

# Refuchess: Locating Bosniac Repatriates after the War in Bosnia–Herzegovina

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## ABSTRACT

One of the central contradictions characterising the state of Bosnia–Herzegovina that emerged from the ashes of the 1992–1995 war concerns the territorial distribution of its population according to nationality. On the one hand, the foreign intervention, and the Dayton Peace Agreement it brokered, sanctioned its division into largely nationally homogenised polities, consolidating military conquests. On the other hand, large foreign funds were invested in programmes of refugee repatriation and return to redress ethnic cleansing, with considerable success in terms of property restitution. Rather than understanding these dynamics as a resurrection of a prior situation, this article considers them as part of a set of interrelated transformations. Working from ethnographic material gathered among Bosniac repatriates in the early phases of large-scale return, it first introduces the notion of *refuchess*, the strategic deployment and movement of nationalised persons across nationalised places. It then zooms out to investigate such return movements more generally in terms of different projects of home making and in terms of their paradoxical implications on the national demographic structure of Bosnia–Herzegovina. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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## INTRODUCTION

A 1994 poster entitled *REFUCHESS* by the Art Publishing Service in the then besieged city of Sarajevo depicted a chessboard with two rows of 10 person icons. Representing those displaced in the conflict in Bosnia–Herzegovina (BiH) as pawns, a classic metaphor of subjection and manipulation, the poster implied that displacement itself had become a strategic parameter in the 1992–1995 war. Wartime *refuchess* took many forms, of which the military expulsion of persons of undesired nationality – an activity that henceforth came to be designated as ‘ethnic cleansing’ – was the most documented. It also involved nationalist elites organising, with varying degrees of force, the resettlement of the very people they claimed to represent, such as the resettlement of Bosnian Croats into western BiH. Post-war examples include the 1996 exodus to territories under Serbian control by Bosnian Serbs from Sarajevo suburbs that the Dayton Peace Agreement had assigned to the Bosniac-dominated canton of Sarajevo.<sup>1</sup>

Chess, of course, often serves as a metaphor for war. If the poster represented displaced persons (DPs) as pawns, who were the Karpovs, the Fischers, and the Kasparovs in this lethal game in BiH? In wartime Sarajevo, the primary actors referred to are undoubtedly the Bosnian Serb nationalist elites and their tutors in Serbia. In fact, both the wartime political leader of the Bosnian Serb nationalists, Radovan Karadžić, and their

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military commander, Ratko Mladić, were known to be keen chess players – during the war, they even countered rumours of disagreement between them with a televised game near the front line. Chess is also popular in the detention centre of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in Den Haag, where many inmates have apparently no aversion towards those with different national backgrounds when it comes to post-war entertainment. In this context, it is important to note that the *refuchess* poster shows a chessboard set up for a game, which requires more than one player: Hence, at least two of the military-political elites in the conflict (and possibly all three of them) are being accused of treating the displaced as pawns in their geostrategic schemes. Events on the ground have tended to support this view: Many patterns of displacement in the BiH war can only be understood as integral parts of wider processes of military conquest, consolidation of territories, foreign and local political support, control over humanitarian aid, and so on (see e.g. Bougarel, 1996).

Furthermore, already during the military violence, most Bosnians clearly detected another party at the chessboard: the Foreign Intervention Agencies (FIAs).<sup>2</sup> Dominant Serbian and Croatian nationalist discourses represented them largely as an occupying imperialist force, but among others, particularly among inhabitants of Bosniac-dominated territories, the situation was more ambiguous (partly reflecting the overlaps between Bosnian unitarism and Bosniac nationalism): On the one hand, FIAs were seen as possible allies, or at least guarantors of survival, but on the other hand, people resented what they experienced as their inefficacy, their reluctance to intervene when desired, and their pragmatic (many say cynical) deal making with various sides. A much-quoted example involves FIA complicity in the invasion of Srebrenica by the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS), the ‘evacuation’ of its Bosniac population (itself already consisting largely of DPs), and the ensuing massacre of thousands of men and boys. Another reason for indignation was the fact that the FIAs allowed VRS considerable control over humanitarian aid deliveries to the city of Sarajevo that it besieged. In both cases, pictures of foreign functionaries engaging in a seemingly friendly manner with Bosnian Serb nationalist top brass (over food, drinks, and, indeed, the occasional

game of chess) further fanned resentment. As a result, even among those who did not straightforwardly reject the FIAs as the institutional and military arm of Western conspiracies, suspicion was prevalent. It is against the background of this multi-stranded chess game of war-time BiH that we must understand the bitter paradoxical combination of the sense of subordination and of abandonment felt by many Bosnians.

The stakes of this game were high. Every second Bosnian fled her or his pre-war place of residence, and around 100,000 people have been confirmed killed or are still missing, of which some 41% civilians. Over 80% of all civilians confirmed killed or missing are Bosniacs.<sup>3</sup> In late 1995, with the territorial balance tipped after a period of intense offensives as well as NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) air strikes against VRS positions, the foreign-brokered Dayton Agreement secured a sovereign BiH, which had been the stated preference of 62.68% of its adult population in a 1992 referendum (99% of those who did vote in a 64% turnout; a majority of Bosnian Serbs did not vote). Dayton BiH, however, was divided into two entities: *Federacija BiH* (‘the Federation’) and *Republika Srpska* (‘RS’). Because the Federation was itself decentralised into cantons, this effectively consolidated the largely nationally homogenised Bosnian Serb, Bosnian Croat, and Bosniac polities produced by wartime population movements. Indeed, in 1996, only 10% of all Bosnian Serbs who had, in 1991, lived in the geographical area that is now the Federation remained there, while only 5% of all Bosnian Croats and Bosniacs remained in their pre-war places of residence in what is now RS. The military dimension of *refuchess* thus ended with a near-total unmixing of the population in terms of nationality.

