Minority return: the way home

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Studying cases of successful minority return may help determine what policies could help other potential returnees.

Displaced people may return home after long periods of absence despite the presence of hostile local authorities and opposition from new occupants or settlers in their old homes. What underlies these difficult decisions? Studying cases of successful voluntary return might lead to a better understanding of which institutional arrangements and policies could help potential voluntary return as well as how to help communities in displacement. With this possibility in mind, we analysed several cases of forced migration followed by large-scale voluntary minority returns (or intentions to return) among Bosnians, Cypriots and ethnic Kurds in Turkey. Our research combined qualitative fieldwork with large-scale surveys focusing on 'minority returnees' (that is, displaced persons returning to an area now under the political control of another ethnic group). Our research has been driven by an attempt to understand how, in the wake of ethnic cleansing and genocide, communities struggle to restore a multi-ethnic environment and reintroduce positive majority–minority relations.

What minority returnees share

Our findings suggest that gender, age and education are the principal factors that affect the likelihood of individual return of minority returnees. In Bosnia and in Turkey's Kurdish region, those with a high level of education and permanent employment in the place of exile are less likely than others to return.[1] For example, while young, educated women are very unlikely to return, elderly men with a low level of education are very likely to do so. Forced migrants are also more likely to return if they have memories of positive pre-conflict inter-ethnic relations and if they still see their pre-conflict residence as 'home'. Data from Bosnia and Cyprus also show that internally displaced persons (IDPs) who are less nationalistic are more likely to

return and live as a minority in their former place of residence. Finally, the informal association of neighbours in exile can have a key role in organising and facilitating rural returns, and displaced people from areas which experience high rates of return are more likely to return themselves.[2]

Even after decades have passed and people have re-established their lives elsewhere, a significant percentage of people aspire to return, especially to areas in which there are many people of the same ethnicity. In Cyprus, about a third of Greek Cypriot IDPs surveyed in 2016 said they never thought of returning, even in the case of a negotiated peace settlement; another third said they only rarely or sometimes thought about it; and another third said they were always thinking about it. Given that a reunited Cyprus will be a federation with Greek and Turkish Cypriot constituent states, we presented two scenarios to potential returnees. When asked how likely it was for them to return and live in their pre-1974 home under Greek Cypriot administration in the next three years, nearly 60% said it was likely or very likely. When asked the same question but under Turkish Cypriot administration, numbers dropped to just over 22%.[3]

How to support returnees

Based on our research, we have some suggestions about the kind of policies and institutional arrangements that are most likely to facilitate return, especially among those who are less inclined to return. The presence of international security forces and the removal of war criminals from positions of power have certainly helped to facilitate return in Bosnia. Furthermore, in Bosnia and in Turkey's Kurdish region, the return of property (houses and land) or compensation for its loss or destruction definitely facilitated returns: for example, Kurdish returnees

who receive State compensation are three times more likely to return, after taking other factors into account. And allowing displaced people to vote remotely in the local elections in their pre-war place of residence was a very important facilitator of the revival of local political power in several Bosnian cases of successful mass minority return, such as Kozarac and Drvar.

In addition, well-organised associations of neighbours in exile have clearly provided coordination, enhanced a sense of security, and recreated some sense of community after return in Kozarac and Drvar.[4] As the differences in the experiences and the minority return rates of Bosniacs and Bosnian Serbs imply, if the political leaders of an ethnic/religious community openly and consistently support the return as 'patriotic', displaced people are more likely to return and reintegrate successfully. The case of Bulgaria is particularly instructive (and counterintuitive) following the voluntary return of approximately 40% of displaced Turks in the post-Zhivkov era. Their return was encouraged by the European Union during Bulgaria's accession talks but it was also Bulgaria's inclusive political institutions (specifically its use of proportional representation in national elections) which incentivised coalitions and allowed the Movement for Rights and Freedoms – the political party formed by the Turkish community following Bulgaria's transition to democracy – to become pivotal in elections and to play an active role in all critical legislative processes in parliament.[5]

Finally, to ensure returns are sustainable, local economic development and economic opportunities for the returnees need to be planned well in advance and provide support after return. In addition, potential returnees seem to be more likely to support peace agreements if those agreements ensure their property rights and/or access to fair compensation in accordance with international standards such as the Pinheiro Principles or precedents set by the European Court of Human Rights. More importantly, the general portrayal of IDPs and refugees as radicalised groups needs to be challenged.

In Cyprus, contrary to received wisdom, almost twice as many non-displaced Greek Cypriots as IDPs were absolutely determined to reject a future peace plan, despite the IDPs often being portrayed as less willing to reach a compromise. Similar research among Palestinians suggests that refugees are more likely to accept a peace plan than non-displaced Palestinians, indicating similar trends even in more polarised environments.[6]

A future research agenda
While our research on minority return has produced several important findings, we have so far failed to answer some key questions that might inspire future research.

First, our individual-level findings indicate elderly family members (especially men) are most in favour of return while younger family members (especially women) are most opposed to it. However, we do not have the data necessary to understand how and why family members with divergent views arrive at a certain collective return decision, hopefully without a painful split in the family.

Second, while we know young educated women are the least likely to return, we are unable to tell whether this preference is the result of greater educational and paid employment opportunities in the place of exile or may be a consequence of the desire to avoid returning to a patriarchal rural community.

Third, as the majority of successful cases of mass return have been to mono-ethnic villages and townships, it is unclear what policies are needed to facilitate mass minority returns to urban areas, and thus to recreate multicultural cities. Evidence on the small number of urban minority returns suggests the importance of creating a multi-ethnic police force and enforcing non-discriminatory hiring practices; rural returnees are more self-sufficient, for example by relying on their own land to produce food, while urban returnees may depend on the willingness of others (i.e. the ethnic majority) in order to get jobs and secure a livelihood.

Fourth, our research has so far failed to measure the impact of different war-time contexts (such as the regional intensity of violence, local mortality rates and the level

of housing destruction) or to collect time-specific data (such as completion of education) that would explain why return might take place at an early rather than late stage.

While we now understand what worked in some cases of difficult minority returns, we advise against generalising our findings to other post-conflict contexts without first testing them through similar surveys. For a voluntary, sustainable and successful return process, it is crucial to allow displaced people to voice their key concerns, trade-offs, priorities and intentions. They are the ones who have to find the strength and the courage to face the difficult path back home.

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