

The Road Home: Bosnians' Return

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"WHEN THEY BROKE THROUGH THE front line, up there, we only had 4 or 5 hours to leave the village. We left in a hurry, a bag on our shoulders, to save our lives."

Duško looks up at the hill behind his house. On September 15, 1995, when Vozu'ca in the adjacent valley fell, he abandoned all his belongings and became a refugee. Over two million people, during the war in Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH), from 1992 to 1995, suffered the same fate.

Twenty years after the beginning of that conflict, no one knows exactly how many of them have gone back home.

"I came back on March 8, 2001, with the first group of 20 families. Till then we had been on the outskirts of Doboj in the Republika Srpska (editor's note: one of the two entities BiH is divided into), about 50 km from here. Coming back was hard. Our farm was here — we depended on that. The barns were gone," he says, showing an old heap of rubble, "and our livestock were destroyed." Duško's house, like most of the houses in his village, Bocinje, close to Maglaj, had been occupied by a family of *mujaheddin*, foreign volunteers who had fought alongside Bosnian Muslims in central Bosnia during the war.

"Here in Bocinje and the surrounding villages 145 foreign families had settled, plus a few hundred families of Bosnian *mujaheddin*. They didn't want to leave. At the end they were forced by the international community and local authorities to do so. Only those who had bought property legally before our return stayed on. We had some issues with them at first, not violent, but arguments. Over time, though, everything calmed down. And in the last three years a sort of cooperation has even begun between us, returning Serbs and the mujaheddin. I'd say at least half of the homecomers meet them to buy or sell produce or exchange goods."

Bocinje is a village in rural Bosnia which, before the war, had about 4,000 inhabitants. If one considers the recent history of this local community and the fact that almost all its dwellings were destroyed, some in 1995 and the rest in 2001, when the mujaheddin left, the return process here can be deemed a success. Houses have been rebuilt in groups of 10 or 20, depending on the possibilities of the organizations involved in the reconstruction. As elsewhere in Bosnia, the funds were insufficient for repairing all the damage. Most people, however, have been able to come back, their property has been given back to them and, according to the residents, there are no more problems of security. Even so, many of those who came back have left again. Today little more than 600 people live in the local community of Bocinje — less than a quarter of the original inhabitants.

Sudden Bombardment

A FEW KILOMETRES NORTH OF Bocinje, along the course of the river Bosna, one enters in Republika Srpska. One of the first villages encountered by the river, after Doboj, is Kotorsko. Before the war, the village of Kotorsko was completely Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim). It still is today, despite now being within an entity with a Serb majority. Twenty years ago though, at the beginning of the war, the Bosnian Muslims of Kotorsko were forced to flee.

"On the first of May," recalls Muhamed, "we were all together in Doboj with Serbs and Croats, celebrating the public holiday. Then, two days later, the bombing began on our village. We couldn't believe it. We defended ourselves as best we could, but on June 17th we had to leave our homes. We

managed to get everyone out, but we lost everything."

The speed with which ethnic cleansing went ahead in Bosnia, in particular in Republika Srpska, at the start of the war, has recently been evoked at the trial of the former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić by a demographic expert, Ewa Tabeau, a witness for the prosecution.

Tabeau says that around 300,000 Bosnian Muslims had to leave their homes in the very first months of 1992, and in some districts, for example Prijedor, their number fell by 97 percent between 1992 and 1997, while the Serb population increased by over 100 percent.

Muhamed's village, Kotorsko, was also occupied by Serbs, and Bosnian Muslims were only able to return in the year 2000. Part of the village was destroyed and a part was still occupied.

"At first it wasn't easy," Muhamed explains. "People had settled in the houses; there was some resistance. Then when they saw there was no other solution, gradually the Serbs left."

International donations have not been enough to rebuild everyone's houses. Some, especially those who fled abroad, have had to manage by themselves. But, in spite of the difficulties, the story of Kotorsko seems to be one of success. All properties have been handed back, and return is a reality.

