

# The role of remote voting in encouraging return

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**Once there is a genuine possibility of going home, what influences a forced migrant's decision to return to a pre-conflict residence, often in the face of very difficult conditions? What role can remote voting play?**

Victims of 'ethnic cleansing' have returned home in significant numbers all over Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) but no municipality has been as successful in peacefully reversing ethnic cleansing as the Drvar region in western BiH. In 1991, 97% of Drvar's 17,000 inhabitants were Serbs. After the September 1995 offensive by Croat forces, the only original inhabitants who remained were 83 older people in isolated villages. However, by 2000, Serb returnees represented 70% of the local population, making Drvar the first municipality in which the pre-war majority was restored via peaceful returns.<sup>1</sup>

Not only did former residents from Drvar region start returning in large numbers before the country-wide turn of the tide in 1999-2000 but they won municipal elections, gained significant representation in the police force and local administration, and recovered the demographic majority status they had had before the war. This was achieved despite bitter resistance to return from some quarters.

This article combines findings of fieldwork conducted in Drvar region in 2011 with data collected in BiH in June and July 2013,<sup>2</sup> including data on both currently displaced people and returnees. Survey-focused work on displaced persons is relatively rare, for a number of reasons. It is frequently risky in terms of the personal security of interviewees, is politically sensitive and is difficult to carry out with a representative sample of displaced respondents. In conflict zones, forced migrants represent vulnerable but mobile populations; while their vulnerability makes them extremely important for social science enquiries, their mobility makes it equally challenging to determine representativeness in the sampling procedures. Such studies consequently often focus on available populations in designated refugee camps or neighbourhoods, overlooking those displaced persons who are more integrated within the broader population. In the end, governments, international organisations

and NGOs are often forced to make decisions without consulting vulnerable groups.

Reflecting the importance both of security concerns and of memories of home in making decisions about return, our data indicates that women and those who experienced wartime victimisation are less likely to return. Likewise, older Bosnians with positive memories of pre-conflict inter-ethnic relations are more likely to return than younger persons or those with negative memories. Better-educated forced migrants are less likely to return, which is probably related to their easier economic integration in their new place of residence. Young women are the least likely to return, which might be related to greater opportunities for women in urban Bosnia (or Western countries of exile) compared to small-town or rural Bosnia. Finally, persons displaced from areas experiencing high levels of return are more likely to return themselves.

The Bosnian return experience points to several limitations of internationally sponsored peacekeeping. Even in the townships where community effort led to successful returns, the mass return was generally not followed by well-designed and well-funded local economic development programmes. Consequently, many returnees left again but this time primarily for economic reasons – to find jobs. While BiH's cities were once genuinely multi-ethnic, they are now overwhelmingly mono-ethnic. However, there have been examples of successful returns in smaller, mono-ethnic townships or villages, most notably in the Drvar region.

### The Coalition for Drvar

The Drvar association of displaced persons (the Coalition for Drvar) was formed when it became clear to those wishing to return that the authorities in different parts of BiH were not truly interested in implementing the right of return. One of the first achievements of the Coalition for Drvar's leaders was to convince followers to vote in their pre-war hometowns, against the wishes of those who were counting on the votes of displaced Serbs in order to consolidate their own control in the parts of BiH which were now predominantly Serb.



Mixed groups of Serb and Croat returnees living in Bukve village, 2001.

Annex 3 Article IV of the Dayton Peace Agreement stipulates that “a citizen who no longer lives in the municipality in which he or she resided in 1991 shall, as a general rule, be expected to vote, in person or by absentee ballot, in that municipality.”<sup>3</sup> This electoral provision permitted refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to cast absentee ballots in their pre-war home cities and in 1997, for example, Mile Marčeta was elected by absentee ballot as mayor of Drvar. Described by the international media as a “symbol of hope in a land of hate”, the mayor convinced around 1,600 to 2,000 displaced persons to accompany him back to the municipality. Despite Croat resistance, the assassination of two elderly returnees and an assassination attempt against Marčeta himself, forced migrants managed to re-establish themselves on their land. The Coalition for Drvar not only

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helped reverse ethnic cleansing but also played a leading role in mobilising support from the international community as well as locally among the multi-ethnic country-wide Coalition for the Return of the Expelled.

The theme poster of the Coalition for Drvar was a large yellow map of all Bosnia and Herzegovina and a picture of a house with a little chimney. “*Hocu kuci*,” it says. “I want to go home.”

The Drvar experience highlights the importance of remote voting for successful returns. In Drvar many IDPs have continued to have a vote in their pre-conflict municipalities, even while in exile. As per Article 20.8 of the Bosnian Election Law, distant voting for displaced persons will remain in place until decided otherwise by the UN High Representative or the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH.<sup>4</sup> Voting

rights was a key element of the Dayton architecture – in contrast to other UN-led peace mediations such as the Annan Plan for Cyprus which included significant restrictions on the political rights of displaced persons. To prevent situations arising in post-conflict societies where municipal authorities represent exclusively either new or old inhabitants but not both, peace settlements should combine remote voting with – what was missing from Dayton – power-sharing systems at the local level.<sup>5</sup> Such institutional mechanisms could allow refugees and IDPs to maintain financial, institutional and political ties with their home region.

Could cases of successful return in BiH be replicated in other post-conflict societies? While some conditions appear to be unique to Bosnia and hard to replicate – such as the massive presence of the international agencies in a *de facto* protectorate – others might work elsewhere. If a post-conflict settlement enables forced migrants to vote in local elections in the place of displacement (by a remote voting mechanism), forced migrants might be able to peacefully regain a stake in local political institutions and be encouraged to return.

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1. International Crisis Group (May 2000) *Bosnia refugee logjam breaks: is the international community ready?* ICG Balkans, Report No 95. <http://tinyurl.com/ICG-Bosnia-May2000>

2. The data collection was done by Sarajevo-based Ipsos BH, with funding provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, as part of ‘The Way Home: Peaceful Voluntary Return Project’. For an earlier study focusing on community returns see Stefanović D and Loizides N (2011) ‘The Way Home: Peaceful Return of Victims of Ethnic Cleansing’, *Human Rights Quarterly*, 33 (2): 408-430.

3. See [www.refworld.org/docid/3de495c34.html](http://www.refworld.org/docid/3de495c34.html)

4. See [www.izbori.ba/Documents/documents/English/Laws/Election\\_Law\\_of\\_BiH-eng.pdf](http://www.izbori.ba/Documents/documents/English/Laws/Election_Law_of_BiH-eng.pdf)

5. See [www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6a6e84.html](http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6a6e84.html)