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Foreword

In early 2006, in discussion with Dr. Nenad Javornik, Executive President of the Croatian Red Cross, we agreed that the return operation in Croatia was in need of scientific assessment. In particular, it was increasingly being said that some 40% of the then 124,000 ethnic Serb returnees officially registered in Croatia had, indeed, left the country. We wanted to know more about this situation. UNHCR has a wealth of experience in return operations - in the last 10 years alone, the UN Refugee Agency has organised the voluntary return of over 7 million refugees worldwide. It is estimated that since its establishment in 1951, UNHCR has assisted, in one way or another, the return of some 40 million. As a result, we know that a return movement, from a sociological viewpoint, is always a complex process.

Therefore, we commissioned the Department of Sociology of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciencies at the University of Zagreb to undertake a study. The fact that it was directed by Professor Milan Mesić and assisted by Dragan Bagić guarantees the quality of the results. We would also like to thank the Croatian Red Cross and the Serbian Democratic Forum teams for their essential field work.

While UNHCR may not agree with all the arguments presented in the report, this does not diminish the relevance and importance of its findings. With regard to humanitarian action in Croatia, we had identified three objectives for the study:

a) to obtain a reliable approximation of the number of registered returnees actually present in Croatia;

b) to create basic indicators of the sustainability of return in Croatia;

c) to use these results to help develop policies to improve the returnees' living conditions.

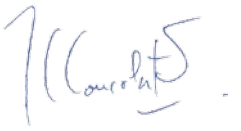
There is no need to discuss in detail here the evidence presented in this study. However, it is clear that it must be considered as a warning which, if heeded, could avoid the social, demographic and economic decline of the Areas of Special State Concern (ASSC). In this endeavour we have between three and five years, and to succeed means to reach a certain number of benchmarks that will drastically improve the situation and create an irreversible, positive dynamic in the return programmes of Croatia.

These benchmarks can be divided into two categories: the first one relates to specific concrete objectives centred on accommoda-

tion of returnees, pensions and legal status. The second category relates to broader issues aimed at making the return sustainable in the long term. For the time being, the focus is very much on the first category of benchmarks, which is to be expected, as they have already been agreed upon by both the Republic of Croatia and the international community. Implementation is now required. The second category of benchmarks relates to the much-needed development of the ASSC and is not as easily defined as the first. Nevertheless, thanks to the 'Social and Economic Recovery Project for the ASSC' created by the World Bank and the Republic of Croatia, with which UNHCR is associated, this process is now underway. We predict that if all actors involved fulfil their tasks, within three years the ASSC will see enormous positive change. For this EUR 60 million programme, Mr. Božidar Kalmeta, Minister of the Sea, Transport, Tourism and Development, has agreed to fully involve UNHCR and its partners from civil society. This will prepare the ground for the forthcoming European Commission pre-accession funds that will make an essential contribution to the economic and social recovery process for the war-affected ASSC.

The study of the Department of Sociology of the University of Zagreb has made an outstanding contribution to our understanding of the precarious situation of the ASSC. Due to the mutual efforts of the authorities of the Republic of Croatia and the international community, remedies to this situation have been found and are now being implemented.

I am confident that within three years the existing communities, the present returnees, and a new generation will reside in the ASSC of the Republic of Croatia, with a bright future ahead.



Jean-Claude Concolato

Contents

SUSTAINABILITY OF MINORITY RETURN IN CROATIA

1. Introduction

UNHCR, other international organisations and civil society associations, and governments, both in receiving countries and countries of origin, have for various reasons from the early 1990s been increasingly involved in refugee return as the preferred durable solution. Recent research evaluating mass return campaigns, primarily to Bosnia and Herzegovina but also to other third world locations, have drawn the conclusion that return cannot be viewed as a one-time and one-way process, a final (irreversible) act, but must be understood as a complex, sometimes contradictory, long-lasting and reversible process. For these reasons, the focus in this study has been directed towards successful or sustainable return and to the factors that secure its relative stability through the full social and economic integration of (minority) returnees.

We were honoured to be entrusted by the UNHCR office in Zagreb to build instruments of a representative field survey of the sustainability of return of Serb refugees to the Republic of Croatia. At the same time, we were mindful of the great social and scientific responsibility of this weighty task. You now have in front of you our analytical report based on the data collected, accompanied by a related analysis. The research was made more difficult on account of the shortage of time, as is often the case in such an endeavour, with the sensitive subject and the respondents, the lack of established and generally accepted indicators of return sustainability, the need to involve civil activists as interviewers, as well as for other reasons. Nevertheless, with full freedom of action, governed only by our conscience and expert competences, we are entirely responsible for any possible weaknesses and ambiguities, whether conceptual, methodological or analytical.

We have tried in our approach to avoid the usual, although often self-imposed, clientalistic position of the researcher towards the commissioner as client. In other words, we attempted to view the refugee–returnee situation not as a 'problem' to be solved by the UNHCR within its international mandate, or as a 'problem' of the host countries and countries of origin. Similarly, the perspective of refugees themselves could be more or less restricted, firstly by their basic daily struggle to live, and secondly by their sad experience in the period of ethnic conflicts and refuge. Therefore, our approach had in a way to be set free, based on the concept of equality and the rights of all ethnic communities to have a home and a homeland and to share responsibility for co-existence. In this context, we examine the sustainability of return, as well as other 'durable' solutions to

which refugees are entitled, and their dynamic inter-relationship. In this study, our task was to focus on the issue of sustainability of return, but in the interpretation of at least some of its aspects we bear in mind the broader context of the refugee – returnee. In such an approach, any possible factor might become a 'problem' (including the 'international' community) and might hamper the sustainable return or any other durable solutions for refugees, or might simply be insufficiently effective in that respect. We ourselves are aware of having been only partially successful in this study, but to what precise extent is not for us to judge.

Zagreb, 2 March 2007

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2. Research Methodology

Our empiric research was undertaken to meet two main goals: firstly, to establish the actual presence of registered Serb returnees in Croatia (to what extent they have stayed permanently); and secondly, to evaluate the effect of return factors on the sustainability of return. The research was carried out on a representative sample of the known population of 120,000 registered returnees. The process of data collection was divided into two phases. Firstly, we established the current location, or at least the country, of the permanent residence of each selected returnee and then conducted elaborated structured research with returnees who were continuing to live in the place of return.

We built suitable research instruments comprising three basic documents:

- *interviewers' log*, where interviewers recorded all the information obtained during contacts with respondents when trying to establish the actual residence of each registered returnee;
- *questionnaire for absent returnees*, where interviewers recorded information collected from informants on a returnee's residence in places where a certain returnee was registered but not found;
- *main questionnaire* with questions about the respondents' conditions of life and their feelings after return.

Every interviewer was provided with a list of returnees who were to be contacted at the addresses that were announced and recorded during their official registration. Arriving at the given address, the interviewer was to establish whether the person lived at that address. In the event that during the first visit there was nobody there, the interviewer had to assess the likelihood of someone living permanently in the house (in most cases these were houses), taking into account the condition of the house and the surrounding area. If the house was damaged or unattended, information was sought in the nearest neighbourhood. If the neighbours confirmed that the house was permanently inhabited, the interviewer had to visit it for at least two more times in an effort to make contact with the returnee. The same rule was applied if it was assessed that the house was permanently inhabited. If one of the neighbours, on the other hand, stated that the particular returnee did not live at the given address, the interviewer sought information on the absent returnee from the neighbour (concerning the returnee's permanent

address, how often he/she came, etc.). To ensure the confidentiality and security of this information, a note on the informant was to be entered on the form (relationship or kinship with the returnee and reliability of information given). If it was discovered that the returnee's changed address was in the same village, the interviewer would look for him/her and conduct the interview using the main questionnaire.

An elaborate interview with returnees took on average 40 minutes. Interviewers were instructed, whenever possible, to fill out the main questionnaire without the presence of a third person. This rule could be overlooked only with questions relating to the whole household to which a respondent could not necessarily know the best answer.

The possible refusal by a returnee to participate in an interview was also recorded in the log. Should another member of the same household also refuse to participate, the interviewer was to check whether or not the said person lived at the given address permanently. If the address was confirmed, a final refusal was recorded in the log, while in the opposite case, such a returnee was entered into the form related to absent returnees. Finally, there was the chance that neighbours or family members would confirm someone's permanent address, but the interviewer could not find the said returnee after three visits. The interview of this person could then be abandoned, which was also recorded in the log.

A representative sample of registered returnees was randomly selected from the database of UNHCR and the Ministry of the Sea, Tourism, Transport and Development (hereinafter Ministry). Since no other characteristics of the population were known apart from the place of return, the sample was stratified as follows: a) by region, and b) by size of resettlement.

We concentrated on the traditional Croatian regions, some of which had been occupied during the war, i.e. controlled by Serb forces. We obtained eight (sub)regions: occupied parts of Slavonia; unoccupied parts of Slavonia; occupied parts of Lika and Banovina; unoccupied parts of Lika and Banovina; occupied parts of Dalmatia; unoccupied parts of Dalmatia; Central and Northern Croatia; Kvarner and Istria. We found such a division reasonable, taking into account the different ethnic structure of these areas and their historic and socio-economic particularities. Besides, they were unequally affected by the war and ethnic conflicts, and consequently by movements of displaced persons and refugees.

To stratify our sample based on the settlement size, we used the 2001 Croatian Census Official Settlements classification. We can

thus monitor returnees in the following settlements according to size: a) up to 500 inhabitants; b) from 501 to 2,000 inhabitants; c) from 2,001 to 10,000 inhabitants and d) above 10,000 inhabitants. We did not find further stratification of urban settlements relevant for our purpose, since the percentage of returnees in such settlements is relatively small (around 5%).

We thus came to a total of 32 strata. Each of them is represented in the project sample of 1,500 returnees in proportion to the portion of registered Serb returns. In our field survey, we did not collect the required data on about 50 persons. The main questionnaire was answered by 403 respondents from the sample. We maintain that the sample is a good representation of registered returnees, both with respect to its size and stratification. It does not, therefore, include possible returnees (whom we deem exist) but who, for various reasons, are not registered in the related Ministry database. The fact that they are not registered might be due to failures made by official registering bodies, or (which we believe was more often the case) to the conscious or unconscious avoidance by certain returnees of official return channels. Besides, we might assume that those returnees differ in some features from our known population.

As an illustration, returnees whose property was not damaged or occupied had less reason to report to the authorities upon return. Similarly, not all members of a returnee family would register, but only the owners of houses and other property, and family members who returned at a later stage might also not register, etc. Finally, some returnees may not have wanted to have their return publicly known. Consequently, readers should be warned that our empirical findings cannot truly be methodically generalized for all possible minority returns, since they cover primarily the population described herein.

The margin of error in the total realised sample of 1,450 respondents is +/- 2.5%, and for the main questionnaire (403) +/- 4.8%. In addition, note should be taken of several possible distortions in the total sample which could cause the empirical error to grow above the theoretical maximum. We cannot be certain that 50 persons, for whom it was not possible to collect data, do not differ to some extent in some important features from the sample total. If those persons were unreachable for reasons which would be in a particular manner connected to the essence of our survey, this might increase the error by an additional 3%. Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that some 15% of the sample was not found at the given address nor was the information on their actual residence obtained in the field (this would mainly happen in towns). This fact could considerably

affect the data on the number of returnees present in their places of return, which was taken into account in the evaluation of the data. To a lesser extent, this can distort the results of the main questionnaire related to the returnees' attitudes and conditions of life. As for refusal to participate, this was very rare and consequently could not have affected the research results.

In agreement with UNHCR, the conducting of this survey in the field was entrusted to two civil society associations, which we believed could relatively easy establish contact with our respondents. One of them is an ethnic political organisation – the Serb Democratic Forum (SDF), and the other is a humanitarian organisation – the Croatian Red Cross (HCK). They selected 43 interviewers. Since they were persons with little or no experience in such an activity, they were called for training in order to be informed about the project objectives, the rules of sociological interviewing, and their own tasks. Apart from verbal instructions, each interviewer was furnished with detailed written instructions on their field work. Regrettably, this was not sufficient to ensure an even quality of interviewing. Moreover, due to some interviewers' errors, some questions in a considerable number of questionnaires remained without (written) replies. This is why the number of respondents per question varies, while some of the questions even had to be deleted from the analysis. Nevertheless, the research has, in our opinion, yielded valid and applicable results, since the key questions are relatively well covered.

Data entry was done by the PULS agency in accordance with ISO standards to which this agency conforms. An analysis of the data entry showed that the percentage of error was below 0.5%.

The research was developed in line with basic ethical standards, which was confirmed by the Ethics Commission of the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciencies, University of Zagreb.

3. Sustainability of return – conceptualisation

Refugee return (and the return of other migrants) after the fall of the Berlin Wall and, in particular, following the mass refugee movement caused by the civil wars on the territory of the collapsing Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo) is being viewed with increasing importance by Western European governments and by the entire international community. Although, from the point of view of international refugee law, 'return' has been considered as the first among three 'durable solutions', much more energy and funds have, for reasons of the various political and strategic Western world positions in the Cold War, been directed to local integration in the host countries or to resettlement in third countries (Chimni, 1992:2). In short, three main reasons exist for the increasing engagement in the issue of return by international organisations in charge of refugee (and migrant) return. Firstly, a new world order and a new climate in international relations have enabled large return projects to be implemented.[1] Secondly, it is in the interest of international key players to establish lasting peace in areas affected by wars and ethnic conflicts, where return is viewed as one of the important stabilising factors in the post-conflict countries. Return is meant to rectify, at least to a certain extent, the consequences of ethnic cleansing through the process of the return of members of 'minorities'[2] to their places of origin. Through such an ethnic 'remixing', 'the international community'[3] makes an effort on one hand to redeem its 'sins' (for not preventing and stopping ethnic cleansing in a timely and efficient manner, on account of the conflicting interests of the big 'players'), and on the other hand to test the sustainability of multi-ethnic (multi-cultural) communities. Finally, refugees, like other unwanted migrants, have become too heavy a burden (economic and socio-political) for a number of host countries.

[1] See IOM (2004:7)

[2] The notion *minority* or *national minority* is marked with inverted commas, since it is not used, as Joanna Harvey (2006:108) correctly notices in the reports on refugee movements in this region, in its usual sense, but refers to groups which return (or stay) in the territory effectively under the control of the other ethnic group (even in cases where they are, locally, in the majority).

[3] We agree on the characterisation of the notion 'international community' as well, which is for the same reason marked with inverted commas. "A sort of a unique intent is often ascribed to a different collection of states, institutions, actors and structures, which shape what is called 'international community'. In fact, there are many interests at play among various actors, and they affect the process of return in different ways" (Harvey (2006:107).

"It is evident that the primary interests of different actors involved in promoting 'durable solutions' for the displaced populations (international agencies, 'host' governments, and 'home' governments) have frequently been different from the interests of those populations. Efforts by nationalist parties to relocate refugees and displaced persons to politically sensitive areas, and a corresponding desire on the part of international actors to oppose local integration and promote return, have combined to make it very difficult for individuals to take independent action and to integrate locally. For those people who have been unable or unwilling to return to their pre-war homes (or, especially in the case of Croatia, unable to resolve their property rights and thereby obtain economic means to settle where they choose),[4] the result has been a situation of extended liminality and insecurity" (Harvey, 2006:107).

* * *

Return has traditionally been looked on as a one-time and final act. That is why it has been placed at the top of the list of 'durable solutions'. It implies a happy ending to refuge, and, consequently, an end to the worries of responsible international organisations. While refuge (except in the case of asylum seekers from the communist block) has the negative connotations of suffering, 'rooting out', 'loss of home', in a word, social pathology, return is taken as its opposite: something good, 'natural'. Return enables refugees to lose their stigma and become 'normal' people who can again, like everybody else, belong to their 'home' and 'homeland' (Hammond, 1999:227). In this way, a 'natural' and 'national' order, which is supposed to have existed before the flight (Black and Gent, 2006:19), is re-established. Ultimately, the wish of refugees to return to their 'homes' is 'normal'. Regrettably, return operations reveal that return and reintegration are far from being a 'natural' and smooth continuation, especially in post-conflict situations (Eastmond, 2006: 142–3).

The traditional concept of return has lately been exposed to vigorous criticism by academics and researchers dealing with migration and exile. It seems that the opinion quickly prevailed that return was always a long-term and diversified process and that the engagement and assistance of international organisations could not be reduced to logistical support to help refugees cross borders on their way home, or to simply repossess their houses. Such criti-

[4] It seems that the author is not aware of the latest postitive steps regarding the return of property to Serb returnees in Croatia, in particular private houses, which was also confirmed by our research. Still remaining to be resolved is the issue of tenancy rights over the former socially-owned apartments, which no longer exist as a legal institution.

cism has been bolstered by an overall academic atmosphere of ever stronger postmodern views marked by decentralisation and pluralism of perspectives, and by the deconstruction of all fixed concepts of identity, belonging, and territorisation. From the position of socio-constructivists (or de-constructivists), the notion of 'home' and 'homeland' has been attacked, as has the undifferentiated notion of 'returnee' (Allen and Morsnik, 1994:7; Black, 2002). Also under attack is the very assumption that return 'home' is non-problematic, weighed down by politics and various interests (Black and Gent, 2004:4). H. Malkki (1992:37) does not accept the depiction of refugees as 'up-rooted' in the sense of being unable to 'be rooted' elsewhere.

The monitoring of returnees soon revealed a worrying tendency, namely, that many, sooner or later, and for various reasons, migrate again. The conclusion was simple, but dramatic – return as such is not enough; it should also be effective and successful. As the notion of 'sustainability' was at hand, originating from ecology but now widely used, it was applied to refugee return, bringing us the standard called 'sustainable return'. Overnight, like other fashionable words, it has become ubiquitous in refugee (migratory) studies, but also in the refugee-related policies of UNHCR and other international organisations. Notwithstanding, return has not become a less controversial concept. Rather, the issue of 'sustainability' has opened new questions and controversies.

It is easy to agree on the general position that return has to be 'sustainable' in order to be meaningful. But it is more difficult to determine how 'sustainability' is first to be defined and then measured.. In the simplest terms, 'sustainability' is determined by the 'absence of a new migration' (for some time) (Migration DRC, 2005:2). However, since in all return movements it seems there is to a certain extent a new migration, this concept does not provide answers to the much more complex question about why this happens, or what the prerequisites are to prevent it.

The other approach to sustainability is more complex and deals with the socio-economic problems that returnees face, i.e. their conditions of life. These comprise: safety, accommodation, employment, infrastructure and availability of state institutions and social services (schooling, health care) (UNMIK and UNHCR, 2003:3). In a pilot study in Sussex on the voluntary return of refugees to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo conducted by the Ministry of Home Affairs of the United Kingdom, Black et al. (2004:39)[5] defined individual sustainability in the following words: "Return migration is

[5] This, however, is a very small sample – only 30 for each country.

sustainable for individuals if returnees' socio-economic status and fear of violence or persecution is no worse, relative to the population in the place of origin, one year after their return".

An earlier and simpler approach to 'measuring' return was conceptualised on an individual level and in counting those who had (permanently) stayed, that is, had not migrated again. It is true that socio-economic indicators of social status are also generally clear and easy to operationalise. But, when we talk about the sustainability of refugee return, we have to know what it is compared to, namely, how it is measured. For example, is the returnees' unemployment to be regarded in relation to some absolute standard, or to a relative standard? We can easily agree on that, but then a new question arises. Is the level of (un)employment to be compared with the situation in the place of refuge, or 'at home' where they have returned? In the latter case, is it a national average, the average of a specific region or of the place of return? Statistical data at national level are usually available, but at other levels this is rarely the case. Even if the data are known, they refer to the general population whose demographic structure (by age, education, etc) is often significantly different from the refugee population which is more or less negatively selected in this respect. What should the lapse of time following return be before we can compare the (un)employment of returnees with that of the local population? Should unemployed returnees be registered at the unemployment bureau? If so (and how otherwise would they find jobs except by having them secured by returnee programmes in advance), would the time of waiting for a job or, better said, the waiting time of comparable categories (by age and qualification) in the unemployment bureau be a real indicator for returnees' (un)employment? In the case of Croatia or Bosnia and Herzegovina, not to mention less developed countries of origin, there would be years of uncertainty and waiting. How 'living conditions' could be ensured in the meantime? In one of its recent reports on return to South–East Europe, UNHCR (2004) gave warning that returnees were in competition with locals for (usually scarce) resources.

There is another problem in the issue of 'measuring' the 'sustainability of return' and its indicators (dealt with in recent approaches, which will be further discussed here). Should we 'measure' the effectiveness of the return of individual returnees (methodological individualism) or that of returnee communities? In the latter case, should we define the returnee (minority) community at the level of a settlement, a region, or the entirety of the ethnic corpus? Should not (permanent) sustainable refugee return actually depend on the relationship with the other ethnic majority community or commu-

nities (at the local and national level)? If so (as this was only a rhetorical question), then we have to 'measure' the social reconstruction of local and broader communities in the areas of return. How do we 'measure' co-existence (and in comparison to what – the situation before the war, during the war, or according to some arbitrary 'standards')?

One such form of a socio-economic approach to return sustainability puts special emphasis on livelihoods. International organisations and sponsors define 'sustainability of livelihoods' primarily as the ability of returnees to secure enough robust means to be able to survive without 'outside' assistance, and to be able to endure outside shocks. Here we might wonder whether 'outside' help should include remittances by refugees and migrants (the family members or relatives of returnees) sent from countries of exile, or whether they might better be considered as diversification (and transnationalisation) in securing sustainable 'livelihoods'?

International organisations have, in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina (within this model), insisted on the reinstitution of returnees' property (houses, apartments, etc.) as the basic precondition for (sustainable) return. A few studies have warned (Eastmond, 2006: 143)[6] that the (timely) reconstruction of refugees' houses is an important but, in itself, insufficient incentive to allow refugees to return permanently, particularly if they are members of an ethnic minority in the areas where an economic crisis and nationalistic policy work against the normalisation of life. "Indeed, even in Bosnia, where both restitution and return have been promoted, many refugees and IDPs have chosen not to return after regaining their properties; instead, they sell them, rent them, or use them only as a summer home" (Black, Eastmond and Gent, 2006:10).

By selling or exchanging their houses, returnees only complete and bolster ethnic cleansing and ethnic homogenisation as the objectives of war. "For those who do return, even where ethnic relations and physical security pose no obstacles to integration, the possibilities of re-establishing 'home' would seem to depend in no small measure on livelihood opportunities" (Eastmond, 2006:143). A survey carried out in a rural returnee community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, eight years after the return, showed that returnees were still living in great economic poverty with no prospects of finding employment. Although assessing their housing and security as satisfactory, they only remained because they had no opportunity to go somewhere else and live better (Čukur, 2005).