However in this village too, which pre-war had 3,600 inhabitants, there now live less than half. Over 2,000 are no longer there. Having escaped from the bombs in 1992, they have decided not to come back. They have stayed in Canada, Australia, the United States, or in other parts of Europe. If they do come back to Kotorsko, it's only for their summer holidays. For one thing, there's no work here. "Just a bit of trade or construction work," says Muhamed. "The factories are no longer here — just bars."

Trnovo Polje 1

AT THE FOOT OF THE HILL on which Kotorsko stands, on the bend in the great river which gives the country its name, the Bosna, there's a clearing. Here an agglomeration of houses has grown up without a proper layout — no infrastructure apart from a gravel road and the odd electricity pole. Not everyone has water, and the sewage system is non-existent. Its inhabitants call it Trnovo Polje 1. These are on the whole Serbs who had occupied the Bosniaks' houses in Kotorsko and who, after those houses had been given back, either didn't wish or weren't able to go back to where they had lived before the war.

"Not everyone wants to return, especially those who lost someone in this unfortunate war," explains Simo, a man of 50 years old. "I would have gone back, but my house was wrecked right down to its foundations. There's nothing left; it doesn't even seem as if there was a house there. I asked for help with rebuilding, or compensation, but I haven't received anything."

For some years Simo occupied the property of a Bosnian Muslim woman in Kotorsko. When she came back from Germany, where she had fled during the war, Simo crossed the road and built a shack at Trnovo Polje 1. With time, and not without contention, that shack, along with numerous others, acquired walls, and a temporary solution has become permanent.

Back in the Federation, the part of the country with a Croat-Bosniak majority, we meet another group of returnees in Zeleze, in the district of Žepče. Živko, a Serb, complains of the complete lack of work. A Bosniak neighbor confirms that many returnees, after coming back, sold their houses and went away again.

In the long post-war period in Bosnia, refugees have taken different routes: some decided not to come back, staying abroad or in other parts of the country; others, however, tried to go home. But often the latter did not find what they expected and left again, setting off a second wave of migration after the one of the 90s. The effects of this second exodus have not yet been evaluated.

Official Data

MARIO NENADI?, civil servant at the Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees in Bosnia Herzegovina, at present assistant to the Minister, has followed the return process from the beginning.

"According to our figures," says Nenadi?, "the people who had to leave the country during the war, or were displaced in other parts of Bosnia Herzegovina, number 2,200,000. The last census taken in this country, in 1991, registered 4,300,000 inhabitants. Over half the Bosnian population, therefore, were forced to leave their homes."

Approximately one million, according to the Ministry, is the number of people who fled abroad. Slightly larger is the number of internally displaced, taking refuge in areas where their nationality was in the majority. The Government data, in the spring of 2012, show that of these 2,200,000 people, 1,070,000 returned to their own homes. The families on the waiting list for the reconstruction of their own house number 47,000. Lastly there are 113,000 people in Bosnia Herzegovina who still have "displaced" status.

In 2010 the Ministry published a document entitled "Revised Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina. For the Implementation of Annex VII Of the Dayton Peace Agreement", the part of the Peace Accords which established the right of all refugees to return to their pre-war homes. The strategy fixes 2014 as the date within which the right to return is guaranteed to those still wishing to do so. By the same date issues of compensation still pending for those with property destroyed will have to be resolved. A series of additional components including health, education, work, mine clearing, and infrastructures complete the document.

In describing the strategy, Nenadi? underlines one of the successes achieved by Bosnia Herzegovina in dealing with the demographic tidal wave: the adjustment of the question of property rights, massively violated during the 90s. "In the course of these enormous shifts in the population," he explains, "illegally occupied properties amounted to 225,000. To date we have been able to give back 99.9 percent, that is, practically all."

The process of returning properties has not, however, been painless. Often someone who occupied a house and didn't want to or couldn't go back to his/her own, was transferred to temporary lodging, to leave space for the legitimate owner. These temporary lodgings meanwhile became permanent, and today in Bosnia Herzegovina more than 8,000 people still live in small or medium sized collective centres. Many of them are victims of evictions which took place when properties were returned to their previous owners.

