

Their last name is 'refugee': return and local activism

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Sustainable refugee return can only take place in Bosnia and Herzegovina when ordinary people and human rights activists are included as full participants in the recovery process.

As a result of the 1992-95 war, over two million people – fully half the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) – were displaced. Of that number, well over a million people fled to dozens of countries around the world. The rest – internally displaced persons – ended up in collective centres, in abandoned houses belonging to other displaced persons, or staying with relatives in the entities controlled by their ethnicity: Serbs to the Republika Srpska (RS), and Croats and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) to the Federation.

Although the Croats and Bosniaks were formally allied at the end of the war, the Federation was ethnically divided as well. Territory that ended up under the control of Bosnian Croat forces amounted to about 20% of BiH, with another 30% under Bosniak control. Bosnian Serbs controlled the other half of the country. The ethnic homogenisation of these territories was nearly complete and, for the first time, Croats, Bosniaks and Serbs were each designated as 'minorities' in those areas where their own ethnicity did not hold power.

"Poor people, poor people. All split up, all spread out everywhere." (Raba, aged 70, Sarajevo)

Assessing the wreckage at ground level

The displaced persons I encountered in BiH after the war¹ were living in collective centres (schools, barracks and hotels, temporarily converted for this use) and in the homes of relatives, or in abandoned houses and flats. While they may have been residing in a 'temporary' home for quite some years – and often this was the pre-war home of someone now displaced to the other side of the inter-entity borderline (IEBL) – very few of the displaced were comfortably settled, and a large number were living in wretched conditions. This, combined with homesickness, was the impetus for going home.

In the eastern Bosnian city of Gorazde, Bosniaks who had been displaced from the industrial suburb of Kopači and from nearby Višegrad were crowded within the city limits. In the northwestern part of the country, displaced Bosniaks from Prijedor and Kozarac had returned from Croatia but were still internally displaced. Many of them came back to Sanski Most – not far from their homes but still on the far side of the IEBL. Displaced Srebrenicans who had not fled abroad were living in poor conditions in Tuzla and the outskirts of Sarajevo. Meanwhile, Croats who had been expelled (by Serb or, later, by Bosniak forces) from their ancestral homes in central BiH were displaced to western BiH or to parts of Croatia. There, they occupied homes owned by Serbs who had been expelled. And Serbs from Mostar, Sarajevo and central BiH had been resettled in parts of the Serb-controlled entity.

All of these ethnically re-concentrated populations now formed homogeneous voting blocs that leaders on all three sides could rely on for support. Those leaders therefore had little or no interest in helping them return to their pre-war homes. There ensued a period wherein, at best, many politicians paid only lip service to refugee return; much more common was open obstruction to return in any direction.

"Most of us would like to return home. As for myself, every morning when I wake up, I ask myself, 'What am I doing here?' The people of Tuzla have become tired of us. We are second-class citizens here. Our last name is 'refugee'." (Zehra, displaced from Bratunac to Tuzla)

It was left to the ordinary people, championed by grassroots activists, to fight against the post-war geographic and political divisions that kept them powerless. Quite soon after the end of the war, thousands of displaced people mobilised to return

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Writing on arch reads: 'Returnee settlement Sućeska'. Sućeska is a village in the municipality of Srebrenica, and was the first return settlement in the municipality. June 2000.

to their pre-war homes but it was to be an uphill battle. These local activists formed organisations to promote their own return and that of their communities. Many such organisations were supported both by local people and by the international community, but potential returnees faced obstruction and intimidation from local authorities and from others who covertly sabotaged return efforts. Damaged homes were rebuilt only to be bombed again, and returnees were assassinated or intimidated into giving up and leaving once again. Mines were planted on roads in Gacko and Stolac. In late 1999, an early returnee to Srebrenica who was an employee of the municipal council was stabbed and left for dead in the municipal building. In that same period, dozens of rebuilt homes in Srebrenica were torched.

The most effective deterrent to return, however, was non-violent, with massive 'obstruction at the office window' perpetrated by all three sides. Slavenka, who had been displaced from Sarajevo, described the ordeal she faced when she tried to return:

"When I returned, I found out that there was someone in my apartment. The man who was living

there ... sent me a message that I would never get my apartment back. I went to the police and told them about that person. They said to me, 'And what should we do, throw him out? We can't help you.' I went to the municipal offices and to the ministries – I knocked on every door, everywhere, and nothing happened. Everyone supposedly filled out forms and wrote letters but they just lied to me. I went around and around for almost a year trying to get my apartment back. ...they were kicking me around like a ball."

Tent encampments

The grassroots activists who led dozens of local associations campaigning for return persisted in their efforts. When they were rebuffed by local authorities and ignored by international agencies, they set up tent encampments in or near the villages where they wished to return.

One of the first organised returns was that of Bosniaks to the village of Jušići, not far from Zvornik in eastern RS. In October 1996, with the encouragement of the prominent return activist Fadil Banjanović,² dozens of returnees set up tents and got to work clearing rubble from their demolished farmhouses. They had to repair an access

road to the village and watch out for mines, which hampered the planting of their first crops. During that month “there were more policemen than returnees, to show that we were not wanted, even among the ruins,” one villager reported. Despite threats and occasional gunshots, the returnees persisted.