[6] See the thematic issue of the magazine *International Migrations*, 44 (3).

Sustainability of return can also be viewed from the position of securing basic rights for refugees. All people, including migrants and refugees, have the right to return to their country of origin (and equally, the right to leave it), which is stipulated in the Human Rights Declaration (Article 13). However, this is a soft right which cannot be imposed on states by force. Following the experience of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, international organisations, through the Dayton Agreement, reinforced this right, specifying it as 'the right to return to their *homes*' (our italics). Somewhat later, in Kosovo, UNMIK finally defined the 'right to sustainable return'. The Manual for Sustainable Return divides it into four areas: a) security and freedom of movement, b) access to public services (public utilities, education, health care), c) access to shelter (through the efficient return of property or assistance in the reconstruction of housing), and d) economic options, by fair and equal opportunities for employment (Black and Gent, 2006: 22– 24).

Within this model, even the integration of refugees is primarily characterised as a right. At least, this is how the statement can be understood that "there can be no hope of normalcy until the majority of those displaced are able to reintegrate themselves into their societies" (UNHCR, 1997:162). In the first place, integration is at least a two-way (or rather a multi-way) process and cannot be imposed on the other (majority) ethnic community and, moreover, if it is imposed from the 'outside' as an exclusive right, not only will it remain a formal right but will rather cause rejection than reconciliation. Secondly, this request by the 'new orthodoxy of the responsible bodies of the international community', although it may have been conceived with good intentions, might unintentionally inflict new injustice on refugees (returnees) – the denial of their right to leave the country for good (or opt for some other forms of transnational half-return) (Black and Gent, 2006:20). Moreover, their own option of non-return, particularly in the situation where return is possible and desired, is viewed as 'not normal' and their status as 'non-returnees' pathological (Malkki, 1992:31). In a number of cases, however, return did not change the life of the up-to-then refugees, and the returnees, for various reasons, had to move on again.

All the above-mentioned approaches to sustainable return have been directed towards individuals and their families. But it is becoming increasingly clear that the sustainability of return cannot be restricted to returnees themselves, but must be conceptualised as an aggregation, taking into account the consequences of the return dynamics on the economic and social picture in the areas of return. "Not only is it difficult for refugees and other migrants as individuals to simply go 'home', but return to countries of origin can

contribute to a spiral of decline, whether through re-igniting conflict, through perpetuating inequality or abuses of rights or through economic hardship, which could stimulate greater levels of forced displacement in the future. In this sense, it is not only a question of how to make return sustainable, but how to make it sustainable on a community-wide basis and not just for individuals" (Black and Gent, 2006:32).

In the case of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and more or less of all post-conflict societies, return and integration happen in circumstances of deep changes, including transition into new economic and political systems. They are dynamic and controversial processes which impose the need to negotiate returnees' social position in the new relations of power and inequality. "Social reconstruction … refers to these processes of (re)creating, in new circumstances, the social relations, identities and cultural meanings through which people in a post-war setting (re)connect to a particular place and community as 'home" (Eastmond, 2006:143). The above-mentioned study in Sussex confirmed that re-migration is "sustainable for the home country or region if socio-economic conditions and levels of violence and persecution are not significantly worsened by return, as measured one year after the return process is complete" (Black et al., 2004:39).

We maintain that it is an over-optimistic, unrealistic view, more suited to 'measuring' 'sustainability' and meant for international organisations and (Western) governments interested in promptly 'resolving' the refugee problem. The above-mentioned study on the small returnee community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Čukur, 2005) and our representative survey confirm that it is a long-term process which, in its various phases, might become reversed. Finally, it is known that even less sensitive social integration (e.g. of migrants into Western countries) stretch over years, if not decades.

Black, Eastmond and Gent (2006:4) suggest differentiating between 'closer' and 'broader' return indicators. The former respond to the simple question – are returnees reintegrated upon return? The latter include "both the extent to which individual returnees are able to reintegrate in their home societies, and the wider impact of return on macro-economic and political indicators." Today, two basic conditions of sustainable return are singled out. The first is voluntariness. This is not as unproblematic as it might seem (Black and Gent, 2006:19). Can we actually speak of voluntariness when refugees are to decide between return, to which they are being pushed by host countries and the international community offering its assistance, and uncertainty in the country where they are un-

wanted guests (especially when we speak of actual refugees without a formal status according to the Convention). The second condition is the return environment, in the security, economic and political sense.

The conditions in exile, as well as the reasons for and against return, are rarely discussed, and if they are, studies have mainly referred to Western refugee-receiving countries. With reference to Serb refugees from Croatia, they mainly fled to Serbia and the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and remained there. There are at least two reasons for such an orientation. The first is the direct involvement of Milošević's regime in both the 'Serb rebellion in Croatia' and their later movement out of the territory of the 'Serb Krajina' after it was defeated militarily. It would have been entirely illogical to assume that their economic situation and, even more, that the political environment did not influence the will and readiness to return. In both cases, these refugees found themselves under the powerful control of the Milošević regime. "The political rhetoric of the ruling Serb Democratic Party (SDS) in Republika Srpska on the return process in Bosnia centred on the claim that Serbs did not wish to return to the Bosniak/Croat Federation, and the implication that all Serbs should live in one state." Serb refugees from Croatia faced similar pressure. At the beginning, they were encouraged to settle in Eastern Slavonia, which was then under Serb control, in order to strengthen the Serb population there, and some were transported to Kosovo, in line with the strategy of legitimisation of territorial control through ethnic domination (Harvey, 2006:96).

Finally, there has recently been a new, postmodern approach towards the sustainability of return (already rather widespread in studies on migration), which questions or at least reviews earlier conventional models – transnationalism. Marita Eastmond evaluates the return strategies employed by Bosniak refugees, and the uncertainty they face, pointing to the transnational environment in which they occur. "The return strategies described are of different duration, often take place outside established policies and programmes, and are based on the need to keep options open in different places. While policies have tended to define refugee return as a single and definitive move to the country or place of origin, the transnational perspective suggests that return is better conceptualised as a dynamic and open-ended process, one which may be extended over long periods of time, involving mobility between places and active links to people and resources in the country of asylum. Transnational strategies also include the many refugees abroad who hold onto their repossessed houses in Bosnia and visit regularly, some of them for longer periods and in preparation for

returning permanently at a later date. In such a transnational dynamic, refugees and returnees are not always clear-cut categories, as both may move between and combine resources at both ends. The transnational perspective also throws into question notions of 'home' as something bound to one particular locality or national community. If home is not just a place or physical structure, but also a site of social relations and cultural meanings, it may well extend to several places, each one of which may hold its own particular sets of relations and meanings to those concerned. This transnational dimension of home is thus a challenge to notions of 'repatriation' or 'return' in the simplistic mode. Instead, the reconstructed home may be translocal, where each locality becomes part of a new home. Rethinking the return of refugees in terms of transnational mobility and belonging also suggests new ways of conceptualising the potential for the reconstruction of a large refugee population abroad" (Eastmond, 2006:141–2).

We have quoted the author rather extensively since she has systematically and meaningfully elaborated the transnational approach to the sustainability of return with which we almost fully agree, except for the possible implications of her conclusions. We have no objections to her criticism of the conventional approaches which are held to be insufficient and restricted. In the conventional approach, return is understood exclusively as a final act of return to the original socio-environmental location. The other approach, however, emphasises the dynamics, open-endedness and transnationalism of refugees' networks. We do not agree, however, with Eastmond's and similar opinions which negate (or at least neglect) the symbolic meaning of 'home' as a unique place for many refugees, and, related to this, the importance of repatriation or return. It is not that transnationalism as a framework for understanding (part of) the return processes can be accepted only to the detriment of conventional approaches, but these approaches can complement one another, which the analysis of our research study will prove. We have not looked into the transnational relations and strategies of Serb returnees, but some findings suggest they do exist. It has been confirmed beyond doubt that certain types of refugees (the elderly, the less educated, and country folk) would be oriented towards traditional return, while a significantly smaller portion, especially within permanent (official) return, comprises young, educated and enterprising persons, which indicates they have different strategies for resolving their refugee status.

Finally, we would like to emphasis the point regularly omitted in analyses of exile and return. In no way are refugees and returnees a 'grey area', an undefined body, which move, exclusively prompted

by external stimulation (pressures, manipulation, expulsion, aid) and with no will of their own – whether towards the place of refuge or of return. Before exile and in exile alike, and finally during the return, refugees–returnees are defined not only by their innate characteristics but also by their economic status, ability to cope, life achievements, political orientations, etc.[7] In addition, this population largely changes over time in their socio-economic features – due to war traumas, the death of family members, the birth of new members, marriage, divorce (particularly among ethnically mixed marriages), family divisions and reunifications. This is why we conditionally speak of refugees and returnees as a group,, but always acknowledging their differences.

In conclusion, in the analysis of return sustainability, particularly related to incentives, it is important to differentiate between the factors which cannot be influenced, since they are the natural features of returnees (such as age and gender), and those which (through policies) can be influenced (such as education, qualifications, employment, forms of assistance, etc.).

* * *

In this study, the concept of sustainable return has been conceptualised with respect to several aspects or dimensions:

I) to what extent return is permanent
II) socio-demographic characteristics of returnees
III) living conditions (objective features and subjective assessment, and security)

If we further elaborate on the conditions of life, we arrive at seven aspects of sustainable return:

I) to what extent return is permanent – absence of new movements
II) feeling of safety
III) socio-demographic structure of (permanent) returnees
IV) socio-economic conditions of sustainable return
V) refugee experience and orientation towards return
VI) citizenship and minority rights as preconditions for sustainable return

[7] In his first sociological study of refugees and displaced persons in Croatia (Mesić 1992), the author already suggested differentiating among six types of refugees or displaced persons, based on the very aspect of refuge, including the reasons and modalities which show how the people came to seek refuge. Further to this, the author built, on some other dimensions, several other typologies, primarily to point out their differences and the effect of these differences on refugees' life in exile and their orientation towards non-return.

VII) subjective perception of sustainability (returnees' assessments, opinions, feelings)

The first dimension matches the notion of narrow return indicators, while all the others relate to 'broader' ones. Unfortunately, we were not able to explore the broader effect of return on the macro-economic trends and political scene in the country, but had to limit ourselves to the conditions of life of returnees.

4. Research Results

4.1. Presence of officially registered returnees

The primary and main goal of this field study was to establish the physical presence or permanent residence of registered returnees at the addresses given at the time of registration upon return to the Republic of Croatia. Recent studies of returnee trends have shown inaccuracies in the official numbers of returnees, whether those given by 'homeland' governments or international organisations. We do not imply here that there is a deliberate inflating of figures, simply that there is a problem with a certain number of registered returnees who stay in their places of return for a short period of time or only sporadically, rather than permanently. The official registration of a returnee does not actually have to indicate an intention to stay. A formal registration is in the first place prompted by certain returnee benefits and entitlements

Apart from being confirmation of the right to return, registration in our case facilitates repossession of property, namely it ensures the reconstruction of a damaged or destroyed property, as well as the right to the acquisition of health and social benefits. Thus, formal registration might be linked to various strategies leading to the final resolution of refugee status, which may not necessarily be connected to the return to a pre-war residence.

There has been increasing evidence that return, at least for a good number of refugees, is not a one-time and a final act, but a complex and long-lasting process. That is why return is not considered to be a 'durable solution' for all refugees who return to their country of origin (once), even to their 'homes' and whose arrival is officially registered. It is necessary to assess the 'sustainability of return'. A simple and measurable indicator of the sustainability of return in the physical sense is the number (absolute and relative) of returnees who, upon return, remain living (relatively) permanently in their homes, or at least in their country of origin. Therefore, our task was to determine how many Serb (minority) returnees actually live at their addresses of return.

Based on certain findings and recent research of refugee return, newspaper articles and informal talks with returnees and informants, we started from the realistic assumption (hypothesis) that a certain number of registered Serb returnees to the Republic of Croatia actually do not live or do not intend to live in the place of return or anywhere else in the country. By selecting a representative

sample, we intended to secure relative reliability in our findings for the whole population of registered returnees. In concrete terms, the question was how many returnees (absolutely and relatively) actually live and intend to live in their homes.

How many returnees of the sample did we find at their registered addresses? According to our results, out of 1,450 persons randomly selected from the Ministry's database, 504 or around 35% actually live in their places of return (Table 1). The majority of these (403 or 80%) agreed to participate in the survey and fill out our questionnaire. A total of 63 returnees (around 12.5%) did not agree to participate, while the rest (38 or 7.5%) were not in their houses at the time of the visit. In the period between the registration upon return and our survey, as many as 162 (11%) persons had passed away. According to our informants, only a portion of them lived in the places of return, while others lived somewhere else in Croatia, and in most cases in the country where they had sought refuge (mainly Serbia).

Table 1 – Physical presence of returnees

	n=1450
Live at the registered address	**34.8%**
a) Interviewed	80.0%
b) Refused/not present	20.0%
Do not live at the registered address	**54.0%**
a) Live in other settlements in Croatia	6.5%
b) Live outside Croatia	65.0%
I) Serbia	*82.3%*
II) Bosnia and Herzegovina	*5.9%*
III) Montenegro	*1.4%*
IV) Other countries	*10.4%*
c) No reliable information	28.5%
Dead	**11.2%**

A relative majority of registered returnees (54%) were not found to be living at the address where they were registered. The considerable majority of those (65%, or 35% of the total sample) live permanently outside Croatia and only 7% (or 4%) live in another settlement inside Croatia. According to informants, the majority of absent 'returnees' (82%) live permanently in Serbia, which had pri-

marily been the country where they had found refuge. Some 11% (6%) of registered returnees who had left Croatia after having registered as returnees live outside the region, in a Western European country. Another 6% (3%) live permanently in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and 1% in Montenegro.

The attempt to obtain a complete picture of the sustainability of return was made more difficult by the fact that in the case of around 15% of registered returnees of the sample (or 29% of those who were not found at the address of their residence) it was not possible to gain information on their residence. One in four (4% of the total sample) was not residing at the registered address and the informants did not know where they lived, and an additional 5% (1%) had registered at addresses which interviewers were not able to find. It was not possible to obtain any information on the remaining 70% of persons from this group (which constitutes 11% of the total sample). The majority of persons had never been heard of by the available informants.

The returnees on whom no reliable information was available mostly originate from larger settlements. While the percentage of returnees in settlements with more than 10,000 inhabitants makes up 18% of the total sample, their percentage among those whose permanent residence was not confirmed accounts for as much as 60%. This might have been due, at least to some extent, to the fact that citizens of larger urban areas do not know each other well. To be methodologically correct, it must be emphasised that as a consequence the reliability of the survey for larger settlements is considerably lower than that for smaller settlements. It can be said with great probability that returnees in smaller settlements who were not found at the given address and of whom neighbours had no knowledge do not reside in this settlement, while in towns there is the chance that they had moved to other addresses.

Based on the data collected in such a way, it is not possible to verify exactly the percentage of returnees residing permanently in the settlement where they had registered upon return. We estimate that the figure lies between 35% and at the most 50%.[8] The higher figure would be more realistic if all returnees whom we could not locate did live in the settlement where they had registered. However, it is more probable that the exact percentage of returnees who stayed is closer to the lower figure. It is highly improbable, particularly in small places, that a person would reside there permanently without this being known to other villagers, even in cases where returnees were newcomers who had moved there after the war. In the

[8] More precisely, between 32.5% and 52.5% if we count the lower and the upper level of error of the total sample.

best of cases, the distribution of places of residence for respondents for whom no reliable information was obtained should be similar to the distribution of respondents for whom relatively reliable information was collected. If this were true, the percentage of those who reside at the given address would be around 41%. If we accept this assumption, then we could claim that the percentage of those who live in their homes is actually between 35% and 41%.[9]

According to our findings, around 35% of registered returnees reside at their registered addresses, and an additional 3.5% moved to other locations within Croatia. If we made a similar distribution of those whom we could not verify – which we would consider a rather optimistic approach – then the upper figure of this estimation would be set at around 45%.

If we follow this logic, we could conclude that between 44% and 50% of registered returnees do not permanently reside in Croatia. If we translate our findings to the whole population of 120,000 registered Serb (minority) returns, we arrive at a realistic estimate of 46,000 and 54,000 registered returnees living permanently in the country, of whom 42,000 to 49,000 reside in their place of origin. To this figure, a certain number of unregistered returnees who stayed permanently (perhaps a few thousands) should be added. Some missing data in our sample may suggest that a small portion, particularly among younger family members, is not registered, not to mention those who may, for particular reasons, have avoided registration upon return. When we deduct some 14,500 deceased returnees, there remain 51,500 to 59,500 registered returnees who continue to reside permanently outside Croatia, mostly in Serbia.[10]

The fact that some 'returnees' do not reside in their place of origin (or return) does not necessarily mean that they (at least some of them) are not in contact with it. According to the informants' statements, 12% of returnees who do not permanently live in Croatia (5% of the total returnee population) spend at least part of the year in such places. On the other hand, 5% (1% of the total sample) of returnees who were found in their place of origin and who were interviewed spend some time outside Croatia. In total, some 6% of

[9] More precisely, between 32.5% and 43.5% if we count the lower estimated level for the minimal value and the upper estimated level for the maximal value. Further errors in the sample are not given here, as the possible errors in the measurements (and not the sample) are much larger than the standard errors of the sample.

[10] We give the mean value of the the range of the probable number of deceased, which is between 13,000 and 16,000 returnees, namely between 11% and 13%. The lower estimate is valid in the case that none of the returnees, for whom no reliable information was obtained, died, which is not very probable, and the upper is valid if the share of the deceased among those of whom no reliable information was obtained is close to the share of those of whom reliable information was obtained.

the returnees were shown to spend some time in Croatia and some outside, mainly in the country of refuge. Every other returnee (or every fifth it total) who does not permanently live in Croatia comes to his/her home occasionally. According to our informants, this happens at least once and on average two to three times a year.

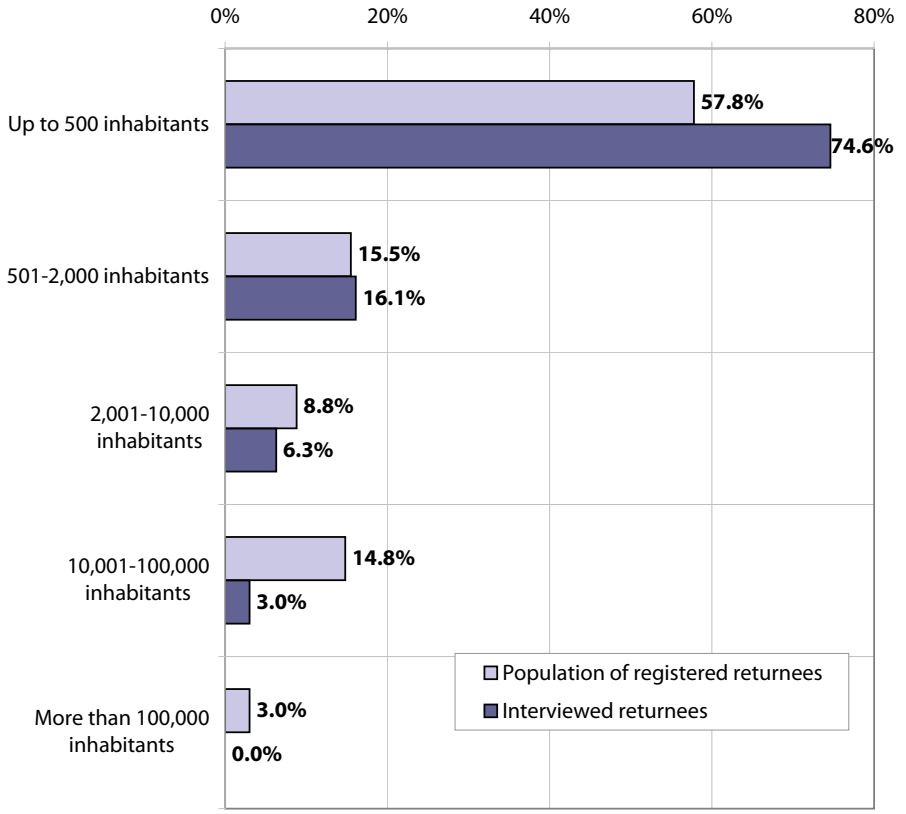
Comparing the structure of interviewed returnees according to the size of settlement with the structure of all registered returnees (Figure 1) clearly shows that the permanent stay of registered returnees is considerably larger in smaller settlements. Out of 120,000 registered returnees, 58% are from settlements of up to 500 inhabitants, while the percentage of respondents from those settlements is very much higher (75%).[11] Our findings suggest that the inclination to stay is much stronger in smaller, rural settlements, especially when compared with larger urban settlements exceeding 10,000 inhabitants.[12]

The fact that returnees more often stay permanently in smaller rural settlements can be explained by a few basic, interrelated reasons. Firstly, the large majority of returnees have their own agricultural land in such areas, which secures certain earnings. In urban areas with a larger number of returnees, the unemployment rate is very high, since these are mainly economically poorer areas of Croatia, and returnees who do not have a garden or agricultural land will find it more difficult to survive there. Secondly, almost all returnees in smaller settlements return to their (reconstructed) houses, while a portion of returnees to larger settlements lost their tenancy rights to apartments where they had lived before the war. Finally, the rural population was and still is older and less educated. On the one hand, they had difficulties adapting to life in refugee camps or in staying with relatives, often in towns, with no possibility of wor-

[11] $\chi 2=71.660$; df=4 $p<0.01$.

[12] Note that more than 70% of the respondents whom it was confirmed resided in Croatia were interviewed. Thus, our generalisation for all such returnees is quite reliable. While drawing this conclusion the earlier emphasised fact should be taken into account, namely, that there is a considerably larger portion of returnees to towns for whom no reliable information was obtained regarding their place of residence, and that the general reliability of these results is surely lower for settlements above 10,000 inhabitants. Nevertheless, our conclusion is quite legitimate. The portion of interviewed respondents from the smallest settlements could have been reduced by a maximun of 4% if half of the returnees from the larger settlements (which make up to 9% of the total population) of whose residence we do not have reliable information were present in a similar proportion to that of the respondents from smaller settlements (40%). In that case, the difference will still be large, with more respondents from smaller settlements present.

