



bicc report

RESTORING DIVERSITY AFTER WAR AND DISPLACEMENT?

LESSONS FROM REFUGEE RETURNS IN POST-YUGOSLAVIA

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Project ●●●
Return and Belonging
after Conflict-induced
Displacement (RE-MIG)

Houses can be rebuilt. Restoring homes is another matter entirely. Massive international efforts to support refugee returns to post-Yugoslavia failed to rebuild social relations between communities. Much more than incentives for return, displaced people need conditions that allow them to rebuild their lives, social relations, and futures.

This is a search for lessons learned.

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SUMMARY

Drawing on extensive literature and original empirical research conducted between 2019 and 2025, in this *bicc report*, we examine the return of displaced persons following the wars in the former Yugoslavia and ask what can be learned from one of the most ambitious international efforts to reverse the consequences of violent displacement and restore ethnically diverse societies—for current policies supporting refugee return.

Return became a central goal of post-war reconstruction in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia, framed as a legal right, a moral obligation and an indicator of successful intervention.

However, it was also driven by destination countries seeking to reduce refugee numbers. While return patterns varied between the case studies—shorter wars resulted in faster (majority) returns, and protection schemes varied between destination countries, creating unequal pressures to return—barriers to sustainable return remained high, especially for minorities. Even though considerable progress was made in restoring property rights, reconstructing housing and establishing legal frameworks for return, these achievements did not translate into social reintegration. Many returns were temporary, and people left again due to insecurity, weak economies, discrimination and

limited access to services. Where conflicts were not actually solved but merely frozen, and their structural legacies not adequately addressed, rebuilding the everyday relationships, local capacities and forms of cooperation through which diverse societies sustain themselves proved elusive. In many places, return coexisted with continued separation, limited social interaction and new forms of mobility and transnational living.

We identify several reasons for this. First, return is most likely to be sustainable when embedded in broader recovery and development strategies. Property restitution and housing reconstruction are necessary but insufficient; they need to be linked to inclusive security, livelihoods, accessible public services, accountable governance, legal certainty and opportunities for meaningful social participation. Return should therefore be understood as an outcome of post-war recovery rather than as an instrument through which recovery or reconciliation can be achieved.

Second, international support is most effective when it connects with locally grounded approaches. Returnee associations and participatory reconstruction have successfully contributed to local ownership and self-determined returns but were largely overlooked by formal programming. Policies that supported both returnees and receiving communities were better placed to address

shared needs and avoid new tensions. Rather than focusing on high numbers, programme design should reflect these dimensions from the outset.

RETURN BECAME A CENTRAL GOAL OF POST-WAR RECONSTRUCTION IN CROATIA, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, KOSOVO, AND MACEDONIA, FRAMED AS A LEGAL RIGHT, A MORAL OBLIGATION AND AN INDICATOR OF SUCCESSFUL INTERVENTION.

Third, international actors often pursued multiple—and at times competing—objectives simultaneously: protecting the right to return and responding to migration management objectives; promoting minority return, amnesties for former combatants and ethnic power sharing arrangements; pursuing democratisation and far-reaching economic transitions without the involvement of accountable governance structures. These objectives were not always mutually reinforcing. Creating conditions for sustainable return requires a comprehensive, strategic and well-coordinated approach. These findings also explain why sustainable return cannot be achieved through return assistance alone. The question of how universal and differentiated needs and rights can ultimately be reconciled—and diversity restored—remains, however, unresolved.

INTRODUCTION

Thirty years ago, the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and introduced unprecedented provisions for refugee return. Yet its legacy remains contested. Did it foster the reintegration of a war-torn society or entrench the ethnic divisions from the war? Did it prioritise justice for the displaced and their right to return or serve the interests of destination countries to remove refugees as quickly as possible?

International support for refugee returns after the wars in post-Yugoslavia—Croatia, BiH, Kosovo and (North) Macedonia—was unparalleled. The money pledged for housing and infrastructure reconstruction in BiH alone made it the most expensive development programme per head in the world at the time (Cox, 1998), followed by immense spending on reconstruction and return in Kosovo a few years later (Baldwin, 2006). Another novelty was the international support

rallying behind so-called minority returns, as previous peacebuilding paradigms tended to accept forced displacements committed in the name of ‘ethnically pure’ territories and nations rather than trying to reverse them (Rebecca Brubaker, 2025). The outcomes, however, fell far short of expectations. Our analysis shows that international responses failed to adequately analyse the wars’ underlying causes, understand the needs and aspirations of displaced persons and account for the context-specific roles and meanings attached to ethno-religious boundaries

Responses were also shaped by conflicting interests and mixed agendas, leading to contradictory approaches. Hence, much can be learned from the choices made and their implications for the post-war political orders, safety and security, reconstruction and livelihoods, institutions and public services and social relations—all of them key conditions shaping return—as well as from the impact of return programming itself. Beyond taking stock, we aim to inform ongoing debates and policies designed to support refugee returns.

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES FAILED TO ADEQUATELY ANALYSE THE WARS’ UNDERLYING CAUSES, UNDERSTAND THE NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS OF DISPLACED PERSONS AND ACCOUNT FOR THE CONTEXT-SPECIFIC ROLES AND MEANINGS ATTACHED TO ETHNO-RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES

The emphasis on refugee returns was controversial at the time. In the context of international interventions, return was seen as good on three counts: (1) “good for refugees” (claiming their right to return); (2) “good for governments hosting them” (for various reasons, see below) and (3) “just plain good (the way the world should be)” (Jansen, 2007, p. 180). The third point reflects the sedentary bias—the assumption about a natural connection between people or communities and their place of origin embedded in return programmes and policies—which scholars have long criticised (see Hammond, 2018 and Malkki, 1997). On the one hand, forcibly displaced persons are likely to express strong feelings of longing for and belonging to the place that once was their home. On the other, these memories of a violently disrupted life must be distinguished from the wish to (re-)establish a ‘normal’ life and a future—a future not necessarily bound to the place of origin (Jansen, 2007)—and one that often becomes more tied to a new place of residence the longer displacement lasts.

The second point is equally ambivalent: Refugee return had moved from a topic of little governmental concern to the preferred durable solution during the 1980s (Chimni, 1999), replacing local integration. After the end of the Cold War, ideological obstacles no longer prevented returns from the European Union to eastern European countries (Black & Gent, 2006). Refugee returns became a key indicator for the validation

of post-conflict regimes, especially where these had been brought about by international actors. Return programming thus served to legitimise international interventions and maintain donor confidence (Black & Gent, 2006). In the specific context of post-Yugoslavia, after horrific violence and genocide, refugee return was promoted as a means of fulfilling the moral imperative of “righting the wrongs” (Black, 2001, p. 183) and as a remedy for the international community’s failure to prevent these. Refugee and especially ‘minority return’ was even seen as a fast route to reconciliation (Cox, 1998). This constituted a departure from previous approaches that often tolerated forced population exchanges or even accepted them as a tool of nation-building.

As Rebecca Brubaker’s (2025) recent analysis shows, this shift was driven by an alignment of interests between the Bosniak leadership (seeking an independent Bosnian state), the Clinton administration (looking for foreign policy successes that reflected values of plurality), European Union (EU) host states, especially Germany (aiming for speedy returns) and international organisations. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in particular played an influential and ambivalent role, assisting evacuations during the war and managing minority returns afterwards while simultaneously consulting with host countries about delaying returns. Thus, in various ways, return had become a proxy for other aims, reflecting the perspectives

of governments and international agencies much more than the aspirations of displaced people.

The end of the Yugoslav wars accordingly marked key dynamics in the development of return infrastructures in EU countries—notably the rapid expansion of assisted return programmes and the emergence of new return counselling centres, especially in Germany. Hence, the goal of remixing a violently “unmixed” population (Rebecca Brubaker, 2025) allowed destination countries to conflate different policy objectives: Assisting refugees willing to return became entangled with the migration policy goal of returning asylum seekers and refugees whose temporary protection had been terminated, often against their will (Koser, 2001).

As to the first point, the right to return—as enshrined, notably, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—was asserted and specified more strongly than ever before, particularly through the DPA. In practical terms, the record in protecting the right to return for those who wished to exercise it was mixed. Importantly, the right to return is not the same as the right of readmission, and conflating these two risks undermining safeguards protecting displaced persons against refoulement while reflecting the growing governmental interest in implementing returns. The strong emphasis on returns was not matched by equally strong commitments to creating conditions for sustainable return.

THE RIGHT TO RETURN IS NOT THE SAME AS THE RIGHT OF READMISSION, AND CONFLATING THESE TWO RISKS UNDER- MINING SAFEGUARDS PROTECTING DISPLACED PERSONS AGAINST REFOULEMENT.

In this *report*, we examine the experiences of violence, displacement and return in four successor states of Yugoslavia: Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and (North) Macedonia¹. It is worth noting that the international interventions in the four case-study countries differed considerably in their emphasis on restoring diversity. After the war in Croatia, there was international support for refugee return but less emphasis on restoring the pre-war societal composition (Harvey, 2006). The DPA's paradigm of demographically reversing displacement was somewhat applied to Kosovo after 1999, reflected in efforts to recreating a multi-ethnic Kosovo and through substantial support for the return of displaced persons from all communities to their places of origin—though under fundamentally different conditions. In Macedonia, partly due to the different nature of the war, the international response was much more about institutionalising diversity management at the governance level than about promoting the remixing of citizens. While the analysis that follows builds largely on commonalities to generate lessons learned, these differences should not be overlooked.

We focus on conditions for, and experiences of, return to 1) compare facilitating and impeding factors across the cases, with particular attention to differing approaches to supporting and enabling return; and 2) identify lessons relevant to current and future post-war return scenarios.

TERMINOLOGY

The term “minority return” emerged in the context of post-war return programming in BiH, referring to “the return of individuals to areas not controlled by their own ethnic group” (Rebecca Brubaker, 2025, p. 87). As “minority” is usually defined in relation to the state, the literature uses the term in the two senses: for displaced persons returning to their pre-war homes in sub-state administrative units where they now constitute an ethnic minority (Rebecca Brubaker, 2013) and for people returning as part of a minority to their state of origin. However, the

assumption that clearly defined ethnic formations constituted stable majorities and minorities in the former Yugoslavia has been convincingly challenged (Rogers Brubaker, 2006; Stamenova, 2017; Todorova, 1997).

In this respect, the term mistakes the outcomes of years of mobilisation and violence for the norm (Denich, 2001) and reflects misconceptions held by international media, agencies and other actors about people and social relations in the Balkans (Blumi, 1998; Hromadzic, 2012),

1 Macedonia was renamed North Macedonia in 2019. For most of the reporting period relevant for this *report*, it was called the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia or FYRoM. To prevent confusion, we will refer to it as Macedonia throughout this *report*, without prejudice to its formal status, official name or EU accession path.

Europe's "other within" (Trakilovic, 2015). It also reflects the unrealistic hope of remedying past violence by re-establishing a status quo ante (Phuong, 2000). Empirically, even among 'minority returnees', gender, age and life-cycle stage proved significantly more influential in return decision-making than ethnicity or religion (Stefanovic & Loizides, 2011). Researchers studying displaced persons' and other bottom-up perspectives have therefore criticised the ethnification² and identitarianist lens reflected in this term and in much of external stakeholders' planning and programming, though to little avail (Blumi, 1998; Cox, 1998; Jansen, 2016; Stamenova, 2017).

All Yugoslav republics—Slovenia to the least extent—had ethnically diverse populations. The Yugoslav constitution distinguished between so-called constituent peoples (the 'majority' within each republic) and all others, referred to as nationalities; yet self-identification did not necessarily coincide with these categories, populations grew increasingly 'mixed' (at least until the 1980s), and people partly preferred civic identifications such as 'Yugoslav'.

After the wars, one can distinguish four types of minority: (1) those with former Yugoslav republics as kin states (for example Serbs in Croatia and BiH); (2) minorities with kin states outside the region, such as Hungarians or Italians;

(3) Albanians and Turks, whose kin states are located in the broader region but did not act as "external national homelands" throughout the wars (Rogers Brubaker, 1993, p. 7); and (4) minorities without kin state, such as Torbesh/Gorani, Roma and Ashkali (König, 2001). Some—especially in the last category—gained visibility only after the wars (Lichnofsky, 2013; Marushiakova & Popov, 2001). Another aspect that minority return conceals is that the positions attributed to a person on the basis of 'minority status' differ widely: The existence and active role of kin states, for example, influence community relations, access to resources and the shape of minority return programming, which tended to focus on minorities with high salience during the wars and less on others.

While not treating ethnic categories as an explanatory variable or unit of analysis, we do apply ethnic labels in this *report*—as used by our interlocutors, parts of the literature and organisations such as Minority Rights Group International. We understand these labels as socially and politically constructed categories charged with salience in contexts of nation- and nation-state-building—group-making (Rogers Brubaker, 2006)—and, in our case studies, through international interventions and the introduction of consociational (ethno-political) constitutional frameworks. Research—including our own—shows that the meanings people

attach to these labels vary significantly, and that the boundaries they suggest are often fluid and change over time. Just as armed and political actors mobilising under an ethnic label are usually internally diverse and do not represent all people associated with that label (Rogers Brubaker, 2006)—nor do they spare 'co-ethnics' from threats or violence—ethnic categories do not apply to displaced people in a straightforward manner; they deny, for example, the normality of so-called mixed families (Hromadzic, 2012). In this sense, of course, our use of the term diversity is also reductionist, as it foregrounds one—of many—features of diverse societies, namely ethnicity.

We use the term minority return to refer both to the goal of international interventions and programming and to the physical return of a displaced person to, or within, their country of origin, including newly independent and contested states, to a sub-state administrative unit where they are politically and administratively underrepresented on the basis of ethnicity. Depending on the country, the relevant administrative unit is the entity (BiH), county (Croatia) or municipality (Kosovo; Macedonia). Terms that can refer either to ethnicity/national identity or citizenship are used here in their ethnic

or national sense, unless stated otherwise. For example, 'Macedonian' refers to a person identifying as Macedonian, while 'Macedonian citizen' refers to all citizens of the state of Macedonia.³ In the case-study countries, 'community' is the more established term when referring to a minority.⁴ It similarly refers to perceptions of shared origin and culture but avoids the potentially pejorative or inferiorising connotations associated with minority. It is also less sensitive in contexts of contested borders.⁵

JOBS, HOUSING AND SOCIAL INFRA-STRUCTURE DETERMINE RETURN SUSTAINABILITY; THEIR ABSENCE CAN CREATE NEW TENSIONS, REIGNITE OLD ONES AND LEAD TO RENEWED DISPLACEMENT.

Return itself is also not a straightforward term or process. Empirically, it can be dynamic, open-ended, partial, translocal, temporary and fragmented (Eastmond, 2007). It is influenced by a myriad of factors, including variations in the motivations and degree of coercion behind return, length and conditions of displacement, place of exile, legal status during displacement, gender or life-cycle stage—most of which are largely concealed by

2 Ethnification refers to the process of viewing social and often quite generic phenomena through an ethnic lens, thereby attributing ethnicity an explanatory value (see Cukut Krilić, 2011).

3 Moreover, in this *report*, the terms 'Serb', 'Croat' and 'Bosniak' refer to a nationality/ethnicity, while the terms 'Serbian', 'Croatian' and 'Bosnian' refer to citizenship.

4 At the time of writing, Croatia officially uses the terms 'national minority' and 'national community', while Bosnia differentiates between 'constituent peoples' and 'national minorities'.

5 For Kosovo, the distinction between returnees and repatriated persons is also relevant, as the term 'returnee' refers to displaced persons returning from neighbouring countries (usually from a minority community) and the term 'repatriated person' refers to readmissions from EU countries after 2008.

terms such as return or minority return. Through the increased emphasis on promoting returns, a continuum of coercion is applied ranging from deportations and pressure to return through indirect incentives such as assisted return programmes—collectively described as coerced returns (Şahin-Mencütek & Triandafyllidou, 2024). “Decided return” (Cassarino, 2008, p. 12) describes a return decision free of any such influence. A further important distinction must be drawn between return from internal displacement⁶ and return from abroad: the latter typically receives more attention and resources. Finally, there are differences between return from neighbouring countries, EU destinations and more distant ones such as the United States or Canada. However, the real challenges emerge after return and binaries such as successful and unsuccessful are inadequate to categorise actual return experiences, even more so when “successful return” is measured by having spent one night at the place of return (Zila, 2019, p. 530). Across all types, refugee returns are sustainable⁷ when returnees find conditions that allow them to (re)establish⁸ their lives. Jobs, housing and

social infrastructure determine return sustainability; their absence can create new tensions, reignite old ones and lead to renewed displacement (see Koser, 2001).

METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

This *report* draws on a review of existing literature—both grey and academic—and on empirical research conducted between 2019 and 2025. The authors interviewed displaced and returned persons, experts, representatives of international (aid) organisations, ministry and municipality officials, practitioners involved in return and reintegration programming, local scholars and civil society actors in BiH, Kosovo, Serbia and Macedonia. Local researchers made substantial contributions to data collection in all four countries and provided valuable feedback and input throughout

the research process. Croatia is included as a desk-based case study; research on conflict-induced displacement and post-war returns in Macedonia is also desk-based, as interviews there were limited to displaced persons from Kosovo.

A challenge in preparing this *bicc report* was the fragmentation of knowledge production in and about the post-Yugoslav space (Subotic, 2015). Apart from disputed borders and boundaries and parallel educational systems, written and oral narratives about past and current events often reflect highly politicised

6 Within Serbia and in some international reports, displaced persons from Kosovo (“The Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija” according to the Serbian constitution) are referred to as internally displaced persons (IDPs). For the sake of consistency, however, we refer to them as displaced persons.

7 ‘Sustainable’ in the sense of allowing life in dignity and supporting people’s well-being, not in the sense of ‘durable’ (Grawert, 2018; Koser & Kuschminder, 2017; Lietaert, 2021).

8 Importantly, as argued by Black and Koser (1999), return is likely no “re-anything” but the beginning of something new.

and mutually exclusive views. Academic research is highly polarised (Halpern & Kideckel, 2000). In some cases, the academic literature has responded by documenting competing narratives rather than common ground (Georgieva et al., 2011). We have been working on the region for several years and have sought to address these challenges through deliberate engagement with different strands of literature, purposeful triangulation of sources, careful fact-checking and close collaboration with research partners of various backgrounds. Nonetheless, we take responsibility for any findings perceived as biased and any omissions perceived as problematic.

Data and return statistics typically express re-entry, registration as a returnee or receipt of assistance, mostly without any information on the durability—let alone sustainability—of return. Post-return monitoring has been a policy gap for the past 30 years (see Koser, 2001): in post-Yugoslavia as elsewhere, there are only anecdotal insights on renewed departures, re- and onward migration and very limited assessments of the overall reintegration outcomes over time (Özerdem & Payne, 2019). Research in Bosnia questioned the validity of returnee statistics, even in the short term, showing discrepancies between published figures and the realities on the ground (Zila, 2019).

Following a brief overview of war-related displacement in each context, we compare the cases along the key conditions for return: safety and security; political system and quality of governance; material and social aspects as well as return programming. In the final step, we distil key lessons learned.

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YUGOSLAVIA'S BREAK-UP WARS AND PATTERNS OF DISPLACEMENT

Literature on Yugoslavia's break-up wars is vast and in parts controversial; a detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this *report*, but a few key elements of our reading deserve highlighting. The violence of nation- and nation-state formation in the Balkans is still commonly attributed to 'civilisational clashes' of different religions and cultures and to presumed century-old interethnic hostilities. Such explanations mistake the result of the wars for their cause (Stamenova, 2017). Yugoslavia faced

economic recession and rising foreign debt from the 1970s onwards. Austerity measures increased social insecurity (Baum, 2016; Woodward, 1995), creating a breeding ground for nationalist mobilisation. This mobilisation turned into a tool in the power struggles over economic and constitutional issues among the political leaderships of the six republics and the federal government in Belgrade (Denich, 2001). Nationalist ideologies mainly date back to the 19th-century liberation movements against Ottoman and

TWO DYNAMICS PREDOMINATED. FIRST, VIOLENT DISPLACEMENT AND MASSACRES TO ERASE THE LIVED DIVERSITY. SECOND, TENSIONS BETWEEN THE NEWLY NATIONALISING STATE OR ENTITY AND A NEW NATIONAL MINORITY ON ITS TERRITORY.

Habsburg rule (Majstorovic, 1997) and had partly been suppressed and partly channelled into the federal power-sharing arrangements of socialist Yugoslavia (König, 2001). The unresolved status of Kosovo, the “contradictory heart of Yugoslavia’s problems” (Mursic, 2000, p. 61) as well as growing economic disparities and growing foreign debts fuelled tensions within the federal structures, and wealthier republics—Slovenia and Croatia—began to question the fiscal redistribution arrangements (König, 2001; Baum, 2016; Woodward, 1995). Eventually, in 1991, they pursued secession, followed by BiH and Macedonia. With the onset of violence, sweeping sanctions were imposed against the remnants of Yugoslavia and the seceding republics, leading to hyperinflation and thereby boosting the role of shadow enterprises and war entrepreneurs operating across sectors, across territories and conflict lines (Aparac, 2024).

In terms of nationalist mobilisation and violence, two dynamics predominated. First, violent displacement and massacres were used to forge and change identities so as to erase the existing lived diversity and to achieve ‘national’ populations (Duijzings, 2000; Hayden, 1996; Stamenova, 2017). Second, during and after secession, kin-state dynamics emerged in the form of tensions between the newly nationalising state or entity, a new national minority on its territory and its respective kin state (Rogers Brubaker, 1993), fuelling violence in seceding

republics with larger Serb populations (Croatia and BiH). Kin-state dynamics also influenced displacement patterns, protection and return policies (see below) and continue to shape relations between communities and their governments and between states in the region. However, beyond what can be presented here, “militias and local warlords, spurred by greed, cruelty, and vengeance” have played a large part in the violence and destruction in addition to governments and armies (Halpern & Kideckel, 2000, p. 13).

THE WARS

In Croatia (1991–1995), fighting between Croatian forces, the Serb-controlled Yugoslav People's Army, and forces of the self-proclaimed Republic of Serbian Krajina (RSK) resulted in the displacement of roughly 750,000 people—first primarily Croats from Serb-controlled areas and later Croatian Serbs following Croatian military operations in 1995 (Crvenkovic, 2005).

In BiH (1992–1995), war between the forces of BiH and the Croatian-led forces of the Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia, supported by Croatia, and between forces of BiH and Serb-led forces of the Republic of the Serb People of Bosnia and Herzegovina, supplied and supported by the Yugoslav Army involved systematic violence, persecution, genocide and territorial control strategies, leading to over 100,000 deaths and the displacement of more than half of the population, both internally and abroad (International Crisis Group, 1997).

In Kosovo—a formerly autonomous province within the republic of Serbia—escalating repression during the 1990s, armed confrontation between the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the Yugoslav Army and NATO's 1999 intervention triggered massive displacement, first predominantly of Albanians and other non-Serb communities, and subsequently during and after the withdrawal of Yugoslav forces, of large parts of the Serb population and non-Albanian communities (Elsie, 2010; König, 2001).

In Macedonia, spillover dynamics from Kosovo and unresolved tensions over minority rights and the status of the significant Albanian minority escalated into armed conflict between the National Liberation Army (NLA) and the Macedonian government in 2001—ten years after Macedonia's secession from Yugoslavia—causing significant but largely short-term displacement (Marusic, 2021; Shumkovski, 2020).

DISPLACEMENT PATTERNS

Ethno-nationalist divisions shaped displacement patterns as well as the protection and regularisation policies of receiving countries within the region. The larger proportion of Serb refugees from Croatia, for example, fled to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), as did most Serb and other communities displaced from Kosovo in and after 1999. Serbia encouraged local integration and over the years granted citizenship to many Serb refugees from Croatia and Bosnia but did not apply the same approach to Serbs from Kosovo. While holding Serbian citizenship, the latter are still considered internally displaced, and their number—put at 200,000—continues to be emphasised to underline Serbia's stance on Kosovo (Mylonas & Žilović, 2019). In contrast, nationalist actors in BiH—especially in Republika Srpska—mobilised against the return of displaced Serbs, claiming that “Serbs should all live in one state” (Harvey, 2006, p. 96). In Croatia, Serbs were encouraged to move to Eastern Slavonia

to bolster the Serb population there, or were even relocated to Kosovo (Harvey, 2006, p. 96 in Mesic & Bagic, 2011), indicating that displacement responses were extensions of the violent nation-building and territorial control strategies.

Half a million Albanians from Kosovo found shelter in Albania in the first half of 1999 (Vullnetari, 2013), often in private accommodation. A further 360,000 in Macedonia, predominantly in the western part of the country (Shumkovski, 2020). To stabilise the situation in Macedonia—which experienced a 12 per cent population increase within weeks—some 90,000 refugees were evacuated to third countries under the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme. Meanwhile, Macedonia implemented selective protection policies, registering and granting temporary protection status to Roma, Ashkali, Egyptians, Serbs and mixed-marriage refugees from Kosovo, but not to Albanians (USCRI, 2001). Kosovo, in turn, hosted some 65,000 mainly Albanian refugees from Macedonia in 2001, despite massive destruction and the large number of IDPs it continued to face (USCRI, 2001). Croatia's constitution and citizenship act grant citizenship far more readily to people

perceived as “belonging to the Croatian people” (Croatian Citizen Act, Article 16), for example, to Croats from BiH, whereas Serbs living in Croatia had to undergo a costly and seldom transparent naturalisation process (Goeke, 2013). Croatian Serb refugees who fled or were forced to leave Krajina during and after the Croatian military takeover in 1995 were in a particularly difficult position as—although being legally Croatian citizens—they lacked certificates of Croatian citizenship, which prevented them from claiming the full rights as Croatian citizens (Goeke, 2013).

Displacement to EU countries occurred partly through family networks—many Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia had migrated there before the wars, partly in response to discrimination (Council of Europe, 1996; Musliu & Ademi, 2002)—and through evacuations or asylum-seeking. Within the European Union, Germany received the largest number of refugees from the former Yugoslavia. Of the approximately 600,000 people seeking refuge from BiH and who reached an EU country, Germany took in about 350,000, many of whom were granted only a *Duldung* (tolerated stay).⁹ EU member states received 146,000 asylum applications by people

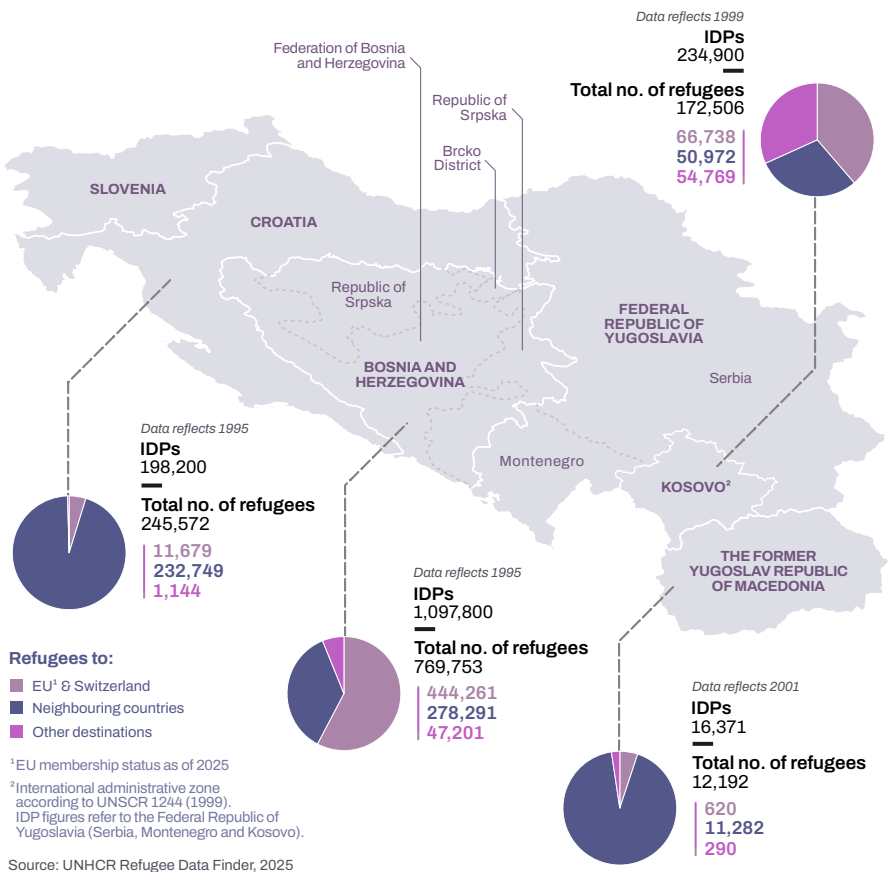
9 Of the approximately 288,000 asylum seekers from BiH registered on 31 March 1995, around 80 per cent had been granted a tolerated stay only (Oltmer, 2023). This non-status was issued for three months and could be periodically extended until the end of the war, creating considerable legal uncertainty for those affected. Around one-sixth of refugees from BiH managed to obtain temporary residence permits through family reunification. In June 1994, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) suspended the processing of asylum claims. Assuming that the fighting would soon end, German authorities aimed for the return of those displaced by the wars in the former Yugoslavia to ease pressure on German social systems and—as the stated objective—to enable returnees to participate in the reconstruction of their origin countries (Wittmann, 2020 in Oltmer, 2023). Asylum claims were processed again only after the signing of the Dayton Agreement, but were still mostly rejected (Ottmer, 2023).

from FRY between January 1998 and May 1999, mostly from Kosovo. Around 48,000 of these applications were lodged in Germany and 33,000 in Switzerland.

For a limited contingent arriving in Germany after 1 April 1999, temporary protection of three months was issued (§ 32a AuslG), while an unknown number of refugees found shelter with relatives in EU countries.

PROVISIONS FOR AND PATTERNS OF RETURN

MAP 1: DISPLACEMENT FROM AND WITHIN THE COUNTRIES OF THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA



While the war in Croatia ended through military victory of the Croatian forces, the war in Macedonia erupted ten years after secession and was settled diplomatically. NATO intervention ended the wars in Kosovo and BiH. While levels of external engagement varied, in all four cases, the peace and ceasefire agreements, as well as the post-war constitutional arrangements, were brokered under direct international stewardship—BiH and Kosovo

holding the status of a semi- and an actual international protectorate respectively after the wars. All agreements contained provisions for the return of displaced persons, as the topic held high priority on the international peacebuilding agenda. In this chapter, we compare these provisions and then analyse the degree to which post-war constitutional arrangements were consistent with this goal.

TABLE 1: PEACE AGREEMENTS

Country	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Croatia	Kosovo	Macedonia
Peace agreement	Dayton Peace Agreement (General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina)	Erdut Agreement (Basic Agreement on the Region of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium)	UN Security Council Resolution 1244	Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA)
Negotiated by	Contact Group (USA, Russia, Great Britain, France and Germany) through US envoy Richard Holbrooke with Alija Izetbegović (BiH); Franjo Tuđman (Croatia); Slobodan Milošević (FRY)	Contact Group (USA, Russia, EU, and UN) with Hrvoje Šarinić; Milan Milanović (RSK) on behalf of FRY	UN Security Council Members, accepted by Serbia, China abstained	Representatives of four main political parties, (2 Macedonian, 2 Albanian), facilitated by EU and US delegations
Date of signature	21 Nov. 1995	12 Nov. 1995	10 June 1999	14 Aug. 2001
Transitional administration	UNMBIH; OHR (overseeing the implementation and coordinating the civilian aspects of the DPA)	UNTAES (Jan 1996–1998)	UNMIK (June 1999–ongoing)	—
International forces	NATO Implementation Force (IFOR from 1995 (60,000); from 1996 SFOR (32,000); from 2004 European EUFOR Althea (7,000)	UNTAES (4,849 troops, 99 military observers, 401 civilian police)	NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) (initially 50,000, now around 5,000)	NATO contingent "Amber Fox" (3,500 mainly for disarmament)
International monitoring of police	International Police Task Force (IPTF) and subsequently European Union Police Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUPM)	UN Civilian Police Support Group (UNPSG)	EULEX (EU Rule of Law Mission) and UNMIK	EU police missions Concordia and EUPOL Proxima

RETURN PROVISIONS

The Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) contained the most far-reaching provisions for refugee return. Annex VII of the DPA established the right to return and to property restitution in the following terms:

All refugees and displaced persons have the right freely to return to their homes of origin. They shall have the right to have restored to them property of which they were deprived during hostilities since 1991 and to be compensated for any property that cannot be restored to them (General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1995).

Thus, despite a clear preference for return to the place of origin, it allowed relocation after property restitution—an option many returnees, particularly those who would have formed part of a minority in their area of return, chose. In fact, the DPA, especially Annex VII, encouraged early returns so strongly that some doubt its full alignment with non-refoulement provisions in international law (Barkan & Adelman, 2011).

THE DAYTON PEACE AGREEMENT CONTAINED THE MOST FAR-REACHING PROVISIONS FOR REFUGEE RETURN.

The Erdut Agreement included provisions on refugee return to the region from which people had been displaced, the protection of refugees and their property rights, including restitution. United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1244 aimed to support “safe and free return of all refugees and displaced persons” (UN Security Council, 1999) but was not specific regarding the details, which were later developed by the UN administration (UNMIK) together with the provisional Kosovar institutions. Return policies strongly prioritised return to the pre-war homes, mainly due to a lack of clear procedures for housing reconstruction in new locations (OSCE, Department of Human Rights & Communities, 2009); this changed only slowly after many years. In Macedonia, by contrast, displaced people had the right from the outset to choose between return to their place of origin—with assistance for reconstruction

or renovation if needed—or compensation (Topalova, 2019), and the process was less complex due to the short-term nature of the war and displacement.