Not all countries in the region have dealt with the issue of property rights in the same way, moreover. Croatia, for instance, unlike Bosnia Herzegovina, denied refugees the right to take back their houses if they were socially owned apartments, a form of property quite common in socialist Yugoslavia. Consequently in Bosnia, and particularly in Republika Srpska, today there are still about 7,000 refugees from Croatia, especially from the Krajina region, who cannot get back the houses they lived in before the war. Many of them are in temporary lodgings or collective centers.*

The New Exodus

A SHORT DISTANCE from the Bosnian seat of government, on the other side of the Zmaja od Bosne, are

the UNHCR offices. This is the organization to which Dayton assigned the task of supervising the return of refugees and displaced persons. The UNHCR estimates it has spent around 800 million dollars fulfilling its role in Bosnia. The amount spent on supporting the process of return is, however, certainly greater. No one has a complete picture of the situation though, given that funding has often taken bilateral forms through States or various international organizations, governmental and not.

Scott Pohl, Senior Protection Officer at UNHCR in Bosnia Herzegovina, substantially confirms the figures on return supplied by the Ministry. But, according to UNHCR, the million plus returnees could be subdivided into 550,000 who returned to areas where their nationality has the majority and 450,000 who went back to where today they are in a minority.

"In our view the majority returns were absolutely sustainable," states Pohl, "and we believe that those people remained in those places. The minority returns were much more difficult. Some could have found it too difficult to stay in the place of return and decided to sell (after getting their property back), or could have decided immediately upon repossession that they did not want to stay there or they wanted to come back only on weekends. There was no comprehensive monitoring after the fact; the focus was on making it possible for people to make a free choice."

The next census, scheduled for April next year after long discussions between the main political parties of the country, could bring some surprises. The returnees, according to official figures, are a little over a million. If only half of these, 550,000, have really returned, Bosnia Herzegovina, which in 1991 had a population of 4,300,000 and had 100,000 losses in the war, risks discovering itself a depopulated country. Moreover, if the only effective returnees are those in majority areas, the census could give a photograph of a Bosnia officially divided in three ethnically homogeneous zones: one Serb, one Croat, and one Bosniak.

End of the Melting Pot

"THE PLAN OF ETHNIC CLEANSING has, unfortunately, been a success," maintains Srećko Latal, analyst at the International Crisis Group in Sarajevo. "The great melting pot that Bosnia Herzegovina represented before the war, especially in the urban centres, no longer exists. BiH today is a sum of prevalently monoethnic local communities, cantons and regions. Even the larger cities like Sarajevo or Banja Luka are essentially inhabited by a single ethnic group. Property was given back efficiently with almost 100 percent success. But then the owners, after getting their house back, often sold or exchanged it in order to be where they were in a majority."

Latal maintains the error was in the timing of the return process. "The first years after the war offered the most opportune moment — which was lost. After that first period, when refugees had a strong desire to return, then other factors came into play, such as the possibility of finding a job. Those who had found work, abroad or elsewhere in the country, decided to stay there. Today, with unemployment at around 40 percent, more returns are unlikely, at least in significant numbers. About one million people have by now found a new life, a family, a job, somewhere else and come back only for the summer or winter holidays. Their lives and their children are unfortunately lost to Bosnia."

"The problem," explains Armin Hošo, assistant field officer at UNHCR where he has worked since 1993, "is that in 1996 and 1997 it was difficult even to mention the word 'return.' It was risky, especially in some communities, even for our staff. We had to take a step at a time. At Dayton they all agreed, with all three sides signing Annex 7, giving the right to return. On the ground, though, the situation was very different. Those same people who had been in power in the period of ethnic cleansing had assumed the position of mayor, police chief, and clerk in the council. It took 2 years

just to begin implementing the property laws."

Victory for the Nationalists

ONE OF THE MAIN AIMS of the nationalists during the war was to move people from one side of the country to another, using terrorism and ethnic cleansing. After the war, the aim became stopping the return of minorities and keeping evacuees where they were if they belonged to the majority in that place. Despite Dayton and the widespread efforts of the international community, in Bosnia the nationalists seem to have won both the war and post-war.