Figure 1 :
Share of registered and interviewed returnees according to size of settlements



king outside the house. On the other hand, they find it easier to return and are ready to remain in tough conditions in their isolated, ethnically compact communities (where the ethnic structure may not have changed considerably during their absence). Urban settlements were naturally more appealing to settlers (Croats from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo) than small isolated villages.

Our findings show that, comparing the regions, the largest number of returnees (45%) remained in the area of Lika and Banovina (Lika–Senj, Sisak–Moslavina and Karlovac County). Almost half of all registered returnees (48%) are actually from this region. This is followed by Dalmatia (Sibenik–Knin, Zadar, Split–Dalmatia and Dubrovnik–Neretva County), then come Central and Northern Croatia (the City of Zagreb, Zagreb County, Krapina–Zagorje, Varazdin, Medjimurje, Virovitica–Podravina, Koprivnica–Krizevac and Bjelovar–Bilogora County) where the number of registered returnees who stayed permanently amounts to 30%. It is interesting that the lowest number of registered returnees who stayed (13%) is in Slavonia (Požega, Brod–Posavina, Vukovar–Srijem and Osijek–Baranja County).[13] The number of registered returnees to Istria and Primorje–Gorski Kotar County in our sample was too small (only 11) to be able to give any estimation for this region. Finally, there is a clear tendency for returnees to remain more often in the areas of Croatia which had been occupied by Serb forces during the war. Since those were also the regions where the Serbs were in an absolute and relative majority before the war, we can conclude that ethnic concentration is one of the factors determining the permanent return of a minority. Unfortunately, this claim has not been verified by testing the decision to stay against the ethnic structure of the settlement, and consequently, it cannot be accepted unconditionally.

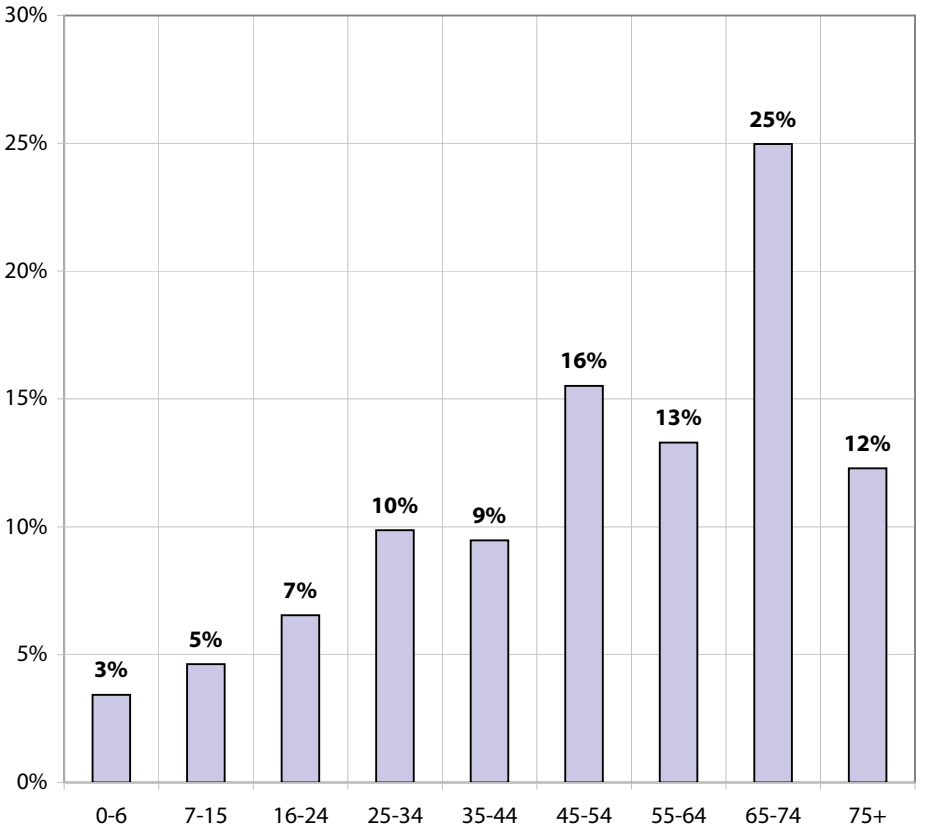
4.2. Return and Characteristics of Returnees

Demographic Characteristics

The returnees' demographic structure is one of the key indicators of the sustainability of their return as a group. The basic precondition for the sustainability of a community is the issue of its biological reproduction.

[13] Note that the Serbs who remained living in the area of peaceful integration (Eastern Slavonia) are not a part of the returnee population and consequently are not covered by this research.

Figure 2:
Age structure of all household members of interviewed returnees (n=993)[14]



[14] Only households where the age of all memeber was known were included (354 out of 403 interviewed).

The research results confirm the prevailing impression that Serb returnees are predominantly old people. True, the interviewed returnees were on average around 60 years of age, with every second one being older than 65. However, the returnees' age structure is somewhat more favourable. The age structure of the interviewed returnees does not fully represent the actual age structure of the returnee population. There are three reasons for this. Firstly, only returnees over 15 were interviewed.[15] This automatically excluded all persons under 15 from calculations, which resulted in a higher average age of the selected population. Secondly, there is a possibility that some family members were not registered as returnees and it can be logically assumed that they may on average be younger than those registered.[16] Thirdly, the youngest family members born after the return to Croatia were surely not entered in the related database.[17] Thus, the average age of all interviewed family members, who represent the total returnee population, is around 51. It is still considerably higher than the average age in Croatia which is 39 (Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) 2006), which is a clear indicator of a negative age selection. Age selection is a characteristic of every migration, while negative selection is a feature of return movements.

However, a closer look into the age group distribution of all family members in the interviewed households suggests that the average age does not correctly represent the age structure of the returnee population (Figure 2). As many as every fourth returnee is between 65 and 74 years of age, with an additional 12% being 75 or above, which means that more than one third (37%) of the returnee population is over 65, while 43% are older than 60. Every other returnee is older than the Croatian average, which is 51 years of age. On the other hand, children under 15 made up only 10%

[15] If a child under 15 years of age was accidentally included in the sample from the base of registered returnees, another person (parent, care-taker) from the same household would be interviewed.

[16] It is realistic to assume that, for the sake of return and reconstruction, firstly the owners of houses, land and other property would register upon return, followed by other household members. If a household comprises members of different generations, there are many reasons for children and younger members to return later, when conditions for their return were met. The household members returning at a later stage do not have the formal need to register as returnees, and that is why they could not have been selected in the sample, unlike the older memebers of the household.

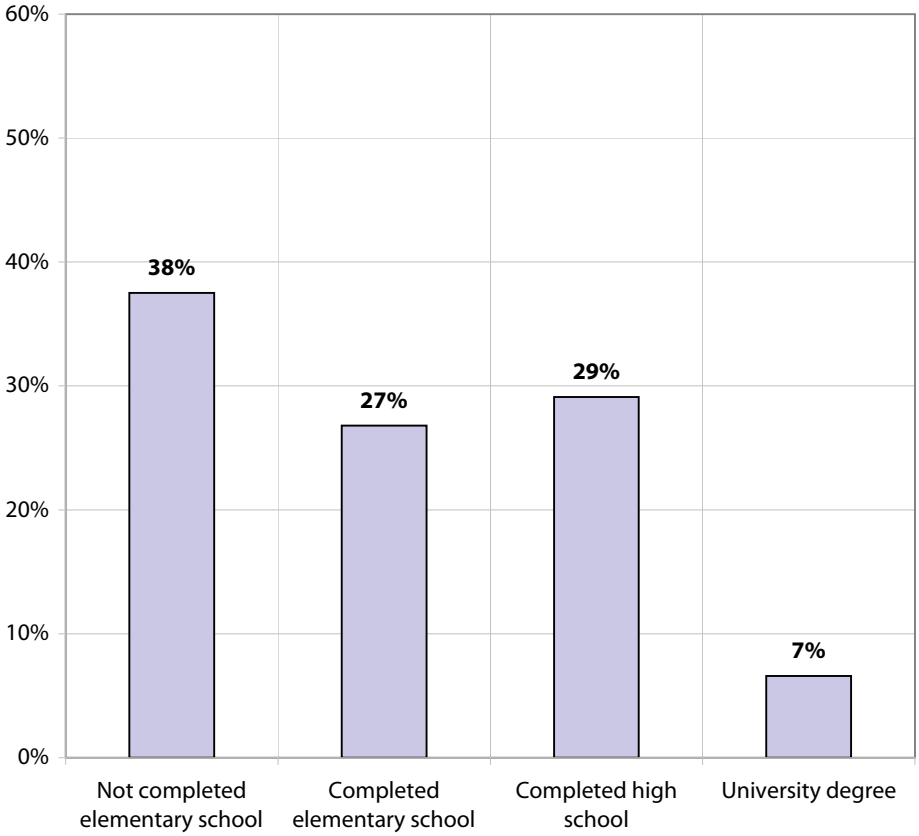
[17] Although, from a formal point of view, returnees' children born in the RC are not returnees, since they were not refugees either, we can consider them part of the returnee population, particularly if we assess it in the light of return sustainability, as they are members of the returnees' household, sharing the same destiny as the returnees.

of the returnee population, and pre-school children accounted for 3.5% of the population. All in all, children and young people under 19 years of age make up 12% of the returnee population, which is half the corresponding figure in the entire population of the Republic of Croatia (CBS, 2006). We assess that the actual situation would be at least somewhat better should we take into account unregistered younger family members. Such a ratio between returnees aged under 19 and those above 60 gives a very unfavourable returnee population aging index of 358 which puts into question its biological sustainability, particularly in the light of the fact that the vast majority of returnees live in small and isolated settlements (under 500 inhabitants) which are already demographically endangered. An aging index above 40 is considered to be a critical limit between the young and the elderly in the given population. To illustrate, we can say that the aging index of the entire population in the RoC is 90.7. A more accurate comparison would be if we compare the ageing index of the returning population with that in the county to which they return, such as the counties of Sisak–Moslavina, Karlovac, Lika–Senj, Sibenik–Knin and Zadar (as many as 70% of all returnees are registered in these counties). The aging index in these counties ranges from 145.7 for Lika–Senj to 86 for Zadar County. This shows that the returnee population is negatively selected, not only with respect to the entire population of Croatia, but also to the regions to which it returns (Tomek–Roksandic et al., 2006).

It can be concluded that, as far as the sustainability of return is concerned, the age structure of returnees (who returned permanently) is unfavourable, but this could have been more or less predicted. Some earlier studies by the same author, relating to displaced persons and refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, clearly proved that older, less educated persons from rural areas showed more readiness to return. In contrast, younger, better educated, urban persons from the very beginning would express an inclination to be locally integrated in the new environment, or to migrate elsewhere. Besides, they put as a condition for their return, apart from physical safety, their future socio-economic status and especially the political situation in the place of origin, thinking, primarily, whether their ethnic group would be able to effectively hold power (Mesic, 1992; Mesic 1996).[18] In other words, even at

[18] The first survey referred to Croatian displaced persons within Croatia, and the second to Croatian and Bosniak refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in Croatia, Hungary and Germany. Serb displaced persons and refugees were unreachable, but we are confident that our findings could be applied to them as well and also be generalised to include other refugee populations. Return movements to a large extent confirm the existence of different return perspectives of refugees and displaced persons in relation to their age and educational structure, as well as type of settlement.

Figure 3:
Educational structure of interviewed returnees



that time, there were reservations about 'minority' returns, reservations primarily held by young, educated and urban refugees and displaced persons.

Ultimately, there exists a merciless logic in every migration process, independent of the wishes and expectations of the migrants themselves. First of all, younger persons more easily adapt to the new environment, since they are forced to, particularly because of the children. Return to urban areas without a secure job is much more difficult. Moreover, young and enterprising people migrate, expecting better conditions of life and prospects. Rather, as minority refugees, they should generally accept worse conditions and prospects, at least for some time. Finally, for some of them, the main issue against return could be their active involvement in inter-ethnic conflicts (including participation in crimes). Even if this were not the case, many of them cannot simply side with the political changes (and accompanying changes of power), in this case, the creation of an independent Croatian state.

Elderly, uneducated persons had difficulties finding new jobs and starting a new life in the country of refuge. Their adaptation is made more difficult by the fact that they had left small rural places to arrive at bigger urban areas which coincide with migratory movements known before the war (Bagic, 2004). This certainly does not imply that the majority of those forced to leave their places or origin would have done so in times of peace. This helps us understand one of the possible reasons for some younger refugees not to decide to return. The same economic (though not political) grounds apply which years or decades before had made their relatives voluntarily abandon those areas and move to larger settlements in the territory of former Yugoslavia.

According to the gender structure, returnees do not differ from the entire population of the Republic of Croatia. There are more women (54%) than men (46%).[19] As in the entire population, women are statistically considerably older than men. The average female returnee is 54 years of age and the average male returnee is 49 years of age.

The educational structure of refugees is mainly connected to their age and the type of settlement they originate from. As many as 38% of returnees aged 15 or older did not complete elementary school, and an additional 27% have only elementary school. Secondary school education was recorded for 29% while the percentage of those with higher education is 7%.

[19] The gender proportion was only made for households for which we had related data for all household members (320 out of 403).

Household Structure

The age structure of the returnee population and the fragmentary return of household members affect the returnees' household structure. The returnee household has, on average, two or three members (2.6), but the majority of households (60%) are one- or two-member households. The size of the households had decreased compared to the pre-war period when, according to informants, an average household had 3 or 4 members (3.6).[20] We consider that the reasons for the decrease are less of a biological nature and more as a consequence of a strategy of return. Some household members, specifically younger members, opted for other refugee solutions (at least for the time being). Around 40% of those interviewed explicitly stated that at least one member of their pre-war household now lives outside Croatia, of whom the vast majority are in Serbia (86%).[21]

Every fifth returnee household is a one-person household, with this person being on average 67 years of age, which depicts them as exclusively 'old households' (Figure 5). It is easy to conclude that those households experience the worst living conditions, considering the aggregation of negative factors (age and frailty, low socio-economic status, isolation in remote settlements, distance from social and medical institutions, etc.). The most common household, which makes up one third of all households, is a household comprising a couple without children, again elderly. The average age of those household members is around 65, where three out of four members are 60 or older. In total, almost half of all households (45%) do not include a person under 60 years of age and every fourth (26%) under 70! There is a large share of elderly returnees in other households too. As many as 65% of all households include at least one member who is 65 years of age or older (Figure 6).

Nuclear families, parents with children, make up 15% of all households, the 'children' being on average 24 years of age, which means that the vast majority of those households comprise elderly parents and their grown-up children (40% of the 'children' in those households are 30 or above). Extended families make up 18% of returnee households and single parent families make up 12%. These, however, do not refer to young single mothers or single fathers, but grown-up persons who live with one of their parents. There was hardly any real single parent family with young children recorded in the survey. In only 13% of households were children under 14

[20] t=-13.518; df=402; p<0.001.

[21] These data were obtained from 205 respondents, thus an error of +/-6.8% is possible. The questions were answered only by respondents from households with a reduced number of members.

Figure 4:
Number of members in returnees' households

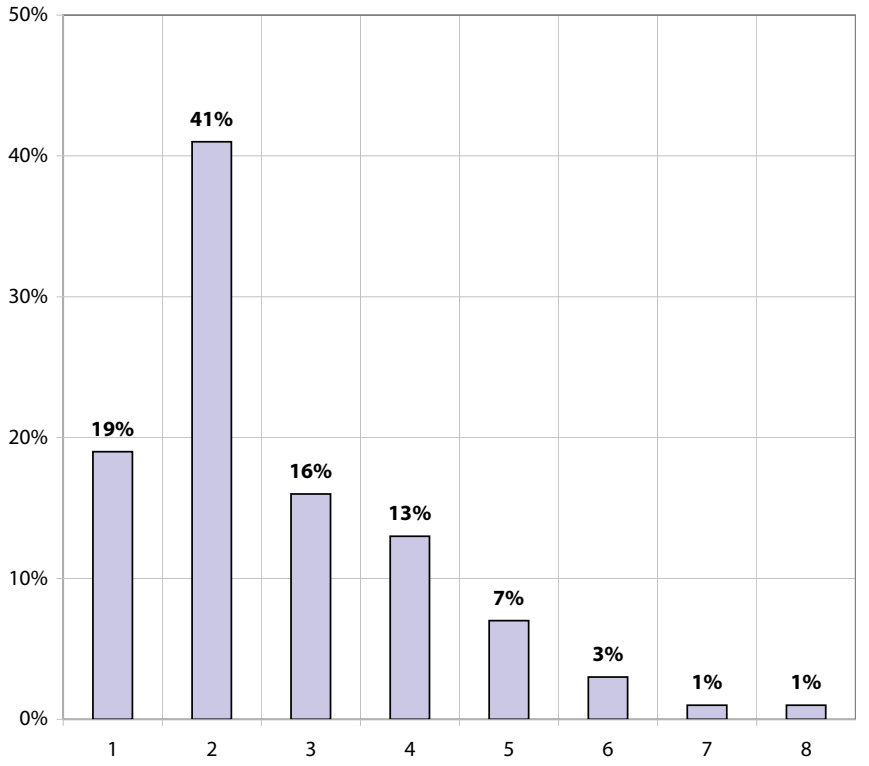
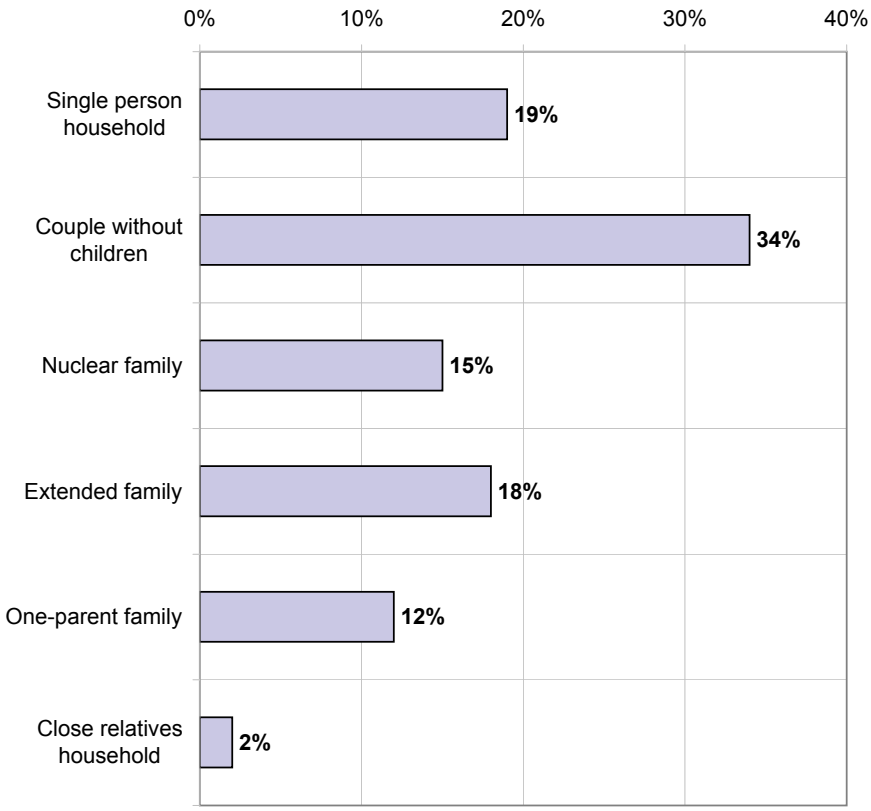


Figure 5:
Household structure



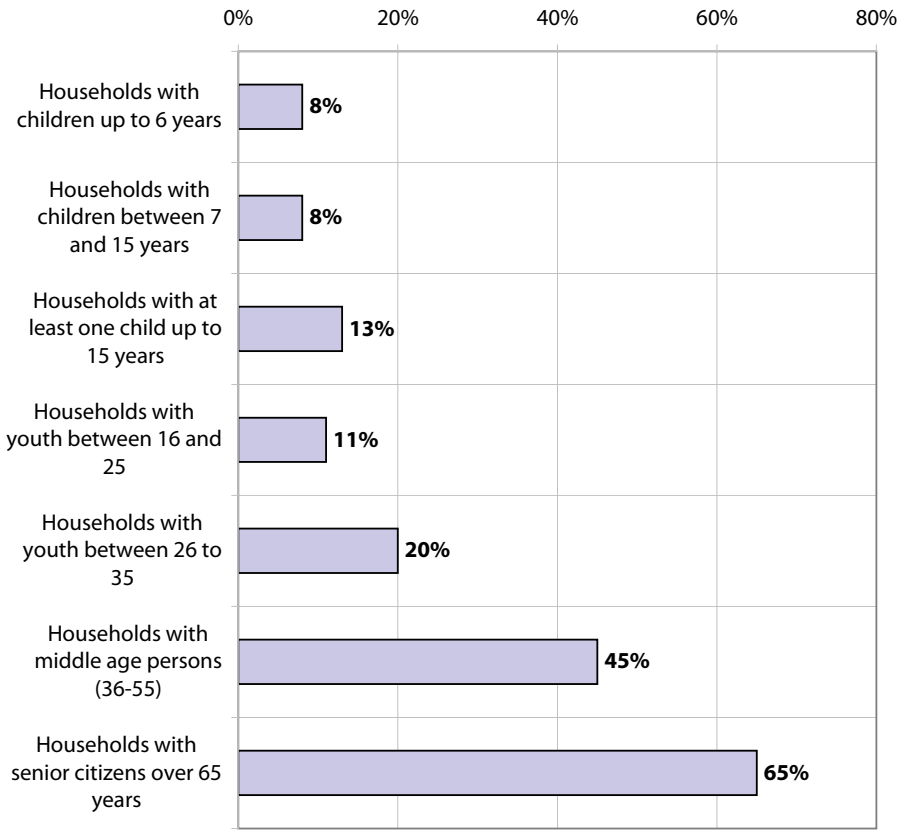
years recorded, and young persons between the ages of 14 and 25 were recorded in 11% of households, which means that only every fourth household was found with offspring (Figure 6). All other households do not include any member younger than 25 years of age!

