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# Political and social consequences of continuing displacement in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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**Twenty years after Dayton, failures to facilitate effective refugee and IDP return have had a social and political impact at both community and state level.**

The 1990s wars in the Balkans triggered large-scale displacement within the region. Serbia, Montenegro and Croatia hosted about 40% of the refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), while Austria, Germany, Canada, the United States and Australia also received large numbers. One hundred thousand people died in the conflict and two million people – almost half the population of BiH – were displaced, one million of whom were internally displaced. Although the peace agreement signed in Dayton, Ohio, on 21 November 1995 made provision for the return of refugees and IDPs to their place of origin, 20 years on the impact of displacement still affects the social fabric, political context and economy of the country.

The first two years following the war saw large numbers of people returning from abroad – but mainly to the areas where their ethnic group was dominant (known as ‘majority returns’). ‘Minority returns’ – displaced people who would now be ethnically in the numerical minority in their areas of origin – only picked up in the early 2000s, and by the mid-2000s it was clear that most of the ‘returns’ were fictional. People returned and registered in their place of origin solely for the purpose of reclaiming and then selling their property, after which they moved back to areas where their ethnic group was in the majority. This was particularly clear in the case of Serbs in Sarajevo, who tended to re-settle in the predominantly Serb part of the city, which is part of the Republika Srpska.

Some of the displaced choose not to return because of past traumas and a continuing feeling of insecurity, others because of an absence of economic opportunities. Displaced populations often experience high rates of poverty and limited access

to social and health services. They may not be able to finance their return or the reconstruction of their pre-conflict homes; furthermore, finding a job and reintegrating into the economy where there already is a staggeringly high unemployment rate is particularly difficult for a person from a minority ethnic group. When returns occur, it is often the older and economically inactive population that moves back, which affects the dynamic of community life and in turn hampers the potential for economic activity and development in the area.

Refugee and IDP return is also likely to be discouraged by the nature of the restructured state whereby, for example, the education system is divided ethnically, following the majority ethnic curriculum for subjects such as history, language and religious studies. Finally, most of the IDPs, particularly the younger ones, have by now re-established their lives and livelihoods and have built social capital in new areas of residence, and no longer have connections with their place of origin or a desire to return there.

## Political and social consequences

Bosnia and Herzegovina was ethnically the most mixed state in the former Yugoslavia, with a high degree of mutual respect, tolerance and coexistence. The displacement of large numbers of people during the conflict, however, caused **demographic changes** in the ethnic composition of towns and villages. Although Annex 7 of the Dayton Peace Agreement attempted to restore the multi-ethnic character of BiH, the ‘entity’ lines<sup>1</sup> followed war-time divisions and when the displaced populations did not, on the whole, return to their pre-war residence, ethnic homogeneity was further embedded. The result was the creation of



Sarajevo, 1996.

separate, almost mono-ethnic communities with little intermingling of the population.

These entity lines pose not only institutional and structural borders but also emotional and psychological barriers. Heterogeneous, mixed communities were the places of the most vicious fighting, and return to these areas has been slow and difficult. In cases where it has occurred, the high levels of **mistrust** and in some cases ethnic intolerance remain, with little potential for building strong and integrated communities.

In turn, mistrust, intolerance and lack of community-level integration have resulted in the failure of **reconciliation** efforts at both the community and national level. Even in cases where there have been minority returns, these did not necessarily facilitate the process of reconciliation; simply sharing living space does not imply that the ethnic groups have resolved the issues of the past and forgiven each other. And as people from different ethnic groups continue to live separately from each other, the divisions are being fomented and used by those promoting nationalist

politics and potential secession, generating renewed **political instability** in the country.

Although Annex 7 of the Dayton Peace Agreement created a legal and policy framework for the return of refugees and IDPs with the goal of re-building inter-ethnic trust and respect, the subsequent policies and approaches did not succeed in ensuring long-term returns and, with that, long-term stability and community building. Although the majority of the population of BiH simply wishes to see progress and better opportunities, the approach to refugee and IDP return has instead perpetuated political and economic instability by entrenching ethnic divisions. The absence of inter-ethnic community integration which could have happened through returns also resulted in missed opportunities for reconciliation.

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1. The Dayton Peace Agreement divided BiH into two 'entities': the Federation of BiH and the Republika Srpska.