. The Foreign Ministry was also closely involved in the negotiations with the international community, and the Deputy Prime Minister, Ljerka Mintas-Hodak, has also played a part.²⁸ Statements issued by the ministers and officials connected with the programme have at times been positive and suggested real commitment to its implementation. However, other statements have added to fears of a lack of will.

In presenting the programme to the Sabor, Radic insisted that the government had not submitted to any international pressure, nor would it.²⁹ He pointed out that implementation of the programme was in the government's hands, and said that they would know how to defend Croatian interests. This emphasis raises particular fears given the past record which has suggested that senior Croatian officials do not see Croatian interests as including the return of Serb refugees. In particular measures taken after the 1995 offensives designed to encourage Croat settlement in previously Serb-inhabited areas were clearly designed to prevent large-scale Serb returns.³⁰ The reassurances of Granic that there was no need to fear a mass Serb return, as few Serbs had applied for documents at the Croatian embassy in Belgrade, did not give the impression that Serb returnees would be particularly welcome.³¹

It may be that such statements were intended to reassure the many Croats who are disturbed by the prospect of significant Serb returns, and thus to disarm potential opposition to the programme. Indeed, other statements by Croatian officials have given greater cause for encouragement. At a meeting in Topusko on 7 July 1998, government officials, including Radic and the head of the ODP, Lovre Pejko, explained the programme to the local officials who will have to implement it in practice. OSCE and UNHCR officials who were present were impressed by the positive tone of the statements made by the government officials, who, for example, met objections to the notion of extending the hand to former "aggressors" with insistences that the plan must be implemented.³² Following a meeting with local leaders in eastern Slavonia, Mintas-Hodak stressed that the programme will certainly be implemented.³³ A second conference on the returns programme, following the one in Topusko, was held in Baske Ostarije in August 1998.³⁴ Nevertheless, given the poor record to date, concerns as to whether there is any greater will to facilitate the return of the Serb minority than has hitherto been the case remained.

²⁸ There have been reports that Granic was isolated in the government over his advocacy of acceding to international demands over refugee returns; that the Prime Minister, Zlatko Matesa, as well as Radic and Mintas-Hodak all preferred a hard-line stance, and only yielded due to the intensity of international pressure. See, for example, commentary by Davor Butkovic in *Jutarnji list*, 31 October 1998.

²⁹ Report on the Sabor's acceptance of the programme carried in *Jutarnji list*, 27 June 1998.

³⁰ The August 1995 laws on *The Temporary Take-over and Administration of Certain Properties* and on *The Renting of Apartments in the Liberated Areas*, both of which have been repealed since the adoption of the returns programme.

³¹ In the Sabor Granic stated that only 505 Serbs had applied for Croatian documents in Croatian diplomatic missions abroad. In a later press conference he said that in the previous month and a half 787 applications had been received at the embassy in Belgrade, and another ten in other diplomatic missions in the FRY (*Jutarnji list*, 4 July 1998).

³² Impressions of the Topusko meeting obtained from OSCE and UNHCR officials who were present, as well as a positive assessment of the meeting at an OSCE press conference, reported in *Vecernji list*, 9 July 1998.

³³ Reported in *Vjesnik*, 14 July 1998.

³⁴ HINA, 18 August 1998.