RETURN PATTERNS

Legal frameworks, protection titles and opportunities to decide on return differed significantly between destination countries and considerably affected the timing, extent and patterns of return mobility to the case study countries. Countries in the region often provided prospects for remaining and, in some cases, regularisation—sometimes according to ethnic or national criteria, as shown above. Most western European countries—Germany being the most significant—ended protection status and tolerated stays shortly after the wars.

Rapid, decided returns in large numbers—predominantly into majority areas—followed relatively short periods of fighting. In Macedonia, 90,000 out of 93,000 persons displaced outside the country had returned by the end of 2001 (NRC, 2002). Not all returned to their previous place of residence, however (Topalova, 2019); Macedonians and Roma from formerly mixed villages in the western part often moved to other parts of the country (UNHCR, 2002). The

post-war return of displaced Albanians from Kosovo—particularly from Albania, Macedonia and Montenegro—was one of the fastest self-organised refugee returns in history (Hajdari & Krasniqi, 2021). Within weeks of the end of fighting, over 90 per cent of Albanian displaced persons from neighbouring countries had returned (UNHCR, 1999). There were also self-organised returns from EU countries; however, some returnees regretted their decision, and many would have preferred to remain longer in EU countries than temporary protection policies permitted—from there, they would have been better placed to support returned relatives and contribute financially to reconstruction.

ACROSS THE REGION, RETURN FREQUENTLY TOOK THE FORM OF TEMPORARY, SEASONAL OR PARTIAL MOBILITY RATHER THAN PERMANENT RETURN.

In Kosovo, reconstruction was far outpaced by the volume of decided returns, and many returnees initially lacked food and shelter. Moreover, during the short period between the end of the war and the establishment of UNMIK, receiving countries carried out 12,533 forced returns without proper identification procedures or risk assessments (Council of Europe, 2001). After 2000, UNMIK established pre-return screening procedures and readmission criteria, which significantly slowed forced returns from the European Union and Switzerland (Lüthke,

2007)—particularly for communities considered at risk such as Serbs and Roma. On average, 50 per cent of Germany's repatriation requests were rejected by UNMIK (Misselwitz, 2010); those with a criminal record, however, could always be readmitted. While these measures were meant to protect displaced people from post-return risks and persecution, they led to a surge of deportations, particularly of Roma, after the unilateral declaration of independence and signing of a readmission agreement by the Kosovar government.

Germany had implemented a similar policy after the war in BiH, while other destination countries such as the United States, Austria, Sweden, Canada and the Netherlands granted permanent residency rights. As a result, most early returns to BiH originated from Germany, but a substantial share of those deported—60 per cent—and even some of those who avoided deportation by enrolling in assisted return schemes became internally displaced within their country of origin (Engelbrecht, 2004).

Minority returns were slower, more limited and often temporary compared to returns into areas where people formed part of the majority. In BiH and Croatia, minority return movements increased several years after the wars due to political change (Mesic & Bagic, 2011), whereas segregation further proceeded during the first years after the wars in BiH (Rebecca Brubaker, 2025). However, even where people returned, many of

them subsequently left again—either moving within their country to majority areas or emigrating abroad—illustrating the persistence of unresolved structural constraints.

MINORITY RETURNS WERE SLOWER, MORE LIMITED AND OFTEN TEMPORARY COMPARED TO RETURNS INTO AREAS WHERE PEOPLE FORMED PART OF THE MAJORITY.

The lack of any survey on the sustainability of returns implies not only an absence of reliable data on this (for minority and majority returns), but also a lack of interest in producing such data, as it could have shown the scale of the failure (Rebecca Brubaker, 2025). In Kosovo, minority returns peaked in 2003 and declined again following renewed violence and displacement in 2004 but have continued at a low level to this day. Given the protracted nature of the process, the profile and motivations of returnees have shifted over the years—from people seeking to rebuild their lives in their former homes to those driven by precarious living conditions in neighbouring countries, the wish to sell their property or retire and a small number who had not returned earlier due to security concerns.

Problems arose where people were not permitted to integrate or regularise after many years in displacement. While Montenegro eventually provided permanent residence to minority displaced persons from Kosovo, Macedonia

issued mainly temporary protection, and regularisation was granted somewhat arbitrarily—according to our interviews, only to people who had married Macedonian citizens. Interviews with those who returned over recent years—often feeling pushed to leave, as UNHCR assistance ceased and permits were not extended—revealed precarious conditions. Ashkali from Dubravë/Dubrava and Ferizaj/Uroševac have been waiting for housing assistance for many years; rent is covered only for the first year after return. They have not been able to integrate economically and have not received the promised assistance. Many suffer from health conditions they cannot get treated, and in several cases, family members could not be registered after return, rendering them stateless in their own country.

Across the region, return frequently took the form of temporary, seasonal or partial mobility rather than permanent return. Many returnees reclaimed property for symbolic, legal or economic reasons while maintaining livelihoods elsewhere—in other parts of the country, neighbouring states or western Europe. Transnational and translocal strategies—split-family arrangements, seasonal labour migration and maintaining residences in multiple locations—allowed families to manage economic insecurity and political uncertainty. These patterns highlight the need to understand post-conflict return not as a single event but as part of broader, long-term mobility systems that have historically characterised societies in the region.

NAILA: COPING IN DISPLACEMENT AND AFTER RETURN

Naila was born in a town in Eastern Bosnia in 1988. After being evacuated, she, her mother and sister were temporarily housed in Sarajevo before continuing to Belgrade and later Macedonia. Arriving on their own in the middle of the night, the family found refuge with a local family in Macedonia. “That family took care of us as if we were their own,” she recalls. For two months, they were sheltered, fed and supported. The family even collected money among friends and neighbours, enabling them to buy plane tickets to the Netherlands.

From there, their journey continued to Germany. Initially housed in a refugee container, they were eventually offered an apartment—a turning point that brought a sense of stability. Despite speaking no German when

Naila and her sister started school, they learned the language rapidly and integrated with ease. She later attended secondary school and excelled academically. Looking back, she describes her childhood in Germany as happy and full of opportunity.

After the war, in 1996, her mother decided to go back.

Returning to her hometown, however, was never an option for Naila. The town’s population had drastically reduced, and hardly any Bosniaks had returned after the war. A visit years later left a lasting impression: In a building used by the municipality, she saw a picture of Ratko Mladić [former commander of the Army of the Republika Srpska, convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity] displayed in a window. Shocked and feeling unwelcome, she and her sister have not returned since.

Instead, the family settled in Sarajevo. “But it was too early—especially for children,” she says. Sarajevo was still heavily damaged. Many buildings had no proper windows, only plastic sheets. Schools operated in shifts due to lack of space, and classrooms were heated with coal. Food was scarce. The social environment was harder still: Children who had lived abroad were labelled as outsiders who had spent the war in comfort while others had endured it at home.

Over time, Naila rebuilt her life in Sarajevo. But the process of reintegration was slow—much slower, she notes, than her integration in Germany had been.

“Integration in Germany was easier than reintegration in Bosnia,” she says. “Two worlds collided—our experiences, our interests, everything was different.”

Only gradually did she find her place, find work in Sarajevo and marry. Germany continues to occupy an important place in her life. “It is still my second home, and I have not closed the chapter on Germany,” she says (BiHCSPSI45, 29 August 2019).

TABLE 2: RETURN PATTERNS IN POST-YUGOSLAVIA

Country of Origin	Timing of Return	Type of Return (pressured/ voluntary/ assisted/ self-organised)	Majority vs Minority Return Pattern	Peak Return Period	Key Figures	Key Structural Constraints
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Wave 1 (1997–1999): early assisted 8 pressured returns (mainly from Germany). Wave 2 (1999–2002): property restitution-driven voluntary assisted return. Wave 3 (post-2005): decreasing return numbers	Pressure-induced; assisted voluntary; later self-organised	Majority returns earlier and larger; minority return slower and less durable	2001–2002: peak years (after successes in property restitution, improvements in security)	>2 million displaced; ~1 million registered returns by 2003 incl. ~390,000 minority returns ¹	Ethnified political order; socio-economic constraints; war-related grievances and trauma
Croatia	Minority return increased after 1998 Return programme; peak in 2000 after political change	Politically contingent; Assisted and voluntary	Majority earlier and larger; Minority return delayed and smaller	2000: peak for Serb returns	250,000 Croatian Serbs displaced in 1995; Serb returns peaked at ~20,700 in 2000 ²	Administrative barriers; political rhetoric; property disputes
Kosovo	1999: extremely rapid self-organised Albanian return; post-2000: slow minority return	Rapid self-organised (majority); Forced and assisted (minority)	Majority Albanian return among fastest recorded; Serb, Roma, Ashkali return limited	1999: majority; 2002–2003: minority peak	>850,000 fled in 1999; >90% Albanians returned by mid-1999 (UNHCR, 1999); <30,000 minority returns in 2000–2023 (OSCE, 2019)	Security concerns; discrimination; documentation gaps; weak regional cooperation
North Macedonia	2001–2002: rapid return after Ohrid Framework Agreement	Predominantly voluntary and rapid	Majority returned quickly; some minorities did not return to mixed areas	2001–2002	140,000–170,000 displaced; majority returned within 1–2 years (UNHCR, 2002)	Local tensions; destruction; weak reconciliation in mixed municipalities

¹ UNHCR (2003); ICG (2002), as cited in Barkan and Adelman (2011).

² Mesić and Bagić (2011).

LESSONS ON WHAT MAKES RETURN POSSIBLE AND SUSTAINABLE

Our research shows that sustainable returns depend on whether the dynamics of war have been overcome, whether the basics for restarting a life—such as housing, livelihoods and access to basic public services—are in place, whether governments and institutions allow people to re-enter into a social contract, and whether communities and neighbourly relations create a new home. In the absence of these conditions, return and reintegration assistance often only has short-term effects, if any.

SUSTAINABLE RETURN DEPENDS ON SECURITY, JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

Significant efforts and resources were invested in creating and maintaining the security conditions necessary for displaced persons to return. Beyond the clearance of mines, unexploded ordnance (UXO) and other dangerous remnants of the wars¹⁰, the key measures were international military and police presence, transitional justice to remove perpetrators of war crimes from public positions and security sector reform to allow countries to take ownership of their security and avoid future escalations.

¹⁰ In 1996, over one million acres in BiH were considered unsafe due to landmines. Since then, landmines have killed or injured more than 1,781 civilians and have reportedly hindered the return of displaced communities, prevented agricultural development and delayed economic recovery. Despite nearly three decades of demining efforts, only 75 per cent of suspected hazardous areas have been cleared (U.S. Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2024).

SECURITY

The risk of continued and unpredictable insecurity dynamics in post-war scenarios should not be underestimated, and relapse into violence is common (Walter, 2011). In post-Yugoslavia, international actors succeeded in creating relative stability through force in BiH and Kosovo and through pressure in Croatia and Macedonia. But despite the large presence of international troops and police personnel, the security situation remained fragile for years, especially in BiH and Kosovo. In Kosovo, a NATO force of 50,000 soldiers (KFOR) was responsible for providing security and conditions for the safe return of displaced persons, but proved unable to prevent continued evacuation threats, attacks, lootings and the burning of houses directed mainly against minority residents. Forced displacements peaked again in 2004, with violence directed mainly against Roma and Serbs, while Gorani, Ashkali and others who had considered themselves relatively safe in Kosovo were also targeted and often unprotected. In effect, the security monopoly remained with remnants of the KLA in parts of the country (Baldwin, 2006); not only minorities but also Albanians perceived as 'traitors' or 'collaborators' were at risk (ICG, 2000). KFOR thus concluded that its mission "must be interpreted in the context of the overall security situation, which is not just a KFOR/Police responsibility, but a collective one" (UN OCHA, 2001).

In BiH, security incidents—including violent attacks against returnees, shootings, use of explosives, killings, attacks on religious or symbolic sites—continued for several years after the signing of the DPA: The NATO-led multinational Implementation Force (IFOR) and the unarmed International Police Force were often unable to prevent the violence. In some cases, perpetrators included police officers (ICG, 1998b). Incidents directed against minorities were more frequently reported from Republika Srpska (Engelbrecht, 2004; Ivanisevic, 2004). To remove war criminals from state institutions, the UN Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (UNMIBH) implemented vetting of the police—with relative success (Finci, 2007).

In Croatia, physical attacks against returnees were less widespread, and international influence was exerted through political conditionality—making progress toward Council of Europe membership and EU accession contingent on improvements in the treatment of returnees and protection of minorities (Ivanisevic, 2004). A transitional police force was created in 1996 in Eastern Slavonia, initially made up only of Serbs and later of both Serbs and Croats, while the United Nations and OSCE monitored local police performance. In 2000, a new government came to power that was more open to returns, and in the years that followed, violence experienced by returnees decreased, and political conditions for minority returns gradually improved (Mesic & Bagic, 2011).

HARIS—A LIFE MARKED BY LOSS AND PERSEVERANCE

Haris was born in a village in Eastern Bosnia. After school, he worked as a driver for a large state-owned company. In July 1992, his village was attacked, and many of its inhabitants were executed by Bosnian Serb military police. “Other than most of my neighbours and family, I managed to escape,” Haris recalls. He joined the army and left service in 2002. With the compensation he received, he bought a van and tools and worked as a truck driver, travelling frequently between Bosnia and Germany.

For most survivors, the violence of the past remains a barrier to return—especially since some of those responsible still live in the area. For Haris, however, loss became a reason to come back. “I lost many family members here. This is why I returned—I want to be close to them. I also want to help find the remains of those who are still missing. Someone has to live here so this place is not completely abandoned.”

With limited infrastructure—particularly the lack of electricity in parts of the village—Haris fears that in ten years no one may live there at all. “I can stay just because I own enough land, and the grants I received as a returnee for a tractor and a greenhouse helped,” he explains.

Yet return has not been easy. “After I came back in 2014, I faced harassment and threats from people here. I was also subjected to repeated and arbitrary police checks for several years.” Today, he feels safer—but not entirely at ease. “I still don’t dare to leave the women alone on the farm. If all the criminals had been brought to justice, things would be different. Also, current political tensions worry me and sometimes make us leave the house and stay elsewhere for a few days because we feel threatened” (BiHCSPI88, 14 April 2022)

After the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) in Macedonia, renewed violence in November 2001 was linked to dissatisfaction with the slow implementation of the agreement (NRC, 2002). In general, security institutions re-established control over the violence-affected regions relatively quickly, with limited international support and monitoring by EU and OSCE observers under NATO protection (UNHCR, 2002). The police were disarmed, and mixed police units were established to restore trust. The NLA agreed to disarmament, but security concerns deterred early returns and returns into formerly mixed neighbourhoods. Some Macedonian displaced persons, for example, demanded army escorts for their return to Albanian-majority areas, but Albanians resisted such deployment (NRC, 2002). The security situation stabilised, though low-intensity attacks and provocations continued, revolving mainly around issues of identity politics. Members of the NLA went on to form a political party, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), which represented Albanian interests in all coalition governments in Macedonia until the most recent parliamentary elections (2024).

In retrospect, studies offer an ambivalent assessment of the impact of international military interventions—both on minority returns and more broadly. Particularly in BiH, many studies argue that the number of minority returns is directly related to the scope of the international intervention (Barkan & Adelman, 2011; Fischel De Andrade & Delaney, 2001; Harvey, 2006;

Jenne, 2010); for Kosovo, the argument is that efforts were insufficient to allow significant numbers of minority returns (Baldwin, 2006). Some concluded that greater military force and political pressure would have been required to guarantee safety and security for minority returnees and that international actors were too lenient with nationalists in positions of power (Ivanisevic, 2004). Others argue that international pressure was counterproductive, inadvertently strengthening the position of nationalist leaders by providing ammunition for their mobilisation and making grassroots reconciliation more difficult to achieve (Cox, 1998). Close observers pointed to the risk that international military presence would give potential returnees a false sense of security (Cox, 1998), while in practice being unable to shield them from harassment or renewed displacement.

INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTIONS FACED THE DILEMMA OF WHETHER TO OPPOSE ETHNIC SEPARATISM OR ACCEPT—OR EVEN ENFORCE IT

International interventions also faced the dilemma of whether to oppose ethnic separatism or accept—or even enforce it—and there was no clear strategy on how to handle it (Rebecca Brubaker, 2013; Cox, 1998). KFOR forces in parts of Kosovo, for example, strictly separated Serb and Albanian residents to maintain security, thereby preventing minority Albanians from returning to their previous homes—which in turn undermined support for the return of non-Albanian

communities elsewhere in the country. Similarly, acknowledging that persisting insecurity restricted freedom of movement for minorities in Kosovo, international organisations established separate public transport for them (OSCE, 2007)—a measure that showcases the lack of clarity in UNMIK’s international ‘agenda for coexistence’, both in terms of its aims and its operationalisation. In Kosovo, law enforcement capacity was lacking, especially in the early period, compounding the ineffectiveness of international security provision: Even when individuals were caught harassing or threatening people to displace them, KFOR could only detain them for three weeks—and without trial—making impunity a significant obstacle to security provision.

