

Croatia: Papal Visit Sparks Holy Row

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Towns Pope intends to visit angry that government is unwilling to pay for preparations.

Pope John Paul II's upcoming tour of Croatia has provoked a row between the Zagreb authorities and the five towns included on the pontiff's schedule.

Rijeka, Zadar, Dubrovnik, Osijek and Djakovo, which the Holy See is to visit from June 5-9, are to be allocated around three million euro from the state budget - far less than they had expected.

The total cost of the visit is unclear at present, but some observers believe it could top the 30 million euro spent on the pontiff's previous Croatian trip, in 1998.

While Prime Minister Ivica Racan's centre-left coalition would be boosted by a successful Papal visit ahead of parliamentary elections, which are expected later this year or early in 2004, Zagreb does not have sufficient reserves to fund the event and has asked each of the towns to raise the money themselves. However, their coffers are also largely empty.

Osijek, which the Pope is scheduled to visit towards the end of his five-day trip, has so far raised only a tenth of the 10 million euro it calculates will be needed for the reception. A planned steel and concrete altar is expected to cost around 760,000 euro alone.

"The government told us to turn to local companies for help in covering the costs - but which ones? They all have financial difficulties," Osijek's deputy mayor Ivan Beslic told IWPR.

Djakovo's mayor Zoran Vinkovic expressed disappointment with Goran Granic, the deputy prime minister in charge of arranging the papal visit, after a recent meeting ended without an agreement on who would meet the costs involved.

The towns took the decision to build altars, parking lots and other amenities for the pontiff's visit, as they believed that central government would provide the necessary money to make the event a success.

Now that Zagreb has made it clear that such funds will not be forthcoming, the situation has developed into a bitter war of words. Many analysts, however, are critical of the towns' for assuming that the state would pay for their preparations, and even the church has said such expenses are "unreasonable".

Well-known Catholic commentator Zivko Kustic said, "The world is aware of Croatia's poor economic situation - and so is the Pope. There is no need to waste money building infrastructures that would be used only once."

In the meantime, security is already being stepped up in the run-up to the papal visit. All houses lining the routes expected to be used during the tour have been inspected - and their residents have been screened by the authorities, with some upset at the line of questioning.

"Along with the usual questions about party affiliation and family history, one policemen asked me if I knew any martial arts, owned weapons or had been prosecuted on criminal charges - and warned me that every answer I gave would be checked out," Dubrovnik resident Marijo Bukvic told IWPR.

While the squabbling rumbles on, analysts agree that the papal tour is of great importance to Racan as he prepares for upcoming elections.

A successful visit would help the premier refute allegations from the opposition - especially the Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ - that the ruling coalition is communist and atheist.

The HDZ was in power during the pontiff's first two visits to the country, in 1994 and 1998. The then president, Franjo Tudjman, used the second visit to boost his election prospects by having his photograph taken with the Pope. The Vatican later discreetly protested - but the HDZ achieved its aims nonetheless.

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