#### THE DAYTON PARADOX AND 1 MILLION RETURNS

In 2000–2001, basing myself in Tuzla, I carried out a year-long period of participant observation and interviews among displaced and returned persons with different national backgrounds in north-east BiH, both in the Federation and in RS.<sup>4</sup> I worked with people on reconstruction sites, attended meetings by would-be returnees as well as those who did not wish to return, and listened

to their stories over copious amounts of coffee. In this article, I present some findings from that ethnographic research and then cast them against documentary and narrative evidence collected during subsequent yearly research visits to BiH (roughly a few months every year) as well as during a new long-term research project in a Sarajevo suburb (8 months in 2008). This later research did not focus on return *per se*, but the issue is so central to Bosnian political life that its presence is always felt. Hence, while still drawing on the immediacy of ethnography, for the purpose of this special issue, I step back to try to make sense of return movements on a longer time scale, both in terms of different people's (re)makings of home and of their paradoxical implications on the national demographic structure of BiH.

Six years after the production of the *refuchess* poster, when I started my field research, many people still harboured its representation of the displaced as pawns. If anything, the strength of this image seemed to have increased, as had the relative responsibility attributed to the FIAs. The Dayton Agreement established a strongly decentralised state, in which many executive, legislative, and judicial powers lay with a myriad of institutions on the level of entities and cantons, now largely homogenous in terms of the nationality of their populations. Ever since, many Bosnian politicians – particularly but not exclusively Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat nationalists – have actively worked to maintain the weakness of the BiH state level and to maintain or strengthen their fiefdoms. The Dayton Agreement established strong mandates for the Office of the High Representative, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and a host of associated institutions, all as guarantors of the Dayton Agreement. Yet it is precisely this agreement – which still functions as BiH's constitution today – that has consolidated the existence of the nationally homogenised lower level polities (Ćurak, 2004; Mujkić, 2007).

However, by no means should we conclude that the FIAs have only worked to set in concrete the 'unmixed' BiH that emerged from the war. Among many domains, I focus here on one that was considered to be central to their role: the return of DPs and refugees [following local use, I refer to internally displaced persons (IDPs) as

DPs]. Probably the single most quoted section of the Dayton Agreement was its Annex 7:

'All refugees and displaced persons shall have to right freely to return to their homes of origin. They shall have the right to have restored to them their property of which they were deprived in the course of the hostilities since 1991 and to be compensated for any property that cannot be restored to them. The early return of refugees and displaced persons is an important objective of the settlement of the conflict in BiH. The Parties confirm that they will accept the return of such persons who have left their territory, including those who have been accorded temporary protection by third countries.'

The last line indicates that, of the three 'durable solutions' for refugees as defined by the UNHCR, voluntary repatriation of refugees from BiH was prioritised over integration and resettlement (Heimerl, 2005). Clearly, the desire to repatriate refugees from Western Europe included a large dose of *realpolitik*: With hostility towards asylum rising and welfare state provisions decreasing, governments were unwilling to secure long-term shelter for hundreds of thousands of Bosnians (Harvey, 2006). In FIA documents and speeches, however, a more 'moral' argument was made for return policies: They were meant to restore human rights and to show nationalist elites that their war exploits would not be rewarded with mononational mini-states but rather reversed in a 'remixed' BiH (Phuong, 2000: 166; Black, 2002; Heimerl, 2005). The unusual reference to return to 'homes of origin' [the UNHCR normally emphasises return to *country* of origin (Phuong, 2000: 170)] also indicates that, from the outset, FIA rhetoric opposed return to ethnic cleansing.

The return process, both internal and external, is ongoing, but tiny figures after 2005 indicate a saturation point. Results have been hailed as a success by many foreign observers, and, when compared with other recent post-war situations, they are impressive indeed. According to 2008 UNHCR statistics – the source of all figures in this article – a total of just over 1 million Bosnians have become returnees in BiH (of whom 440,000 repatriates). That is almost half of the total number of people who fled their pre-war places of residence. Over 9 out of 10 claims for property restitution have been settled, re-assigning some

200,000 units of accommodation to their pre-war owners or holders of the right to residence. Taking the link between return and 'remixing' at face value, it would seem then that the ethnic cleansing of BiH has been reversed considerably by massive homecomings.

To a large extent, the remainder of this article qualifies this judgement. Given my critical tone, let me point out first that I salute both foreign and local efforts that have made return possible for a proportion of the displaced and, particularly, the courage of many of those who pioneered as actual returnees. Perhaps more controversially, I also sympathise with those Bosnians who draw a degree of moral satisfaction from seeing ethnic cleansing campaigns being partially reversed in the face of those who carried them out. Yet in what follows, I focus on two major limitations of such reversals. First, branching out from ethnographic research, I consider the *national demographic* impact of return on BiH's population-territory matrix: To what extent have the 1 million returns actually reversed and to what extent have they left untouched, consolidated, or even exacerbated nationally homogenised patterns of residence? Second, to understand some less immediately visible patterns beyond aggregate statistics, I trace some *experiential* aspects of return as a process, not an event (see Introduction to this issue): What kind of 'home' does it involve? What are the implications for the social study of return (cf. Black and Koser, 1999; Long and Oxfeld, 2004; Markowitz and Stefansson, 2004)?