KFOR troops were not well trained for deployment in diverse contexts, and it was often overlooked that smaller minorities and those without a kin state were equally or even disproportionately affected by violence, forced displacement and forced recruitment. Many people had been pressured to align with one side or another, exposing them to retaliation while not necessarily granting them recognition or protection in the post-war order (Derens, 2003). Security providers did not consult communities—including the most vulnerable and least protected—who therefore perceived the decisions and strategies as top-down and unpredictable, engendering a lack of subjective and objective security (Baldwin, 2006). Roma in particular were poorly protected under UN administration

and were exposed to further harm. Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian IDPs were housed in lead-contaminated camps on a former mine. Several died and many suffered severe acute and chronic illnesses, yet none ever received compensation (OHCHR, 2019). On balance, international interventions had a key stabilising function but were hampered by unrealistic assessments of the security dynamics on the ground, overestimation of their own capacity to enforce security and the absence of a strategy for effectively operating in—and enabling the recreation of—a socially diverse environment.

EU and NATO membership prospects and other incentives (Subotic, 2015). The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), established in 1993, dealt with serious violations of international humanitarian law committed since 1991 (Zyberi & Letnar Čerňič, 2015). It made significant contributions to ensuring individual accountability for mass atrocity crimes and processed several high-profile cases (Zyberi & Letnar Čerňič, 2015). It also emphasised tangible outcomes, such as the number of prosecutions, rather than ‘messy concepts’ such as truth and reconciliation (Basic, 2006; Subotic, 2015). The ICTY’s processes were therefore unable to overcome contradictory conceptions of ‘truth’ (Basic, 2006). Studies on Croatia and BiH find no evidence of a positive impact of the ICTY on reconciliation (Clark, 2012; Zyberi & Letnar Čerňič, 2015), while in Kosovo, questions of justice and prosecution remain highly controversial and carry significant potential for mobilisation.

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE, TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

Transitional justice (TJ) measures are intended to reassure displaced persons that their origin state has reformed and accepts responsibility and accountability for past abuses (Bradley, 2005). In post-Yugoslavia, TJ was driven primarily by international actors, rather than by domestic—elite demand, and compliance was perceived as a proxy for the success of the international interventions, reinforced through conditionality via aid,

Initiatives for Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs)¹¹ at republic level, such as in the FRY and in BiH, were largely unsuccessful (Ristic, 2019). In Kosovo’s latest TJ strategy, the idea of a national TRC is invigorated (Haxhijaj, 2024), though with little progress so far. A civil society initiative advocating for the creation of an interstate Regional

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Post-war security risks are contingent and dynamic. The security situation remains strongly shaped by the previous war and develops in often unpredictable ways. Early returns are risky and may result in renewed displacement or worse, even under heavy international military deployment. Pre-return risk assessments need to take account of war-related grievances, potentially shifting ethnic boundaries and less obvious risk factors such as perceived (il)loyalty, gender and other context-relevant factors.

International troops—deployed as guarantors of minority returns—lacked the tools and a coherent strategy for restoring diversity. Such interventions must apply integrated approaches informed by legal standards on minority and human rights and consider and reflect the diversity of societies. They need to act coherently—for example on questions of segregation versus minority return—and consult the people they are meant to protect, especially the most vulnerable ones. Where possible, mixed police forces can successfully restore trust in state-provided security.

11. Truth commissions are “officially sanctioned, temporary, non-judicial investigative bodies” attempting “to understand the extent and the patterns of past violations, as well as their causes and consequences” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2006, p. 1).

Commission Tasked with Establishing the Facts about All Victims of War Crimes and Other Serious Human Rights Violations Committed on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia from 1 January 1991 to 31 December 2001 (RECOM) gained considerable public and international support (Humanitarian Law Centre, 2011), but a TRC has yet to be established. As a result, perceptions persisted that understood justice as centred on the prosecution of crimes committed against one's own ethnic community rather than in its name (Subotic, 2015).

The localisation of transitional justice after the closure of the ICTY led to diverse outcomes: In Croatia, prosecution and sentencing in domestic courts was slow and reflected an ethnic bias, and many war crimes remained unprosecuted. In BiH, the war crimes department of the Bosnian Court, established in 2005, suffered from an unmanageable caseload and low public trust from the outset (Subotic, 2015). Kosovo reluctantly agreed to a new special court, the Kosovo Specialist Chambers, established under Kosovo law but seated in The Hague, staffed only by international judges because domestic prosecution of war crimes was not considered viable (Muharremi, 2016). Domestic prosecution also involved UNMIK and the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) (Zyberi & Letnar Čeranić, 2015). Kosovo adopted a Transitional Justice Strategy in 2024—a quarter of a century after the war—to address issues such as justice for war crimes, victim protection, the

search for missing persons (Haxhiaj, 2024). Citizens regard a comprehensive strategy for dealing with the past as long overdue but have doubts about its effective implementation and hold conflicting expectations about its goals and outcomes depending on community background (Visoka & Lumi, 2020). In Macedonia, lustration law—the removal of politicians from power for involvement in past crimes or wrongdoing, including under the communist regime—was implemented in such a way that it undermined rather than restored trust in public institutions and was partly used to remove political opponents (Stasa, 2025).

IN POST-YUGOSLAVIA, TJ WAS DRIVEN PRIMARILY BY INTERNATIONAL ACTORS, RATHER THAN BY DOMESTIC—ELITE DEMAND, AND COMPLIANCE WAS PERCEIVED AS A PROXY FOR THE SUCCESS OF THE INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTIONS, REINFORCED THROUGH CONDITIONALITY VIA AID, EU AND NATO MEMBERSHIP PROSPECTS AND OTHER INCENTIVES.

Amnesty regulations for former fighters were also applied across all four case studies—covering both state and non-state actors in Macedonia, Croatia and BiH and non-state actors in Kosovo—usually exempting cases of sufficient gravity for ICTY indictment and conditional on disarmament. Such amnesties

are tools for ending violence, but they also deny victims truth, justice and reparations (Zyberi & Letnar Čeranić, 2015). In Macedonia, cases referred back from the ICTY were amnestied retrospectively, in violation of the actual intention and scope of the amnesty law (Subotic, 2015). An ongoing trial of former NLA members was halted by the amnesty law, with the result that only one person—a Macedonian—was convicted of war crimes (Stasa, 2025). In Kosovo, following the demilitarisation of the KLA, many of its former members joined the Kosovo Protection Corps, a civilian emergency-response organisation. These amnesties, along with political power-sharing arrangements (see below) and early elections—supported or even mandated by international actors—constrained efforts to investigate and punish war crimes, while also opening “significant access” (Stasa, 2025, p. 170) to positions of power, legitimisation and consolidation for groups and individuals likely to have been involved in past war-crimes, reducing, at least, the perceived security of many displaced persons. As a respondent from Eastern BiH (RS) put it, “How can I feel safe there? How is this possible when I am surrounded by people who, during the war, put their knives under my neck, poured salt into my wounds and wanted to pull my teeth out with pliers? Those people still walk freely [...], people who did monstrous things during the war” (BiHAIS1).

Evidence on concrete links between TJ and return numbers is limited and contested (Korner, 2012). Reportedly, the presence of perpetrators of war crimes in municipal governments and police forces deterred returns (Nalepa, 2012), while arrests—especially of low-level war criminals whom potential returnees associated with specific acts of violence—reduced fears of physical attack among them (Stefanovic & Loizides, 2011, p. 420).

A SEVERE WEAKNESS ACROSS THE CASE STUDIES WAS THE LACK OF EFFECTIVE MECHANISMS FOR WITNESS PROTECTION, BOTH IN ICTY AND DOMESTIC TRIALS, WHICH GREATLY CONSTRAINED THEIR POTENTIAL TO ESTABLISH ‘TRUTH’ AND GATHER RELIABLE EVIDENCE.

The arrest of indicted war criminals can also indirectly have a positive impact on peacebuilding (Belloni, 2005) and thereby on the sustainability of returns. Delays and perceived imbalances in transitional justice, however, continue to impede minority returns to Kosovo. Serbia's non-collaboration on the extradition of suspects has led to Serb returnees being arrested on suspicion of war crimes in Kosovo (OSCE, 2019b). According to the OSCE (2019), “challenging return locations” are places where local communities make the acceptance of returns conditional on returnees' collaboration in finding missing persons or identifying perpetrators of war crimes.

Remedies and reparations for victims were another gap in the transitional justice processes: These were not addressed by the ICTY (Zyberi & Letnar Čerňič, 2015) and only partially at the national level. Macedonia, for example, never established a reparations framework (Zyberi & Letnar Čerňič, 2015). Kosovo's law offers some reparations—for example benefits for veterans or relatives of missing persons—but the lack of ethnic inclusivity of the reparations law, mainly through the exclusion of violence that occurred after June 1999, has been criticised by, amongst others, the Council of Europe (Haxhijaj, 2024).

THE FOCUS ON WAR CRIMES ENTIRELY OVERLOOKED ORGANISED, CORPORATE AND ECONOMIC CRIMES COMMITTED DURING THE WAR, EXCLUDING FROM PROSECUTION GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS WHO HAD PROFITED FROM THE WAR WITHOUT NECESSARILY COMMITTING WAR CRIMES IN THE NARROW SENSE.

A severe weakness across the case studies was the lack of effective mechanisms for witness protection, both in ICTY and domestic trials, which greatly constrained their potential to establish 'truth' and gather reliable evidence. One of our interview partners from eastern BiH described his fears of testifying in war crimes proceedings: During the war, he spent eight months in three different concentration camps: Skelani, Milići and Batkovići. He was subpoenaed by the RS

Ministry of the Interior to testify in court about the wartime events in these three camps. He has refused to testify, because he does not feel protected as a witness. If he were to testify truthfully about the torture, degradation and dehumanisation that prison inmates suffered at the hands of wartime RS authorities in these three camps, he does not believe that the peacetime RS authorities would do anything to protect him and his family against possible retribution.

I have told them a million times that I will not testify, but they tell me over and over again that I have to, that I will have to go to The Hague. I refuse to do this. I will not go there, and that is why I cannot go back to my house [...] and this is why I decided to leave (BiHAISI1).

Finally, the focus on war crimes entirely overlooked organised, corporate and economic crimes committed during the war, excluding from prosecution groups and individuals who had profited from the war without necessarily committing war crimes in the narrow sense. A UN Expert Commission identified 83 paramilitary groups operating on behalf of different sides across the territory of the former Yugoslavia in 1994 (UN Security Council, 1994). Many former combatants who had been involved in criminal activities went on to found private security companies after the war, building on the networks and operations established during the conflict (Aparac, 2024).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Transitional justice requires a comprehensive approach and time. Achievements in prosecuting perpetrators have been undermined by the failure to establish a common truth—which has hindered rather than supported reconciliation—and by leaving war-related crimes unaccounted for. Efforts to establish truth and justice depend critically on effective witness protection mechanisms and on political will—both often lacking in the immediate aftermath of war.

Prosecuting perpetrators has a positive but limited effect on returns. Meanwhile, generalised amnesties and the integration of former fighters into the security sector—while helping to create stability—carry security risks for those formerly persecuted, can limit trust in the security apparatus, and even enable continued displacements or prevent minority returns. Forces can successfully restore trust in state-provided security.

HOUSING AND LIVELIHOODS ARE CONDITIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE RETURN

Alongside the reconstruction of destroyed housing, the often contentious process of restitution—determining individual property rights over houses and agricultural and commercial assets after destruction, displacement and deliberate dispossession—received substantial international support. Yet return can only be sustainable where people find safety, shelter and livelihoods, the latter impeded in many cases by poorly managed post-communist transition.

PROPERTY RESTITUTION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF HOUSING

The massive and systematic destruction of houses, as well as public, commercial, agricultural and cultural property, was not only an effect of the fighting but also a deliberate strategy aimed at preventing the return of forcibly displaced people¹²—affecting more than three-quarters of the housing stock in BiH (Dahlman & Tuathail, 2005). Wartime regimes in BiH adopted laws allowing apartments and houses of displaced persons to be declared “abandoned” and temporary occupancy rights for property to be allocated to third parties (Fischel De Andrade & Delaney, 2001, pp. 319–320). After the war, early returnees struggled to reclaim their homes, as some were forced to sign documents transferring their property to municipal ownership (Fischel De Andrade & Delaney, 2001). Similarly, in Croatia, laws on the administration of abandoned property enacted during and following the war, prevented displaced persons—specifically Croatian Serbs—from repossessing their property (Engelbrecht, 2004). Moreover, the 1996 Law on Reconstruction covered only housing damaged by the Yugoslav

army, effectively barring Croatian Serbs from reconstruction assistance (Engelbrecht, 2004, p. 135). Furthermore, the exemption of former socialist property rights—concentrated largely in urban areas—from restitution prevented returns to urban areas in Croatia (Leutloff-Grandits, 2016). Bilateral agreements on so-called two-way returns of Croats and Serbs, which could potentially have helped to alleviate the problem of occupied houses and apartments did not yield the expected results (ICG, 1998a).

In Kosovo, factors complicating restitution partly pre-dated the war and persisted into the post-war period. Property registration had not been implemented universally in Yugoslavia, with some people—those less integrated in the system—sometimes preferring to not register their property (Tawil, 2009). During the 1990s, property transactions in Kosovo were often conducted informally, largely for political reasons and were, therefore, not formally registered. Also, Albanians were excluded from Socially Owned Enterprises, many of which administered employee housing and apartment privatisation during the 1990s. This led to discrimination-related loss of property rights (Tawil, 2009). After the war, together with the withdrawal of the Yugoslav army and institutions, most cadastral files and records were moved

¹² An exception is Macedonia, where fighting between state armed forces and insurgents affected significant parts of the housing stock in insurgent strongholds, while retaliatory violence in Skopje and Bitola gutted homes and shops belonging to different ethnic communities (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2002).

to Belgrade and—despite an agreement reached in 2011—have largely not been returned (OSCE, 2020). Amidst war-related destruction and without a cadastral system, massive urbanisation followed, with some cities doubling or even tripling their population within a few years after the war. This led to large-scale unregulated construction, partly fuelled by remittances—similar to the pattern observed in BiH, where tens of thousands of buildings were erected without permission on public, agricultural or displaced persons' land (Tawil, 2009), creating new challenges to property legalisation and restitution which remain unresolved. The restitution process in post-Yugoslavia was further complicated by the parallel re-privatisation of formerly nationalised property. In Macedonia, property restitution following privatisation was a larger and more contested issue than post-conflict restitution, owing to the short-term nature of displacements.

Obstructions to return arose partly because nationalist politicians rejected the idea of minorities returning, and partly because influential individuals claimed additional properties. One often overlooked aspect, however, is that in many cases the occupiers were themselves displaced people with nowhere else to go (Fischel De Andrade & Delaney, 2001). A UNHCR report from BiH found that much of the violence surrounding attempts at minority return has been driven by displaced people themselves, with political agreements on minority return

sometimes reversed following violent protests by local IDPs (UNHCR, 1997).

A female respondent from RS, BiH, recounted:

My husband's parents had returned [...] some time before us. Once we visited them and spent a few days in their home. Many people who had already had a home here had trouble getting it back. I don't want to generalise; there were some cases in which the Serbs who had moved into Bosniak homes during the war understood that they had to leave, and did so promptly; others would blackmail the Bosniak returnees and make them pay to move back into their own homes. In some cases, even, Serbs would break the windows and things in the house and leave in the middle of the night. My husband's parents had to pay the people who had been living in their home to leave (BIHCSPSI48).

International actors played a key role in the restitution process, especially in BiH, Croatia and Kosovo. In BiH, sustained international pressure led both entities to pass new property legislation and provided an enforcement framework, the Property Law Implementation Plan (PLIP), allowing for the forced eviction of people occupying displaced persons' property. Over the years, international troops received a stronger mandate to

OBSTRUCTIONS TO RETURN AROSE PARTLY BECAUSE NATIONALIST POLITICIANS REJECTED THE IDEA OF MINORITIES RETURNING. ONE OFTEN OVERLOOKED ASPECT IS THAT FREQUENTLY THE OCCUPIERS WERE THEMSELVES DIS-PLACED PEOPLE WITH NOWHERE ELSE TO GO.

provide physical security to returnees, and following an unprecedented international effort, property restitution was declared complete in BiH in 2004, all the while, reconstruction was not. In Croatia, following intense international pressure for non-discriminatory property legislation and disbursement of reconstruction assistance, parliament voted to accept a Programme for the Return and Accommodation of Displaced Persons, Refugees and Resettled Persons in June 1998 (drawn up in cooperation with UNHCR and OSCE). However, support for property restitution, repossession and return was restricted to territorially defined areas, whereas many Serbs had lived in other parts of Croatia before the war.