Refugees' Experience

According to some studies (Mesic, 1992; 1996; Brajdic–Vukovic and Bagic, 2004a), the decision to return is also influenced by issues other than socio-demographic factors. We would like to draw attention to a number of objective factors and the subjective perceptions connected with them, which, lacking a better term, we might call refugee experience. This primarily covers the actual causes of flight, which are more or less traumatic, and then life in exile (reception, accommodation, living conditions and future prospects). It is reasonable to assume that refugees whose living conditions in the country of refuge are poor would show stronger readiness to return. This would primarily be noticed in situations where refugees did not have the support of relatives or friends in the place of refuge, and where they were forced to spend most of the time in collective accommodation. The decision to return is surely linked to the socio-economic status attained by a refugee in refuge. Those refugees who had secured jobs, and particularly those who had acquired property, would be less ready to return, unless they were given interesting incentives, than those who lived on ever decreasing aid without the chance to establish a better life somewhere else. This is rational behaviour that the researchers themselves would have shown. It is clear, then, that the decision to return is negatively selected, not only with respect to the refugees' age but also to their socio-economic status linked to their level of education and general agility, namely their effort to enhance their conditions of life. To conclude, the decision to return would be made very much more easily by those who were elderly, uneducated, unsuccessful, inflexible, non-entrepreneurial and lacking ability. Consequently, we attempted to examine some elements of their experience in refuge and the way it affected return.

The above statements have been confirmed by our research findings. According to our respondents, 16% lived in collective accommodation in the period immediately preceding return, which, we assess, is far above the average figure for the refugee population, especially in Serbia. This would mean that a higher number of those refugees decided to return than those who were accommodated in their own or rented apartments. The research carried out among the Serb refugees in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina at the end

Figure 6:
Household members' age structure (n=357)[22]



[22] Included here are only the households where the age of all members was known.

of 2003 (Brajdic–Vukovic and Bagic, 2004b) showed that every tenth refugee was accommodated in a collective centre. According to the same survey, as many as 41% of Serb refugees in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina possessed at that time their own apartment or house, with the percentage of returnees who, immediately before return lived in their own, or a family member's, apartment or a house, being only 3% (Figure 7). Although these two figures are not directly comparable since the majority of refugees returned to Croatia before 2002 without having the time to acquire their own property, unlike those who were included in the 2003 survey, this can still be considered a clear indicator of the predominant type of returnee with respect to their property status. Even more so, since there is almost no difference, with respect to the type of accommodation they had immediately before return, among early returnees and those who returned at a later stage. In both cases, the percentage is low for those who, before return, lived in their own property (3% and 5% respectively) for returns in 1999 and after 2001. The same applies to refugees living before return in collective accommodation, with the percentages standing between 14% and 20% for various return years.

The findings showing that refugees of a lower socio-economic status would return more readily than others are supported by the fact that a very small number of returnees had a steady income during refuge (Table 2). To be precise, every fourth returnee from our sample had had a permanent income – such as a salary or pension. Only 8% were employed for a period longer than 6 months, and an additional 9% were dependant on other family members' earnings. The percentage of returnees who were employed during refuge and who returned earlier did not change considerably compared to returnees who returned later (after 2000 and 2001). If we accept that the length of stay in refuge did not substantially influence the employment factor, our findings can to a certain extent be compared with the findings of the above-mentioned survey in 2003. In short, the 8% of returnees in our sample who were employed during refuge constitute a proportionally smaller figure than those employed (36%) in the total Serb refugee population in 2003. While making such a comparison, we must bear in mind that such a low employment rate is very much connected with the returnees' demographic structure (the elderly and those of a lower educational level), which, in this respect, is characterised by negative selection in terms of the whole refugee population. The vast majority of our returnees earned their living on the black market (44%), or was assisted in kind by the authorities in the country of refuge, and/or international organisations (32%).

Figure 7:
Type of accommodation in refuge

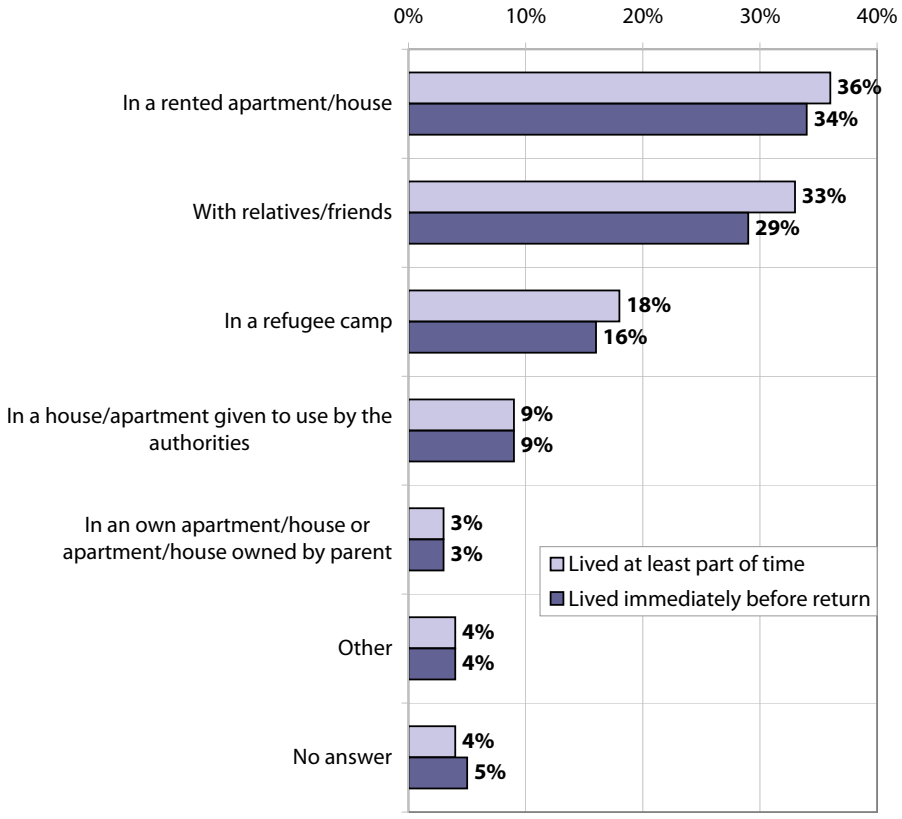


Table 2 – Source of income during refuge

	Whole sample
Sample size	*403*
Officially employed for more than 6 months	8%
Immediate family member was employed for more than 6 months	9%
Received pension	3%
Immediate family member received pension	3%
Received regular refugee cash assistance provided by the state for more than 6 months	2%
Received regular cash assistance from one of the international organisations for more than 6 months	2%
Received regular in-kind assistance from the state or one of the international organisations for more than 6 months	32%
Able to cultivate land and engage in farming activities for more than 6 months	3%
Occasionally worked on the black market or "for a wage" for more than 6 months	44%

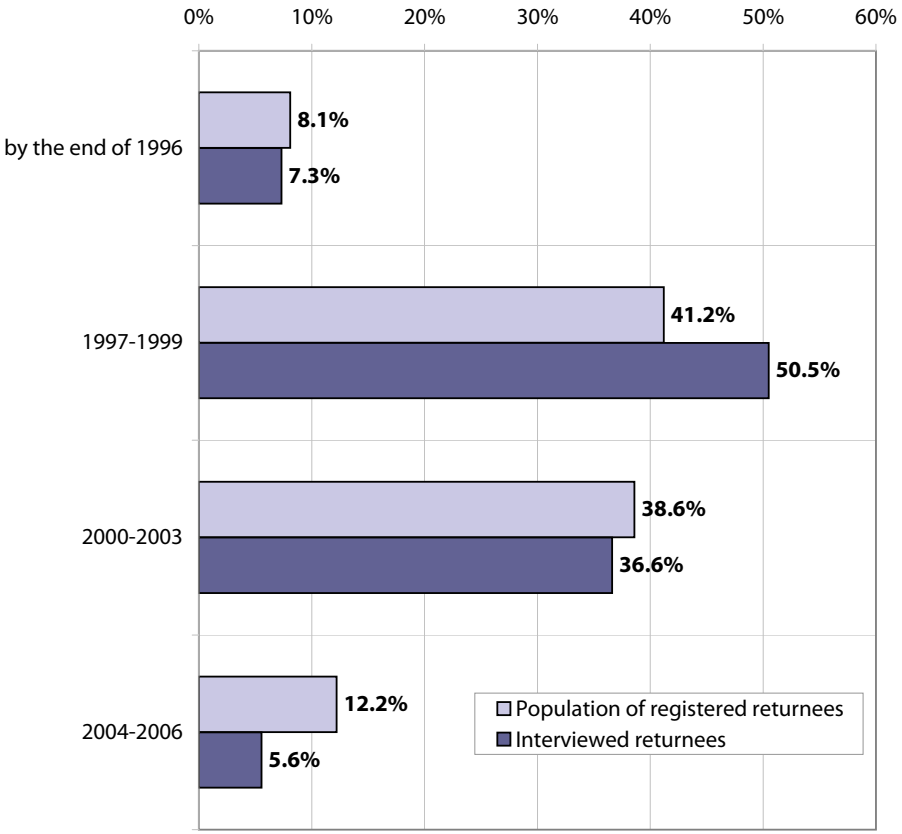
The vast majority of returnees came from Serbia, where most of the Serb refugees had found refuge (77%) and only 8% from Bosnia and Herzegovina (Figure 8), with an additional 9% from other parts of Croatia.[23] On average, returnees from our sample spent on average 4.5 years in refuge.

A more massive return of Serb refugees began in 1997. They made up 8% of all registered returnees until May 2006, namely a little fewer than 15,000 persons. One year earlier the number of registered returnees had been half this number. The largest number of returnees was recorded in 1998 – 20,000, while later the numbers decreased to 14,000 and 15,000 in 1999 and 2000, and to 10,000 in the following three years. In the last few years, the number of returnees has dropped substantially, reaching some 5,000 in 2005.

Our findings show that the frequency of permanent stay varies and corresponds with the waves of return. Taking into account the political and social circumstances of return, we divided return waves into several cycles. The first cycle relates to the period before the beginning of 1997 when political circumstances were rather un-

[23] Around 10% of returnees left Croatia as early as 1991, and almost all others (88%) during and after the 'Flash' and 'Storm' operations (1995).

Figure 8:
Registered and interviewed returnees according to time of return



favourable for return.[24] The second cycle began in 1997 and ended at the end of 1999. This period was marked by increasing pressure on President Tuđman's Government because of the slow democratisation process and the impediments raised for return. The third cycle (2000–2003) corresponds to the defeat of the HDZ Government and the process of the further democratisation of the country. It might have been expected that the political changes would significantly motivate refugee return, but this did not happen. Finally, the last return cycle overlaps with HDZ's resumption of power, this time in coalition with the Serb party (SDSS) and the support of minority MPs in Parliament, which was to open new avenues for the return of Serb refugees.

Our findings show that the second wave (1997–1999) carried the largest number of returnees who would stay permanently. Every other returnee in this wave stayed permanently, while the total number of returnees in this wave made up 40% of all registered returnees (Figure 9). Quite unexpectedly, among returnees who came in the fourth cycle there was the smallest number of those who would stay permanently, half of their share in the total returnee population (6% of 12%).[25] A question arises – why do new returnees, who returned in more favourable political and social circumstances, rarely decide to stay? Their length of stay in refuge can be a possible explanation, or the fact that earlier waves brought back returnees who were determined to stay and whom we call 'unconditional' returnees. The second explanation seems to be more plausible, but surely is not complete and would need to be further elaborated.

A remarkable number of respondents (almost 90%) cited the feeling of attachment to their place of origin as one of the reasons to decide to return (Table 3). Many acknowledged the utility of return (return and protection of property, issuance of documents and other legal matters). A considerable percentage (40%) opted for return due to the 'push' factors in the country of refuge (bad conditions of live).

[24] As already pointed out, a majority of Serb refugees left Croatia in 1995, following the police military actions undertaken by the Croatian Government in order to regain control of parts of the country where Serb rebels held sway with the assistance of Milošević's regime in Serbia and the rest of Yugoslavia. Until the end of the year, conflicts and uncertainty would continue in Bosnia and Hergegovina. The signing of the Erdut and Dayton Agreements at the end of 1995 marked the beginning of the process of normalisation in the region and between Croatia and Serbia. 1996 brought the peaceful integration of Eastern Slavonia and Baranja and the normalisation of the situation in Bosnia and Hergegovina. That year, an agreement of normalisation of relationships between Croatia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) was signed. Only then, at the end of 1996, were better conditions created for more massive return.

[25] The structural difference of registered and permanent returnees with respect to the time of return is statistically significant. $\chi 2=23.374$ df=3 $p<0.01$.

Table 3 – What made you decide to return?

	Whole sample
Sample size	*403*
My home is here, I feel I belong here	89%
Everything I possess is here	69%
To take care of legal issues and obtain documents	43%
To repossess and keep my property	41%
Poor conditions of life in exile	40%
Other family members decided to return	18%
I like spending my retirement here	15%
Better standard of living	9%
Better prospects/future here	7%
More order and a more advanced country	6%
I had no choice; I could not stay legally in the place of exile	4%
I did not have any friends and relatives in the place of exile	3%
Do not know	2%
Other	1%

4.3. Returnees' Conditions of Life

Accommodation

Return or restitution of property, namely the reconstruction of destroyed and damaged houses and the issue of the tenancy rights of former socially owned apartments, is considered to be crucial material conditions of (sustainable) refugee return. Focus has been placed on this by both Serb representatives in Croatia and the representatives of international organisations. In the coalition agreement between HDZ and SDSS, five out of six points relating to refugee return deal precisely with this issue (Agreement, 2006).

According to our survey, 88% of returnees live in the same house or apartment as they did before exile, with the remaining 12% liv-

ing, for one reason or the other, elsewhere. In the latter group, every fourth person is (was) a tenancy rights holder, constituting 3% of all returnees who stayed permanently (Table 4). A small portion (6 out of 51 of those interviewed, or 12%) is awaiting reconstruction or its completion. Generally speaking, reconstruction of houses and apartments is about to be finished. According to data provided by the line Ministry, there are still 1,700 houses to be reconstructed, of which the majority (1,500) are due to be completed in 2007. They are mainly owned by Serb returnees. Only 8 out of 51 of those interviewed (17%) claim that the reconstruction of their house was for some reason not approved, which was either confirmed by a final decision, or the second instance procedure is still in progress. In brief, around half of the returnees who currently do not live in their house or apartment have not had their housing problem resolved, for reasons which are not of their personal choice or for which they are not responsible.

Table 4 – Reasons for residing in some other property

	n	%
Total	51	100%
Reconstruction of the apartment/ house has not begun yet	4	8%
Apartment/house is being reconstructed	2	4%
Held tenancy rights	12	24%
Not in my ownership; do not hold tenancy rights	6	12%
Other	6	12%
Claim for reconstruction was denied	3	6%
Claim for reconstruction in process of appeal	5	10%
Claim has not been submitted	1	2%
Property has been sold/exchanged	2	4%
Moved because of marriage or job	7	14%
Received alternative property	3	6%

Unfortunately, no relevant data have been collected to see to what extent the housing problem affected the returnees who did not remain in Croatia after having registered as returnees. However, the fact that the number of those who do not live in the same house or apartment as before the war is almost the same in different years of return, which suggests that this problem has not crucially affected the decision to migrate. Otherwise it could have been expected that earlier returnees would have migrated more often than those returning later, which has not been confirmed by our findings.

Returnees who (still) do not live in the same house or apartment as before the war are either accommodated in another place owned by themselves or by a family member (11 out of 27 interviewed or 40%), or are accommodated with relatives or friends (40%).

Upon return, every fifth returnee found his or her house completely destroyed. Around 60% of returnees' houses had various levels of damage (Figure 9). 18% of houses or apartments had been, against the owner's will, occupied by other persons, who were later generally relocated. Some of the damaged houses were inhabitable and 14% of the housing units were not damaged at all. The great majority of returnees had, therefore, to request partial or complete reconstruction, or had to wait for the temporary users to vacate their property.

It is encouraging that 43% of the interviewed returnees claim they are to a greater or lesser extent satisfied with their accommodation, and an additional 29% are not explicitly dissatisfied (Figure 10). Those who are dissatisfied, mainly those who have not yet repossessed their house or apartment, make up less than one third (28%). The average rating of the current accommodation status among those who live in the same housing unit as before the war is 3.2, and among those who do not, 2.5, which is a considerable statistical difference.[26] Satisfaction with current conditions of life is not significantly linked to any return factor but to the household's monthly income. Namely, household members who had no income during the month preceding the interview or had a total income under 1,000 kn were significantly less satisfied with their conditions of life than those whose monthly income exceeded 3,000 kn.[27] Therefore, the level of satisfaction with current housing conditions is not affected by the returnees' demographic features (gender, age), size of settlement, or time of return, but by their financial situation. It was only those who had their own means to satisfactorily furnish their houses who were able to secure acceptable living standards. Here, returnees lack international and domestic assistance.

[26] $t=3.306$; $df=55$; $p<0.01$.

[27] $F=2.936$; $df=5$; $p<0.05$.

Figure 9:
Condition and status of property at the time of return

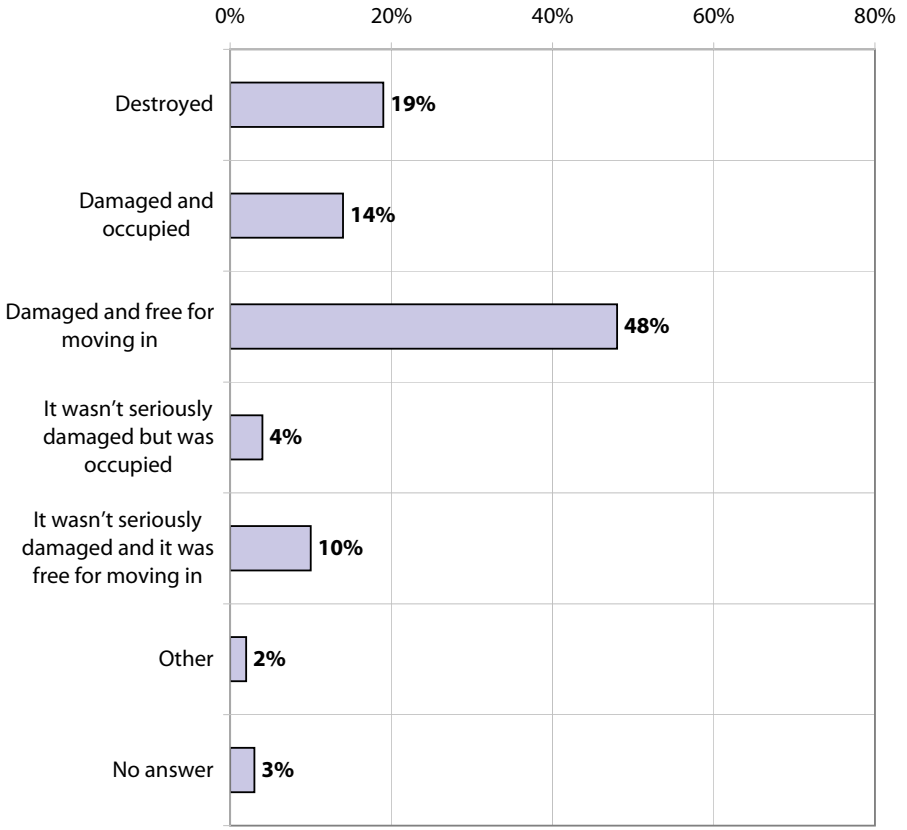
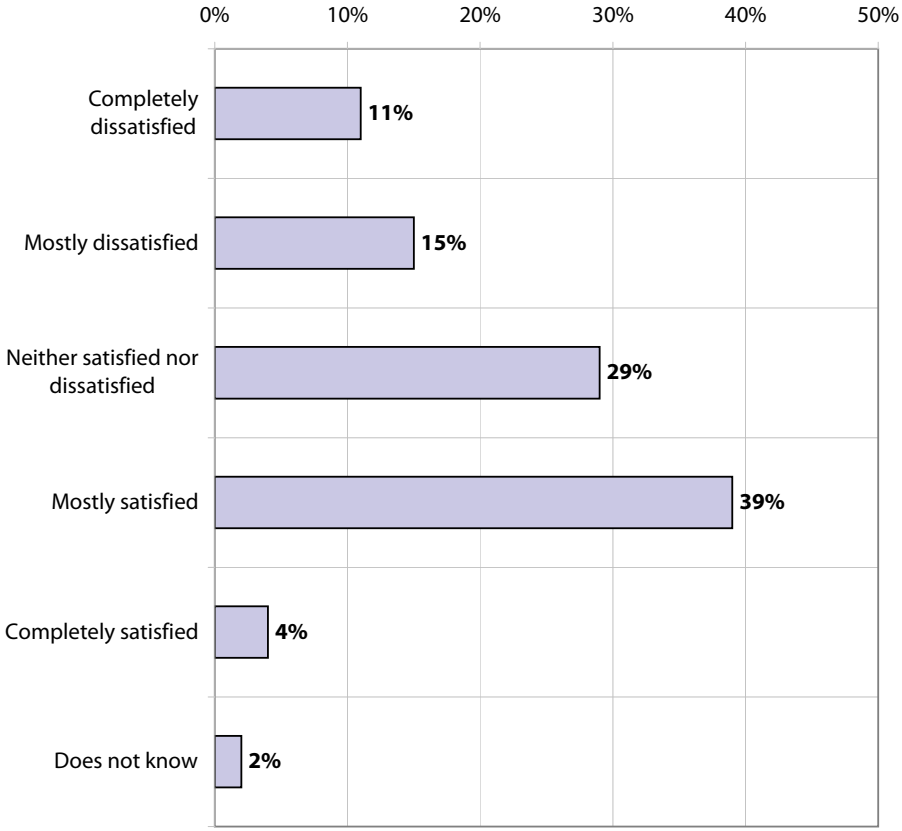


Figure 10:
Level of satisfaction with current living conditions



It should be borne in mind that 4% or 2,000 persons do not have electricity in their housing (Table 5) and are consequently unable to use important household appliances and gadgets. A significantly larger portion of returnees (28%) live without running water. It should be mentioned that almost two thirds of those households did not have running water before the war either, but the remaining third had to (temporarily) accustom themselves to living in deteriorated conditions.