Even though my research has always involved people with different national backgrounds, for reasons of brevity, I shall focus here exclusively on the experiences of Bosniac repatriates. Bosnians are the most numerous among the actual return population (over 60% of all returned DPs and of all repatriates by 2008), and the political parties dominated by Bosnians – whether with explicitly nationalist programmes or not – have shown somewhat more commitment to such return movements than others. Rather than claiming statistical representativity, I first turn the spotlight on the trajectories of some persons who make up the repatriation statistics within a wider context of *refuchess*, then aiming to flesh out some more general contradictions within displacement and return processes themselves. With US policy makers considering a 'Bosnia option'

for Iraq – a 'controlled realignment of population groups in order to minimize communal violence and set the stage for a stable political settlement, what might be termed a "soft partition" of the country' (O'Hanlon and Joseph, 2007) – such a focus may prove timely.

## MAJORITY RETURN

Roughly three-fifths of the over 1 million Bosnians who sought protection abroad did not repatriate. The other two-fifths repatriated mainly as part of a government-assisted repatriation programme, run by the International Organisation for Migration, from Germany, the state that had accepted by far the largest number of them. Some other states, such as Switzerland, followed, and the vast majority of repatriations (over 70%) took place in the first three post-war years. By 2008, out of a total of 440,000 repatriates, about 280,000 were Bosnians. Regardless of whether they actually experienced this as a return to their *patria*, we can distinguish three main categories in terms of their national demographic settlement. In the language of the FIAs: 'majority returnees', 'relocators', and 'minority returnees'.

The first category, 'majority returnees', are persons who repatriated to BiH and moved back into their pre-war town or village, which was by then primarily inhabited by fellow-nationals and controlled by political parties claiming to represent their nation. While precise figures are difficult to obtain, we can deduce that they constituted perhaps about half of all Bosniac repatriates. In terms of its national demographic effects, such majority return, of course, did not reverse ethnic cleansing at all. Instead, every single Bosniac majority returnee to Federation territories now under Bosniac political control tilted the balance further in favour of local Bosniac numerical domination.

But did these persons return to their 'homes of origin'? If by 'home' we mean 'a certain house or flat', then many did. If we widen our definition beyond safety and property (Jansen and Löfving, 2008), this becomes debatable. Majority returnees were not subject to nationally specific problems of physical safety, but many reluctantly sought their way in their pre-war place of residence, which they often experienced as having changed beyond recognition. In this, their situation shared much with other, not war-related returnees



(cf. Long and Oxfeld, 2004; Markowitz and Stefansson, 2004). After a prolonged stay in Western Europe, they were likely to experience less severe material problems than many of those who had stayed behind during the war, which in turn often exposed them to a degree of resentment by the latter (Jansen, 2007). Of course, repatriates were also affected by socio-economic dimensions of war destruction, the collapse of Yugoslav networks, and post-socialist de-industrialisation. Even so, for a section of majority returnees, voluntary repatriation did constitute an attractive option, particularly on an affective basis: It allowed them to be where they felt they belonged (Stefansson, 2004). Others expressed anger at their treatment as pawns in the *refuchess* scenarios of repatriation policies and attempted re-emigration. The voluntariness of repatriations is also put into perspective by the fact that figures from states that did not have early mass repatriation programmes remained minimal.<sup>5</sup>

## RELOCATION

A second category of Bosniac repatriates returned to BiH but *not* to their pre-war place of residence, now under Bosnian Serb or Bosnian Croat control. The *refuchess* they were caught up in unfolded on the crossroads between the repatriation schemes of Western European governments and national demographic concerns of nationalist forces in BiH.

Let us look at an example. Nusreta and Nijaz Lupić, both retired skilled labourers in their late 60s, 'returned' to the town of Gradačac in 1998. Prior to the war, they had lived in a privately owned house in the centre of Modriča, Nusreta's birthplace. Pre-war Modriča had no absolute majority of any one nationality, but its centre was inhabited by a majority of Bosniacs (then: Bosnian Muslims). In 1992, shortly after the referendum outcome in favour of BiH independence, Nijaz Lupić was among the numerous non-Serbs in Modriča who were arrested in a Serbian nationalist takeover. Some men were executed or forced to work as labourers, but Nijaz Lupić escaped this fate, probably, he assumed, because of an intervention by their neighbour-policeman, a Bosnian Serb (or, as he typically put it: Orthodox). Nevertheless, the couple was separated, and they entered a *refuchess* scenario not of their own choosing. Nusreta Lupić fell ill and her

trajectory took her to several refugee centres and hospitals in Croatia. Nijaz escaped, via Croatia, to the Netherlands. After a year of fearing the worst, they found each other through a UNHCR advertisement, and Nusreta joined her husband in the Netherlands. When their asylum procedure was complete, they moved into a flat and drew Dutch pensions. While expressing gratitude to *Holandija*, Nusreta and Nijaz Lupić never really felt at home there. They were far away from their relatives, struggled with the language, felt overly dependent upon others, and were simply bored.