In Kosovo, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) established a property restitution mechanism immediately after the war, but it took years to become fully functional. The Housing and Property Directorate (HPD) administered and adjudicated on housing and property claims—including those relating to discrimination-related property loss and informal property transactions during the 1990s, as well as those resulting from forced displacement, which made up the largest share (OSCE, 2020; Tawil, 2009). It was accompanied by a quasi-judicial body whose decisions could not be overturned by local courts (OSCE, 2020). Once operational, it dealt

with almost all claims filed, with varied outcomes. Approximately one-third of the HPD caseload resulted in declaratory decisions over destroyed property without offering any remedy (Tawil, 2009). Reconstruction assistance—financed by the European Agency for Reconstruction—was provided selectively on the basis of vulnerability through the Housing Reconstruction Programme. Where rightful owners could not or did not wish to return, the HPD could rent out property on their behalf (Tawil, 2009).

In Kosovo, the localisation of restitution added to its complications, and the process remains incomplete. The mandate of HPD's successor, the Kosovo Property Agency (KPA), covered not only residential but also commercial and agricultural property claims, and its decisions could be appealed in court. But apart from funding shortfalls and the slow establishment of a judicial appeals panel, it lacked support from both Kosovar and Serbian authorities (Tawil, 2009). It was succeeded in 2016 by the Kosovo Property Comparison and Verification Agency (KPCVA), which continues to resolve discrepancies between the pre-June 1999 and the newly established Kosovo cadastral registry records (OSCE, 2020) and had to deal with 12,823 contested ownership claims in 2018 alone (Rudic & Haxhiaj, 2018).¹³ In essence, the process has become a pawn in the tense relations

REGIONAL HOUSING PROGRAMME (2012-2022)

The Regional Housing Programme was an attempt to tackle the protracted displacement of the most vulnerable refugees and displaced persons following the 1991–1995 wars through a regional approach. It was a joint initiative by BiH, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia strongly endorsed by the international community—including the European Union, the United States, the Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB), UNHCR and OSCE—contributing 237 million euros, complemented by 50 million euros in national funding. Kosovo was excluded because of its contested status. The programme offered individual housing solutions to almost 12,000 families. Challenges included identifying the neediest beneficiaries, verifying their vulnerability and property status—particularly across country borders. Sustainability raised a further set of challenges for the programme, particularly regarding the return of the most vulnerable refugees and IDPs: The remoteness of pre-war homes and newly constructed buildings, limited infrastructure—electricity, water, road access—and scarce access to employment, education, health and social services, as well as little economic opportunities (Global Compact on Refugees, 2026), all undermined its ability to enable the sustainability of return. By the time of writing, it has not been possible to close all collective centres hosting vulnerable displaced persons or to resolve the issue of informal sub-standard settlements—inhabited in most cases by members of (displaced) minoritised communities.

¹³ More recent numbers are not publicly available, and KPCVA did not respond to interview requests.

between the governments in Belgrade and Prishtina (Petkovic, 2023). The Serbian government criticises its exclusion from the respective institutions—the KPA and later the KPCVA—, does not recognise the Kosovar cadastral system and has not released the old files. It has also built houses and entire settlements—such as “Sunny Valley” near Zvečan/Zvečan in the north of Kosovo—intended for returnees. Meanwhile, Kosovo maintains its return programme, which has faced criticism for delays and intransparency (EWB, 2021) but has also completed complicated and costly restitution cases—for example in Gjakova/Đakovica under police protection or demolishing new buildings on behalf of the rightful owners in Prishtina. What these examples highlight, however, is that enforcing

displaced persons’ rights to return and property restitution—and minority return as a process of social reintegration and reconciliation—may be two entirely different things (see Zila, 2019).

Remaining weaknesses of the process include: the law, which puts the burden of the enforcement process when evicting unlawful occupants on the owner of the property after two evictions have failed¹⁴; the frequent failure in practice to administer rent payments to rightful owners abroad, for example when inhabitants are too poor to be charged rent; and the lengthy restitution proceedings, which discourages many people from even trying (Rudic & Haxhiaj, 2018). Time has also worked against restitution more generally: Many properties have been

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Shelter is among the most immediate post-return needs, and various means—including destruction and dispossession—are used to prevent returns. Despite the urgency, making the determination of eligibility for reconstruction assistance a participatory process—reconciling donor criteria with the interests of the various stakeholders—has significant potential to enhance local ownership, trust-building and grassroots democracy, while preventing the discriminatory use of funds and conflicts over opaque vulnerability criteria.

Property restitution consists not only in establishing legal property rights over contested property, but crucially in enabling access for displaced people—information, outreach, security guarantees, logistical and legal assistance and alternatives for evicted internally displaced persons. It is thus not only a technical, but a deeply political endeavour, and its outcomes depend on stakeholder alignment. Restoring rights, however, does not equal restoring relations.

¹⁴ In this aspect, the Law on Property Restitution violates the Pinheiro Principles that set out international standards on the rights of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to recover housing, land and property lost through conflict, displacement, persecution or disasters.

PROMISING PRACTICE: KOSOVO’S MUNICIPAL HOUSING COMMITTEES

In a context where access to reconstruction assistance was a lottery and the small number of beneficiaries per village posed a risk to social cohesion, a promising institutional mechanism emerged: Municipal Housing Committees (MHCs), established by the UN administration. Tasked with supporting the operational implementation of the Housing Reconstruction Programme, they had a broadly technical mandate of applying pre-defined vulnerability criteria. International organisations—including UNHCR, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), OSCE and NGOs—would compile a list of potential beneficiaries; village-level committees would prioritise them; and NGOs would then conduct social on-site assessments. The MHCs then compared these technical assessments with the reconstruction guidelines, mediated among potential beneficiaries, NGOs, local government and the interim central government and made the final decision on the allocation of reconstruction funds. This task of reconciling conflicting interests turned them into capacity-building and democracy labs. They brought together local and international staff involved in municipal administration working on reconstruction, minority integration, cadastral affairs and social welfare, alongside members of the municipal assembly, representatives of international agencies and NGOs involved in reconstruction. The mechanism prevented external donors and implementing NGOs, as well as local powerholders from deciding unilaterally about reconstruction assistance; it created a space for the localisation of the reconstruction guidelines and built a sense of community around the issue of reconstruction. Assistance to minorities was also meant to be administered by the MHCs, and it was mainly when they were bypassed—as in the return of Serbs to an enclave near Pejë/Peć under KFOR protection—that protests against the return of minorities emerged (Minervini, 2002).

sold—some several times, partly through middlemen—and new buildings have been constructed on the sites of old ones—complicating matters further. While the published numbers indicate that the issue disproportionately affects Kosovo Serbs—96.84 per cent of usurped properties under KPCVA administration belong to Serbs—, this once again conceals the plight of other minorities. Many Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians had no property registration before the war, and some had no personal documents, which prevented them from proving their origin and their belonging to the former Yugoslavia or successor states (Tawil, 2009).

Our research in North Macedonia has revealed several instances of Roma who have never attempted to reclaim their occupied homes in Kosovo. The literature also emphasises that women—particularly in Albanian and some other minority communities in the former Yugoslavia—were traditionally prevented from owning and inheriting land and property, making them far less likely to hold formal property titles, not by law but in practice (Tawil, 2009). A major gap remains the lack of assistance for landless and homeless returnees (OSCE, 2019b), while housing assistance for those with proof of property ownership was relatively generous—at least in terms of funding—perhaps at the expense of livelihood support, which received a proportionally smaller share of the budget (Özerdem & Payne, 2019).

LIVELIHOODS

Even in the first post-war years, when security concerns were high, the lack of livelihood opportunities was the main impediment to sustainable return across return areas, but particularly in rural locations (Özerdem & Payne, 2019). The economic transition from communism to a neoliberal market economy, combined with the economic impacts of the wars and the destruction of industries, resulted in a very weak productive sector—a somewhat less severe situation in Croatia. Kosovo had the weakest economy in the region before and after the war, a situation compounded by the UN-led privatisation of the Socially Owned Enterprises, largely assessed as a failure by experts (Knudsen, 2010). Apart from costing roughly 70,000 jobs, privatisation contributed to limiting Kosovo's socio-economic potential, by restricting the operational possibilities of enterprises and transforming them into cash at a time of low value—and by blocking employees from work while awaiting privatisation, and not assisting with post-privatisation employment or social protection (Knudsen, 2010, p. 89).

In BiH, the effects of privatisation on employment were more mixed—some companies were sold with employment guarantees—but altogether, it increased the dependence of the poor on the shadow economy (Pugh, 2005). As discussed above, economic recession and international sanctions had been critical

factors leading to the wars through their role in ethnic mobilisation; from this perspective, livelihoods should have been the centrepiece of reconstruction efforts not only from the perspective of return sustainability, but also of reconciliation.

Weak economies not only prevent sustainable returns but also create high remittance dependencies and shortages of skilled labour, particularly pronounced in Kosovo, Macedonia and BiH. Regions with larger shares of minority populations may be particularly affected. In Republika Srpska, for instance, many factories closed after the war and the entity experienced significant out-migration and a lack of skilled labour. Even in Croatia, economic conditions in Eastern Slavonia and other regions previously under Serb control were particularly difficult after the war. Private sector activity was lower and unemployment higher than the national average in areas with the highest concentration of returnees, discouraging Croat displaced persons from returning to the region. Prospects for Serbs were reported to be even worse (Blitz, 2005). In Macedonia, villages where minorities reside have benefited less from economic development and thus appear to offer fewer prospects for return (Salihu, 2001). In Kosovo, by contrast, inhabitants of Serb-majority municipalities can rely on financial support from Serbia and are thus under less (economic) pressure to emigrate than others, including majority citizens. A 2008 survey in Kosovo showed that 30 per cent of Albanians had taken steps to move abroad—a higher

proportion than among Serb respondents (Ivlevs & King, 2015). Indeed, a representative survey of all categories of minority returnees in Kosovo in 2015 showed that their aspirations to re-migrate were (slightly) lower than those of the average population (Özerdem & Payne, 2019).

WEAK ECONOMIES NOT ONLY PREVENT SUSTAINABLE RETURNS BUT ALSO CREATE HIGH REMITTANCE DEPENDENCIES AND SHORTAGES OF SKILLED LABOUR, PARTICULARLY PRONOUNCED IN KOSOVO, MACEDONIA AND BIH.

Discrimination—both in the private and the public sectors—is another mechanism preventing people from accessing income opportunities. Roma are most affected by exclusion and discrimination. Minorities with a kin-state, such as Serbs in Eastern Slavonia, also faced discrimination in the labour market after the war. Discrimination often takes concealed forms—for example the Croatian government appeared to have met commitments regarding ethnically balanced recruitment in the public sector, yet permanent employment contracts were awarded mainly to Croat returnees (ICG 1998). A comparison of the situation under socialism and after, however, points to the crucial role of public services and institutions in alleviating marginalisation and exclusion, at least where boundaries were not politicised. For many displaced people, the repossession of pre-war

housing was perceived as “important for reasons of morality, justice, and economic rehabilitation (Stefansson, 2006, p. 117).

The mismatch between reconstruction assistance and livelihood support, however, led to many failed returns—especially among minorities. In BiH, particularly in the early years before the legal framework permitted forced evictions, reconstruction efforts focused on empty, isolated villages of no strategic significance. In 1998, the occupancy rate of reconstructed housing in BiH was 60 per cent, and even those who did return remained dependent on family support from elsewhere (Cox, 1998). Numerous studies—particularly on BiH and Kosovo—describe the temporary nature of return in response to adverse local conditions, including lack of employment, education and necessary infrastructure (Cukur et al., 2005; D’Onofrio, 2004; Phuong, 2000; Stefansson,

2006; Williams, 2006). Many returnees therefore opted to exchange or sell their houses rather than return permanently to minority areas (Leutloff-Grandits, 2016). “Promoting returns was an easy solution, building houses, tick the box, no one thought about schooling, jobs or reconciliation”, remarks one stakeholder in Kosovo critically during an interview (RKS-RV-SHI-33).

The weak economies reinforce the role of informal and personalised networks as the primary means of gaining access to resources, jobs and support (Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2013). The combination of unresponsive state institutions, unemployment benefits far below subsistence level—in Kosovo, BiH and Macedonia—and lack of public health insurance in Kosovo further increases dependence on networks.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Post-socialist transition and privatisation were deeply disruptive to livelihoods, with long-lasting implications, in parts worsening rather than relieving pre- and war-related economic downturns. Decisions about privatisation and austerity measures need to be weighed very carefully against their immediate impacts on livelihoods, return conditions and their potential to be utilised in identity politics/ethnic mobilisation, as well as their long-term implications for economic recovery.

Sustainable economic recovery cannot begin too early and should encompass rural areas, borderlands and sectors independent of the reconstruction boom. While selling or subletting repossessed homes may be considered a legitimate strategy to compensate for wartime losses, it should, however, be a matter of choice rather than a response to insecurity, discrimination or precarity.

INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE, SERVICES AND ACCOUNTABILITY ARE KEY FOR STATE–SOCIETY RELATIONS

Redefining state–citizen relations after forced displacement and atrocities is crucial for people’s trust and long-term prospects in the polity concerned. Measures undertaken by international actors towards this end—mainly designing new constitutions, vetting the public sector and incentivising acceptance of minority returns—yielded ambivalent results. The most underrated factors for sustainable return proved to be the quality, scope and inclusiveness of support available through public services and the accountability of governance structures.

ETHNO-POLITICAL POWER-SHARING ARRANGEMENTS

New constitutional arrangements were introduced in all four case studies after the wars—in line with, and, in some cases as part of, the peace agreements, such as in BiH, where the post-war constitution was a part of the Dayton Agreement—or introduced over time, as in Kosovo. They introduced variations of consociational—that is, ethnicity-based—political power-sharing arrangements as a means of conflict settlement (Bieber, 2004) in all case study countries except Croatia, which is a unicameral parliamentary republic with some reserved seats for national minorities. Initially developed as a governance model in Central European countries, consociationalism became a tool for managing intrastate conflicts in the post-Cold War era (Nagle, 2025). Introducing it in parts of the former Yugoslavia was a strategy to end the wars and tremendous human suffering they had caused. One questionable aspect is its imposed nature, which raises questions about compatibility with democratic standards. Although the respective arrangements were designed to secure elite agreement to peace (Nagle, 2025) and were negotiated between international actors and the nationalist leaders

responsible for the wars (Cox, 1998), implementation continued to depend on international enforcement. International actors therefore still exert influence—in BiH through the High Representative, in Kosovo through EU sanctions, NATO troops and EU and UN missions and in Macedonia and Croatia through incentives such as NATO and EU accession.

BiH's post-war constitution divided the country into two separate entities: The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), encompassing the territories controlled by forces of the Bosnian government and Bosnian Croat forces, and Republika Srpska (RS), coinciding with the territories claimed by Bosnian Serb separatists during the war.¹⁵ It defines three constituent peoples—Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats—while all others, including Jews, Roma, Hungarians, Italians, Slovenes, Montenegrins, Albanians are labelled “others” (ostali) and are ineligible to hold several high government offices, including the presidency. According to the European Court of Human Rights, the territorial and ethnicity-based restrictions on voting and candidacy rights enshrined in Bosnia's post-war constitution violate human rights and anti-discrimination provisions (Constitutionnet, 2023). BiH is considered the most extreme case, as ethnicity is enshrined not only politically but also territorially in the post-war order (Smajljaj, 2020).

APPLYING CONSOCIATIONALISM AS A MEANS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION SOLIDIFIES ETHNIC BOUNDARIES AT THE MOMENT OF THEIR MAXIMUM POLARISATION BY TURNING THEM INTO CONSTITUTIONAL AND INSTITU- TIONAL ARRANGEMENTS. THIS HAS LASTING REPERCUSSIONS—AMONG THEM THE ETHNIFICATION OF POLITICS.

Kosovo's constitution, by contrast, defines Kosovo as a multiethnic society and entails “group-differentiated rights”, in line with—and in some respects going beyond—international law and framework conventions (Beha, 2014, p. 85). Unlike BiH's, it was developed years after the war through a consultative process, though most of its standards had been drafted by the international administration, and addressing Kosovo's statehood was made conditional on their achievement (Beha, 2014). Kosovo also retained a unitary structure, unlike BiH, with reserved minority seats in political institutions at central and municipal level, as well as judiciary and minority veto power (Smajljaj, 2020). Meanwhile, so-called parallel institutions (including municipal offices, schools, health care centres and courts) continued to operate on behalf of the Serbian government, mainly in Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo (OSCE, 2003). The Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) that settled the war in Macedonia required substantial changes to the constitution, including more explicit ethnicity-based

power-sharing arrangements and cultural and linguistic rights for minorities, implemented in stages over many years (NRC, 2002). Unlike Kosovo, Macedonia does not guarantee reserved minority seats; instead, grand bi-national coalitions and minority veto power have been practised since independence (Smajljaj, 2020).

