

RETURNS TO CONFLICT-AFFECTED SOCIETIES: LESSONS FROM POST-YUGOSLAVIA

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In post-Yugoslavia, the international community engaged to an unprecedented degree in supporting ‘minority returns’—with ambivalent results. Experience shows that post-war returns launched under continued security risks, weak governance and structural barriers to reintegration are rarely sustainable unless key political, economic and social conditions are addressed.

KEY MESSAGES

1 INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND ACCOUNTABLE GOVERNANCE ARE KEY CONDITIONS FOR RETURN

In post-Yugoslavia, privatisation in the absence of accountable governance systems gave rise to patronage systems that excluded returnees from economic opportunities and had no significant employment effects. Development cooperation should support overall economic recovery, governance transparency, inclusive institutions, quality public services, the rule of law and the maintenance of social welfare standards.

2 REBUILDING INTER-COMMUNITY TRUST FACILITATES REINTEGRATION AFTER RETURN

Ethnicity-based power-sharing agreements and the ethno-national framing of peace-building and return programming enforced social boundaries in post-Yugoslav states. Development cooperation should follow rights- and needs-based approaches, acknowledging intersectional vulnerabilities. Supporting spaces and opportunities for everyday encounters and inclusive livelihood opportunities can rebuild inter-community trust and facilitate reintegration.

3 SUSTAINABLE RETURN IS NOT INTERNATIONALLY DRIVEN; IT MUST BE LOCALLY OWNED

While international interventions improved security and enabled key legal reforms in post-Yugoslavia, they often did not translate into durable returns. This is in part because local political elites committed to these reforms only selectively. International development cooperation cannot create sustainable conditions for return without domestic commitment to an inclusive reform process.

4 PROPERTY RESTITUTION ALONE DOES NOT ENABLE SUSTAINABLE RETURN

In post-Yugoslavia, many returnees sold their regained property rather than using restitution to return permanently. Restitution is a legal right independent of a returnee's return to a place of origin and can be an important means of establishing a new life elsewhere. External technical assistance to build coherent cadastral systems and formalise property titles is crucial, while housing reconstruction and restitution must be paired with economic recovery and sustainable livelihood support.

BACKGROUND

Post-war return programming to countries of post-Yugoslavia was shaped by efforts to reverse wartime displacement and demographic shifts that had considerably impacted on previously highly diverse societies. In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the term “minority return” came to refer to “the return of individuals to areas not controlled by their own ethnic group” (Brubaker, 2025). Scholars have largely rejected this term for its inaccuracy and pejorative connotation. Subscribing to this critique and understanding ethnic labels as socially and politically constructed categories, this policy brief uses the term a) to refer to a policy goal and b) to denote “the physical return of a displaced person to, or within, their country of origin to a sub-state administrative unit where they are politically and administratively underrepresented on the basis of ethnicity” (Vollmer & Schmitz-Pranghe, 2026).

During the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and the subsequent secession wars, more than 200,000 people lost their lives, and several million were forcibly displaced. While many remained internally displaced or fled within the region, others fled to other destination countries—Germany being the most important one in the European Union (see Map).

Soon after armed hostilities ceased, destination countries began to enforce returns to the young post-Yugoslav states.