Table 5 – Availability of infrastructure

	Whole sample
Sample size	*403*
Electricity	96%
Running drinking water	72%
Fixed telephone line	51%
Sewage system	37%

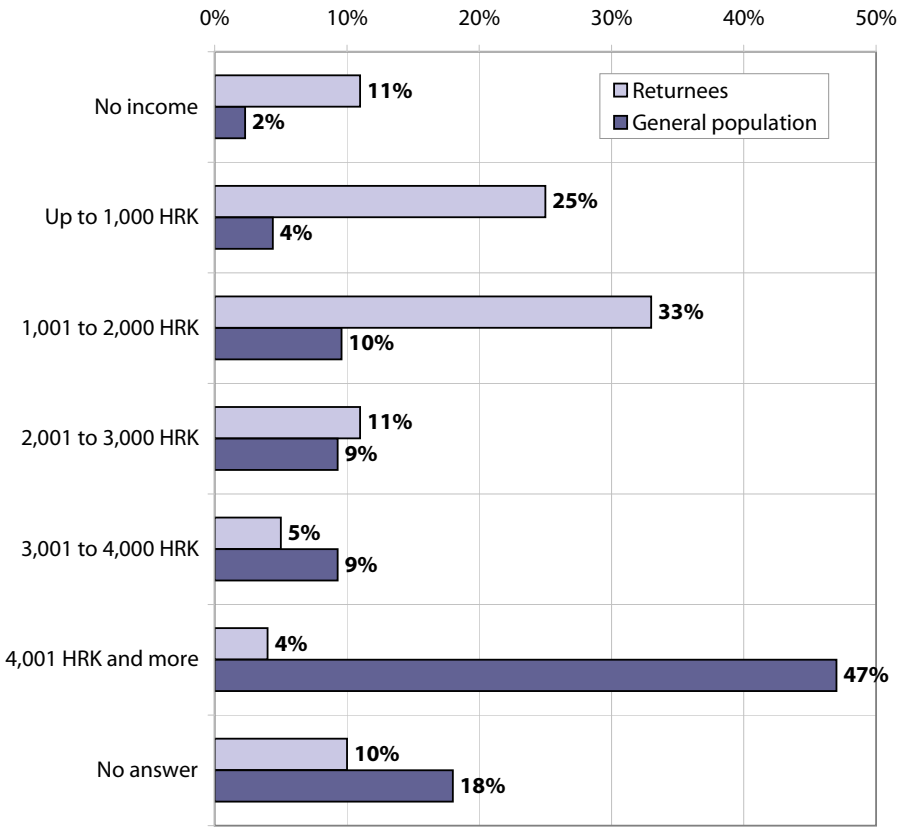
Further to this, every second returnee household (52%) does not have a fixed phone line. Of those, 12% had one before the war. In the meantime, the number of households in Croatia with a fixed phone line has grown to 90% but, of course, in remote settlements elderly household members in the general population fall far behind this figure.

As the majority of returnees live in rural settlements, a high percentage of households (two thirds) do not have a sewage system, but this does not differ from the situation before the war. A poor infrastructure does not equally affect all returnees. Those living in the smallest villages are in the worst position. Actually, all those who are without electricity live in settlements with fewer than 500 inhabitants, just as do the majority of those without running water and fixed phone lines. It should be stressed that their neighbours who are Croats have similar living standards.

Socio-economic conditions

The research results show that the socio-economic conditions, after the repossession of property, are the key elements of sustainable return. According to our respondents, 11% of returnee household members did not have financial income, excluding welfare assistance, in the month preceding the research (Figure 11). In comparison, according to the Puls research (2006), the related percentage

Figure 11:
Total household income in the month preceding the interview



for the overall Croatian population is only 2%. The question is, how do people survive without a regular income? In our sample, every fourth such household is a recipient of welfare assistance and another quarter survive on cultivating their land. The rest (which might also include those mentioned above) must be surviving by receiving support from children or relatives who are in refuge or who are migrants.

However, not even the households with some income are to be envied. The income of every fourth returnee household does not exceed 1,000 kuna, while the corresponding share of those in the entire population is around 5%.[28] The largest relative number of returnee households, every third, has a monthly income in an amount between 1,000 and 2,000 kuna (which is around three times more than the percentage of those in the entire population of Croatia). Only about 11% of returnees have an income over 3,000 kuna (while the corresponding percentage in the overall population is five times larger). Larger households are in a somewhat better position, while small households and particularly one-person households face a difficult financial situation. 72% of returnee households receive regular monthly income, either pensions or salaries from officially registered employment, while the rest live on farming, the black market, social welfare, and other sources.

Such an income structure is to a large extent connected to age, educational level and other unfavourable features of the returnee population. Almost every fourth returnee (46%) is a pensioner or a recipient of a family pension. Every third respondent (31%) is unemployed but one third of them are not registered at the unemployment bureau.[29] The high unemployment rate among returnees is illustrated by the fact that as many as 40% of those who are of working age are officially unemployed. The unemployment rate of returnees is around 68% which is two to three times higher than the average unemployment rate in the counties and municipalities

[28] This comparison is not entirely methodologically correct since the entire population in Croatia is compared to a negatively (according to age structure) selected returnee population. It would be more accurate to compare the returnee population with a non-returnee population of similar characteristics. However, such data are not available. Consequently, this comparison should only be taken as an illustration. The same applies to our other comparisons with the general population.

[29] The respondents were offered a form with answers related to their working status. Later on, all those who had not retired or were not employed were asked whether they were registered with the Unemployment Bureau. All those who are registered with the Bureau are considered as officially unemployed, regardless of the previous answer; those who stated they were unemployed but were not registered with the Bureau are considered as unofficially unemployed.

in which the returnees live.[30] However, this comparison again has to be taken with caution due to the returnees' negative selection, as their population is significantly different from any other population. It cannot be expected, at least not in the near future, for there to be an increase in employment of returnees in state bodies, since this would only increase competition and tensions with the 'majority' population and in the long run lead to new conflicts or unsustainability of return. There is already a surplus, rather than a shortage, of employees in state bodies. This problem will be difficult to resolve without new investment cycles in the undeveloped areas of return to open up new employment opportunities and entrepreneurial options, primarily for returnees, but also for the 'majority' population, and consequently to facilitate the reintegration process.

The returnees' unemployment structure is linked to their age. Every other unemployed returnee is older than 45. The same percentage either did not complete or has completed only elementary schooling. The majority of unemployed returnees, but also those who are employed, are qualified workers who, before the war, worked in factories which in the meantime went bankrupt. Their competitiveness on the labour market is low, particularly in the situation in which they find themselves, in remote villages and in generally underdeveloped counties (e.g. Lika–Senj County). Only 8% of returnees are employed either as self-employed persons or by employers with fixed-term or indefinite contracts. If we count all household members, there would be 16% of households with one household member employed, with the rest relying on other sources, such as pensions, informal income or farming. Such a low employment rate is even more aggravated by the fact that half of the employees have fixed-term contracts. Only a few respondents (fewer than 1%) admitted that they work on the 'black market', which is understandable since they would lose unemployment benefits should this be discovered. The surprisingly low percentage of returnees (2%) who stated they lived off farming might have been due to the fact that the remainder did not consider that they had permanent financial income from selling farm produce.

As the majority of returnees live in small rural settlements, their standard and quality of life are normally linked to agriculture. A great many returnee assistance projects are directed towards agriculture. Thus, the farmers were provided with various agricultural tools and even machinery, as well as consultants' support for know-how and technology transfer. Such an approach could imme-

[30] The unemployment rate is determined as the share of the unemployed registered with the Unemployment Bureau in the total number of active returnees. Active returnees are persons who are officially employed or officially unemployed.

diately be justified by taking a look at these research results. More than 70% of returnees or their family members possess arable land. Moreover, this land includes relatively large plots by Croatian standards, which would even allow production for the market. Almost one third (30%) of returnee households own between 2 to 3 hectares and every fifth between 4 and 5 hectares of arable land. With an average of 3 hectares of arable land, refugee households exceed the Croatian average (2 hectares) (Agriculture Census, 2003).

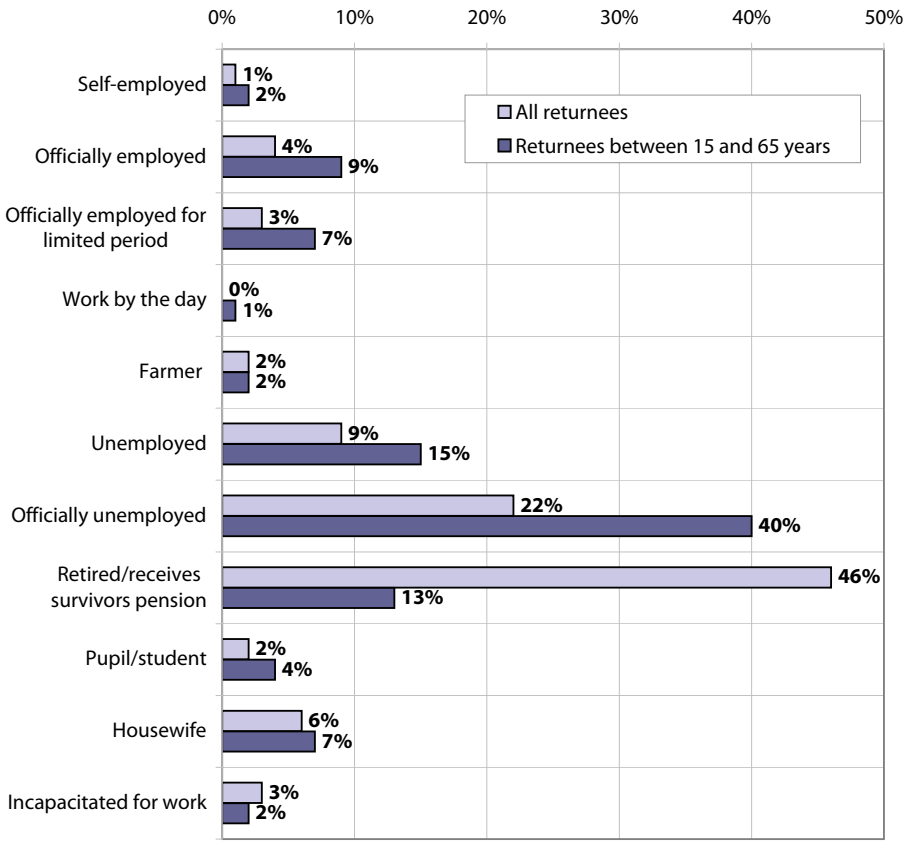
The problem of illegal use of land has been almost entirely resolved (as has the illegal occupation of houses). Only 1% of respondents claim they cannot use any piece of their land because it is being occupied by someone else against their will. Another 4% have had parts of their land illegally taken. It is important to mention that a large portion of returnees' land has been cleared of mines. Only every twentieth respondent claims that a part or all of his land is mined. To conclude, around 93% of returnees possess arable land which can be used without hindrance. However, surprisingly, only a little over one third (37% or every fourth of all returnees) state they cultivate it. How can this be explained?

With respect to the structure of returnees' households, an analysis of the usage of arable land shows considerable variations. The use of arable land by one-person households and generally smaller households, which in the majority of cases mean 'old' households, is to a statistically significant extent rarer than in the case of larger ('younger') households.[31] In concrete terms, more than 60% of households with 4 or more members farm a major part of their arable land, while in the case of one-person households the proportion is only 9%, and around 30% in two-person households. Thus, it is the very age and household structure of the returnee population that prevents the more serious agricultural engagement and exploitation of this important resource.

However, even in cases where returnees use major parts of their arable land they most often produce for their own consumption and not for the market. Only every fourth such household had a certain financial income from selling farm produce in the month preceding the survey (in this case, September 2006). Other returnees seem to farm only a portion of their land in order to secure basic production for their own consumption. According to our findings, 11% of returnees who own arable land (or 7% of the total returnee body) make financial income from selling agricultural produce, and only 2% are engaged exclusively in farming and consider themselves farmers (Figure 12). For agriculture to play a more important role in

[31] $\chi 2=41.096$ df=4 $p<0.01$.

Figure 12:
Returnees' employment structure



the sustainability of return, it would be necessary to improve the returnees' age structure and also to find new incentives in this economic branch, especially in view of Croatia's forthcoming accession to the EU and the bleak prospects for farmers.

With respect to the above findings, it is not surprising that only 16% of returnees, owners of arable land, would like to be farmers in the future. This percentage would be a little higher if we consider only returnees under 60 years of age, particularly those who already farm a major part of their land. An even smaller percentage (2%) would like their children to become farmers in the future. The great majority of returnees, although mainly living in small rural settlements, are not, and will not be in the future, oriented towards agriculture, which means that other employment options are to be exploited (if this trend does not change). Interesting enough, one in three of our respondents (30%) see the key to their improved life in the economic growth of Croatia as a whole.

Documents and other Rights

Acquiring Croatian documents was one of the first and most important problems faced by a number of returnees at the beginning of their more massive return. It seems that, according to our respondents, this has been resolved. Almost all of them have Croatian citizenship and an identification card, and a great number of them possess a passport (the others probably did not want to have one issued) (Picture 14). A considerable percentage (14%) does not have a health insurance card because they have not entered into the health insurance system (employment, pension, etc.). Other more sophisticated forms of health insurance exist, but to access them the returnees (especially those who are elderly and less educated) would need legal aid.

Subjective evaluation of conditions of life

So far, we have shown various objective indicators of returnees' living conditions (socio-economic status). However, the satisfaction of an individual and, in this case, the related sustainability of return, is the result of the returnee's subjective perception of his or her conditions of life. It is certainly always a relative category based on a comparison with the previous status, other referent groups, and future aspirations. In the case of returnees, there are three probable basic comparison frames: the conditions of life in exile, the conditions of life before the war, and the conditions of life of Croatian neighbours.

Figure 13:
Do you farm a major part of your land?
– Only returnees who own arable land which is available to be used (n=267)

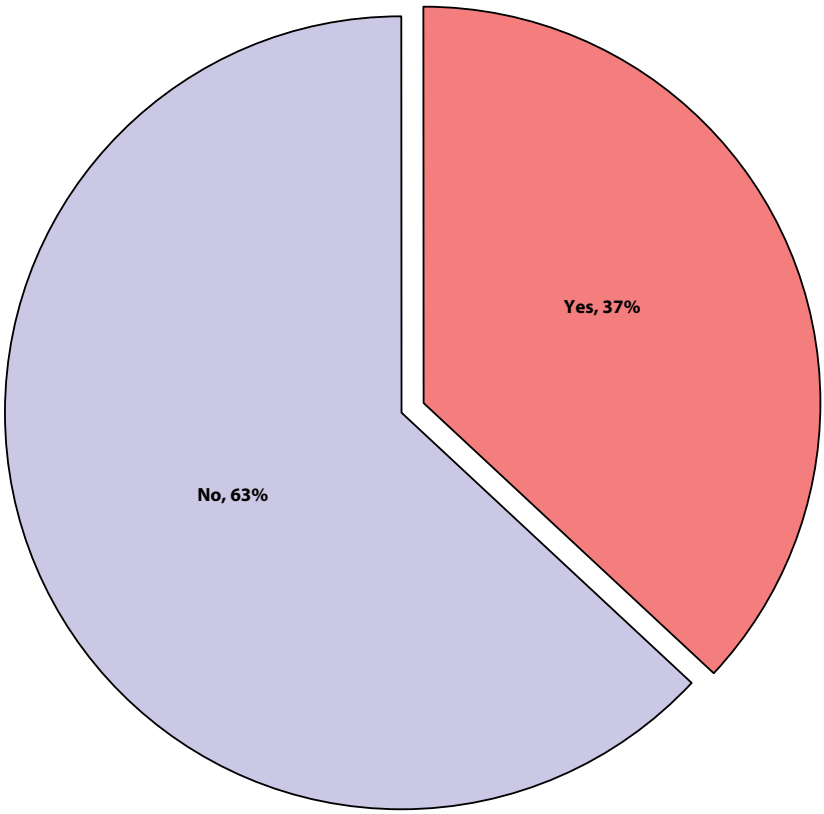
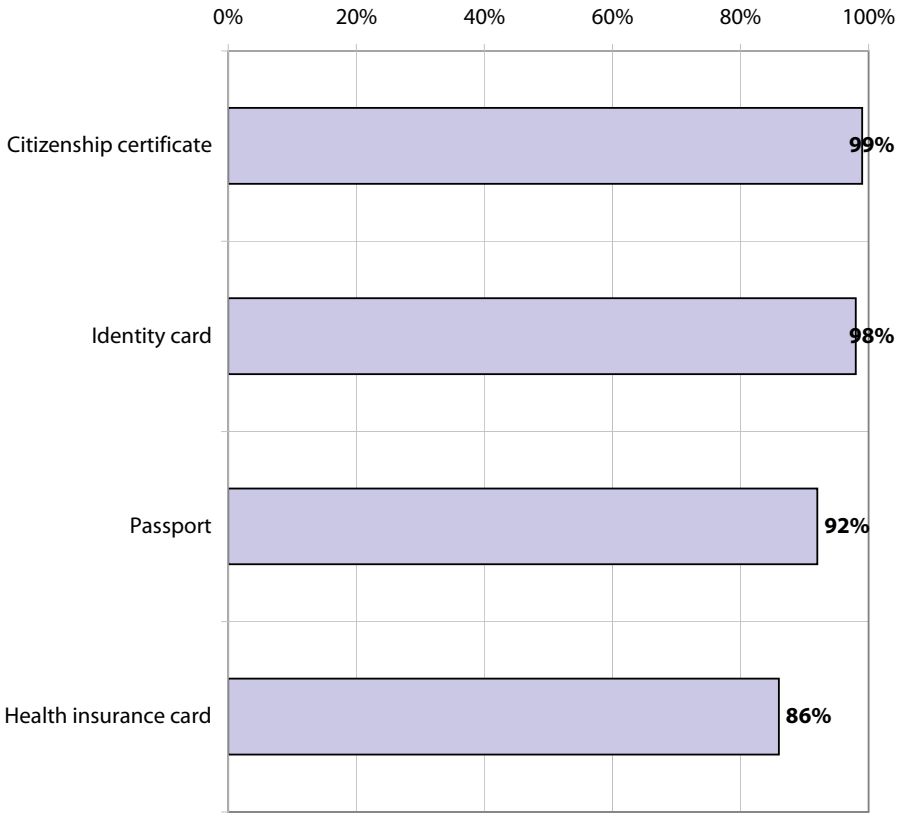


Figure 14:
Possession of Croatian documents



The first comparison frame refers to the life in refuge, again, not only as an objective fact, but viewed subjectively (the way people accepted it and the way they see it from the perspective of a returnee). It is reasonable to expect that exile is a difficult and traumatic experience for the great majority of people, particularly in the beginning. However, expectations regarding conditions of life are rather low, since exile is generally considered a haven, or at least a temporary necessity, both in cases where people are expelled by force, as a result of political moves, or where they have made a voluntary decision to leave, not being able to accept the political and social changes in their country of origin. Moreover, some (the younger, enterprising, politically active ones) eventually manage to integrate in the new community (especially if this is the native country of their ethnic body), while a proportion even capitalise on their exile. This, at least partially, can explain the fact that only half of the exiled Serbs opted for return to Croatia.

Table 6 – Comparison of current conditions of life with …

	Much worse	Some-what worse	Roughly equal	Some-what better	Much better	Do not know
your life in the country in which you spent the longest period of time as a refugee	4%	4%	13%	34%	40%	4%
your life before the war	58%	13%	7%	4%	13%	5%
life of the neighbouring Croats	20%	12%	39%	3%	7%	18%

As expected, for a majority of returnees to Croatia who have permanently stayed, conditions of life here are better that those in refuge. At least this is how they now assess their situation, which is a known psychological need (Table 6). As many as 40% of respondents assess their current conditions of life as significantly better and every third view them as better, with only 8% assessing them as worse. A significant statistical difference is seen with respect to gender, with women being relatively more satisfied than men (the

average rating by women is 4.2, and by men 39).[32] On the one hand, this can be due to the fact that it is more difficult for women to organise life in refuge, and to their greater attachment to 'home', and on the other hand, it can be due to their disinterest in the political motives of flight.

A statistically significant difference was found with respect to the returnees' level of education. There was a clear tendency in better educated refugees to be more critical towards their current situation than those with a lower level of education.[33] The returnees' age, on the other hand, did not show any statistically significant difference in assessing life as a returnee and as a refugee, although we had expected that elderly returnees who found more difficulties in becoming used to life in refuge would tend to assess their current conditions of life more highly than the younger ones.

The largest relative differences in the assessment of the current conditions of life are linked to the country/region of refuge (i.e. indirectly with the quality of life there). Returnees who were in exile outside the region (of former Yugoslavia), in a Western European country, are the least satisfied. It is not surprising then that their number in the sample is relatively low.[34] They all assess their situation in exile as better than their current situation. This is in accordance with some other recent studies (Harvey, 2006; Black and Gent, 2006) which show that the push factors in the country of refuge are important in the process of making a decision on return. To conclude, the harder the life in exile, the stronger the inclination to return (all other conditions being equal). Are we then to jump to the conclusion that refugees should be made to have a hard time in order to force them to return? This undoubtedly could be in the interest of the receiving governments, but is it (always), in the short or long term, in the interest of the refugees themselves?

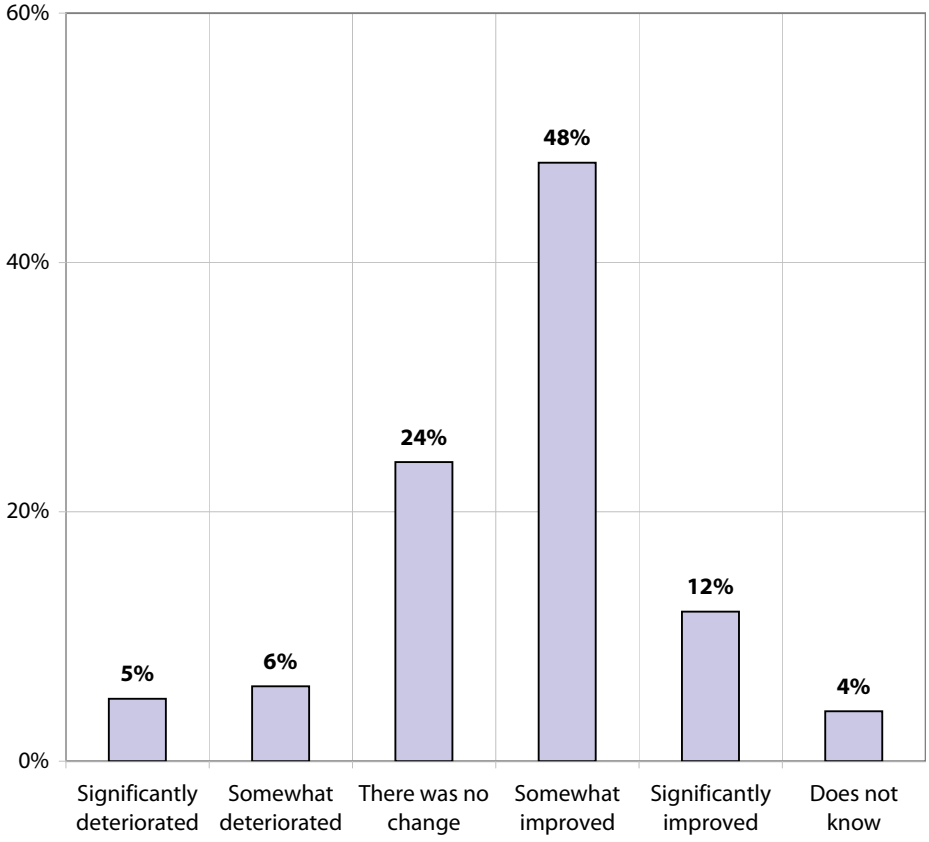
To sum up, for a large majority of our respondents, in subjective terms, return means a improved quality of life compared to life in exile, though according to some objective criteria a great many of them live on the verge of poverty and below the average in Croatia as a whole. A smaller number of returnees are obviously not satisfied with their current life and this is where new migration could be expected. The sustainability of return will depend on the enlargement of the first and reduction of the latter category.