Consociational systems rest on the assumption of clear divisions between ethnic groups. As discussed above, this reflects misconceptions regarding the character of group formation and identification processes in the region (Marushiakova et al., 2001). Applying consociationalism as a means of conflict resolution solidifies ethnic boundaries at the moment of their maximum polarisation by turning them into constitutional and institutional arrangements (Djordjevic, 2021). This has lasting repercussions—among them the ethnification of politics. Political parties, public institutions and electoral competitions become organised along ethnic lines, reducing incentive for cross-ethnic and issue-centred cooperation (Bieber, 2004). Smaller minorities may remain disadvantaged due to limited mobilisation capacity, while veto powers and frequent political stalemates can lead to mutual scapegoating, further deteriorating community relations (Smajljaj, 2020). Similarly, consociational systems have proved unable to transform themselves. With rare exceptions—such as a recent attempt by Macedonia's Anti-Corruption Commission (Marusic, 2024)—they cannot de-ethnicise their structures. They are also generally resistant against

¹⁵ In 1999, Brčko District was formed as a self-governing administrative unit in north-eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina.

reform, partly due to the compromised governability resulting from high structural complexity (Smajljaj, 2020) and partly owing to constant ethno-political polarisation (Bieber, 2004). In Kosovo, the system was not developed ad hoc, but the effects are similar. A UNMIK staff member recently observed:

UNMIK wrote the law. The main issue was that multiethnicity is too broad as a framework and it was never defined. As a result, it entrenched the existing divisions" (RKSRVSHI33).

Critics argue that the institutionalisation of ethnicity—particularly in Kosovo and BiH—has hindered peacebuilding and reconciliation in the long term (Simonsen, 2005). Even proponents admit that consociationalism requires setting aside the lived realities of inter-ethnic collaboration and civic identifications (Nagle, 2025). Meanwhile, the OFA's regulations in Macedonia helped to overcome structural barriers that had previously blocked the Albanian minority's participation in public institutions and the police. In terms of protecting minority rights, their record is mixed: For one, multi-ethnic representation mechanisms alone do not guarantee effective minority

rights protection (Bieber, 2004). For the other—despite shortcomings, particularly in implementation—they have provided some improvements in the mechanisms available for claiming rights, especially for minorities without an active kin state. The effects on promoting returns are also mixed: In Macedonia, the OFA removed some discrimination-related obstacles to return for Albanians (Musliu & Ademi, 2002); in Kosovo, the main issue remains the ongoing tensions with Serbia which neither the constitution nor many rounds of negotiations have resolved. For BiH, close observers noted early on that "the Dayton peace formula itself poses an obstacle to ethnic reintegration" (Cox, 1998, p. 27), as it relied on and even required further ethnic separation and that the virtual autonomy of the ethnic regimes within their respective territories, along with an ethnic formula for parliamentary representation, are inconsistent with the aim of minority return (Wise, 2014).

KEY TAKEAWAY

Ethnopolitical power-sharing arrangements had ambivalent effects on state–society and community relations—enabling stability and overcoming certain discriminatory structures on the one hand but failing to re-integrate societies and impeding minority returns on the other. Most critically, they lack a built-in transformative mechanism to de-ethnicise over time and limit governability.

RESTORING STATE–CITIZEN RELATIONS

Relations between displaced persons and their origin countries—or their successor states—can be severely damaged. The primary condition for just returns (Bradley, 2005) is the fundamental responsibility of the origin state to (re-) instate displaced persons in their role as citizens and provide adequate conditions for their return. The case studies from post-Yugoslavia show that external interventions are limited in their capability to recreate rights-based state–society relations. They cannot manufacture political will and conditionalities, incentives and pressure risk producing lip service or formal rather than actual compliance (Cox, 1998). In fact, the creation of accountable governance structures may have been undermined through the top-down approach and use of illiberal means applied to build a liberal democracy (Chandler, 2000). Programmes to collaborate with civil society operated mainly at a technical and financial level—treating civil society as implementing actors rather than genuine partners—and largely failed to support grassroots initiatives or fill the critical watchdog role that civil society can play in a functioning democracy (Baldwin, 2006).

Restoring state–citizen relations also requires clear and accessible citizenship determination procedures—particularly in the case of newly independent states

or after long periods of displacement. Returnees, and even locals, may lack proof of (previous) citizenship when records have been destroyed; relevant legislation can take years to pass, as in the FBiH; and rules may be designed or applied in discriminatory ways. Across the region, some states grant preferential access to citizenship on the basis of ethnicity or define citizenship in national more than in civic terms (Djordjevic, 2021), while displaced persons often face difficulties obtaining essential documentation, such as birth certificates, from their place of origin when applying for citizenship in their place of residence (Engelbrecht, 2004), resulting in persistent administrative barriers. In 2025, Macedonia, for example, declared that it successfully ended statelessness resulting from the break-up of the former Yugoslavia (which does not—however—include other types of statelessness, such as that caused by the war and displacement in Kosovo) (UNHCR, 2025).

EXTERNAL INTERVENTIONS ARE LIMITED IN RECREATING RIGHTS-BASED STATE–SOCIETY RELATIONS. THEY CANNOT MANUFACTURE POLITICAL WILL, AND CONDITIONALITIES, INCENTIVES AND PRESSURE RISK PRODUCING LIP SERVICE OR FORMAL RATHER THAN ACTUAL COMPLIANCE.

Another fundamental question is whether draft evasion, desertion or other acts of political opposition are covered by amnesty. Compulsory military service

leads to the imprisonment or emigration of citizens on grounds of conscientious objection. In our case studies, amnesties were implemented in the FBiH and in Serbia after the fall of Slobodan Milošević. Evidence on the impact of amnesty regulations on return processes is anecdotal. It can be assumed that those who evaded conscription are unlikely to return if they still risk imprisonment, but some have benefited from the Federation's Amnesty Law (Engelbrecht, 2004, p. 108). Delays in granting amnesties, in the FBiH, and inconsistencies in their implementation, in RS, created legal uncertainties for returnees. Only after considerable international pressure was a new, more comprehensive amnesty law passed (Engelbrecht, 2004).

THE QUALITY AND INCLUSIVENESS OF PUBLIC SERVICES ARE OFTEN-OVERLOOKED DETERMINANTS OF RETURNEES' ABILITY TO RE-ESTABLISH THEIR LIVES.

In Croatia too, inconsistencies in the implementation of amnesty laws, uncertainties about amnesty regulations and discrimination against Croatian Serbs in the treatment of war crimes heightened fears of arbitrary arrest among Croatia's remaining Serbs and potential Serb returnees (Engelbrecht, 2004, p. 128; ICG, 1998b). Legal amnesty cannot, of course, lift the social stigma that often attaches to people who return having spent the time of war abroad in safety.

The quality and inclusiveness of public services are often-overlooked determinants of returnees' ability to re-establish their lives, especially for those without strong networks to rely on. Before the wars, public administration in all the Yugoslav republics was firmly under Communist Party control. The Party exercised control over recruitment, career progression and dismissals. Corruption and nepotism grew significantly in response to the economic crises across all republics, but the level of education among public servants was high, and maintaining effective services was in the state's interest. During and after the wars, ethnic and religious interests emerged as determinants of access to public services, alongside personal connections (Finci, 2007). Judges and prosecutors were required to undergo re-application and re-appointment procedures, during which they had to disclose their war-time activities. Public servants were also subject to verification processes to ensure their appointments complied with the law (Finci, 2007). Following new legislation and comprehensive reform, the main obstacles to inclusive and high-quality service provision remain the continued entanglement of politics and administration, compounded by the complexity of the constitutional arrangements, corruption, lack of transparency, accountability and efficiency (Finci, 2007).

Minorities can be affected by discrimination in public service provision, which is often difficult to prove and constitutes a key hidden mechanism in deterring

returns. In Kosovo, where institutions were built from scratch after the war, an implementation gap is apparent almost across the board: Laws and regulations are very detailed, but service provision—for example the processing of applications from returnees to receive assistance—is patchy, and it is often impossible to determine whether the underlying cause is lack of political will, capacity or funding (own data). Similarly, in RS municipalities in south-eastern BiH, most claims for the repossession of property were neither processed nor acted upon at the municipality level (Fischel De Andrade, 2014, pp. 319–320). Municipalities also resorted to concealed mechanisms to deter returns—such as making returnees pay the accumulated electricity bills of evicted occupants (Cox, 1998). UNHCR therefore designed projects to overcome such obstructions. The Open Cities Initiative, launched in March 1997, was designed to encourage municipalities to promote minority returns by rewarding those who participated with reconstruction aid and economic incentives, but failed to deliver concrete results (Haider, 2009). Reasons for its failure included the opaque selection of beneficiary towns, inadequate monitoring, the rewarding of authorities on the basis of their promises rather than actual results and unaddressed problems such as double occupancy and other property rights violations. For Sarajevo, a declaration adopted in 1998 by representatives of the state of BiH, the FBiH, Sarajevo Canton and the international community even made the continuation of assistance

conditional on progress overcoming obstacles to minority return—in law, housing, public order and security, employment and education—and on meeting a target of at least 20,000 minority returns, without achieving the hoped-for results (Fischer 2006; (International Crisis Group, 1998). In Kosovo, USAID funding for municipal infrastructure and support was also made conditional on supporting minority return (Jenne, 2010). Given the multitude of donors and their lack of coordination, municipal authorities could easily circumvent aid conditionality intended to incentivise acceptance of minority returns (Cox, 1998).

MINORITIES CAN BE AFFECTED BY DISCRIMINATION IN PUBLIC SERVICE PROVISION, WHICH CONSTITUTES A KEY HIDDEN MECHANISM IN DETERRING RETURNS.

The scope of social welfare has narrowed considerably since the political and economic transitions of the 1990s. Some researchers speak of a “forced transition” (Jansen, 2007, p. 53), pointing to the fact that external actors imposed neoliberal reforms—limiting or removing social insurance, pensions schemes and free access to healthcare and education—without any democratic legitimisation. As a result of privatisation, healthcare has become unaffordable for people on low incomes, and the newly founded states struggle to win citizens' recognition. These reforms also weakened the position of trade unions and the

capacity of welfare, social care and public redistribution to confer public legitimacy on state actors. On the contrary, they increased the population's reliance on actors and networks operating outside the state-sanctioned realms. Uneven provision of social welfare affected return patterns: In BiH, the level of social welfare benefits such as pensions varies at entity and canton level, being considerably lower in RS, which reportedly influences where people—including returnees—choose to register (BiHCS-PEI8). Healthcare and education are not only under-prioritised and underfunded in post-war recovery; they are areas where war-related divisions often become entrenched or even exacerbated, and which are decisive for the return aspirations of women and families in particular. Education carries further implications for return decisions. In the FBiH, many parents from minority communities were reluctant to return to places where their children had no option but to be educated under the majority population's curriculum. Peacebuilding and return policies designed by international actors to address these obstacles had, however, severe unintended consequences. In BiH, the cantonisation of the FBiH through the Washington and Dayton Agreements—initiated to end the

war—laid the ground for ethnic segregation in education (Fischer, 2006). Return policies also affected the educational system in places of return. In an attempt to encourage the return of refugees and displaced persons by providing education based on separate curricula for Bosniak and Croat students respectively¹⁶, many instances of 'two schools under one roof' were established as temporary measures but ultimately became permanent, despite efforts by international/external actors to ensure their transition and local court rulings that found the practice discriminatory (OSCE, 2018, p. 4). Returnees who sent their children to schools following the curriculum of the local 'majority' faced severe problems of adaptation and non-recognition of certificates or diplomas. This difficulty in obtaining recognition of educational qualifications ('nostrification') remains a major obstacle for people returning from EU countries or between Kosovo and Serbia. In BiH, parents frequently sent their children across entity lines to schools where the curriculum of the respective local majority was taught (OSCE, 2005 in Fischer, 2006, p. 307).

Dual and competing educational structures characterise school systems throughout the region. In Kosovo, Serbia maintains a

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Restoring state–society relations depends less on imposing democratic and human rights standards through conditionality—in fact, this risks undermining democratic processes and state legitimacy—than on practical measures: clear citizenship procedures, amnesties for conscientious objectors, a critical civil society and a meaningful state involvement in social welfare.

The quality and inclusiveness of public services—particularly healthcare and education—are key to returnees' ability to re-establish their lives and weigh most heavily in the return decisions of women and families. Both are highly sensitive areas: Designing diverse educational systems without entrenching segregation, and restoring trust in health professionals across war-related boundaries constitute persisting challenges.

parallel education system with the Serbian curriculum, while Kosovo offers education in Albanian, Turkish and Bosnian under its own curriculum (Azizi, 2023). In Croatia, too, educational segregation has been institutionalised by granting the constitutional right of 'national minorities' to education is granted through three different school models, one of which offers all classes in the language and script of the 'national minority' with compulsory learning of the Croatian language. In many places, however, Roma face particular challenges—notably in Roma-majority municipalities such as Shuto Orizari (Macedonia), where national majority language instruction is required in public elementary schools. In Croatia, Roma faced segregation in elementary education based on the policy of some Croatian primary schools distinguishing among students based on their grasp of the Croatian language—a policy the European Court of Human Rights found discriminatory (Oršuš and Others v. Croatia, 2010).

INFORMALITY

Corruption rates in the formerly socialist countries of Eastern Europe are among the highest in the world (Imami & Polese, 2025), obstructing entrepreneurship and determining access to employment and public services. The prevalence of high levels of informality—defined as practices outside the remit of state-sanctioned regulations—both in institutions and in everyday life, can be attributed to the legacy of concurrent transitions from communist to market economies, compounded by the break-up wars of Yugoslavia, followed by externally driven institution-building (Efendic & Ledeneva, 2020). When rules change frequently, are externally imposed, lack social legitimacy, are poorly enforced or are undermined by elite non-compliance, people tend to turn to alternative ways of problem-solving—personalised transactions being one such means—particularly in contexts of economic recession (Bojicic-Dzelilovic,

¹⁶ In 2002, the Interim Agreement on Accommodation of Specific Needs and Rights of Returnee Children established a country-wide legal basis for refugee returns in BiH. "It allowed parents to opt for the teaching of controversial subjects following a different curriculum. The concept was intended to integrate returnee children into ordinary classes, while giving them the opportunity to be taught the "national" subjects (language, history, etc.) by authorities of "their ethnic group" (Fischer, 2006, p. 309). The Interim Agreement also contained provisions for the increased employment of returnee teachers and for the ethnic composition of school boards to reflect the school population where the schools were located.

2013). In BiH, for example, the emergence of a war economy coincided with the first stage of market-economic transition.

WHEN RULES CHANGE FREQUENTLY, ARE EXTERNALLY IMPOSED, LACK SOCIAL LEGITIMACY, ARE POORLY ENFORCED OR ARE UNDERMINED BY ELITE NON-COMPLIANCE, PEOPLE TEND TO TURN TO ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF PROBLEM-SOLVING

Privatisation of state-owned businesses and property thus took place in the political vacuum created by the war, providing fertile ground for corruption, ethnicised power struggles and clientelism. Unlike in other post-socialist societies, the transition to a market economy benefited new ethno-political elites rather than the old pre-war elites (Fischer, 2006). Instead of proving transitional, however, ethnicised patronage networks (Jenne, 2010) or so-called ethnocracies (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2005) and informality among political and ethnic elites stabilised and extended well into the post-war era (Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2013).

These clientelist or patronage networks may mobilise ethnicity to exclude formally entitled resource users—such as displaced persons—to increase their power and resource base (Jenne, 2010). They are not primarily based on ethnicity, however, but on loyalty and serve to reproduce inequality and elite survival (UNDP, 2011). Informality has ambivalent

effects on intra-group inequality and also functions as hidden, cross-cutting and often socially accepted mechanism of discrimination (Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2013). It undermines trust in public institutions as well as trust among citizens outside their networks (UNDP, 2011). The literature is somewhat divided on the role of aid and international interventions. One comparative study on patronage networks and minority returns in Croatia, BiH and Kosovo argues that third-party efforts to disrupt and challenge post-war authorities, combined with substantial support for returnees, made a crucial difference to returns (Jenne, 2010). Other authors emphasise how post-war elites appropriated reconstruction and other forms of aid, converting the war economy into a rent economy (Fischer, 2006). UNMIK, for example, was found to have co-opted local political elites, giving “tacit approval to their client–patron logic of governance and corruptive affairs” to achieve stability (Beha & Selaci, 2018, p. 97).

RETURNEES ACROSS ALL OUR CASE STUDIES REPORTED A HIGH PREVALENCE OF CLIENTELIST NETWORKS AND PATRONAGE SYSTEMS AFFECTING MANY ASPECTS OF THEIR DAILY LIVES AND CONSIDERABLY HAMPERING ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT.