Two years after the war, the Lupićs signed up for a return scheme under which they retained their Dutch pension and health insurance. As they remarked, the fact that they had no children made this decision easier. The couple moved back to BiH, but not to Modriča, now in RS. Instead, they moved in with Nusreta's sister's household in Gradačac, a few kilometres to the south-east, in the Federation. This is where I got to know them in 2001. Previously 'mixed', now overwhelmingly Bosniac inhabited, Gradačac contained a large DP population directly from nearby Modriča as well as a number of repatriates like the Lupićs. By 2001, Nusreta and Nijaz Lupić had visited nearby Modriča only once, just after they arrived back in BiH. Their house was destroyed. They had been warmly welcomed by some neighbours, but Nusreta in particular – having grown up there – was hurt by the contrast between her memories of a common, working Modriča and its current overwhelmingly Serbian homogeneity in terms of population, architecture, and iconography, and its depressive atmosphere. The Lupićs put in a claim for property restitution but never intended to return to their old hometown, 'because it didn't exist anymore'. All in all, however, they were pleased to have returned to BiH and happy to be with loved ones.

Bosniacs made up more than half of all refugees from BiH seeking protection in third states (over 600,000). Because Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs were most likely to have fled to Croatia and Serbia, where there was little or no encouragement to return, Bosniacs also constituted more than half (63%) of all refugee repatriations. The vast majority of those, over four-fifths, settled in Bosniac-dominated parts of the Federation. By 2008, less than 10% returned to RS. Many, of course, have never lived in that territory in the

first place (majority returnees), but others had, and yet they did not return there. Instead, like the Lupićs, they 'relocated' into places where a majority of inhabitants, including those controlling the local authorities, shared their national background. Estimates on relocation hover around 50–60% (Phuong, 2000: 174; Black, 2002: 131; Belloni, 2005: 439). The UNHCR's own estimate for 1997, the top year for repatriation, was 70%. These relocators thus make up a considerable part of return statistics, but, unless we consider the outer borders of a weakly integrated protectorate consisting of nationally homogenised territories to be the boundaries of 'home', we must conclude that a large proportion have not returned to the 'homes of origin' of Annex 7. They have effectively moved into internal displacement in the 'other' entity, and some relocators, like the Lupićs, have succeeded to make a *new* home in the Federation upon their return to BiH.

Relocation as a *refuchess* scenario, common among non-Bosniac repatriates too, was justified by the repatriating governments with reference to the 'internal flight alternative': If a person can safely return to her/his state of origin, a localised risk of persecution in one part of that state is not recognised as a basis for asylum claims. So, rather than being personifications of the Dayton pledge to reverse ethnic cleansing through return to 'homes of origin', a large majority of repatriations actually entrenched national homogenisation both in RS and in the Federation. While some, like the Lupićs, moved in with relatives, many others occupied accommodation of which the owners or holders of the right to residence had themselves fled. Given the dynamics of the BiH war, those previous residents were often national others, and *their* potential return was also made difficult by such relocation. In fact, rather than 'remixing' BiH, relocation movements have thus produced *further* 'unmixing' by increasing already existing local majorities of a particular nationality.

#### 'MINORITY RETURNEES': EARLY DAYS

Rather than relocation or majority return, the reversal of ethnic cleansing requires 'minority return', defined by the UNHCR as 'return by people to their pre-war homes in areas controlled by another ethnic group'. Yet, from the outset, the spectre of minority return has met with strong

resistance from nationalist elites and has been countered with *refuchess* strategies that sometimes amount to 'ethnic engineering' (see Ito, 2001; Ó Tuathail and Dahlman, 2006). Thus, on the one hand, through intimidation, violence, and non-intervention (no evictions of illegal occupants, passive police presence, etc.), local authorities in RS prevented Bosniacs such as the Lupićs from returning. On the other hand, using promises, fear-inducing propaganda, and threats, they also discouraged Bosnian Serb DP populations in their municipalities from returning to their pre-war places of residence now in the Federation. While officially responsible for the implementation of return, local authorities in RS were much more adept at allocating accommodation to their own displaced nationals than they were to create conditions for return by Bosniacs. Of course, there was a genuine need to house large numbers of displaced Bosnian Serbs (partly because local authorities in the Federation were often similarly reluctant to create conditions for their return), but local authorities also cherished such people as loyal voting banks (Jansen, 2003). These strategies to demographically 'secure' certain territories through relocation and integration of their 'own' DPs further diminished prospects for Bosniac returnees to RS, but it did not completely prevent such return.

We can gain some insights about early minority return from the experiences of one household who had been repatriated from Germany. In the summer of 2000, Sebiha and Muharem Đapo (both in their late 40s) were among perhaps a thousand returnees in the large village of Janja, nestled along the Drina, now the state border with Serbia. Their 18-year-old daughter Sanela was with them while another daughter had remained in Germany. With most of the early (mainly older) returnees, the Đapo's lived on a peripheral unpaved dust road. Two houses had self-made kiosks in the front, selling a tiny selection of goods. Many had solid metal fences around their gardens. In those summer days of 2000, most shutters were closed, some damaged, and plastic screens of foreign humanitarian organisations were ubiquitous. Yet, as we shall see, much of the destruction that these screens covered up had not occurred during the 1992–1995 war.