[32] $t=-2.845$; $df=369$; $p<0.01$.

[33] $F= 3.284$; $df=3$; $p<0.05$.

[34] $F=5.336$; $df=7$; $p<0.01$.

Figure 15 – Have your conditions of life improved or worsened from the time of return up to the present day?



We have already stated that every subjective assessment is relative. That is why it might be expected that a relatively high mark given to the current way of life when compared to life in exile would not necessarily imply absolute satisfaction with the existing situation. As soon as the referent frame changes, the subjective picture changes too. Thus, a significant number of returnees assess their current living conditions as much worse than that before the war. Only 17% of respondents think the opposite. The objective life quality indicators of the returnees' life mentioned above are evidence that this opinion is not only due to nostalgia for the better times of the past (also a known psychological rationalisation). The respondents do not refer only to the pre-war material status, but also to the general social and political climate, where they were equal, and some even rather privileged, members of society. We maintain that in this subjective comparison, apart from some objective factors (such as employment and income), the social exclusion of returnees plays a prominent role. It is of interest that in this assessment respondents do not statistically differ in respect of their other evaluated features. In order to understand the subjective assessment of the returnees' quality of life, the comparison they make with the Croats who are their neighbours is of particular importance. This aspect is an indicator of a sense of relative deprivation and discrimination, which can strongly influence the overall feeling of dissatisfaction. It is seen, somewhat unexpectedly, that the relative majority of respondents (40%) find no difference in each others' life, and every tenth assesses his or her situation better than that of the Croatian neighbours. However, every third said he was worse off, while the remaining 18% were not able to assess and compare their conditions of life with those of their Croatian neighbours, or tried to avoid answering for the sake of conformism. All in all, these findings are not discouraging for sustainable return, at least for the majority of returnees. (From the point of view of sustainable return, it would be interesting to assess the views, on these issues, of Croats from those regions, many of whom were, before the Serbs, and on account of Serb forces, forced to flee and find refuge elsewhere.).

As in the previous case, none of the refugees' characteristics (such as gender, age, level of education, financial status, size of settlement, etc.) explains the variations in the assessment of the quality of life compared to the life of Croats.

Apart from evaluating the current conditions of life compared with life in refuge, the relationship with neighbours and the situation before the war, an important indicator of return sustainability, in our opinion, is the feeling of a relative improvement or deterioration in conditions of life in the course of the years following return.

A significant majority of respondents (60%) assess that their life has improved with time, of whom a smaller share (12%) feel considerable positive changes and the remainder (48%) moderate ones (Figure 15). The main cause of improvement for the majority (60%) is the increase in income, whether in the form of a pension or from employment or farming (Table 7). Another important element in the improved conditions of life is the repossession and reconstruction of houses. In line with this is the assessment that the returnees who live in their houses or apartments perceive to a statistically significant extent positive changes more often than those who have not yet resolved their housing problem.[35] However, every tenth (11%) returnee still assesses his or her living conditions as worsening over time. Among them, there is an equal share of those who blame personal problems (the death or illness of a household member) and financial troubles (income) (Table 8).

Table 7 – In which way have your conditions of life improved?

n	*245*
I have my own pension / we have pension/have income	38%
Employment / getting a job	12%
We do some farming and have income from farming	9%
Have livestock / have farm animals	5%
Better economic situation	3%
Obtaining welfare assistance / achieving social rights	3%
House reconstructed / house under reconstruction	30%
We live in our own house / we live on our own farm	27%
Better housing conditions	4%
Have electricity	3%
Better co-existence / better inter-ethnic relations	3%
Safety / freedom	3%
Have health care protection / have health insurance	2%
Peaceful (decent) life	2%
Return of neighbours	1%
Other	6%
No answer	6%

[35] $t=2.230$; $df=385$;$p<0.05$.

Table 8 – In which way have your conditions of life worsened?

n	*44*
Illness / Health issues	32%
Unemployment / no jobs	14%
Poor living conditions / poor social situation	14%
Bad financial situation	11%
Death of a close family member	7%
Small income	7%
Insufficient aid, donations	7%
No people / loneliness / dispersed family	7%
Problems with inter-ethnic relations	5%
No electricity, running water	5%
Health care - other responses (no health insurance)	5%
Political problems (division along party lines)	2%
Other	5%
No answer	14%

When asked to name the three greatest problems that they face, more than 70% of respondents singled out their material-financial situation (Table 9). Unemployment is one of the biggest problems for 29% of returnees, and insufficient income for 22%. Another group of hardships includes quality of housing, including availability of infrastructure. The most common complaint is the unsatisfactory reconstruction of apartments or houses. Then come problems of a personal nature, such as illness, invalidity and old age. This group of problems was singled out by every third respondent, just like the lack of infrastructure. Every fourth returnee is troubled by isolation and the distance of his or her settlement from bigger towns which entails difficulty in reaching important services (public institutions, schools, hospitals). The objectivity of this finding is verified by the fact that almost one third (30%) of the respondents do not have a doctor's surgery or elementary school within a distance of 10 kilometres from their house (Table 10). Here it should be added that more than 60% of respondents live in settlements with a bus line which only once or twice per day connects them to the centre of town or municipality. The sense of loneliness expressed by 16% of

returnees is surely the result of the poor level of transportation infrastructure and social isolation, primarily due to the small number of returnees, particularly youngsters, in the area.

Table 9 – The three greatest problems that a returnee personally faces

	Whole sample
n	*403*
Unemployment	29%
Financial situation (low salary, low pension)	22%
I don't have any income / I don't receive a pension	7%
Problems in agriculture (not enough farming machinery, etc)	7%
Low standard of living / Poverty	5%
Social insecurity	1%
Need for better jobs	1%
No prospects for the future	1%
Reconstruction (inadequate, insufficient, I am not entitled to it)	19%
Problems with housing (no apartment, poor housing)	6%
No (drinking) water	5%
Poor roads / lanes	5%
No electricity / weak voltage	2%
No telephone	1%
Illness / disability	17%
Old age	11%
Separated families	4%
A close family member is ill or has died	2%
Loneliness	7%

(continue next page)

	Whole sample
A small number of inhabitants in the location	6%
Problems of young people (no young people, no prospects for young people)	3%
No (public) transportation	8%
Health care institutions are far away (hospitals, health care)	6%
The place is far away from the town and other centres	4%
Education (schools are far away, high costs of education…)	3%
Shops are far away	3%
Health care protection issues (insurance, high costs…)	2%
Problems with the administrative apparatus	2%
Problems with proving employment records	2%
Problems related to documents (citizenship, diplomas, ID card)	2%
No support for returnees	1%
Inter-ethnic problems / problems with neighbours	4%
Problems with wild boars	2%
There are no problems	2%
Other	10%
No answer	9%

Table 10 – Distance of public institutions

	0 – 5 km	6 – 10 km	11 – 15 km	16 – 30 km	Don't know
Health centre or hospital	34%	22%	17%	19%	7%
Elementary school	36%	24%	14%	16%	10%
Secondary school	14%	9%	15%	37%	24%

If we put the problems of Serb returnees on a collective level, we obtain a similar structure, although with a different frequency of related responses. The dominant problems, similar to those on a personal level, are material-financial conditions, but with a considerably higher percentage of responses which single out unemployment (close to 70%) (Table 11). It should be stressed that an almost equal percentage of the general population in Croatia reports unemployment as the biggest problem in Croatia, although this problem is objectively significantly smaller. Unemployment is constantly perceived as the biggest social problem, which may have influenced both groups of respondents. A large number of respondents single out the reconstruction of property and infrastructure as a problem on the collective level.

The largest difference in the frequency of responses on the personal and collective level is found in the question of acceptance and discrimination. While almost nobody utters any personal feeling of being afraid, unaccepted or discriminated against, every fourth respondent maintains that this happens to fellow returnees. We all more or less tend to conform socially and try to avoid personal confrontation with others, and this is even more understandable with returnees. We can thus assume that some at least project their own personal fears and negative experiences during social contacts to a collective level. Another explanation can come from the difference between personal experience and the collectively constructed image of reality. If this explanation is to a certain extent correct, it would mean that the majority of returnees do not personally face rejection or discrimination by the Croats, but at the collective level there is a sense of a threat created by various 'rumours'. The truth probably lies somewhere between these two proposed explanations.

Table 11 – The three greatest problems faced by the returnee population in Croatia

	Whole sample
N	403
Unemployment	61%
Unemployment of young people	6%
Poor economic situation	6%
Poverty / Extreme poverty	5%
Low standard of living	3%
Lack of farm machinery	3%
No prospects for young people	2%
Agriculture	1%
Lack of prospects	1%
Inability to use credit cards	1%
Reconstruction (slow, non-objective, uncompleted)	23%
Unresolved housing issue	9%
Restitution of property	7%
Poor infrastructure	4%
Traffic isolation	4%
Inability to pursue education	3%
Secondary schools (very far away, no secondary schools)	2%
Health care	1%
Returnees without support and aid	5%
Safety	5%
Discrimination	5%
Co-existence / non-acceptance by Croats	3%
Rights are not respected / human rights	3%

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(continuation)

	Whole sample
Negative perception of returnees	1%
Integration / adjustment	1%
Non-recognition of employment records 1991–1995	2%
Laws on minority rights are not enacted	2%
Bureaucratic obstacles to return and exercising rights	1%
No participation in government, self-government	1%
Politics	1%
Scarce return of young people	4%
Isolation of the location	2%
Low population density	2%
Large number of elderly people / problems of the elderly	1%
People have settled in the place to which they fled	1%
There are no problems	1%
Other	2%
No answer	21%

A little more than every third respondent (35%) states that Croatian politicians in Zagreb can best assist the process of return, and every fourth (26%) says that this role belongs to international organisations (Table 12). A surprisingly small number of respondents believe that local politicians can efficiently improve return. Regrettably, we have not investigated further – is this opinion the result of experience or ignorance about their work?

Returnees differ when assessing the facts which would enhance the process of refugee return. Every third respondent states that there would be no efficient return without the engagement of international organisations which should either put pressure on the Croatian authorities or give direct financial aid (Table 13). A little fewer than that, (30%), maintain that the key factor for return lies in

Croatian economic growth. Finally, a relatively small number think that successful return depends primarily on better rights for Serbs in Croatia.

Table 12 – Who can best assist the process of Serb refugees' return to Croatia?

	Whole sample
n	*403*
Croatian politicians in Zagreb	35%
International organisations	26%
We ourselves	11%
Serbian politicians in Croatia	4%
Someone else	3%
Local Croatian politicians	3%
Croats	2%
Serbian politicians in Serbia	1%
Do not know / Refuse to answer	16%

Table 13 – What can best assist the process of Serb refugees' return to Croatia?

	Whole sample
N	403
Better economic situation in Croatia	29%
Stronger pressure by the international community on Croatia	18%
Larger financial assistance from international organisations	14%
More rights for Serbs in Croatia	10%
Better political cooperation between Croatia, Serbia and B&H	7%
Creation of conditions for simultaneous and safe return for all	4%
Croatia' s accession to the EU	2%
Other	1%
Do not know / Refuse to answer	15%

Feeling of Safety and Tolerance

In our opinion, the sustainability of minority return in the long term depends on the acceptance of the returnees by the majority ethnic community, namely on inter-ethnic tolerance and respect of equality. The sense of (physical) security is normally taken not only as a basic indicator of the subjective feeling of integration, but as an indicator of the sustainability of return in general. According to the statements by every other respondent, Serb returnees to Croatia can feel rather or absolutely safe in Croatia. Roughly every third (32%) still has some concerns, while every tenth (11%) explicitly states he or she is not safe. It is publicly known that there have been several serious incidents in which the safety of Serb returnees has been threatened, and that symbolic damage has been inflicted on religious facilities, and so on, but fortunately less drastically than some of the xenophobic incidents, including terrorist attacks against foreigners, in some Western European countries where migrants live. Still, in situations where mistrust prevails, this is enough to create an atmosphere of insecurity, which is probably what the instigators and perpetrators of these incidents desired.

Roughly half of the respondents, mainly those who do feel safe, have a feeling of being accepted, which is far beyond what was expected, while only every tenth (9%) feels the reverse. There is a consequent high correlation (0.614) between the feeling of acceptance and safety. Some respondents (29%) felt as though they were not accepted by Bosnian Croat settlers more than by others. This might be due to the fact that the Bosnian settlers (expelled from their property, mainly in Bosnia and Herzegovina) had been invited to take the Serb houses and properties, which, upon their return, had to be given back.

It is interesting that the respondents from smaller settlements (up to 500 inhabitants) feel on average safer than others, and considerably more often maintain that the relationship between the Serbs and Croats in their location is the same as before the war. They also perceive fewer differences in the attitudes towards the Serbs held by Croat settlers and domicile Croats.[36] This is probably due to the less significant changes in the post-war population structure and the much closer neighbourly relations that increase the sense of safety and, to a certain extent, explain the larger number of permanent returns in those settlements. Furthermore, here statistically significant difference was found with the respondents in Lika/Banovina and Dalmatia. The latter group of respondents feel safer and accepted by the Croats and also perceive less change in

[36] $F=5.800$; $df=3$; $p<0.01$; $F=9.197$; $df=3$; $p<0.01$; $F=4.754$; $df=3$; $p<0.01$.

the post-war interpersonal relationships.[37] Finally, women feel safer than men,[38] while the difference based on age is not statistically relevant, though we could have expected this (that younger persons would feel less safe). Here, we have to bear in mind that roughly one third (30%) of respondents admitted that they are rarely in touch with Croats.

The findings proving that a great majority of returnees feel they can freely state their ethnic belonging and freely exercise their religion are encouraging. A somewhat less positive situation concerns the usage of the Serbian language.[39] Every fourth respondent has the feeling of being looked at 'with surprise' when they speak their language in public. Women have the feeling of greater freedom in stating their ethnic belonging than men,[40] while no statistically significant difference was recorded in the case of expressing religious identity and the usage of the Serbian language.

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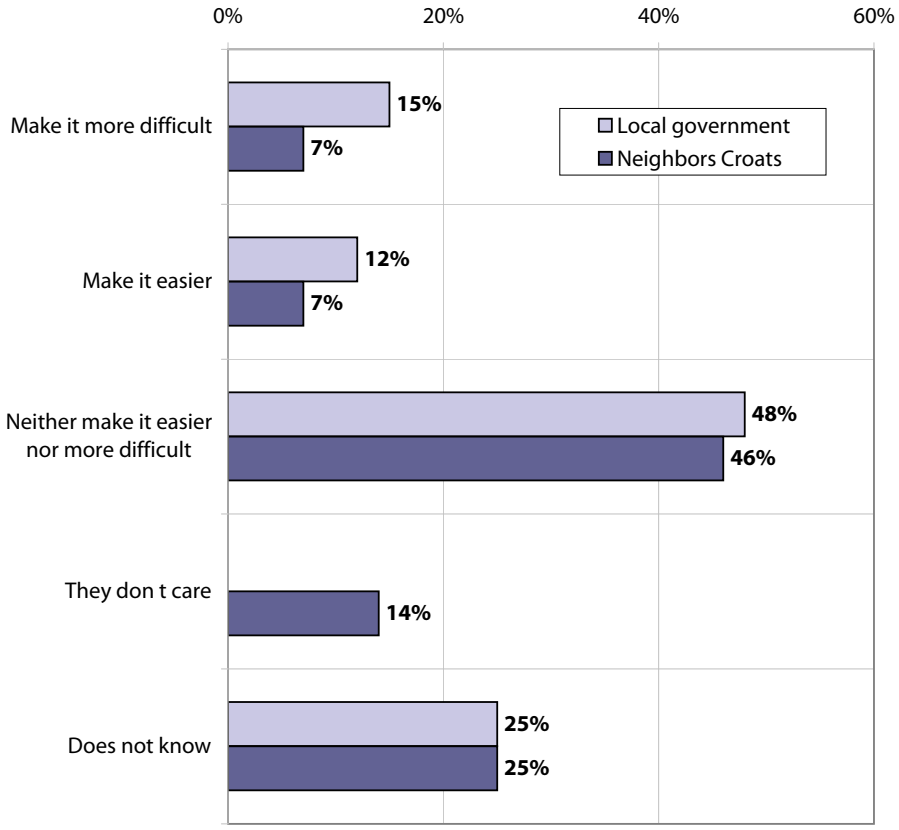
[37] t=-3.236; df=317; p<0.01; t= -5.682; df=308; p<0.01; t= -5.204; df=287; p<0.01.

[38] t=-2.639; df=382; p<0.05.

[39] Here we should draw attention to the complexity of the issue of the Serbian language in Croatia. Serbs have traditionally spoken the same language as the Croats, which was defined in the Croatian Constitution (Art.138) of the year 1974 as follows: ' In the Socialist Republic of Croatia in public use is the Croatian standard language – a standard form of the language of Croats and Serbs in Croatia, which is called the Croatian or Serbian language.' So, as a standard form, this language was called the Croatian standard language and it differed from the standard language in Serbia (or Serbian–Croatian in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Writers and intellectuals of Serb ethnic origin in Croatia made a huge contribution to Croatian literature and culture. Serbs in Croatia, traditionally, did not use Serbian ethnic standards. That is why the Serbs in Croatia were put in a delicate position in terms of language, torn between the language which is now exclusively called Croatian and which they themselves use, and the Serbian version of the language which is now exclusively called Serbian. Should they admit that they are speakers of the *Croatian* standard language (and then it would not make sense to request their own schools using the Serbian standard language), or that they are speakers of Serbian, and that they accept all the standards of this language, which they had not used before, becoming in this way a distinctive language minority? While in refuge, many of them had accepted (to a certain extent), for practical and opportunistic reasons, the Serbian version of the Serbian language, which aroused suspicion from their Croatian neighbours. The members of the Serb ethnic minority are very much divided over this issue, which was also confirmed in the last Population Census (2001). This latter option, in terms of choice of language, was chosen by one quarter of the Serb population (some 50,000 people), a figure which also includes, we assume, returnees.

[40] t=-2.852; df=324; p<0.01.

Figure 16:
Do local authorities and Croatian neighbours make Serb refugees' return easier or more difficult?



It seems that the sense of discrimination is mostly felt in the area of employment. Over 60% of respondents state that the Serbs are not equally represented in public institutions. A little less than this feels discrimination in private enterprises owned by Croats, while around one third (30%) also notice it with public service officials.

Returnees express relatively strong dissatisfaction with their political rights. More than half of the respondents claim that Serbs in Croatia are second rate citizens without sufficient political rights. Judging by the formal-legal standpoint, and considering the acquired Serb political representation at all levels of authority and particularly in Parliament, there should not be such a high level of dissatisfaction. Croatia has adopted a broad legal framework, including the Constitutional Law, all international and European standards of protection of minorities, and has even gone beyond this. It is less important today that the HDZ Government did this under the pressure of the international community, and in particular European institutions and bodies. The process of establishing high standards of minority protection is understood as a basic legal and political precondition for political consolidation and for the appeasing of inter-ethnic tension in various Eastern European countries, including Croatia. It was of course expected that this would open the door for mass return and for the reintegration of Serb refugees. What if this does not satisfy them? In fact, almost 70% of respondents agree with the statement that Serbs should not have the status of a national minority, but should have the same political (constitutional) position as the Croats. As expected, and in accordance with the gender-based differences shown so far, males to a larger extent state that Serbs are second rate citizens[41] with insufficient political rights.[42]

Dissatisfaction with their rights arises primarily from the fact that a number of returnees cannot, in essence, accept the minority status of their ethnic community in Croatia. This was ultimately one of the main reasons (or at least causes) of the Serb rebellion in Croatia, and we assume one of the main reasons for the non-return of some of the remaining Serb refugees. Here we see on one side a serious impediment to sustainable return, and on the other the potential for renewed ethnic conflicts. In the interest of their own full integration and legitimate pursuit of their minority and civil rights, Serb returnees will clearly have to accept the constitutional order of the country which they, rightly, consider a homeland. A lesser problem arises if the returnees, refugees and other Serbs in Croatia

[41] $t=2.293$; $df=279$; $p<0.05$.

[42] $t=2.262$; $df=251$; $p<0.05$.

simply do not believe that minority status can secure the full cultural and social development of their ethnic community, since, in this region, the notion of minority is still associated with inequality and favouritism. With such a view, they might more or less be right and should legitimately request full civil and citizen equality, even obtaining more rights since they are a minority. In order to achieve this, they have to seek support and find allies among the democratic forces of the majority population (and not exclusively count on pressure from the 'international community') which, without the full affirmation of minority rights, cannot go on to build democratic order in the country today.

Table 14 – Opinions on the position of Serbs in Croatia[43]

	Completely untrue	Mostly untrue	Roughly equally true and untrue	Mostly true	Completely true	Do not know
Serb returnees can feel safe in Croatia	3%	8%	32%	30%	17%	10%
I feel accepted by Croats	2%	7%	29%	29%	21%	12%
Relationships between Serbs and Croats in my place are the same as before the war	11%	13%	17%	24%	17%	18%
New settlers and domicile Croats treat Serb returnees in the same way	11%	18%	22%	16%	9%	24%
I believe a lasting peace between Serbs and Croats is possible	1%	5%	12%	25%	40%	17%
Children of Croats and Serbs do not socialise with each other	14%	19%	17%	10%	6%	34%
I rarely have contacts with Croats	22%	21%	20%	21%	8%	8%

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[43] Opinions are grouped according to their content.