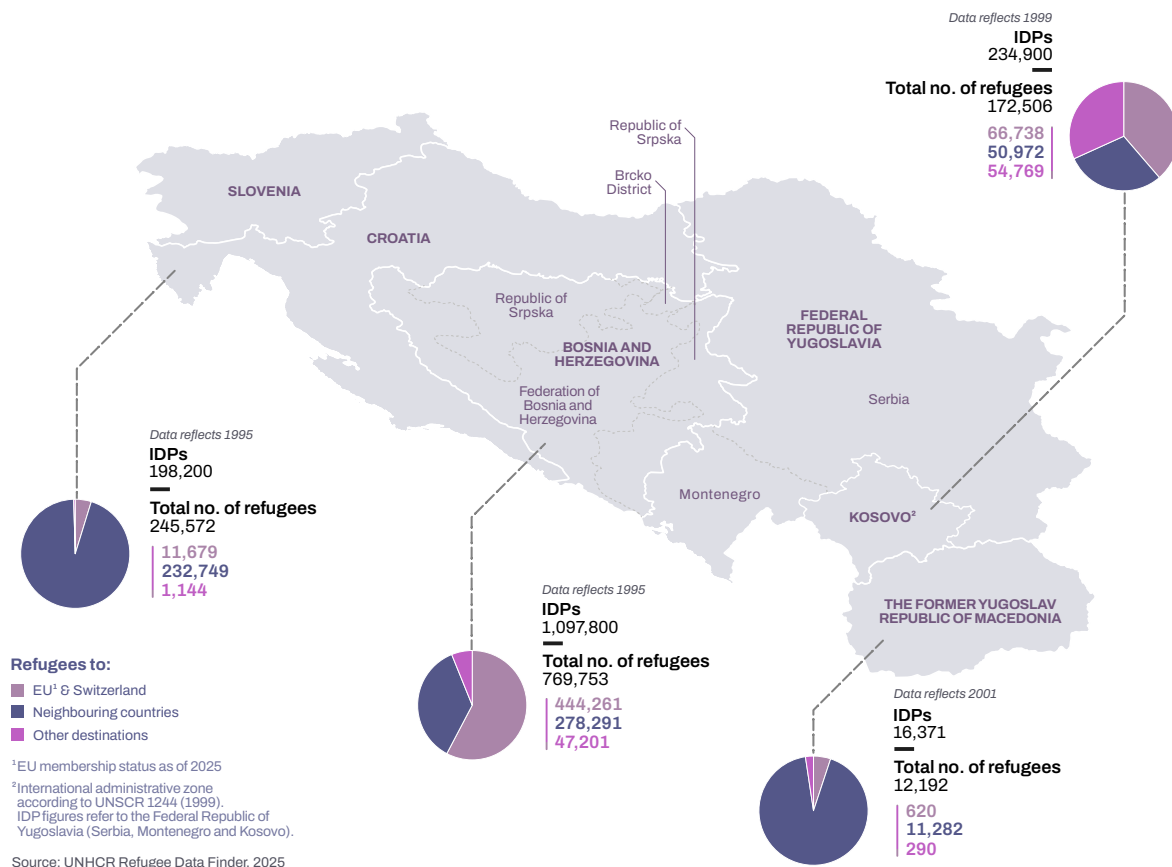
This happened despite:

- weak governance structures;
- considerable safety and security risks and the obstruction of returns by local ethno-political powerholders;
- a lack of adequate livelihood options upon return;
- challenges regarding transitional justice and property restitution;
- entrenched war-related ethnicised boundaries.

These conditions led many ‘early returnees’ to become internally displaced persons.

Peace agreements in BiH, Croatia and Kosovo contained stipulations on return, and the international community took the lead in democratisation and return policies by establishing (temporary) protectorate-like governmental structures in all three countries. A strong military and police presence in BiH and Kosovo secured the peace agreements and helped improve security—though security conditions, particularly for minority returnees, remained fragile for years. In addition, the

REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS DURING THE 1991–2001 CONFLICTS



international community established the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), which achieved accountability for some war crimes but did not foster reconciliation or establish widely accepted narratives of truth.

With unprecedented efforts, the international community supported minority returns to counter the massive displacement that took place during the wars and the ethno-demographic changes that had considerably reduced ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. Yet the long-term results of this engagement fell short of expectations. The unfavourable political and socio-economic framework conditions—notably corruption, patronage and lack of livelihood options—under which externally funded large-scale return programmes operated persist in BiH, North Macedonia and Kosovo to this day and continue to be among the biggest obstacles to return. Reintegration support, often limited to housing assistance and small-scale individual livelihood support measures, lacked alignment with broader socio-economic reconstruction strategies and failed to provide meaningful future perspectives for many.

Although minority returns have occurred, these returns often remained fragmented, short-term and unsustainable in the sense that they did not enable returnees to find conditions that enabled them to (re-)establish their lives. Ethnic segregation persists and ethnic enclaves within so-called majority areas are still common.

Experiences from post-war Yugoslavia are highly relevant for current policy debates on refugee returns. While the international community not only invested vast sums and took the lead in democratisation, peacebuilding and return processes in post-Yugoslav states, considerably less funding and international engagement for return and reintegration can be expected in today's post-conflict settings. Moreover, many of today's post-conflict contexts are non-democratic, posing additional challenges to returnees. Finally, conditions at the place of migration or displacement and the duration of stay matter considerably both for return mobility and for collective diaspora engagement in reconstruction and return. The protractedness of many of today's conflicts—which exceeds the duration of the secession wars in the former Yugoslavia—will in all likelihood render large-scale (minority) return even less probable.