Janja had formed a municipality on its own until 1963, after which it became a part of the

larger municipality of Bijeljina. While Bijeljina town had a 'mixed' population, most villages around it were almost exclusively inhabited by people of one national group. In Janja, known as a relatively prosperous place with a strong agricultural sector, some 95% of the over 10,000 pre-war inhabitants had declared their nationality as Bosnian Muslims. Because of its proximity to Serbia, some had worked there, while there were also contingents of *Gastarbajteri* in Germany and in non-aligned states. Sebiha Đapo used to work in a shop, whereas her husband had been a long-haul lorry driver. In the spring of 1992, the area very quickly fell under control of Serbian (para)military forces from both sides of the Drina. Unlike in many other parts of RS, many Bosniacs initially stayed on in Janja, being promised safety after handing in any arms they had to the militarily vastly superior surrounding Serbian forces. Nevertheless, the exodus of the Bosniac population started straight away and lasted for over 2 years: Several dozen *Janjarci* were killed, and by 1995, all but some 200 had left – some expelled with physical violence, and some worn out by discrimination and threats, which increased as the war continued and ever more Serbian DPs arrived. Expulsion often took the form of so-called voluntary departure, organised at great cost (see Human Rights Watch, 2000).

The Đapo's did initially stay, a decision helped by the fact that they had no sons who could be mobilised. They maintained relatively good terms with the Bosnian Serbian DP reserve officer who they, as instructed, accommodated in their house. Still, in 1994, Muharem Đapo, who had been subjected to a regime of forced labour, came under pressure to work at the frontline, and Sebiha Đapo lost her job. Like many *Janjarci* before them, the Đapo's eventually fled to Tuzla, the nearest sizeable town in the Federation, and from there, they soon joined Sebiha's sister in Germany. In 1998, they were repatriated to BiH. Their eldest daughter remained in Germany, and the rest of the family relocated to Tuzla. A Janja DP association there was actively organising for return to Janja, and the Đapo's were among the first to return, in 2000. However, they found their arrival obstructed; by then, Bijeljina housed about 30,000 Bosnian Serb DPs, one of the highest rates in BiH. Because no real battles had taken place in Janja, its housing stock had remained largely unscathed by the violence, and by the end of the

war, Bijeljina's nationalist authorities allocated most of them to Bosnian Serb DPs.

Much of the destruction that was so visible in Janja in the summer of 2000 had taken place recently, when groups of Bosnian Serb DPs 'protested' against the possibility of eviction from the Bosniac-owned accommodation they occupied (the inverted commas indicate that they knew full well that the local authorities, who were supposed to carry out those evictions, would not do this on their own accord). Sebiha and Sanela Đapo told me that they had first noticed that their phone had been cut off, and quickly after that, the electricity went. Then, a large number of Bosnian Serb DPs entered their street: men, women, and children. Some marched and sang 'This is Serbia', whereas others appeared in cars with the number plates removed. They blocked the roads, harassed and stoned Bosniac returnees, threw molotov cocktails, and seriously damaged some houses. Sebiha and Sanela Đapo, terrified, hid in a cupboard. Meanwhile, Muharem Đapo returned from one of his on-and-off jobs in Tuzla and tried to make his way into the street, but the 'protestors' stopped him. They dropped an explosive device, and while he reacted quickly enough to kick it away, he was badly burned and had to be transported to hospital. The RS police and Russian Stabilisation Force (SFOR) soldiers, the Đapos told me, looked on from the corner of the street. It was only after US SFOR helicopters flew over that things calmed down.

With many other Bosniacs, the Đapos fled temporarily back to Tuzla. But they quickly returned. When I first met them, Muharem Đapo was recovering from his wounds, Sebiha was on a heavy diet of tranquilisers, and the whole household shared the multiple precariousness so typical of minority returnee lives in BiH in those days. It is in this context that we must understand the fact that by the end of the millennium, only about a quarter of all returns in BiH fell into the category of minority returns and that, in 1999, it was reported that only 3% of Bosnians who succeeded in obtaining a certificate of property restitution from the foreign-run Commission for Real Property Claims actually succeeded in moving back into their house or flat (International Crisis Group, 1999). Moreover, even reconstructed houses, less subject to competition, often stood empty: some 40% in 1999 (Cox, 1999).

## MINORITY RETURN: 2000–2008

FIA functionaries were well aware of these problems: By the end of the 1990s, when they considered the major part of the repatriation effort from Western states over, it became clear that the number of relocating repatriates was much larger than the number of minority returnees. Return movements were thus doing more to consolidate nationally homogenised populations on certain territories than they were doing to counteract them. Minority returns were considered dangerous; the small number that had taken place by 1999 was mainly those of Bosniacs and Bosnian Croats within the Federation. In response, FIAs mounted a campaign for minority return. Despite the Dayton consolidation of wartime territorial conquests, this reaffirmed the foreign intervention's self-representation as an effort to reverse ethnic cleansing (ÓTuathail and Dahlman, 2004). If, before 1998, FIAs had in fact discouraged minority return to places where they feared safety problems (Belloni, 2005: 439), this policy was later changed, particularly in response to pressure for return from Bosniac DP associations, such as the *Janjarc* in Tuzla. Very large funds were invested, and increasingly effective guarantees for the safety of returnees were provided by foreign soldiers and pressure on local police. Money and materials were set apart for beneficiaries who had made a clear commitment to engage in minority return in all directions (e.g. by cleaning up the site and taking part in FIA-supported overnight stays). In the process, statistics regarding minority returnees became central in the self-evaluation and self-justification of the foreign intervention (Jansen, 2005).