Returnees across all our case studies reported a high prevalence of clientelist networks and patronage systems affecting many aspects of their daily lives and considerably hampering access

to employment. Returnees are often excluded from such networks, and those from minoritised or marginalised communities may find it even harder to access and benefit from them. Highly educated returnees who aspired to contribute to the country's socio-economic and socio-political development report high levels of frustration and tend to integrate into the expatriate circles or transnational spaces instead. Importantly, clientelism limits the opportunities for diaspora actors to play an active role in reconstruction or other origin-country-related activities, unless they become part of these networks.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Clientelism and informality strongly shape access to rights and services. Operating outside state-sanctioned mechanisms plays an ambivalent role—potentially filling gaps in public service provision but in many cases reproducing socio-economic and ethno-political divisions. Returnees in particular are often excluded from relevant networks, limiting their chances of employment and access to services.

COMMUNITY- LED APPROACHES FOSTER RETURN AND REBUILD TRUST

‘Home’, for most people, is neither a place nor a house but a “living organism of relationships and traditions” (Zetter, 1999, p. 12). Neighbourhood relations at the community level—or the ‘institution of the neighbourhood’, consisting of “intentionally developed networks of primary social relations” (Županov, 1995 in Koska, 2008, p. 198) between people of diverse backgrounds—were deliberately destroyed through the promotion of nationalism and during the wars, with lasting repercussions for reintegration, specifically for minority returnees (Koska, 2008). The political reproduction of ethnicised grievances—drawing on various external interventions and nationalist mobilisation during the Balkan wars, the two World Wars and the Yugoslav wars, as well as conflicting interpretations of historical and political events and selective omissions—continued after the end of the wars (Denich, 2001; Stasa, 2025).

Through ethnopolitical power-sharing arrangements, educational segregation, weak economies and social protection—reinforcing zero-sum perceptions of ‘us versus them’—the failure to support truth and reconciliation and the accommodation of post-war elites for the sake of stabilisation, these boundaries have become entrenched. In this climate, blame for war crimes was often attributed to collectives defined by language, religion or ethnicity rather than to individuals and their actions, while social spaces and opportunities for people to meet and connect across these boundaries remain limited. “People do not speak the same language and therefore receive information about the war only from one side,” an international stakeholder in Kosovo observed recently (RKSRVSHI33).

NEIGHBOURHOOD RELATIONS AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL BETWEEN PEOPLE OF DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS WERE DELIBERATELY DESTROYED THROUGH THE PROMOTION OF NATIONALISM AND DURING THE WARS, WITH LASTING REPERCUSSIONS FOR REINTEGRATION, SPECIFICALLY FOR MINORITY RETURNEES.

In some instances, divisions grow even stronger among post-war generations, constraining opportunities for people to reconnect with former neighbours after their displacement, as this internally displaced man from Kosovo recounts:

I had no contact with Albanians from my village until 2004, and

the only occasions I met with Albanians were regular security meetings organised by KFOR, but we didn’t even greet each other. After 2005, we started again to shake hands and ask after our families. [...] To achieve reconciliation, it would be necessary to go from house to house, from family to family, have some roundtables with Serbs and Albanians. But it is so much harder with the younger generation than with the older ones who still remember the times when everything was fine. [...] I once met my former Albanian neighbour in town who told me that if there were a vote on Serb returns, he would definitely vote for them to come back. But old men like him no longer have any influence on the younger generation, and many people from the older generation have already passed. I actually don’t know who could have any kind of influence on the younger ones when it comes to reconciliation (RKSCSPSI18).

Our research showed however that people do form relationships across politicised boundaries, by deliberately excluding politics from their conversations (interviews and observations in the north of Kosovo; cf. (Peni, 2024) for examples from central Kosovo). Even before and during the wars, people deliberately resisted nationalism and nationalist mobilisation (Bartulović, 2013), practised

EVEN BEFORE AND DURING THE WARS, PEOPLE DELIBERATELY RESISTED NATIONALISM AND NATIONALIST MOBILISATION, PRACTISED SOLIDARITY AND MAINTAINED COMMUNITY BONDS DESPITE ALL ODDS. RATHER THAN BUILDING ON AND STRENGTHENING THIS

POTENTIAL, EXTERNAL PEACEBUILDING ACTORS LARGELY NATURALISED AND SOUGHT TO ACCOMMODATE THE INSTRUMENTAL, CONSTRUCTED AND TOP-DOWN ETHNO-NATIONALIST PROJECTS OF POLITICAL AND POSTWAR ELITES.

solidarity and maintained community bonds despite all odds—in some cases going so far as to risk their own lives to save or protect people (Haxhiaj, 2022; own data). Rather than building on and strengthening this potential, external peacebuilding actors largely naturalised and sought to accommodate the instrumental, constructed and top-down ethno-nationalist projects of political and postwar elites (Jansen, 2011).¹⁷ Meanwhile, these widely propagated ethno-nationalist discourses offer sets of “symbolic resources that explain war and post-war experiences” and allow especially disenfranchised people to carve out a sense of self-worth (Jansen, 2003, p. 215).

How relations across social boundaries evolve over time is highly context-specific and non-linear. Across our case-study countries, we encountered hope that younger generations who have not themselves experienced the cruelties of war, discrimination and displacement will be more open to reconciliation and social integration than those directly affected. Collaboration on the job and embeddedness in overarching social networks can facilitate exchange and trust-building despite segregated settlement patterns, as observed for example in Sarajevo. By contrast, continued politicisation of boundaries by ethnonational elites and parties tends to reinforce these boundaries in some contexts. Here, younger generations—often not bilingual, unlike

their parents’ generation raised Yugoslavia—may be less open to exchange and reconciliation (own data from Gjilan/Gnjilane municipality, Kosovo).

RETURN DECISIONS ARE INFLUENCED BY MEMORIES OF PREVIOUS NEIGHBOURLY RELATIONS AND WHETHER PEOPLE BELIEVE THESE CAN BE RESTORED. TRAUMATIC MEMORIES MOST OFTEN PREVENT RETURN.

Return decisions are influenced by memories of previous neighbourly relations and whether people believe these can be restored. Traumatic memories most often prevent return: Very few people defiantly return to places where they have been subjected to horrific violence (own data from BiH). Where memories of previous relations are positive, however, the likelihood of wanting to return increases. Studies on BiH, for instance, show that the recovery of pre-war local ties and trust at the place of origin matters for the decision to return and for return- and reintegration processes (see Kleck, 2006, p. 117).

Individual preferences also shape return decisions: Some people prefer to live in a community where they can speak—and school their children—in their native, language, practise their religion and be with people whom they share cultural values with (Özerdem & Payne, 2019). In that sense, nationalist and right-leaning

political attitudes tend to discourage return into diverse or minority contexts.

Where there is neither relevant social capital nor ties to the place of return, associations of refugee and displaced persons—founded on the basis of “bounded solidarity, mutual trust, and communal ties” can help overcome “the coordination and security challenges to a successful and durable return” (Stefanovic & Loizides, 2011, pp. 410). Returnee associations have been accorded an important role for return and community rebuilding after the war (Belloni, 2005; Dahlman & Tuathail, 2005; Stefanovic & Loizides, 2011).¹⁸ A case study from north-western BiH, for example, shows that the social engagement of the displaced community itself—in this case Bosniak returnees in the town of Kozarac—in re-establishing basic primary schooling helped to facilitate return and reintegration to such a degree that it led to what is reportedly the only successful example of contested minority return (Sivac-Bryant, 2008). Particularly in BiH, the main entry point to the return process was often through associations of displaced persons (Harvey, 2006, p. 95), which were connected with international organisations (Stefanovic & Loizides, 2011) and helped stimulate returns (see Koska, 2008, p. 204). Some put political pressure on the state and international institutions to create conditions for safe return (Belloni, 2005)

and providing logistical support during the return process (Stefanovic & Loizides, 2011, pp. 410). They also played an important role in information exchange, the promotion of returnees’ rights and interests and as partners for the international community’s reintegration projects (Porobič, 2016). Moreover, returnee associations played a decisive role in mobilising electoral support for moderate political parties—facilitated by diaspora voting rights in BiH—which facilitated returns against nationalist resistance (Stefanovic & Loizides, 2011, p. 415). They also played a key role in rebuilding local institutions, including schools, even in the face of political obstruction and limited external support (Sivac-Bryant, 2008, 2016). Their power and impact depend on whether their members left at the same time and on their geographical proximity in exile (Harvey, 2006, p. 95).

RETURNEE ASSOCIATIONS HAVE BEEN ACCORDED AN IMPORTANT ROLE FOR RETURN AND COMMUNITY REBUILDING AFTER THE WAR.

Even without forming associations, people sometimes decided to return collectively, partly because doing so felt safer. While this met communities’ social and emotional needs, it also meant enforced spatial segregation at the place of return—clustering in majority areas or forming isolated settlements such as the returnee settlement in Kamenicë/Kamenica.

¹⁷ Only more recently have projects begun to acknowledge local understandings and practices of peace, as illustrated by the Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI) methodology.

¹⁸ For a discussion of how closed diaspora and returnee communities may hinder integration or serve as recruitment ground for extremists, see Stefanovic and Loizides (2011, p. 429).

IMAGINE COEXISTENCE

While reconciliation was generally treated as a low priority, one exceptional project was “Imagine Coexistence”. UNHCR designed this project by choosing locations based on the lead of returnees themselves.

Rather than directing funds to mayors, it provided funding at the community level and for non-government organisations (NGOs)—to returnees and stayees alike. The project developed joint activities in public spaces—schools, playgrounds and health clubs—to help overcome mistrust among different communities, and to (re)build relationships and promote cooperation. Many activities also incorporated an income-generation component. Although a review of this and similar projects found that it achieved successes in repairing social relations, addressing poverty and strengthening communities in Bosnia, such initiatives received limited attention and funding (Haider, 2009, p. 108).

At the time of writing, returnee associations are less visible and appear to have become short-lived interest groups with largely project-based agendas (BiHCSPSI88). Anecdotal evidence from our interviews in a municipality in RS also suggests that the interests of returnees with their main residence at the place of return are poorly represented, particularly where representatives no longer live in RS—reportedly heavily influenced by party politics and corruption. In Serbia, Kosovo Serb returnee associations played an important role as partners in the implementation of return programmes to Kosovo in the past (SRBINGO9), but are less active today, as funding has decreased and formerly active members have grown older or locally integrated in Serbia and abandoned the idea of returning.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Everyday practices can both resist and reproduce the ethnification of political and social life. Effective means of supporting trust-building and positive social relations include the creation of environments that facilitate everyday encounters, inclusive employment strategies and participatory processes—for example on housing and reconstruction at the municipal level.

Community-led and participatory mechanisms facilitate returns: Where communities and neighbourhoods no longer existed—or only in exile—grassroots initiatives, returnee associations and community-based approaches facilitated return. Returnee associations in particular engaged in advocacy, representation and transnational logistical support for those who wish to return, often more effectively than formal programmes.

RETURN INCENTIVES CANNOT COMPENSATE FOR UNFA- VOURABLE CONDITIONS

In the previous chapters, we have discussed international efforts to establish conditions for the return of displaced persons and have shown that these faced considerable challenges and ambivalent outcomes. Alongside these efforts, a variety of actors implemented programmes directed at displaced persons themselves to incentivise returns. Comprehensive analysis drawing on BiH and Kosovo has shown that return decisions are shaped far more by conditions and prospects in the origin country than by restrictions and incentives in the destination context (Black et al., 2004). However, as the latter continue to be seen as key tools for promoting return, this chapter aims to highlight the lessons learned from the 1990s in this regard.

After the Yugoslav wars, assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes (AVR and later AVRR)—often implemented by IOM on behalf of EU destination countries—expanded rapidly. They usually included the pre-return provision of information and logistical, administrative and sometimes financial assistance

for those who signed up. The target group of such programmes was often those with no legal means of remaining abroad or no means to organise their own return. Actors involved in implementing return programming ranged from the governments of destination countries, origin country institutions, NGOs, charities and international organisations—UNHCR being the key actor in the early years.

RETURN DECISIONS ARE SHAPED FAR MORE BY CONDITIONS AND PROSPECTS IN THE ORIGIN COUNTRY THAN BY RESTRICTIONS AND INCEN- TIVES IN THE DESTINATION CONTEXT.

In Germany, non-state and municipal return counselling organisations were founded to support displaced persons facing numerous difficulties under the restrictive return regime. A return counsellor recalls challenges faced by people returning from Germany to Kosovo immediately after 1999:

As a human being and as a citizen of this republic, I am disappointed that so little came from Germany. We couldn't build any houses there anyway, even though housing was a major problem—and in some ways, it still is. So I begged [organisation X] to give us wood for a new roof, but most of the time, they just said, 'Not our responsibility.' I knocked on many doors, including UNMIK's, and every now and then we even managed to get something small (GER-RV-RC-24).

Their testimony underlines the need to align assisted return programmes with reconstruction efforts. Returnees supported through AVRR predominantly reported that the assistance was insignificant compared to the challenges they faced in re-establishing their lives, while stakeholders commented that top-ups to AVRR assistance—for example from municipal programmes—were often confiscated by local authorities upon return.

In addition to programmes geared towards displaced persons in western European countries, international programmes—funded mostly by the European Union and benefiting returnees from abroad and from within the region were established. In BiH, UNHCR supported displaced persons and returnees, spending over US \$500 million between 1995 and 2004 alone (UNHCR, 2004). Programmes such as the scheme for two-way returns between Croatia and BiH or the Regional Housing Programme (see Box 2) specifically targeted displaced persons and vulnerable groups from within the region.

From the outset, civil society organisations played an important role in implementing internationally funded return and reintegration assistance such as housing assistance, livelihood support or free legal support. Vasa Prava, implementing partner of UNHCR, has assisted refugees, returnees, displaced persons and vulnerable persons in legal matters such as property restitution, harassment, discrimination in access to employment,

utilities, education and social assistance as well as other human rights issues since 1996. Its work remains crucial in facilitating returnees' access to rights, particularly for marginalised communities, but has been severely affected by recent funding cuts.

In BiH, the Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina (MHRR) is responsible for policies on human and minority rights, refugees, IDPs and return.¹⁹ Following the Dayton Agreement, the return and reintegration of refugees and IDPs was a major focus of the Ministry's work. But the impact of return and reintegration programmes—for example in housing or employment—often depends on the cooperation of the municipalities concerned, a factor frequently underestimated and overlooked by donors. Swiss cooperation conducted some capacity building with municipalities in response and civil society organisations have often been able to establish relationships of trust more easily and were therefore able to coordinate much more closely with municipal officials (BiHCSPEI36).

In Kosovo, reintegration infrastructure was established at two levels from the outset—central and municipal. The Ministry for Communities and Returns holds the mandate for coordinating and supporting the return process for persons

displaced by the war within the region, while municipal offices for communities and returns (MOCRs) are responsible for implementation at the local level. For readmissions, including many displaced Roma from Kosovo, however, the coordinating body at the national level is the Ministry of Internal Affairs, while the MOCRs' mandate has been expanded to cover both types of returns.

A dual structure thus emerged in Kosovo—distinguishing between returnees from the region and readmitted or repatriated persons from EU countries—institutionalised both in national structures and in international funding and programming. The bulk of financial assistance went to return programmes for displaced persons within the region. UNMIK and the Provisional Institutions alone spent 40 million euros on projects supporting the return of displaced persons from neighbouring countries between 1999 and 2007 (UNMIK, 2007), with additional projects funded by other donors. The longest-running programme supporting return, reintegration and housing reconstruction for displaced persons from the region is the EU's Return and Reintegration Programme (EU-RRK), which entered its fifth phase in 2017 (OSCE, 2019b). UNHCR was responsible for implementation in the early years, before this shifted to IOM.

CONTRIBUTIONS BY DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

A positive example of contributions by development cooperation is the integrated approach combining individual assistance to returnees with the reconstruction of local public infrastructure, funded by Swedish development cooperation and implemented locally in BiH (Cukur et al., 2005). Programme evaluations have also shown that assistance for self-help—for example in the reconstruction of houses—and the transfer of agency to village committees can contribute to social trust, collective confidence and self-esteem among returnees (Molander, 2005, 120 pp.). Stakeholder interviews, however, confirm that programmes integrating returns with community benefits were rare, while reconstruction in itself did little to reconnect people or include local stakeholders and authorities. German development cooperation supported an innovative job-matching programme implemented by the non-profit organisation AGEF, which provided highly skilled displaced persons with comprehensive support, including training, job placement and preparation for and connections aiding their return to Kosovo—an initiative that was well received by beneficiaries.

¹⁹ At the entity level, RS has established the Secretariat for Refugees and Migration and FBiH a Ministry for Displaced Persons and Refugees—more an example of institutional fragmentation in BiH than of an aligned multi-level structure.

