

Foreword: Addressing the legacy of violence

Valentin Inzko

The devastation orchestrated by political, military and paramilitary leaders a generation ago continues to exert a malicious influence on the Western Balkans region long after many of those responsible have been convicted for their crimes. Just as the legacy of rape, murder and genocide committed during the conflict has left the region deeply scarred, so has the ideology of ethno-territorial nationalism poisoned its societies.

This is the complex subject explored in this issue of *Forced Migration Review*. Contributions reflect lessons learned and insights gained from practitioner and researcher engagement in the Western Balkans over the last 20 years. This practice-oriented approach offers us a tool to be more effective in tackling the problems the international community faces in this region and beyond, and this is why this work has my strong support.

Combating ethnic division

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the aim of creating ethnically homogeneous statelets was curbed at Dayton but the dominance of ethnic politics was not. In many ways it was entrenched. While the Dayton Peace Agreement explicitly provides for the return of all refugees and displaced persons to their pre-war homes and requires the authorities to uphold and facilitate this process, it also relies on the goodwill of authorities who often perceive their political interest to be in maintaining ethnic division.

Substantial numbers of people have exercised their right to return – it is important to remember this success. But it is also true that powerful elites have continued to resist the reintegration of the country, clearly acting outside the provisions of the constitutional settlement. Public officials – from municipal clerks to those in high office – have obstructed return. Indeed, in the decade after the war, High Representatives had to intervene

robustly to end this obstruction. But something else was also at play: an effort to cement ethnicity as a single social and political building block. This is a policy we must continue to push back on.

In many cases, those who have tried to consolidate the results of forced migration appear to believe that their efforts are principled. They have accepted the argument that people with different customs and beliefs cannot live peacefully together. They are wrong. Their vision, their narrative, runs counter to the conclusive evidence from other parts of the world that societies that encompass complex and intermingled identities **can** and **do** thrive. It also flies in the face of the historical record in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a society which for centuries was a model of successful – often fruitful – coexistence among different religions and cultural traditions.

I believe that the irrational acceptance of a principle of divisiveness underpins many of the problems discussed in the following pages. The forced migration – ‘ethnic cleansing’ – conducted in the Western Balkans during the 1990s has not been fully and universally understood as a moral as well as a political failure, and its legacy of suspicion and spite continues to frustrate efforts to reverse the demographic distortions created by violence. This core challenge is one that will need to be faced ever more directly in future.

Many of the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, working with the active support of the international community, are determined to address this political challenge and we owe it to them and to the victims of the war and of course to future generations to continue to support them. It is a long hard struggle but one that, I am certain, will in the long term see reintegration triumph over division.

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