Results became visible in 2000 already, with over 60,000 minority returnees. The Đapos formed part of an official total of some 25,000 Bosniac minority returnees to RS that year. While they and many other early returnees to RS experienced violent obstruction, they persisted in their desire to return to their pre-war place of residence and paved the way for several more thousands of returnees to Janja in the following years. For BiH in its entirety, the minority return process peaked in the period 2001–2003, after a shift from actual return to property restitution (see below), and 2008 statistics speak of a cumulative 460,000 minority returnees (a little under half of all those returning from internal or

external displacement). Some 150,000 Bosniacs are said to have returned to RS, which is about one-third of all Bosniacs who used to live on that territory before the war. This figure is unlikely to rise further without major changes in the political set-up of BiH.

## REFUCHESS AND THE SOCIAL STUDY OF HOME MAKING

I now step back and, refracting my ethnographic material against broader patterns on a longer time scale, propose a critical look at some more general patterns in the return movements in BiH. Anyone familiar with the return process in BiH (anthropologists, FIA functionaries, and, above all, returnees) knows that official statistics of minority returnees have always been inflated. Registration of returnees is often based on unsystematically collected figures from local authorities and FIAs, both of whom, for different but related reasons, wish to provide evidence of good performance. A second problem is of more interest to me here: The dynamics of population movement in BiH render the line between a returnee and a non-returnee much more ambiguous than it may seem at first sight. I have written about this in ethnographic detail elsewhere (Jansen, 2008); so in the remainder of this article, I schematically sketch some of its interrelated patterns in order to put into perspective the official tally of 150,000 Bosniac minority returnees in RS. This will require me to relate the notion of minority return constituting a reversal of ethnic cleansing to wider processes in post-war, post-socialist BiH and, thus, to the social study of home making.

## Degrees of Return

Minority return has involved a reorganisation of horizons of security and possibility, reflecting the new political geography of BiH and its division into nationally homogenised territories. Resonating with the view of return as a process, not an event (see Introduction to this special issue), this has also shaped return practices, rendering them not either/or experiences but a matter of degree. Many early Bosniac minority returnee concentrations were located in villages just across the Inter-Entity Boundary Line (IEBL), thus allowing life in RS which was predominantly oriented towards



the Federation. But also further into RS, and until today, many retain their Federation identity (ID) cards and effectively straddle the IEBL for employment, education, health care, shopping, and so on.<sup>6</sup> In fact, many people initially signed up for return programmes in order to qualify for reconstruction assistance without intending to move back permanently. This was made easier once the FIAs switched their emphasis from actual return to property rights (Philpott, 2005) and lifted provisions of actual return. Even after physical safety became less of a burning issue, in villages in RS like the one I have written about elsewhere (Jansen, 2008), many returnees maintained this ambiguity. Still today, only a proportion of those making up the figures of minority returnees live permanently on RS territory, while some occasionally stay overnight, some use their houses for weekend purposes, and others commute from the Federation. Some rent out their restituted accommodation, and some of those who have not done so already still hope to sell or exchange it while living in a 'majority' area or abroad.

Many DPs consider the feeling of being suspended in time and space ('being nor in the sky, nor on earth' [*ni na nebu ni na zemlji*], as the local saying goes) one of the worst problems associated with displacement. Why then would they prolong such a situation of suspension? In the specific circumstances of Dayton BiH, where the very set-up of the state itself is experienced as being in suspension, I suggest that many choose to engage only in a degree of return because this allows them to spread both risks and opportunities. With few people confident that *refuchess* is completely over, a degree of return allows them to re-establish forms of affective attachment as well as material investment in their pre-war place of residence while stopping short of a headlong dive into the difficulties associated with 'being a minority'. Local employment, for example, remains extremely difficult to obtain for minority returnees, and straddling remains common for work, but also for educational, health, and administrative purposes. An additional problem in the dysfunctional labyrinth of state, entity, canton, and municipality institutions in BiH is that returnees who register in RS often fail in their bids to replace the welfare payments they no longer receive in the Federation with equivalent ones in RS (e.g. civilian war victims). In the word of one Bosniac

member of the RS assembly, returnees thus 'become ping-pong balls in the hands of politics and of the unsolved relations between entities and cantons' (*Oslobođenje*, 2008b). With the state itself in suspension, and reluctant to be either pawns or ping-pong balls, returnees themselves retain certain forms of suspension (ambiguity with regard to actual return) to reduce other forms of it (precariousness of lives and livelihoods).

### Concentration in Peripheral Enclaves

Minority return in BiH is concentrated in particular places, whereas others are characterised by none or very little of it (for the sake of argument, we will assume that actual statistics, even though inflated, do correspond proportionally to actual return). In Janja, for example, where the Đapos were part of a return vanguard, it is estimated today that more than half of the pre-war population has returned. Again, this has involved *refuchess* strategies by competing political actors. The initial violent obstruction by local authorities and by Bosnian Serb DPs diminished with the provision of alternative accommodation and land plots for those DPs, softening the blow of eventual evictions. Another factor was the lifting of restrictions on the resale of restituted properties in the Federation, which allowed those Bosnian Serbs to sell or exchange their repossessed houses and flats there.