Once armed conflict ends, it will be the responsibility of national governments and societies to address and overcome war-related fault lines. International development interventions should carefully draw on lessons from peacebuilding, statebuilding and return policies applied in post-Yugoslavia, ensuring that they—at least—do not inadvertently exacerbate existing divisions.

1 INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND ACCOUNTABLE GOVERNANCE ARE KEY CONDITIONS FOR RETURN

In post-Yugoslavia, the privatisation of the economies in the absence of accountable governance structures gave rise to patronage systems from which returnees—particularly those belonging to marginalised communities—are often excluded. Moreover, the reforms did not have the expected effects on employment dynamics, specifically in rural areas. The international interventions propagating minority returns underestimated the impact of the transition from war economies to peace economies and market reforms on returnees' livelihood opportunities. Moreover, ethnic powerholders and conflict profiteers with a vested interest in the continuation of inter-ethnic tensions were often able to remain in power in the post-war years in BiH and Kosovo.

INSTEAD OF INVESTING IN COSTLY RETURN PROGRAMMES, INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTIONS AND RETURN POLICIES NEED TO ADDRESS THE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH RETURNEES AND STAYEES CAN RE-ESTABLISH THEIR LIVES

For many respondents in the qualitative studies we conducted in BiH and Kosovo between 2018 and 2025, the livelihood situation had considerably worsened after the wars in terms of employment and social participation. In particular, returnees deplored the loss of jobs in the public sector and increasing discrimination on ethnic grounds. Against the backdrop of the significance of informal labour relations, unemployment and social exclusion of marginalised communities in the post-war context, social welfare standards in health services, child benefits and pensions need to be upheld through economic transition to a market economy, which will benefit returnees and the overall population alike. Instead of investing in costly return programmes, international interventions and return policies need to address the conditions under which returnees and stayees can re-establish their lives and build a future based on economic recovery, inclusive institutions, quality public services and the rule of law. Moreover, they need to engage more closely with local realities, including ethno-politics, corruption and clientelism.

2 REBUILDING INTER-COMMUNITY TRUST FACILITATES REINTEGRATION

Peace agreements and post-war constitutional arrangements in post-Yugoslav states—designed primarily to end the wars—have perpetuated the logics of ethno-politics by introducing ethnicity-based power-sharing systems. In BiH for instance, the Dayton Peace Agreement enshrined ethnicity politically and territorially by dividing the country into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), which comprised the territories formerly held by the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Croatian Defence Council forces, and the Republika Srpska (RS), which coincided with the territories claimed by separatist forces of the Republic of the Serb People of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war. Moreover, it defined three constituent nations (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats), while all others are designated as “others” (*ostali*) and are ineligible to hold several high government offices, including the presidency. Other countries introduced quota regulations for ‘national minorities’ or ‘minority communities’.

While the constitutional arrangements in post-Yugoslavia certainly helped to stabilise peace agreements (BiH and Kosovo) and overcome structural discrimination (Macedonia), they have often reinforced divisions rather than facilitated reconciliation and reintegration: They empowered ethno-nationalist power-holders, reinforced political fragmentation, limited cross-ethnic cooperation and thereby created structural obstacles, particularly to minority return. To avoid entrenching ethnic boundaries in post-war societies, ethnicity-based power-sharing arrangements need to include incentives for issue-centred, cross-ethnic collaboration and be designed with an exit strategy for ethnic quotas, so as not to undermine reconciliation, meritocracy and minority return.

CONSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS IN POST-YUGOSLAVIA HELPED TO STABILISE PEACE AGREEMENTS BUT HAVE OFTEN REINFORCED SOCIETAL BOUNDARIES.

Further stipulations in peace agreements and return policies also perpetuated divisions rather than facilitated reconciliation and reintegration. In BiH, the so-called cantonisation of the educational system through the Dayton Peace Agreement transferred educational authority to the canton level—or, in ‘ethnically mixed’ cantons, even to the municipality level. In an attempt to encourage the return of refugees and displaced persons, the practice of “two schools under one roof” was established: In these school buildings, Croat and Bosniak children were physically separated from each other and taught using separate curricula. Initially conceived as a temporary measure, this practice became permanent in the end—despite the efforts of the international community to ensure its transition and local

court rulings deeming it discriminatory. It is but one example of how ethnic divisions become perpetuated with implications for past, current and future generations. Parallel school systems using different curricula also exist in Kosovo to this day.

