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DIIS Brief

Transnational Returns and Reconstruction in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina

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Abstract

Repatriation has been promoted as a durable solution of refugee situations as well as a vital component in the social reconstruction of war-torn societies. This paper examines the return strategies of refugees to profoundly changed and uncertain circumstances and the transnational space in which they take place, with Bosnia-Herzegovina as an example. It points to the need to reconceptualise return from a permanent and one-time event to a process occurring over a longer period of time, often involving continued mobility. Having citizenship in the country of asylum is thus an important safe-guard for those returning, facilitating mobility and continuing to connect them to people and resources elsewhere. Perhaps because transnational solutions are perceived to undermine sustainability and the emphasis by policy-makers on definitive return, their potential have so far not been sufficiently taken into account in policies on return and reconstruction.

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Over the past ten years, issues of return have represented an area of growing concern for governments and international organisations working in the refugee and migration fields. In the Balkans, large-scale international returns of refugees to Bosnia and Kosovo have occurred alongside intense efforts to promote so-called 'minority return' of displaced people within the two territories. Return has also been an issue in Croatia and Serbia, although there, the scale of return has been much smaller. This interest in return comes from a number of directions. First, the return of refugees and displaced persons have been important components of peace agreements in post-war societies since the 1990s, posited as a vital precondition for reconstruction and reconciliation. Indeed, refugee return and reintegration have often been used as an indicator of the well-being and maturity of a state signalling the success of a political process underpinned by reconciliation, and movement in the direction of justice and a western-style democracy. Second, as repatriation has gained renewed appeal in recent years, return has been promoted as a 'durable solution' for refugees and displaced persons.

In Bosnia, return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes of origin has been a strong policy priority in the international commitment to reverse 'ethnic cleansing' after the war, as manifested in the Dayton Peace Agreement. Return has thus become a highly politically charged process in a number of local contexts, both for returnees and those who did not migrate or flee, leading many observers to question the notion of an unproblematic return 'home'. The reintegration of refugees as a durable solution in profoundly changed and uncertain conditions is rarely unproblematic, and in Bosnia the reincorporation of minority returns especially has been of great concern. Not only in Bosnia but across the region, doubts remain about the conditions and voluntariness of return, the ability of individual returnees to re-integrate in their home countries and regions, and the wider sustainability of the return process.

Given such uncertainties, the strategies of return which refugees themselves adopt, often outside of established policies and programmes, need to be given particular attention. Such return strategies increasingly occur in transnational space, are often of different duration, and based on the need to keep options open in different places. Such transnational strategies of emplacement thus rely on linkages between country of origin and that of exile, and are premised on the possibility, economic and legal, of moving between them. In the Bosnian case, they include the many refugees who continue residing abroad but return to their repossessed

houses in Bosnia regularly, some of them staying for longer periods and in some cases preparing for returning permanently at a later date.

Both in terms of migration theory and policy, 'return' needs to be reconceptualised. While conventional perspectives have tended to define refugee return as a single and definitive move to the country or place of origin, the transnational perspective suggests that return be better defined as a dynamic and open-ended process, one which may extend over long periods of time, involve mobility between places and active links to people and resources in the country of asylum. For those who return, maintaining effective links to the country of asylum, including family and kin who remain there, provides a sense of security in an unstable home environment and connect them to resources elsewhere. For those returning to Bosnia from Sweden, Swedish citizenship has been a valued safe-guard that keeps the door open for re-migration, if necessary. Being Swedish citizens these Bosnians disqualify for host government return grants, but it is the security measure preferred by most and allows them to return with a greater sense of control. Notably, citizenship provides not only the right to return to the country of asylum, temporarily or permanently, for some or all of the household members, if need be, but also, for those returning as citizens from an EU member country, it connects them to a wider area of opportunity.

In such a transnational dynamic, 'refugee' and 'returnee' are no longer clear-cut categories, as both refer to persons who may move between and combine resources at both ends. Thus, transnational strategies are important correctives to standard conceptions of refugee solutions, as envisaged by different policies. Many of the people described in this article are not in any definitive sense either refugees, citizens or returnees as we are used to understand these terms, but can be seen to be in a continuous transit from one place and status to the other, and categories are blurred. The transnational perspective also throws into question notions of 'home' as something bound to one particular locality or national community. If 'home' is not just a place or a physical structure but also a site of social relations and cultural meanings, it may well extend to several places, each one of which may hold its own particular sets of relations and meanings to those concerned. This transnational dimension of home is thus a challenge to notions of 'repatriation' or 'return' in the simplistic mode. Instead, the reconstructed home may be translocal, where each locality becomes part of a new home. Such transnational emplacement and commitments also attest to the creative capacity of individuals, often underestimated in return policies, to envision new and better alternatives than seeking to restore the home of the past

Rethinking return of refugees in terms of transnational mobility and belonging should also suggest new ways of conceptualising the potential for reconstruction of a large refugee population abroad. How may reconstruction and development initiatives take account of these transnational strategies and incorporate them and the need for flexibility they demonstrate into policies and assistance programmes? These would need to be open to a wider range of solutions to refugees from war-torn societies, including remaining in the countries of asylum. Large-scale and permanent returns of those abroad may rather undermine the contributions that diasporas make to their home societies. New programmes encouraging temporary returns of those living in other countries may instead capitalise on their skills and their engagement with the home country. The many young Bosnians now acquiring higher education abroad may so far be a largely untapped resource in this respect. Such short-term returns appear to reflect better the motivations of many visiting Bosnians described. They may also, for some at least, open possibilities for a more long-term return. However, to be effective as a means to post-war reconstruction, such initiatives must be coordinated with more long-term development efforts and involve refugees' own voices in the process.

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