Janja is one example of a place where Bosniac minority returnees, through return in a concentrated fashion, actually came to reconstitute local majorities in certain villages or small towns that form (usually a peripheral) part of RS municipalities. Yet return in Bijeljina town, previously 'mixed', remains much less common. From the perspective of the returnees, such enclave creation reduces the physical, existential, and socio-economic insecurity following from hostility and discrimination of the kind that the Đapos experienced, as well as from more generalised precariousness in BiH. In the face of such challenges, enclaves allow safety in numbers as well as intra-national mutual help, employment, trade, and health care. For the political parties involved, it also has its advantages. Bosniacs constitute a relative majority and are by far the most likely to identify with BiH as a state, and the most successful parties among Bosniacs

present themselves as BiH patriots wishing a reversal of ethnic cleansing. Wishing to capitalise on people's right to vote in their pre-war place of residence, political parties were heavily involved in organising DPs into associations known as 'communes in exile'. Bosniac minority return movements often took place within those frameworks and combined the considerations of returnees themselves with a more or less organised attempt to impact on the national demographic structure of local authorities in RS. Still, the pro-return stance of those politicians has always been uneven: Rarely is a warm welcome extended to potential Bosnian Serb returnees to the Federation. Moreover, such commitment sometimes fails to go beyond rhetoric and electoral strategy, because those parties too are focused on the territory where they can exercise maximal power.<sup>7</sup>

In any case, as well as building some representative muscle in local administration, return enclaves allow impact on the policing of settlements, through direct involvement and through decent relationships with Bosnian Serb RS police officers. Moreover, returnee concentrations in enclaves allow for separate schooling. In 2001, a survey among Bosniac returnees in RS found that 85% of their children went to school in the Federation (United States Committee on Refugees, 2001: 6). Later, these figures shifted somewhat, as Bosniac pupils became increasingly likely to follow – officially or unofficially – curricula used in Bosniac-dominated areas of the Federation (Mulić-Bušatlija, 2001).

### Generations and Transformations

The straddling and degree-like nature of much concentrated Bosniac minority return in (peripheral) enclaves relies heavily on intergenerational household strategies. Initially, having committed themselves to returning to their pre-war village and rebuilding their houses in what was now RS, many households also retained an occupied place in the Federation. The most common pattern was that retired family members returned to settle in their pre-war village, whereas the younger ones engaged at most in part-time return.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, with the household straddling the IEBL, they limited exposure to the risks and problems associated with minority return, including concerns of safety, employ-

ment, health care, and education. On the other hand, a willingness to return opened routes to foreign reconstruction assistance, and many displaced Bosniacs decided to make provisions in case they would be evicted from the accommodation they occupied in the Federation, which some subsequently were. Frustrating as they may have been for pro-return policies, such hedging of household bets is an unsurprising strategy to cope with national minority status. Yet, as we shall see, it is also a strategy to minimise exposure to the precariousness of life in post-war BiH more generally – beyond considerations of nationality.

The longer term results of these intergenerational household strategies, trying to reduce the risks of the *refuchess* game, are becoming clear today. Despite the strong reduction of physical danger and despite very high rates of property restitution, for the vast majority of displaced Bosniacs, nostalgia and FIA return policies have provided an insufficient enticement to (re)make home in their pre-war place of residence now in RS. Moreover, sustainability prospects of some returnee enclaves remain doubtful, especially in smaller, remote settlements. Actual returnee populations contain many elderly persons who are not dependent on employment and do not have school-aged children. After up to 15 years in Federation towns, their children and grandchildren are ever more reluctant to return (note that the younger ones never lived there).

Understanding the parameters by which Bosniacs, and Bosnians in general, attempt to (re)make home after the war thus requires us to look beyond conceptions of security as safety only and of home as house only (e.g. Jansen, 2006, 2008). They must be seen, for example, in the context of a long-term urbanisation process, intensified by the 1992–1995 war. Today, infrastructural neglect and FIA attempts to enforce neoliberal economic reforms further exacerbate the urban/rural gap. A reluctance to return can thus partly be understood as a reluctance to engage in the ruralisation that return has mostly come to mean. Most displaced Bosniacs, whether they previously lived in towns or in villages, have settled into Federation towns. With peripheral enclaves the most feasible targets for minority return, their expectations with regard to livelihoods and ways of life do not entice them to 'go rural' (even if it is 'rural again'). In

the current socio-economic climate, for many, the issue is not only that they do not wish to leave the Federation for life in RS, but they also do not wish to leave a town for life in a village (cf. Holt, 1996).

Our assessment of minority return in BiH must thus take into account a double dynamic: on the one hand, issues of safety and physical violence inherent in ethnic cleansing, and, on the other hand, broader transformations on the societal, household, and individual levels. While the first set of issues are straightforwardly nationality specific (a Bosniac in RS has legitimate – but thankfully decreasing – grounds to experience a degree of fear for her/his safety), the second set involves wider socio-political transformations in BiH and differential engagements with them according to age, gender, wealth, and educational profile. The remembered ‘mixed’ pre-war BiH existed as a unit of the socialist Yugoslav federation, whereas return occurred (or not) a decade later in a BiH going through a FIA-led process of post-socialist ‘reforms’ (Jansen, 2006). To be sure, unemployment and/or reduced health-care provisions are not unrelated to nationality – for example, because of discrimination, a Bosniac in RS will be relatively *more* exposed to them than a Bosnian Serb in RS – yet majority nationals are *also* struggling to reduce precariousness and to generate the ‘sense of possibility’ that is an important part of making home (Jansen and Löfving, 2008). The decisions that underlie population movements, even war-related ones, are taken with one eye on the past and one eye on the future. Practices of return or non-return, and of the variety of patterns that exists as degrees between them, take shape at the point where memories of localised belonging meet or, more often, fail to meet expectations of lives and livelihoods in a changing socio-economic and political context.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Upon return to BiH after the 1992–1995 war, Bosniac repatriates have tried to make home in different ways. Some, known as majority returnees, have moved back to their pre-war places of residence in Bosniac-dominated parts in the Federation, whereas others, who used to live in territory that is now in RS, have relocated to