Internationally managed return programming, with its emphasis on ethnic markers in returns, also mirrored the ethnicisation of post-war governance in the successor states of the former Yugoslavia. Some programmes contributed to perceptions of positive discrimination based on ethnicity, as less assistance was made available for majority, forced and assisted returns. Moreover, these return programmes gave far less consideration to communities not regarded as a conflict party and overlooked intersectional obstacles to return, thereby perpetuating their marginalisation.

Rather than framing returns in terms of ethno-nationality, development cooperation should strengthen rights- and needs-based approaches, as well as intersectional understandings of vulnerabilities and obstacles to return. It should also direct attention and resources towards issues that transcend ethnic boundaries, such as overall reconstruction and employment, or to supporting spaces and opportunities for everyday encounters and inclusive livelihood opportunities.

3 SUSTAINABLE RETURN IS NOT INTERNATIONALLY DRIVEN; IT MUST BE LOCALLY OWNED

In post-Yugoslav states, the international community pressured local authorities into accepting (minority) returns using various approaches ranging from NATO military interventions in BiH and Kosovo, externally driven institution-building, aid conditionality, incentives, diplomatic pressure and direct political interference. In BiH, for instance, the obstruction of returns by ethno-political powerholders and institutions was countered relatively successfully by putting pressure on responsible institutions through the Office of the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina (OHR): The OHR has the right to put forward legal changes and remove officials from their posts—a power that was used extensively in the post-war years but that has been criticised for undermining democratic principles. In Croatia, EU member states conditioned EU accession negotiations on progress in return policies, an approach that—in combination with a change of government in Croatia in 2000—proved successful.

A large military and international police presence, that is 60,000 IFOR troops in BiH in 1995 and 50,000 KFOR troops in Kosovo, and the conviction of war criminals through the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) also aimed to stabilise the peace agreements and improve the security situation. These robust interventions in security and

transitional justice both helped to improve physical safety in return communities—even though the mandate and size of international military and police forces did not always enable them to counter the obstruction of returns on the local implementation and community level. Return-related security incidents were frequent in the post-war years, particularly in BiH and Kosovo. At the same time, international interventions undermined local ownership of state-building processes, fed nationalist leaders' mobilisation strategies and rent-seeking behaviour. They risked overlooking the rationale of ethno-national mobilisation and structural impediments to return.

INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTIONS HELPED TO COUNTERACT OBSTRUCTIONS OF MINORITY RETURNS BUT WERE NOT SUSTAINABLE WITH REGARD TO ENABLING SUSTAINABLE RETURNS.

The fact that large numbers of minority returnees did not remain permanently or continued at least to earn their living elsewhere at their place of return—and that nationalist and separatist forces retained power in many places—demonstrates the unsustainability of external intervention in facilitating minority returns.

In short, international interventions in restitution, economic recovery, transitional justice and public order can help to establish conditions that enable return, yet often face the dilemma of cooperating with illiberal counterparts, being unsustainable and undermining democratic processes.

4 PROPERTY RESTITUTION ALONE DOES NOT ENABLE SUSTAINABLE RETURN

Following international pressure and engagement, post-war regimes in post-Yugoslav states established policies enabling property restitution. However, restitution often did not enable durable returns. Many displaced persons were able to regain their houses but sold them and did not return permanently—due to security concerns or insufficient livelihood options and future perspectives. This highlights that restitution and return do not necessarily coincide. Rather, restitution should be understood as a right, a means of compensation and an important indicator of post-war reparation and effective governance.

RESTITUTION IS A RIGHT, A MEANS OF COMPENSATION AND REPARATION.

Decoupling restitution from return allows for more realistic, rights-based approaches that reflect individual choices and constraints. In this context, issues concerning the lack of formal

land titles—arising from, for example, ethnicity-based discrimination, exclusion of women, removal of cadastral files, displacement and loss—which prevented marginalised communities in particular from regaining property in post-Yugoslavia, need to be addressed. External technical assistance can support property restitution processes by helping to build coherent cadastral systems and formalise property titles to regularise ownership.

Moreover, housing reconstruction and restitution must be paired with economic recovery and sustainable livelihood support if they are meant to enable return. In post-Yugoslav states, interventions in restitution, reconstruction, livelihood support and assisted return were often misaligned. Effective return policies require integrated approaches that simultaneously address housing, livelihoods, infrastructure and services such as education and healthcare.

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