By the spring of 1998 more than half of the pre-war population of this village had returned.

At that point, return to numerous villages was underway in that part of the Republika Srpska. In Jušići, returnees began to install telephone poles in order to access electrical power from the Federation but the RS authorities ordered the poles to be removed. Returning children were bussed across the IEBL to attend schools in the Federation. With time, the security situation around Jušići improved but transportation and water supply remained a problem for several years.

Activists for return found ways to attract the attention and support of international officials, demonstrating in front of embassies and near the headquarters of the Office of the High Representative. In the snowy months of late 1999 the establishment of a tent settlement, hard by the IEBL separating Goražde from the RS, prompted criticism on the part of some international officials. The tent encampment, housing dozens of would-be returnees, was perched on a hill above Kopači; on the tents, hand-painted signs read “Kopači is the key to Annex 7” and “Kopači is the key to return”. In his office in Tuzla, Fadil Banjanović told me, “There is no alternative to return. We are for return in all directions. We won’t call it two-way return, or minority return – just return. We are an organisation that doesn’t hold panel discussions, or publish lofty declarations.”

In response to pressure like this, international officials finally began to make significant changes to support return in 1999.³



Sign on tent reads: ‘Kopači is the key to Annex 7 for all of Bosnia and Herzegovina’. Tent encampment on the edge of Goražde, above the village of Kopači. November 1999.

Peter Lippman

They promulgated laws against obstruction and removed some of the worst offenders. By the end of the 1990s, return picked up, and in the next couple of years it peaked and several hundred thousand displaced people managed to return to their pre-war homes. Not only did Bosniaks return to parts of the Serb-controlled entity and western BiH; Serbs and Croats returned to their pre-war homes as well.

However, the fact that the warlords and their political heirs remained in power meant that return did not happen on a greater scale. In some places, such as Višegrad, no significant return took place, and in others, such as Prijedor and Zvornik municipalities, at its peak return only amounted to some 50% of the pre-war displaced population.

Difficulties with recovery

In the period since return levelled off, the demographic map of BiH has hardened with some 10-20% of returnees living in their pre-war homes. The age of the returnees is skewed towards the older part of the population. Younger people who spent a significant part of their formative years in their new homes found ways to remain there, and thousands have left the country altogether since the war. Preliminary results from the autumn 2013 national census point to a current population of 3.7 million, compared to the pre-war population of 4.4 million.⁴ Thus, in the last decade and more, public discussion of return refers to the sustainability of return that has

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Communal building above Kopači, used by inhabitants of the Goražde tent encampment for return. November 1999.

already taken place, rather than to significant additional return. But there are three notable problems that confound recovery in Bosnia.

The most salient problem is the lack of economic recovery, with the official unemployment rate among all ethnicities remaining upwards of 40%. In places where there is a returnee population, the returnees are the last to receive the few jobs that are available, and those who would establish a business of their own face prohibitive red tape and fees for permits. Where local development projects are implemented, priority is given to the dominant ethnicity.

Discrimination in education is an additional, serious problem. In the Federation, Croat and Bosniak pupils are taught separately in the 'two schools under one roof' system in more than 50 locations.⁵ In Croat-dominated Stolac, Bosniak pupils enter through the back door, and Croats through the front.

The separation between ethnicities that speak the same language and have nearly the same history and customs keeps tension simmering, and it is in this atmosphere, prevalent throughout BiH, that activists endeavour to unite people in the cause of citizens' rights and against corruption. During the period of refugee return, the most effective activists collaborated across ethnic lines and advocated for return in all directions. Today, the struggle against corruption and discrimination is likewise

most effective where returnees can unite with young members of the majority ethnicity. Instances of young people expressing their conscience have increased in recent years; Odisej in Bratunac, although now no longer in operation, was one example of cross-ethnic collaboration,⁶ and in Prijedor, the organization Kwart⁷ boasts exemplary collaboration between intelligent, sincere young Serbs and returnee activists.

It is difficult to be hopeful in BiH, where the Dayton straitjacket reinforces separation and the country's leaders continue to implement their predecessors' war goals by quasi-legal means. Ultimately, recovery will come when a new generation of domestic leaders applies itself to the well-being of the ordinary people. Just as important, change will not happen without the involvement of the mass of ordinary people, led by activists they can trust. With increased cooperation between returnees and open-minded local people of all ethnicities, true recovery can take place.

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1. I lived in BiH from mid-1997 to mid-1999, and have visited the country for extensive periods since then, as a researcher focusing on grassroots human rights campaigns – the campaign for return, and then other campaigns such as those for memorialisation and against discrimination.
2. Then director of Tuzla Canton's Office for Return of Displaced Persons.
3. Under the Bonn powers decreed in December 1997 by the Dayton-established Peace Implementation Council, the Office of the High Representative was empowered to promulgate laws for BiH, as well as to remove domestic politicians from office.
4. As of August 2015, the final results had still not been released.
5. See article by Perry V 'Wartime division in peacetime schools', pp26-7.
6. See <http://balkanwitness.glypx.com/journal2008-4.htm>
7. <http://centarzamladekvartprijedor.blogspot.co.uk/> (Bosnian only)