the Federation. In both cases, their repatriation, whether or not we wish to call it a return to their ‘homes of origin’, further contributes to overwhelming, war-produced majorities of persons of certain nationalities in certain places. In contrast, minority return represents a reversal of ethnic cleansing. Yet in practice, it is a matter of degree, shaped among other things by intergenerational household strategies and ‘straddling’. Therefore, and especially because of its concentration in peripheral enclaves, it actually ‘remixes’ the population of BiH only on some levels. It increases the number of Bosniacs to RS (said to be some 150,000 in 2008), but it also re-establishes previous patterns in the BiH population structure in a different manner, and whether or not this produces ‘remixing’ depends on the scale of measurement. In the case of return just across the IEBL, this can be seen to simply ‘extend’ the reach of the Federation. But deeper into RS, too, contradictory dynamics are at work with regard to the consequences of ethnic cleansing. This is because the populations of many Bosnian towns had been ‘mixed’, whereas villages had often been inhabited by people with a shared national background, or sometimes subdivided in relatively homogeneously populated hamlets. Therefore, with minority return mainly taking place in rural areas and in outlying areas around towns, ‘remixing’ does take place on the level of RS and of those municipalities, but, zooming in on the constituent villages and hamlets that were always already largely nationally homogenous, we can see that segregation is in fact consolidated. What we witness here is the recreation of Bosniac-inhabited enclaves in what is now RS, whereas previously ‘mixed’ town centres, in contrast, see little ‘remixing’.<sup>9</sup>

The return of Bosniacs in RS is thus reduced to a minor, segregated presence. And while authorities in RS today (grudgingly) allow Bosniacs to re-inhabit their houses in places out of sight, the different ‘mixed’ Bosnian home that had been experienced in towns before the war is not about to be recreated. This reluctance to facilitate significant return and reintegration also reigns among Bosnian Croat and Bosniac nationalist elites (even though the latter deploy a pro-BiH rhetoric), who, like their Bosnian Serb counterparts, continue to attract majority electoral support among those of their co-nationals who vote. With most Bosnians unable to imagine a

solid basis to make home in territory dominated by national others, and with entire new generations now growing up in nationally homogenised social spaces, the reversal of ethnic cleansing through minority return is likely to remain limited. Of course, the rights of the displaced have always included the right to return *or not return*. What they do not include is the right to *leave*; yet in every poll over the last decade, a majority among younger persons has stated that they do not see a future *anywhere* in BiH, and would emigrate if that was possible. Whether or not they would actually leave, we may consider such utterances as articulations of socio-economic concerns with a wider lack of perspective – the experience of living in lasting suspension that in many respects seems a cynical but logical outcome of wartime *refuchess*.

## NOTES

- (1) I employ 'Bosnian' as short for the non-national term 'Bosnian–Herzegovinian'. This article relies largely on collective national labels: Bosnian Croats, Bosnian Serbs, and Bosniacs (before 1993: Bosnian Muslims). In no way does this exhaust life experiences before, during, or after the war. Yet politics in BiH today – and much writing about it – actively reproduce the reduction of persons to embodiments of nationality statistics. For my analysis here, unfortunately, returnees' experiences of national labels attached to them are less important than how others experience them and where they fit in the broader national demographic picture. Thus, the imperative use of national labels in the descriptive parts of my article on return is one more expression of the scope and power of *refuchess*.
- (2) Functionaries of those mainly Western-led military and inter-governmental structures, and major so-called non-governmental organisations, as well as most commentators in BiH and abroad talk of 'the International Community', whereas, among themselves, Bosnians usually speak of *stranci* ['the foreigners']. I prefer my own sweeping term.
- (3) Figures from Istraživačko-dokumentacioni centar, Sarajevo (2009).
- (4) Developed with Andy Dawson and financially supported by the Toyota Foundation, the Leverhulme Trust, and the University of Hull, this project also involved shorter periods of 3 months each with refugees in Serbia, Australia,

and the Netherlands. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

- (5) For example, of over 50,000 Bosnian refugees in Sweden, 1329 had returned by 2001, mostly to areas of BiH where they belonged to a national majority (Eastmond, 2006: 147).
- (6) For example, by May 2008, only some 40% of circa 20,000 minority returnees in Zvornik municipality had taken out RS IDs (*Oslobođenje*, 2008a).
- (7) On the lack of actual support for return, see e.g. Hadžić, 2002. In 2008, many Bosniac municipality councillors in RS still commuted from the Federation (e.g. in Srebrenica, where some Serbian councillors *also* commuted . . . from Serbia). Enclave concentration and degrees of return are thus not mutually exclusive.
- (8) See Fischel de Andrade and Delaney, 2001; D'Onofrio, 2004; Stefansson, 2006. In 2002, an estimated 75% of those whose pre-war accommodation was reconstructed did return, but a third of those sent only a part of the household (Heimerl, 2005: 386).
- (9) Many Bosniacs from towns now in RS sought property restitution with an eye on sale or exchange. In 2003, an estimated three-quarters of properties restituted to returnees in urban areas were for sale in all of BiH (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia–Herzegovina, 2003).

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