In terms of allocated funding, return programming for displaced persons from neighbouring countries, so-called minority returnees, was generous, averaging more than 30,000 euros per family²⁰ (Özerdem & Payne, 2019). This is many times more than AVRR programmes offer to displaced persons returning from EU countries, while deported persons receive little or no assistance and an entry ban. As a result of this programming, fewer than 30,000 non-majority returns were registered—out of an estimated 220,000 displaced persons—between 2000 and 2023 (OSCE, 2019b). In a recent stakeholder interview, a local OSCE staff member concluded: “There are successes, but the failures are great. One reason is the slowness, the status quo. Conditions were not created; far more investment would have made a difference after the war. Albanians returned quickly—why not all others?” (RKS-RV-SHI-36). A further problem was the system’s high dependence on individual donors, since projects and programmes typically covered only a limited number of municipalities at any one time, leaving overall coverage fragmented and uneven (OSCE, 2019b). This, together with administrative obstacles and the underfunding of municipal offices responsible for returns, means that returnees must wait years for housing reconstruction, even after they have returned.

THE ROLE OF GO-AND-SEE VISITS

Assessment visits to BiH shortly after the war were either spontaneous or organised by IDP or refugee associations (Engelbrecht, 2004). Some return programmes also included go-and-see visits—for example the IOM cross-border programme between Croatia and BiH, which provided transport and en-route medical assistance to an estimated 16,000 refugees from Croatia and BiH; or the Domovini project, an initiative of the Zepa–Srebrenica Prisoners of War Association, launched in 1998 and implemented by IOM with Finnish and Bosnian partners. The project included an information campaign in Finland, a fact-finding mission to BiH and a period of vocational and practical training in both Finland and Bosnia. An evaluation of the project found that it achieved many of its quantitative goals, such as the number of participants in vocational training, but had little success in reaching its intended audience through the information campaign. Recommendations that have been drawn from this include strengthening collaboration with local NGOs and ensuring coordinators have backing from the target group, integrating equality principles, involving key partners in planning, employing members of the target group

THE NEED FOR INCLUSIVE RETURN PROGRAMMING

Germany and Macedonia (then FYRoM) agreed a DM 20 million multi-year return programme in 1996—before the war. Its main aim was to incentivise migrant workers from Germany to return by offering them micro-credits for business start-ups. The target population was interested in the programme, as labour migration, remittances and self-employment were established strategies, while opportunities for saving had become more limited. Nevertheless, the programme was largely a failure. An assessment by Minority Rights International found that an estimated 80 per cent of the labour migrants from Macedonia in Germany were Albanians, and that their migration was largely a response to limited opportunities in Macedonia. Yet, the programme was advertised only in Macedonian, managed and implemented locally almost exclusively by Macedonians and run in partnership with a Macedonian Bank, with only one project office, in Skopje, and no presence in the Albanian-majority regions of Macedonia (Musliu & Ademi, 2002). The total number of applicants (68) was far below expectations, 25 per cent of whom were Albanian. Among the beneficiaries, however, only nine per cent were Albanian. The programme thus reproduced discriminatory structures and failed to reach its target group or address the root causes of migration, including discrimination against minorities, for example in the banking sector (Musliu & Ademi, 2002).

²⁰ The calculation is based on four major return initiatives listed in the Ministry’s Strategy for 2014–2018 (see Özerdem & Payne, 2019).

in different roles and tailoring seminars specifically to the Bosnian community (Miettinen, 2000). In Kosovo, international organisations (UNHCR, Danish Refugee Council) carried out organised go-and-see visits over many years as tool to incentivise the—otherwise slow and few—returns of Serb and other minority displaced persons from neighbouring countries, which included transport, meetings with former neighbours at the place of origin and ‘trust-building’ measures in other locations, as well as meetings with public representatives and security personnel.

IN MANY CASES, PROSPECTIVE RETURNEES DID NOT TRUST THAT THEIR SAFETY WOULD BE EFFECTIVELY ENSURED IF THEY RETURNED,

While these projects certainly contributed to informed decision-making about return, their outcome in terms of actual return numbers is unknown or, in the case of Kosovo or the Domovini project in BiH²¹, minimal. In many cases, prospective returnees did not trust that their safety would be effectively ensured if they returned, and those who did return often waited years for promised housing reconstruction to materialise.

PROGRAMMES TARGETING THE DIASPORA

In BiH, programmes incentivising the return of Bosnian citizens whose qualifications were considered essential for reconstruction and development were implemented early on: The Reconstruction, Capacity Building and Development through the Return of Qualified Nationals to Bosnia and Herzegovina programme²², administered by IOM, specifically targeted skilled Bosnians from the region and elsewhere. Through this programme, 862 persons were placed in employment upon return (79%) or received support for self-employment (21%). An evaluation of the programme found that a broad majority (at least 60%) of returnees remained beyond the one-year subsidised period, which was expected given their strong social integration and the fact that most had little opportunity to emigrate again.

Most businesses that had originally been supported by the project continued to operate. However, many beneficiaries were unable to return to their own property in the early post-war period and could

not cover their living costs while paying rent. Moreover, the project failed to attract additional returns of Bosnian refugees (outside the project), and BiH did not develop institutional capacity within the project to ensure the sustainability of its goals (Sandgreen, 2001). In Croatia, too, programmes to encourage the return and immigration of diaspora members, financed from the state budget, have been established and income tax exemptions introduced for returning Croats. The AGEF programme for Kosovo mentioned above actively recruited and trained diaspora experts before connecting them with job offers and vacancies in their origin country. However, beneficiaries of these programmes rarely belong to marginalised communities.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Conditions matter far more for sustainable return than return assistance. With few exceptions, such as programmes that invest substantially in skills development or systematically link return with support for receiving communities, the impact of return programmes remains short-term and insufficient to make returns sustainable.

Return assistance is more effective when it jointly addresses the needs of local communities and returnees, when its design and implementation consider the diversity of the target group, when it responds to actual demand rather than to migration management objectives and when it has a clearly defined goal.

Restitution, reconstruction, livelihood support and return assistance need to be integrated. Without a concerted/coordinated approach, restitution may simply determine ownership of destroyed property, assisted returnees become homeless, and reconstructed property may stand empty where there are no income-generation opportunities. Reconstruction should also draw on as many local businesses, experts, workers and materials as possible, since income is the key requirement for sustainable return.

²¹ Only one participant had returned at the time of the evaluation, while lack of work and housing in BiH and family-related factors supported the decision to stay in Finland for all others (Miettinen, 2000).

²² The Return of Qualified Nationals programme (RNP), administered by IOM, included transport arrangements, financial assistance for education, vocational training, job placement and support in acquiring necessary equipment and supplies to establish small businesses. Similar programmes were also implemented in Croatia and Kosovo (Ciger, 2025) by other actors, such as the United Nations Development Programme (Diaspora for Development programme (D4D) or GIZ (“Migration and Diaspora”).

CONCLUSION AND MAIN LESSONS LEARNED

In *this bicc report*—drawing on empirical data collected between 2019 and 2025 with returnees, displaced persons and other stakeholders, as well as extensive literature research—we took stock of a crucial episode in post-war refugee return and return programming: the period following the break-up wars of the former Yugoslavia. During this time, return came to be seen as a proxy for the success of international interventions, a means of remedying past violent displacement, a shortcut to reconciliation—while also being the receiving country governments’

preferred solution to displacement. This weight of projections and expectations helped to obscure the mixing of different policy objectives—the promotion of a right to return alongside the coerced return of displaced persons who sought protection and prospects, not return itself.

International actors placed particular emphasis on facilitating, conditioning and even imposing minority returns on municipalities — an emphasis that reflected both their misconceptions about the aspirations and needs of displaced

persons and their overestimation of their own capacity to create the conditions for sustainable returns. For those desperate to return, the necessary conditions were often absent; for many others, the prospect of return—even with assistance—could not compensate for their displacement and loss of community and home. Furthermore, the notion and the practice of minority return disregarded the diversity of factors shaping people’s—including minorities’—decisions to return, as well as the diversity and fluidity of minority positions across the region.

International responses to the wars in the former Yugoslavia, meanwhile, focused first and foremost on containing violence and creating stability. The consociational power-sharing arrangements introduced as a means of conflict resolution—except in Croatia—were designed to secure elite agreement to end the wars and, in doing so, entrenched ethnicity as the determining factor in political representation and power relations. Arguably, this response exposed conflicting goals and interests within the interventions and marked a lack of clarity over what the laudable goal of recreating diversity and peaceful coexistence actually meant in definition or in practice. Studies on consociationalism underline that, at minimum, such arrangements require incentives for cross-ethnic collaboration and an exit strategy—for example an indicator-based cut-off point for ethnic quotas—if they are not to undermine reconciliation, good governance, meritocracy and minority return.

FOR THOSE DESPERATE TO RETURN, THE NECESSARY CONDITIONS WERE OFTEN ABSENT; FOR MANY OTHERS, THE PROSPECT OF RETURN—EVEN WITH ASSISTANCE—COULD NOT COMPENSATE FOR THEIR DISPLACEMENT AND LOSS OF COMMUNITY AND HOME.

All peace agreements contained provisions to support refugee returns, with variations, however, regarding the emphasis placed on restoring diversity (which was most pronounced in the DPA). Regardless of that, even in BiH, most people returned to places where they were part of a local majority. The early initiation of large-scale refugee removals by EU countries, especially Germany, contributed to internal displacement and left people displaced within the region without crucial transnational support. The lack of livelihood and future prospects meant that many people returned only temporarily or partially. Mainly elderly people with pensions or support from abroad returned permanently into minority situations.

Many years after the wars, enforced minority returns—whether from the European Union or neighbouring countries—still put families into untenable situations, but with much less attention and support. This highlights the need to prioritise local integration, especially where conflict and displacement persist over several years, which does not necessarily prevent return, but helps to avert protracted legal limbo,

statelessness, risky returns, internal displacement after return and the forced 'return' of second and third generations.

THE CENTRAL WEAKNESS OF THE TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE PROCESS WAS ITS FOCUS ON TANGIBLE OUTCOMES—PROSECUTIONS AND CONVICTIONS—AT THE EXPENSE OF A SHARED TRUTH THAT MIGHT HAVE HELPED TO FOSTER RECONCILIATION.

International actors heavily shaped not only the provisions for return but also the conditions surrounding it; we discussed, in particular, safety and security—including accountability for perpetrators—housing and livelihoods, state–society relations and public services, as well as the role of refugee-led initiatives and return programming. The security situation itself remained volatile. Meanwhile, measures to maintain security in origin countries, such as the segregation of populations, were partly at odds with the right to return. Despite the large international military presence in BiH and Kosovo, perceived security—and, for some, objective security, too—remained low, due to the absence of consultation with those most at risk of violence or renewed displacement and to the lack of any coordinated approach to managing diversity and lingering ethnic tensions. Key among these issues were limited law enforcement capacity and sweeping amnesties for former fighters, which allowed an atmosphere of impunity to persist. By contrast, the International

Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and domestic courts prosecuted war criminals relatively effectively, with variations. The central weakness of the transitional justice process was its focus on tangible outcomes—prosecutions and convictions—at the expense of a shared truth that might have helped to foster reconciliation.

Beyond survival and justice, restarting life after displacement depends on housing and livelihoods. Restitution of property is a task layered with complexities that can benefit from external assistance. The success of the restitution process depends not only on a trusted process for determining property rights, but also on the enforcement of its outcomes, on alternatives for evicted persons and on support for returnees who lack the assets or resources to engage with restitution at all. The key determinant of whether returns become sustainable, however, is income generation. In the former Yugoslavia, a combination of factors—pre-war recession, the war-related destruction of companies and production facilities, the privatisation of socially owned enterprises at the point of lowest value, and transition-related cuts to social safety nets—left international organisations and the service sector as main, if temporary and insufficient, sources of income. There is much reason to believe that stronger efforts to revive economic activity and more sensitivity in managing the transition would have helped not just to provide livelihoods, but also to reconnect people. The underlying assumption is that

RETURN CAME TO BE SEEN AS A PROXY FOR THE SUCCESS OF INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTIONS, A MEANS OF REMEDYING PAST DISPLACEMENT, A SHORTCUT TO RECONCILIATION—WHILE ALSO BEING THE RECEIVING COUNTRY GOVERNMENTS' PREFERRED SOLUTION TO DISPLACEMENT.

economic prosperity creates conditions for reconciliation and removes the breeding ground for the politicisation of divisions and grievances; in short, it helps to transcend ethnic boundaries both directly and indirectly. However, such measures were not prioritised.

STRONGER EFFORTS TO REVIVE ECONOMIC ACTIVITY AND MORE SENSITIVITY IN MANAGING THE TRANSITION WOULD HAVE HELPED NOT JUST TO PROVIDE LIVELIHOODS, BUT ALSO TO RECONNECT PEOPLE.

Restoring state–citizen relations and creating or maintaining inclusive public services are key to enabling people to envisage a viable future. The case studies highlight the limits of external interventions in conditioning or imposing good governance standards. Promising areas for external support instead include backing citizenship determination procedures, amnesties for conscientious objectors and fostering a critical civil society and grassroots initiatives. Public services—particularly health and education—constitute a highly sensitive area, posing challenges such as how to maintain quality and high standards while removing perpetrators or supporters of violence, ensuring non-discrimination and accountability and avoiding segregation, including within the educational system. Here, positive lessons learned are scarce—a gap linked to the fact that the conflicts were contained or frozen but not really solved and to some extent to

the high prevalence of informality and clientelism as alternative means of ‘getting things done’, one that also reproduces illicit power hierarchies and exclusion.

In a final section, we discussed the impact of return assistance and returnee associations: The latter played a key role in transnational support and advocacy on behalf of returnees, while the former showed room for improvement, particularly in addressing the needs of returnees and local communities and in becoming more targeted and inclusive in design.

A few more general insights emerge that apply across the different spheres of intervention examined in the case studies: The first is that participatory processes at regional or municipal level carry multiple benefits, turning potentially contentious processes—such as the distribution of reconstruction assistance—into an undertaking that connects stakeholders, interest groups and communities, builds trust, transparency and ownership of the process and reduces the risk of tensions and harm bearing in mind that targeted assistance is a major aid-related threat to social cohesion.

The second is that there is considerable potential for linking and intertwining assistance across different but related areas, such as restitution, reconstruction, livelihood support and assisted returns, since doing so would significantly improve the sustainability of returns, minimise gaps and lower overall costs.

THE CASE STUDIES HIGHLIGHT THE LIMITS OF EXTERNAL INTERVENTIONS IN CONDITIONING OR IMPOSING GOOD GOVERNANCE STANDARDS. PROMISING AREAS FOR EXTERNAL SUPPORT INSTEAD INCLUDE BACKING CITIZENSHIP DETERMINATION PROCEDURES, AMNESTIES FOR CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS AND FOSTERING A CRITICAL CIVIL SOCIETY AND GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES.

The largest shortcoming was that the voices and aspirations of those displaced were hardly considered in the planning and implementation of programmes and interventions. In this and other relevant aspects, the lessons from post-Yugoslavia are relevant to ongoing and future international development interventions seeking to facilitate return to post-war countries characterised by entrenched conflict-related social divisions. There are, of course, limits to the direct transferability, first and foremost because of the new geopolitical context and end of the liberal peace paradigm but also because of the protracted nature of many contemporary conflicts and crises. In an increasingly unpredictable and fragmenting global context, the question of whether, how and by whom positive social relations and peaceful, diverse societies can be re-created or restored after war and displacement remains unanswered.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AGEF	Arbeitsgruppe Entwicklung und Fachkräfte im Bereich der Migration und der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit
AVRR	Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Programme
BAMF	German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CEB.	Council of Europe Development Bank
DPA	Dayton Peace Agreement
DUI	Democratic Union for Integration
EU	European Union
EUFOR	European Union Force
EU-RRK	European Union - Return and Reintegration in Kosovo
EULEX	European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo
FBiH	Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina
FRY	Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
FYRoM	Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
HPD	Housing and Property Directorate
ICG	International Crisis Group

ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia	RS	Republika Srpska
IFOR	Implementation Force	RSK	Republic of Serbian Krajina
IOM	International Organisation for Migration	SFOR	Stabilisation Force
IPTF	International Police Task Force	TJ	Transitional Justice
KFOR	Kosovo Force	TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commissions
KLA	Kosovo Liberation Army	UN	United Nations
KPA	Kosovo Property Agency	UN-HABITAT	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
KPCVA	Kosovo Property Comparison and Verification Agency	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
MHC	Municipal Housing Committees	UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
MHRR	Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina	UNMIBH	United Nations Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina
MOCR	Municipal Offices for Communities and Returns	UNMIK	United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization	UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation	UNPSG	United Nations Civilian Police Support Group
NLA	National Liberation Army	UNTAES	United Nations Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium
OFA	Ohrid Framework Agreement	US	United States
OHR	Office of the High Representative	USCRI	U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe	UXO	Unexploded Ordnance
PLIP	Property Law Implementation Plan		
RECOM	Regional Commission Tasked with Establishing the Facts about All Victims of War Crimes and Other Serious Human Rights Violations Committed on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia from 1 January 1991 to 31 December 2001		

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In this bicc report, we examine the return of displaced persons following the wars in the former Yugoslavia and ask what can be learned from one of the most ambitious international efforts to reverse the consequences of violent displacement and restore ethnically diverse societies—for current policies supporting refugee return to post-war countries characterised by entrenched conflict-related social divisions.