(continuation)

	Completely untrue	Mostly untrue	Roughly equally true and untrue	Mostly true	Completely true	Do not know
Serbs are not sufficiently represented in public services in the places to which a large number of Serbs have returned	3%	4%	4%	23%	40%	26%
Croats who own companies employ Croats rather than Serbs	4%	5%	12%	25%	26%	29%
Employees in public institutions treat Serbs and Croats in the same way	4%	13%	19%	25%	24%	15%
Employees in public institutions treat members of their ethnic group better	14%	12%	18%	19%	10%	27%
I feel I can freely express my ethnic identity	4%	8%	13%	35%	28%	11%
I feel I can freely satisfy my religious needs	1%	1%	7%	41%	35%	14%
I feel I am looked at in a strange way when I speak my language	19%	19%	18%	18%	7%	19%
Serbs in Croatia are second class citizens	8%	8%	8%	21%	30%	24%
Serbs do not have enough political rights in Croatia	5%	7%	10%	23%	22%	33%
Serbs should not have the status of an ethnic minority in Croatia but be equal to Croats	1%	3%	5%	15%	53%	23%

4.4. Evaluation of return and plans for the future

Despite relatively poor material conditions and the series of problems they face, the great majority of respondents still believe that their decision to return was good. To the direct question – was the decision to return a good one or bad one? – 80% of respondents gave a positive answer, while every tenth was indecisive and only 30% were convinced they had been wrong to return (Figure 17). A negative attitude towards return was recorded, naturally, in cases where returnees still do not live in their houses or apartments.[44] More frequently, this decision is being reviewed by the returnees who returned at a later stage (after 1999), which again is probably linked to the fact that they have not yet repossessed their property.[45] Besides, they had spent a longer period of time in refuge and were in a better position to grow used to life there. Other variables, including household income, as expected, did not affect the answers to any statistically significant degree.

The respondents who assess positively their return differ considerably from those who doubt that this was the right decision – both in the perception of their being accepted and in their assessment of discrimination, political rights, etc. The latter to a larger extent feel insecure and less accepted by the Croats with whom they also rarely establish contacts, more often feel discriminated against, more often maintain that the Serbs do not have enough political rights in Croatia, and that they should not have the status of a national minority.

All these variables might conditionally be positioned as dependent or independent, or, in other words, be perceived as causes or consequences. For example, to have doubts about the decision to return could be considered as a 'cause' of a feeling of discrimination, and, conversely, the feeling of discrimination might bring about doubts about whether they should have returned). In short, apart from the housing issue, none of the 'hard' features is significantly connected to the assessment of return, while differences exist in almost all variables. We can thus conclude that a negative attitude

[44] $\chi 2=6.432$ df=1 $p<0.05$. We compared the difference between those who stated that the decision to return was the right one and those who to a certain extent have some doubts regarding this decision. Thus, the respondents who stated that the decision was equally right and wrong and the respondents who stated it was rather wrong were combined in one group. The same approach was applied in all the comparison tests in this question.

[45] $\chi 2=8.747$ df=3 $p<0.05$.

Figure 17 – Evaluation of the decision to return

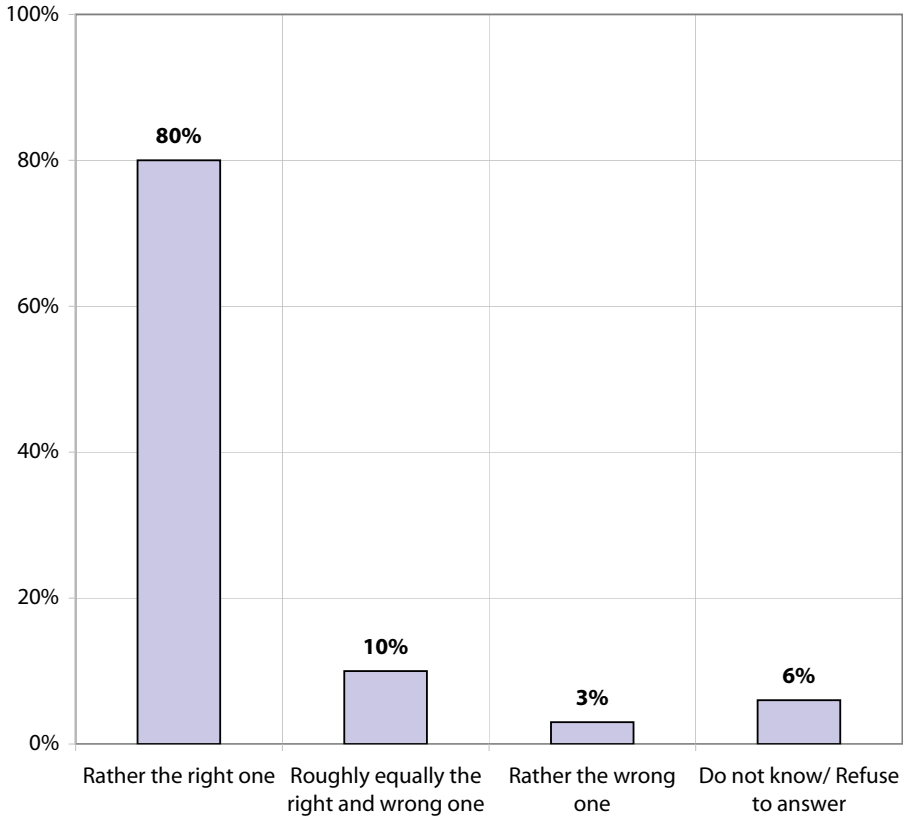
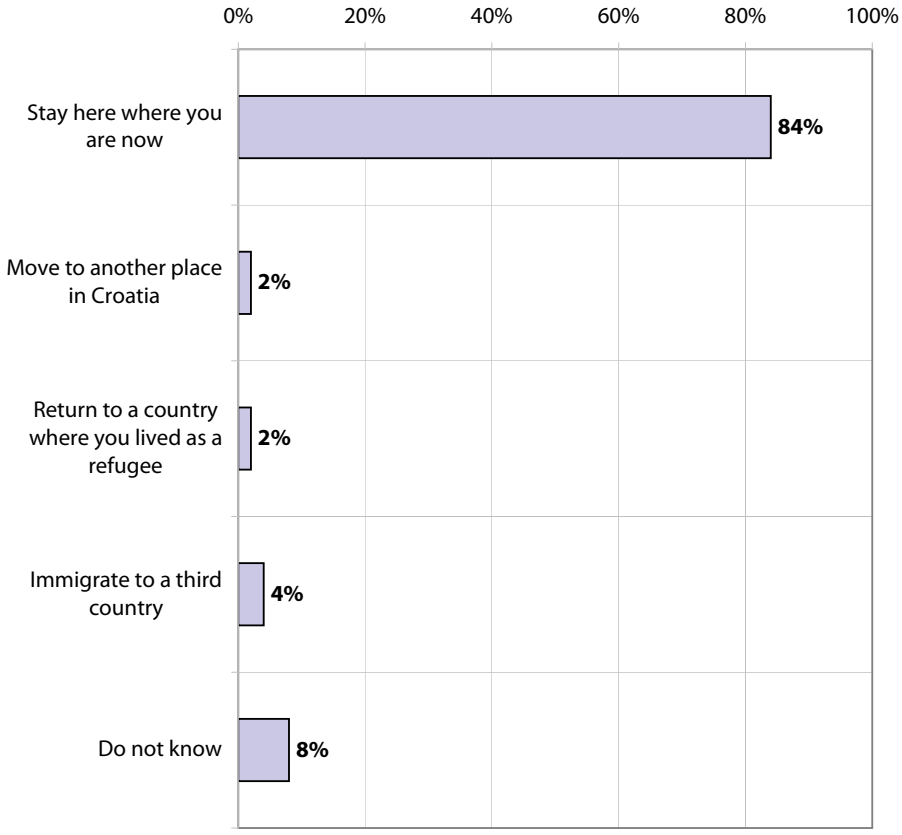


Figure 18 – Future plans



towards return is more the consequence of political standpoints and opinions than the concrete conditions of life and hardships met after the return. Such a conclusion seriously questions every concept of return sustainability that is based on the assumption that objective conditions of life in the areas of return are its determining factor.

Another point to challenge this concept lies in our findings of the statistically significant effect of the respondents' relative satisfaction with the conditions of life in their place of refuge, compared to the situation in the place of return, on the decision to return. Respondents who doubt that their decision to return was correct more often evaluate their conditions of life today with lower grades than the conditions of life in exile.[46] If we know that those respondents do not have significantly worse living conditions (at least with respect to employment and income) than those who consider their decision to return a positive one, we can conclude they had (or perceived that they had) better conditions of life in the country of refuge. This again confirms that the decision to return is evaluated relatively and not simply as an absolute assessment of the current conditions of life.

The assessment of the decision to return matches the respondents' future plans. It is encouraging that 84% of returnees intend to stay in the place where they currently live, while the rest intend to move, or are still unsure of their plans (Figure 18). Clearly, those who are not convinced that the decision to return was the right one are the ones who think more often about moving on. Roughly 8% of returnees want to leave the place where they currently reside, of whom half wish to leave for 'third countries', which means they neither intend to stay in Croatia nor return to their former place of refuge. Of the remainder, there are as many who want to find a new residence within Croatia as want to return to the place where they lived during exile. The respondents who consider leaving should be grouped with those who are indecisive about their future. If we translate these figures into the total returnee population, we have a total of some 3,000 to 4,000 returnees who are potentially new migrants.

A change of residence is more often considered by the unemployed,[47] those who returned after 2000,[48] and those who have not yet resolved their housing situation.[49] It is more often considered

[46] $t=6.217$; $df=62$; $p<0.01$.

[47] $\chi 2=6.857$ $df=3$; $p<0.1$.

[48] $\chi 2=8.390$ $df=1$; $p<0.01$.

[49] $\chi 2=10.173$ $df=1$; $p<0.01$.

by men,[50] younger persons, specifically in the age between 15 and 24,[51] and by better educated returnees.[52] It is worrying that enterprising returnees consider leaving for good, or at least changing the place of residence more often, which might worsen an already unsatisfactory socio-demographic structure.

The impossibility of finding employment, their unresolved housing situation, the feeling of loneliness due to a small number of neighbours and relatives who have returned, as well as the sense of deprivation as a result of ethnic belonging are the main reasons which make returnees contemplate leaving (Table 15).

Table 15 – What reasons make you think of leaving?[53]

	n	%
Sample size	24	100%
Impossibility of finding a job	17	71%
Unresolved housing issue	8	33%
Problems with repossession of property	2	8%
Administrative and other barriers I encounter	5	21%
Separation from family	6	25%
The feeling that I am not welcome	3	13%
The feeling of being in danger because of ethnic belonging	8	33%
Loneliness / return of a small number of people	9	38%
Other	2	8%

A little more than half of the respondents believe it is possible to establish normal conditions of life in their current place of residence, while every third respondent does not believe this. This indicates that the number of returnees dissatisfied with their conditions of life is considerably larger than the number of those who are con-

[50] $\chi 2=8.787$ df=1; $p<0.01$.

[51] $\chi 2=26.623$ df=7; $p<0.01$.

[52] $\chi 2=11.563$ df=4; $p<0.05$.

[53] Due to an error in the questionnaire, this question was answered only by respondents who plan to leave Croatia, while those who are considering moving inside Croatia did not answer it.

templating leaving their current place of residence. The majority of respondents find the poor economic situation, namely unemployment, the main obstacle in establishing normal conditions of life. The second reason, given by a similar number of respondents, is not having other people in the vicinity, and particularly the absence of children.[54] This probably causes some returnees to feel that 'everything is falling apart'. Returnees in small, remote settlements are seriously affected by the lack of transport and every other form of isolation from larger centres. The lack of prospects is felt more acutely by the young than by the elderly,[55] which is normal considering that the aspirations and what constitutes 'normal conditions of life' and 'perspectives' differ greatly in these two groups.

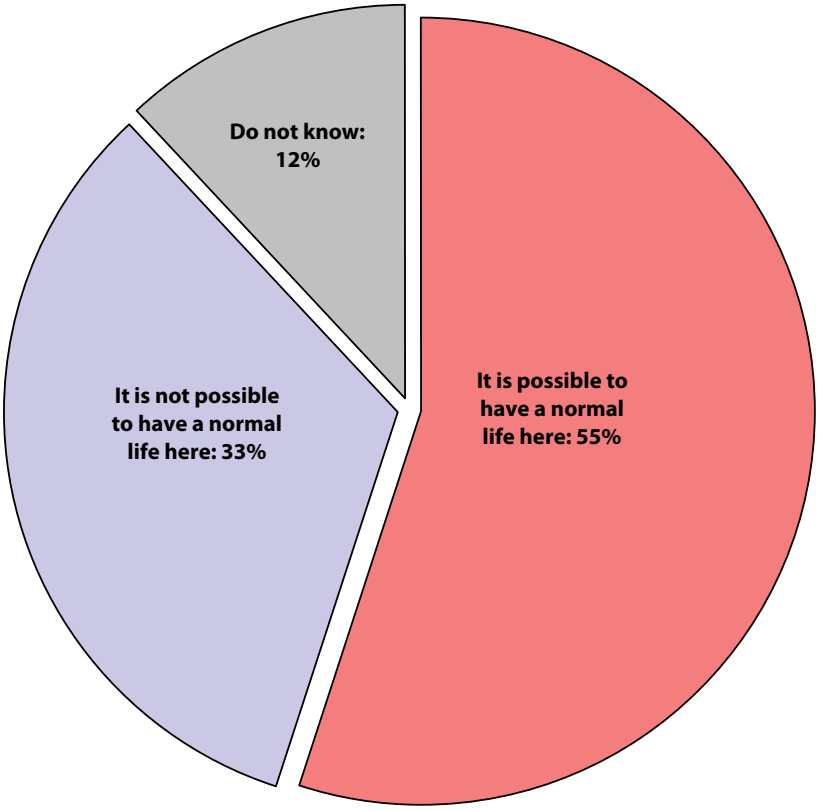
Table 16 – Why is it impossible to create normal conditions of life?

	Whole sample
n	131
No jobs / poor economic situation	86%
No hope that the economic situation will improve	60%
Not enough young people	60%
There are no people	57%
Everything is falling apart	42%
Poor connections with larger settlements	38%
Remoteness from larger settlements	36%
Structure of the population has changed	23%
Village	21%
Small place	19%
Poor interpersonal relations	13%
Other	2%
Do not know	2%

[54] This problem was nicely illustrated by a young man from Vojnic with whom we spoke while preparing the research. He said that the nearest ('eligible') girl is a few hundred kilometres away from him.

[55] $\chi 2=6.700$ df=3; $p<0.1$.

Figure 19:
Is it possible to have normal conditions of life in the place where you live?



5. Conclusion

We present here the basic findings and conclusions, grouped according to seven aspects i.e. dimensions of return, outlined in the conceptual frame.

I) The extent to which return is permanent – absence of re-migration

In the conceptual frame we emphasised that the prime and simplest indicator of return sustainability is the relative permanence of the refugees' stay in the place of return. Some studies propose one year as the shortest period, or the smallest measure, of the relative permanence of stay. Thus, if there is no new movement for at least one year after return, according to this criterion return can be considered permanent (which seems to be acceptable, at least from the point of view of responsible international organisations and interested governments). During our conceptual elaboration, we expressed our deepest concern about such an approach to the sustainability of return, which, actually, in different phases might become reversible. For this reason, we excluded any possible timeframe, maintaining that in some cases not even a whole decade spent in their own home, in their place of origin, would be a sufficient guarantee that the return has been definitively completed. However, with the lapse of time, it is difficult to draw the line between abandoning return and normal migration movements, which, in normal circumstances, might have happened even without a previous exodus. To make this differentiation, it is important to take into account the returnees' personal feelings about whether or not they still consider themselves returnees.

The vast majority of returnees came from Serbia, where most of the Serb refugees had found refuge (77%) and only 8% from Bosnia and Herzegovina, with an additional 9% from other parts of Croatia. On average, the returnees from our sample spent on average 4.5 years in refuge. A more massive return of Serb refugees began in 1997. They made up 8% of all registered returnees until May 2006, that is, a little less than 15,000 persons. One year earlier, the number of registered returnees had been half that number. The largest number of returnees was recorded in 1998, 20,000, while later the numbers decreased to 14,000 and 15,000 in 1999 and 2000, and 10,000 in the following three years. In the last few years the number of returnees has dropped substantially, reaching some 5,000 in 2005.

Therefore, the first main goal of this field study was to establish the physical presence, that is, the permanent stay, of returnees at their registered addresses in the RoC. Whatever the reasons for abandoning return, the share of those who remained is the most important, synthetic, data of the (relative) effectiveness of return. Only later can we proceed to analyse the factors which affected it to a greater or lesser extent.

Recent research of returnee trends has shown smaller or greater imprecision in the official number of returnees, whether these figures were given by 'homeland' governments or international organisations. We do not imply here that there has been a deliberate inflating of figures, but that there is a problem with a certain number of registered returnees who stay in their places of return for a short period of time or only sporadically, and not permanently.

According to our findings, between 35% and a maximum of 41% of registered returnees reside permanently at their registered addresses, and an additional 3.5% moved to other locations within Croatia.

At the same time, between 44% and 50% of registered returnees do not permanently reside in Croatia. If we translate our findings to the whole population of 120,000 registered Serb (minority) returns, we arrive at a realistic estimate of 46,000 and 54,000 registered returnees living permanently in the country, of whom 42,000 to 49,000 reside in their places of origin. To this figure, a certain number of unregistered returnees who have stayed permanently (perhaps a few thousands) should be added. Some missing data in our sample may suggest that a small proportion, particularly among younger family members, is not registered, not to mention those who, for particular reasons, may have avoided registration upon return. When we deduct some 14,500 deceased returnees, there remain 51,500 to 59,500 registered returnees who continue to reside permanently outside Croatia, mostly in Serbia.

The fact that some 'returnees' do not reside in their places of origin (or return) does not necessarily mean that they (at least some of them) are not in contact with it. According to informants' statements, some 6% of returnees spend some time in Croatia and some out of it, mainly in the country of refuge. Every other returnee (or every fifth in total) who does not permanently live in Croatia goes to his/her house occasionally. This happens at least once, and on average two to three times, a year. Our findings indicate further that the greatest inclination to stay permanently exists in small rural settlements, in contrast to towns of more than 10,000 inhabitants.

Finally, we would like to point out the clearly higher tendency of returnees to remain in the areas of Croatia which were occupied by the Serb forces during the war. Since those were also the regions where the Serbs were in an absolute or relative majority before the war, we can conclude that ethnic concentration is one of the factors determining permanent minority return.

We might conclude that the research findings undoubtedly confirm the assumption that a number of returnees (taken simply as refugees who at one point of time cross the border of their country of origin) do not remain permanently in their places of origin, and that they actually live in the place of refuge, migrate elsewhere, or stay temporarily in their place of origin. It is impossible to answer definitively whether the figure of less than a half of registered returnees who permanently live in the country of origin is an indicator of successful, or in other words, sustainable, return. We cannot know what the absolute standard should be, while a comparison with similar return processes would also be problematic since it would have to evaluate the different socio-political contexts in which they happen. Do we 'measure' the proportion of permanent returnees in terms of registered refugees, or in terms of the entire refugee body? Should we count those refugees who do not want to return, although there are neither formal nor security impediments? Is the number of returnees (absolute and relative) what matters, or is it their actual successful process of reintegration in the local or broader community and their attaining satisfactory conditions of life? Is their socio-economic structure as a basis of return sustainability more important than their subjective feeling of satisfaction? From whose perspective is the sustainability of return 'measured'? In assessing from the point of view of the returnees themselves, would it be better for them to remain despite the low living standards and the poor prospects for economic and social progression, i.e. integration? What would we do, and what would we want in such a situation? Some of these questions will be further discussed in the analysis of each factor of return (non)sustainability factor.

Our findings give a conditional general answer to the basic question about sustainability of return which is: the return of Serb refugees to Croatia is taking place, which means that at least the basic preconditions have been met and a significant number of refugees have stayed in their places and homes for a number of years (some for even a decade). There are clearly important reasons for a significant number of refugees not even to have attempted to return, and almost half of those who did return have not stayed.

II) Feeling of safety

Safety is surely one of the key factors reviewed by the refugees when making the decision about return. Ultimately, it also significantly influences the decision to remain in the place of return. According to the statements of every other respondent, Serb returnees to Croatia can feel rather or absolutely safe in Croatia. Roughly every third respondent (32%) still has some concerns, while every tenth (11%) explicitly states he or she is not safe. It is publicly known that there have been several serious incidents in which the safety of Serb returnees has been threatened, and symbolic damage has been inflicted on religious facilities, and so on. However, these incidents have fortunately been less drastic than other xenophobic incidents, including terrorist attacks against foreigners, in some Western European countries where migration occurs. Still, situations where mistrust prevails are sufficient to create an atmosphere of insecurity, which is probably what the instigators and perpetrators of these incidents wanted in the first place.

It is interesting that respondents from smaller settlements (up to 500 inhabitants) feel on average safer than others and considerably more often assess the relationship between the Serbs and Croats in their location as the same as before the war. They also perceive fewer differences in the attitudes towards the Serbs held by Croat settlers and domicile Croats. This is probably due to the less significant changes in the post-war population structure, and much closer neighbourly relationships which increase the feeling of safety and, to a certain extent, explain the larger number of permanent returns in those settlements.

The findings proving that a great majority of returnees feel they can openly state their ethnic belonging and practise their religion are encouraging. A somewhat less positive situation concerns the usage of the Serbian language (see note on the Croatian Serb language). Every fourth respondent has a feeling that he or she is looked at 'with surprise' when they speak their language in public.

We maintain that it can be concluded that (physical) safety, and primarily the subjective feeling of safety of Serb returnees to Croatia, does not pose a (serious) impediment to their return and permanent stay.

III) Socio-demographic structure of (permanent) returnees

The average age of all interviewed family members, who represent the total returnee population, is around 51. This is considerably higher than the average age in Croatia which is 39, which is an indicator of the negative age selection of the returnee population. Every fourth returnee is between 65 and 74 years of age, with an additional 12% being 75 or above, which means that more than one third (37%) of the returnee population is above 65 while 43% is older than 60. Every other returnee is older than the Croatian average which is 51 years of age. On the other hand, it was found that children under 15 made up only 10%, and pre-school children constituted only 3.5% of the returnee population. All in all, children and young people under 19 years of age make up 12% of the returnee population, which is half of what they constitute in the entire population of the Republic of Croatia (CBS 2006). We assess that the actual situation would be somewhat better if we took into account unregistered younger family members. Such a ratio between returnees under 19 years of age and those above 60 gives a very unfavourable returnee population aging index of 358 which puts into question its biological sustainability, particularly in the light of the fact that the vast majority of returnees live in small and isolated settlements (under 500 inhabitants), which are already demographically endangered.