"It is understandable that the return took place only on paper," emphasizes Vera Jovanovi?, director of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Sarajevo. "When people came back they often had to face terrorist attacks, bombs thrown at their car or their house. The plan was to scare them off, so they would not come back, or, if they did, make them leave again. To say the least, returnees were received in an unfriendly manner. It has to be considered that they were trying to return to places they'd been driven out of, and where those who had committed the crimes were now living. The situation was particularly difficult in Republika Srpska, where the return today is extremely weak. But not only there. That's why most people, maybe 80 percent, have applied for their properties only to sell them."

Some politicians, according to Vera Jovanovi?, had a determining role in making the process of return fail in the years immediately following the signature of the Peace Agreement.

"I remember in 1996 Mom?ilo Krajišnik (then Serb representative in the Bosnian Presidential Office) organizing the transfer of the Sarajevo Serbs, convincing them even to move their cemeteries, explaining to them that it was not possible to continue to live there. He would walk round Ilidža and Vogoš?a (editor's note: quarters of Sarajevo) getting them to leave the city. At the same time, Bosniaks were arriving from eastern Bosnia, organized in bus loads, occupying the empty apartments. I was the ombudsman at the time, and we who were working for human rights realized that there was an agreement, that ethnic cleansing was agreed between the so-called 'mortal enemies,' they were each interested in having ethnically clean territory."

Colonies

AFTER THE WAR, all over Bosnia religious and national symbols were used, in particular crosses and flags, churches and mosques, to mark out territory and indicate allegiances. In some cases important public works programs were launched, in particular house building, to allow the evacuees to stay where they were in the majority, creating sorts of colonies.

Leaving Sarajevo from Grbavica, after crossing the Vraca Park with its monuments to WWII partisans, one enters the municipality of Isto?no Novo Sarajevo, in Republika Srpska. The Vice President of the Municipal Council, Vojislav Milinkovi?, reminds us that even recently 2,500 new homes have been built for the Serbs of Sarajevo.

In the Bosnian capital, according to UNHCR, almost 33,000 properties have been returned, about 90 percent of those which were occupied. But no exact figures are available for the number of returnees to the city. A frequent comment is that the capital of Bosnia Herzegovina would now be an almost completely Bosniak city. In an apartment in Marijin Dvor, however, not far from the city centre, we meet a lady of Serb nationality who contradicts the general picture, telling us her story.

Fight for Your Rights

"I WAS BORN IN SARAJEVO," says Varja, "I've always lived here, in the center. After they bombed our

house, on May 26 1992, my son left, then, some months later, I too, joining him abroad. I came back in January 1996 as soon as the war was over. I knocked on the door of my apartment, but they wouldn't let me in — it was occupied. Since no one listened to me and the authorities wouldn't support me, I decided to take everyone to court — the Council, the Federation, the State. It took 3 years, but in the end I made it. I never had any doubts: my city is my city, and I didn't want to follow the fate of the Serbs who went away, giving up their homes."

Asked about the present and future of her city, Varja details her point of view: "I've always felt fine here, lacking nothing. Many of those who return for short periods complain; they have a different attitude, saying Sarajevo is not what it was. I say they are the ones responsible for this. They went away, and only came back to sell their homes and leave again. It was their choice and I don't agree with it. You belong to a place, isn't it so?"

Twenty years after the beginning of the war, Bosnia Herzegovina is a strange country. On the one hand the Dayton Peace Agreement has certified the ethnic divisions in every aspect of political and social life. On the other hand, Dayton has tried to reconstruct the demographic situation which existed before the war and recreate what Bosnia always represented for European history: union in diversity. That task, however, seems far from being fulfilled. This would be a reason for a new political class, capable of reforming the Constitution, and for a new society. Science fiction in the present Bosnian and European climate.

For the moment we have the example of who chose to return, people who have shown an extraordinary courage, as well as great devotion to their land. People like Varja, Muhamed, and Duško. Next year, with the first census of the population since the end of the war, we will know how many made the same choice. What Bosnia Herzegovina will look like in the future, largely depends on them.

Footnotes