It can be concluded that, as far as sustainability of return is concerned, the age structure of returnees (who have returned permanently) is unfavourable, although this could have been more or less predicted. Some earlier studies by the one of the authors relating to displaced persons and refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have clearly proven that older, less educated persons from rural areas showed more readiness to return. In contrast, younger, better educated, urban persons would from the very outset be inclined to be locally integrated in the new environment, or to migrate elsewhere. Besides, they made as a condition for return, apart from physical safety, their future socio-economic status and especially the political situation in their place of origin, thinking, primarily, whether their ethnic group would be able to effectively hold power.

Ultimately, there exists a merciless logic in every migration process, independent of the wishes and expectations of the migrants themselves. First of all, younger persons more easily adapt to the new environment (regardless even the reason of migration), since they are forced to, particularly because of their children. So, a return to urban areas without a secure job is much more difficult. As minority refugees, they should generally accept worse conditions

and prospects, at least for some period of time. Finally, for some of them the main issue against return could be their active involvement in inter-ethnic conflicts (including participation in crimes). Even if this were not the case, many of them cannot simply side with the political changes (and accompanying changes of power), in this given case the creation of an independent Croatian state.

Every fifth returnee household is a one-person household, with the average age of this person being 67. It is easy to conclude that such households face the worst conditions of life due to the aggregation of negative factors (age and fragility, low socio-economic status, isolation of the settlement they live in, distance from social and health institutions, etc.). Every third household comprises couples without children (which is the most common size); these people are again elderly persons. Nuclear families, parents with children, make up 15% of all households, with the 'children' being on average 24 years of age, which means that those households comprise elderly parents and their grown-up children.

In short, it has been shown that (permanent) returnees (just like migrants in general) are exceptionally negatively selected with respect to age, education, qualification, family situation and some other vital features. This has a negative impact on the biological and social sustainability of returnee communities.

IV) Socio-economic conditions of sustainable return

Return or restitution of property, namely the reconstruction of destroyed and damaged houses and the issue of tenancy rights over former socially-owned apartments, is considered to be among the crucial material conditions of (sustainable) refugee return. This has been put into focus by both Serb representatives in Croatia and the representatives of international organisations. According to our survey, 88% of returnees live in the same house or apartment as they did before exile, with the remaining 12% living, for one reason or another, elsewhere. In the latter group, every fourth is (was) a holder of tenancy rights, making up 3% of all returnees who stayed permanently (Table 4). A small portion (6 out of 51 of those interviewed or 12% in total) is awaiting reconstruction or is waiting for reconstruction to be completed. Generally speaking, reconstruction of houses and apartments is about to be finished. According to the data provided by the line Ministry, there are still 1,700 houses to be reconstructed, of which most (1,500) are due to be completed in 2007. They are mainly owned by Serb returnees. Only 8 out of 51 of those interviewed (17%) claim that the reconstruction of their house

for some reason was not approved, which was either confirmed by a final decision, or the second instance procedure is still in progress. Unfortunately, no relevant data have been collected to see to what extent the housing problem influenced the returnees who did not remain in Croatia after having registered as returnees.

It is encouraging that 43% of the interviewed returnees claim they are to a greater or lesser extent satisfied with their accommodation, and an additional 29% are not explicitly dissatisfied. Those who are dissatisfied, mainly those who have not yet repossessed their house or apartment, make up less than one third (28%). The average rating of the current accommodation status among those who live in the same housing unit as before the war is 3.2 and among those who do not, 2.5, which represents a considerable statistical difference.

It has been shown that satisfaction with current conditions of life is not influenced by the returnees' demographic features (age, gender), size of settlement, or time of return, but by their monthly income. Namely, only those who also had their own means were able to fully furnish their houses after reconstruction, and thus secure a satisfactory quality of life. Here, returnees lack international and domestic assistance.

Poor infrastructure does not equally affect all returnees. Those living in the smallest settlements are in a particularly dire situation. Thus, all those without electricity live in a settlement up to 500 inhabitants, as do the majority of those who do not have running water and fixed telephone lines. It should be mentioned that their neighbouring Croats have similar living standards.

The results of this research show that socio-economic conditions, after property has been returned, are the key element of sustainable return. According to our respondents, 11% of returnee households did not have financial income, excluding welfare assistance, in the month preceding the research. According to research conducted by the Puls agency (2006), the related percentage for the overall Croatian population is only 2% (it would be pertinent to compare these figures to elderly Croat households living in remote regions, where no significant differences would be seen). The question posed is how people survive without a regular income. In our sample, every fourth such household is a recipient of welfare assistance and another quarter survive on cultivating their land. The rest (this might also include the above-mentioned) must be surviving on support received from children or relatives who are in refuge or who are migrants. This relates to a diversification of financial means

and transnational strategies that returnees employ to secure themselves.

However, not even households with some income are to be envied. Namely, every fourth returnee household has a monthly income in an amount up to 1,000 kuna (for the overall population, this percentage is 5%). The largest relative number of returnee households, namely every third has a monthly income between 1,000 and 2,000 kuna (this proportion of households is three times more than in the overall population). Only about 11% of returnees have an income over 3,000 kuna (the corresponding percentage in the overall population is five times larger). Bigger households are in a somewhat better position, while small households and particularly one-person households face a difficult financial situation. 72% of returnee households receive a regular monthly income, either pensions or salaries from officially registered employment, while the rest live off farming, the black market, social welfare, and other sources.

Such an income structure is to a large extent connected to age, educational level and other unfavourable features of the returnee population. Almost every second returnee (46%) is a pensioner or a recipient of a family pension. Every third respondent (31%) is unemployed, but one third of whom are not registered at the unemployment bureau. Every other unemployed returnee is older than 45. The same percentage did not complete or has completed only elementary school. The majority of unemployed returnees, but also those who are employed, are skilled workers who, before the war, had worked in factories which in the meantime went bankrupt. Their competitiveness on the labour market is low, particularly in the situation where they find themselves, in remote villages and in generally underdeveloped counties (e.g. Lika–Senj County). Only 8% of returnees are employed, either in the form of self-employment or by employers with fixed-term or indefinite contracts. If we counted all household members, there would be 16% of households with one household member employed, while the rest rely on other sources, such as pensions, informal income or farming. Only a few respondents (fewer than 1%) admitted that they work on the 'black market', which is understandable since they would lose unemployment benefits if this were discovered.

It cannot be expected, at least not in the near future, for there to be an increase in the employment of returnees in state bodies, since this would only increase competition and tensions with the 'majority' population, and in the long run lead to new conflicts or unsustainable return. There is already a surplus rather than a shortage of employees in state bodies. This problem will be difficult to re-

solve without new investment cycles in the areas of return to open up new employment opportunities and entrepreneurial options, primarily for returnees, but also for the 'majority' population, and consequently to facilitate the reintegration process.

The vast majority of returnees, though mainly living in rural areas, are not oriented towards agriculture, particularly not as a future occupation, so other means of employment will have to be sought (unless this trend changes). An unexpectedly small percentage (2%) stated they live off agriculture, as the others may have thought they did not make a permanent income in agriculture. This is even more surprising, since it was found that over 70% of returnees possess arable land. Moreover, they are large plots by Croatian standards, which would enable production for the market. With an average three hectares of arable land, refugee households exceed the Croatian average which is two hectares (Agriculture Register 2003).

The problem of the illegal use of land has been almost entirely resolved (as has the illegal occupation of houses). Only 1% of respondents claim they cannot use any piece of their land on account of it being occupied by someone else against their will. Another 4% have parts of their land illegally taken. It is important to mention that a large portion of returnees' land has been cleared of mines. Only every twentieth respondent claims that a part or all of his land is mined. To conclude, around 93% of returnees possess arable land which can be used without hindrance. However, surprisingly, only a little over one third (37% or every fourth of all returnees) state they farm it. How can this be explained?

With respect to the structure of returnee households, an analysis of the usage of arable land show considerable variations. The use of arable land by one-person households and generally smaller households, which in the majority of cases mean 'old' households, is to a statistically significant extent rarer than in the case of larger ('younger') households. In concrete terms, more than 60% of households with 4 or more members farm a major part of their arable land, while in the case of one-person households the proportion is only 9% and around 30% in two-person households. Thus, it is the very age and household structure of the returnee population that prevents the more serious agricultural engagement and exploitation of this important resource. However, in the case where returnees use a major part of their arable land, they do not produce for the market, but for their own consumption. Taking into account the above findings, it is not surprising that only 16% of returnees, owners of arable land, would like to be farmers in the future. This percentage would be a little higher if we take into account only re-

turnees under 60 years of age, particularly those who already farm a major part of their land. An even smaller percentage (2%!) would like their children to become farmers one day.

For agriculture to play a more important role in the sustainability of return, it would be necessary to improve the returnees' age structure and also to find new incentives in this economic branch, especially in view of Croatia's forthcoming accession to the EU and the bleak prospects for farmers.

V) Refugee experience and orientation towards return

It is reasonable to expect that refugees who lived in poorer conditions in their place of refuge would be more oriented towards return. This would mainly refer to those who had no support from relatives and friends and were, consequently, forced to find shelter in refugee collective centres. The socio-economic status during refuge surely has an impact on the decision to return. Those refugees who managed to find a job, and especially if they were well off, would be less ready to return, unless given attractive incentives, than those who lived from ever decreasing assistance and who had no chance of improving their lives elsewhere. This is a rational solution which the researchers themselves would probably have chosen. It is reasonable to expect that return is negatively selected, not only with respect to age, but also to the refugees' socio-economic status and, linked with this, to their ability to improve their quality of life. In short, the elderly, uneducated, unsuccessful and inadaptable would return sooner than others.

Every fourth returnee from our sample had a stable monthly income during refuge, such as a salary or pension. Only 8% were employed for a period longer than 6 months, and an additional 9% were dependent on the income of another member of the household. The proportion of the employed has not substantially changed in the group who returned in the later stages (after 2000 and 2001).

VI) Citizenship and minority rights

If we apply UNMIK's Manual for Sustainable Return with its high returnee standards grouped into four groups to the situation of Serb returnees in Croatia, we come to the following conclusions. Firstly, there are no restrictions of movement imposed on this group in comparison to the majority population. The acquisition of Croatian documents was one of the first and most important problems faced by some of the returnees at the beginning of the more massive re-

turn. According to our respondents, it seems this has been resolved. Almost all of them have Croatian citizenship and an identity card, and a greater part have a passport as well (those who do not, have probably not applied for one). As far as safety is concerned, physical assaults on returnees, and occasional harassment and damage to houses and religious facilities have been publicly condemned. It is encouraging that the majority of respondents feel they can freely express their ethnic belonging and practise their religion. A smaller portion still has a subjective sense of uneasiness or fear.

Secondly, all returnees have access to public institutions (state offices, education) and a great majority to health care. Still, almost one third (30%) state they feel discriminated against by public officials. This probably has more to do with the officials' attitude and readiness to assist than to their refusal to perform what they are obliged to. Some 14% of the respondents did not have a health insurance card, which is due to the fact that they have not yet acquired health insurance. Certain more sophisticated forms of health insurance exist, but to use them the returnees (those who are elderly and less educated) would need legal aid.

Thirdly, the restitution of property (houses and land) is coming to an end. Already 88% of respondents live in the same house or apartment as before the war, while the remaining 12%, for various reasons, live somewhere else. In the latter group, every fourth respondent was a tenancy rights owner, making up 3% of all permanent returnees. The issue of tenancy rights, namely the buying off of the apartments over which Serb returnees had tenancy rights, still remains to be resolved. For sure, this 'right' doesn't not fall into the category of conventional ownership rights (in the meantime, in the process of privatisation and following the collapse of socialism, this right has been abolished) and can hardly be counted as part of returnees' rights. Rather, it can be assessed as a mark of uneven treatment between those who, at the beginning of the war, remained in the country, and those who fled. The first group was entitled to buy their apartments under favourable conditions, although this right was also limited by deadlines. Consequently, there is no firm legal basis for squeezing this right from the homeland, although it might show its good will here. It must be known, however, that compensation, and even the return of those apartments, without the simultaneous provision of (good quality) employment and a broader social perspective, would only to a smaller extent influence the return of younger and better educated people,

The fourth aspect of rights – equal access to the labour market – seems, according to our respondents, the most disputable. The

respondents claim they are discriminated against with respect to employment. More than 60% state that the Serbs are not evenly represented in public institutions. Slightly fewer say they are discriminated against by private Croat employers. It is not known if there has been a suit for discrimination in employment (which is otherwise difficult to prove, as this is a case of 'structural discrimination'), but it is nonetheless shown by a much higher rate of unemployment amongst the Serbs.

We maintain that sustainability of return, as far as the enjoyment of various rights is concerned, is to be extended to yet another aspect – political rights, and, especially, minority rights. If we speak about returnees as a minority population with respect to their social power and status, then the analysis should also include the issue of minority rights in the country of origin. These returnees express relatively high dissatisfaction with their political rights. More than half think that the Serbs are second-rate citizens in Croatia and that they do not have sufficient political rights. Judging by the formal and legal position, and considering the existing political representation of Serbs at all levels of authority, and particularly in Parliament, there should not be such huge discontent. Croatia has built into its legislature, including the Constitution, all the international and European standards for the protection of national minorities, and even more than this. The international community has expected that this will open the door for a more massive return and integration of Serb refugees. What if this does not satisfy them?

In fact, almost 70% of respondents agree with the statement that Serbs should not have the status of a national minority, but the same political (constitutional) position as Croats. This was, ultimately, one of the main reasons (or at least one of the causes) of the Serb rebellion in Croatia and, we assume, one of the main reasons for the non-return of some of the remaining Serb refugees. Here we see on the one side a serious impediment to sustainable return, and on the other the potential for renewed ethnic conflicts. In the interest of their own full integration and legitimate pursuit of minority civil rights, Serb returnees will clearly have to accept the constitutional order of the country which they, rightly, consider a homeland. It is a lesser problem if returnees, refugees and other Serbs in Croatia simply do not believe that minority status can secure real civil and citizen equality and give them the chance for the full cultural and social development of their ethnic community, since, in this region, the notion of a minority is still associated with inequality and favouritism. With such an opinion they might be more or less right, and should legitimately request full civil and citizen equality, even obtaining more rights since they are a minority. In order to achieve

this, they have to seek support and find allies among the democratic forces of the majority population (without exclusively counting on pressure from the 'international community') which, without the full affirmation of minority rights, cannot proceed to build democratic order in the country today.

VII) Subjective assessment of sustainability (opinions, feelings)

All indicators of the sustainability of return presented so far refer to the returnees' objective conditions of life (the way they themselves picture them though). However, for a person's satisfaction, and in this case for the sustainability of return, their subjective idea of the life they have might be more important. Naturally, this idea is always a relative issue, based on a comparison with what life was like before, other referent groups, and life expectations. For a returnee, three frames of reference are probably crucial: conditions of life in refuge, conditions of life before the war, and the conditions of life of neighbouring Croats.

Many will find it surprising that for the majority of returnees, who returned and are staying permanently, life here is better than life in their place of refuge. As many as 40% of respondents assess their conditions of life as considerably better, one third as better, and only 8% as worse than in refuge. A statistically significant difference was recorded between women, who were relatively more satisfied, and men (the average mark given by women is 4.2 and by men 3.9). A statistically significant difference was also found in the level of education, with a clear tendency for the better educated to be more critical about their current situation (lower mark) than those who are less educated, which is consistent with their lower numbers in return and in their greater unwillingness to remain.

It is clear that the harder the life in refuge, the stronger the will to return, all other conditions being equal. The most dissatisfied are returnees who were in exile outside the region (of former Yugoslavia), in a Western European country, and it is therefore not surprising that their number in the sample is relatively low. Are we to jump to the conclusion that refugees should be given a hard time in order to force them to return? This could be in the interest of receiving governments, but is it (always), in the short or long term, in the interest of refugees themselves?

In short, for the majority of our respondents, return, from a subjective point of view, means an improvement in their lives compared to refuge, although, according to some objective criteria, a

fair share of them live considerably below the average in the Republic of Croatia and even on the verge of poverty. A smaller number of returnees are obviously not satisfied with their current situation, and among them new migrants might be found. The sustainability of return will depend on expanding the former category, and reducing the latter.

We have earlier pointed out that every assessment is relative. For this reason it could have been expected that a relatively high evaluation of the present conditions of life compared to life in refuge would not have automatically signified the same satisfaction with the current situation. As soon as the frame of reference changes, the subjective impression changes too. Consequently, the vast majority of returnees assess their conditions of life as significantly worse than before the war. Only 17% of the respondents think the reverse.

The comparison with neighbouring Croats is particularly significant if we seek to understand returnees' subjective assessment of the quality of life. This aspect is an indicator of the feeling of relative deprivation and discrimination, which can produce a general feeling of dissatisfaction. It was recorded that a relative majority (40%) of respondents think that there is no difference between the lives of those two groups, and every tenth evaluates his or her conditions of life as better than those of the Croats. Still, every third assesses that he or she lives worse off, and the remaining 18% were not able to assess the conditions of life of their Croatian neighbours or tried to avoid answering for reasons of social conformism. These findings, generally speaking, are not discouraging for the sustainability of return, at least for the majority of returnees. It would be interesting, from the point of view of sustainable return, to evaluate the opinions on the same issues of the Croats from those regions, many of whom, before the Serbs, and on account of rebellious Serb forces, were compelled to flee and find refuge elsewhere.

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Our findings and conceptualisation suggest the need for a differentiated understanding of a refugee and returnee to better understand the complex return movements. We propose first to distinguish, within the refugee body, various *potential returnees* from *potential non-returnees*. We are convinced that in the Serb refugee population (and probably others as well) there are a number of people who do not intend to return to their country of origin (constructionists would wonder if it remains their homeland then), even if basic security and restitution of property is ensured. Furthermore, we also have to differentiate between *political non-returnees* (or *hard return-*

ees) and *economic* (or soft) returnees. For the first group, no matter whether they were forced to flee, or had the (more or less risky) option to stay, the primary reasons for flight were the political changes in the country, or the inter-ethnic power shift. If 70% of permanent returnees (mainly the elderly and rural types) are clearly dissatisfied with their position as a national minority, how important this must be for refugees (mainly the young and educated) who never even attempted to return, or did return but only officially, for property, a passport, and the like!? For this reason, we rate them as *hard non-returnees*.

Soft non-returnees share similar socio-demographic features as the previous group, but their reason for non-return is of an economic nature, that is, it is typically migratory. During their period in refuge, they became integrated in the new community, settled there, found employment, schooling for children and there were new perspectives for social prosperity. If they had a chance of returning under the same conditions, they would take it, but such a return has not been heard of. We rate them as soft because they do not stay long in another country (even if this is the parent country of their ethnic body) because they wish to do so, but because it is rational behaviour, which we ourselves would probably have adopted.

Such a typology is important for the frame of reference which measures the success of return. If it is more or less justified, then there is no such thing as an 'ideally typical' return that can be applied to the whole refugee body.

Speaking of the returnee population in a broader sense, including both formal and actual returnees, we propose using the following typology: A) *unconditional permanent*; B) *conditional permanent*; C*) semi-returnees* or *transnational*; D) *non-formal returnees;* E) *formal or quasi-returnees*. When we refer to unconditional returnees, we do not literary think that they will return even in situations where there is an indirect threat to life or when the country of origin does not allow them to cross the border. We want to stay that such persons are ready to return and stay permanently in their homes, even if they have to face a difficult life there, as soon as there is an opportunity for return, and when basic security and conditions of life are met. They will try to stay as long as they live. They are typically elderly persons, uneducated and unqualified, rural types, who (also) lived badly in refuge where they did not settle well and where they did not feel 'at home'. Some of them return only to 'die on their threshold'. For them, 'home' in the place of origin has a real and symbolic meaning, and the postmodern deconstruction of the notion of belonging to home, homeland, ethnic and national group, and religion, cannot

be applied to them. Almost 90% of our respondents gave as one of the most important reasons for return the feeling of attachment to the place and region from which they fled.

Under *conditionally permanent* returnees we understand people who wanted to return and who do try to remain, but if they do not resolve existential issues and if a better migratory option appears, they will accept it. Their stay is particularly important for the sustainability of return.

We conceptualised the third category of returnees on the basis of recent transnational approaches to migrations and refugee–returnee movements. According to our informants, some 6% of returnees occasionally stay in Croatia and occasionally outside it, mainly in the country of refuge. They could better be described on the one hand as *semi-returnees* and on the other as *transborder* or *transnational* returnees, who directly connect their two 'homes'. Besides, there are possibly some members of their families who are at a third location, keeping in touch with the 'first.' Indirectly, they could be coupled with those from the two first categories whose members are in refuge or who have migrated, and who economically sustain the life of those who returned, securing at the same time a similar option for themselves. We were not able to define their demographic structure since they were unreachable, but we assume it is closer to category B) than to A), although the demographic structure is broader.

The fourth type is made up of actual returnees who, for one reason or another, were not formally registered. For example, we could not obtain data on all the household members of the respondents we interviewed. We assume that at least some of them, particularly the younger ones, were not registered, as they had returned at a later stage and, besides, were not owners of any property, so that they did not need to register. Apart from that, an unknown number of returnees may have returned and consciously avoided formal registration. Those may have been members of ethnically mixed families as well as other families, part of which were not in refuge. Some may not have wanted to be 'marked' as returnees. A further assumption is that some may have not registered since they did not know that they could, or did not know how to, or did not need a registration (the returnee status lasts for 6 months and secures the right to primary health care and a returnee cash grant, amounting to between 250 and 500 kunas per month).

Finally, as we supposed, a large number of registered returnees are actually formal, *quasi* returnees. They return not to stay, but to repossess their property and then sell or rent it, and obtain

documents necessary for returnee benefits and other rights. It is assumed that these 'returnees' come partly from the group *political,* and partly from group delineated as *economic*, non-returnees. Still, some of those who keep their property here do leave the option of return open and, depending on circumstances, would take it. We surmise that they could be joined by a large section of those who would like to recover their tenancy rights.

* * *

If there is anything valuable to propose to sustain return, then it could be development programmes for the areas of more massive return, which are mainly the economically undeveloped parts of Croatia. The programmes, however, must not be directed only at returnees and their working capacity, but also at the majority population, so that both communities find their common interest in enhancing the integration of the first, and the goodwill of the other group and, consequently, facilitate co-existence (according to the integration model: class before 'race', i.e. ethnicity). Unfortunately, we do not in our survey offer to our respondents any options for the revitalisation of their regions, which as we guess would surely be supported by the vast majority of them, as well as by their neighbors. Should not we then give support to such a proposal?!

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