

THE CONTINUED CHALLENGES OF THE BOSNIAK RETURNEES IN *REPUBLIKA SRPSKA* AND THE THREAT OF SECESSIONISM

HAMZA PRELJEVIĆ*
(International University of Sarajevo)

İBRAHİM FEVZİ GÜVEN**
(Karabük University)

Abstract. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) had two notable consequences. The first is the complex institutional structure, and the second is the war-induced displacement. The article's exclusive emphasis is on the latter consequence. The violent ethnic homogenization and territorialization between 1992 and 1995 permanently altered and severely damaged the ethnic composition of the country. Even though the non-Serbs were forcibly displaced and then returned voluntarily to their home of origin, the returnees are confronted with the secessionist threat and the continuous challenge of life in *Republika Srpska* (RS). The article aims to address the continuing challenges faced by Bosniak returnees in the RS, with particular emphasis on the connections between returnee experiences and the unresolved threat of secession. To explore the social, political, and economic challenges faced by returnees and the impact of increasing separatist agitation and tendencies in the RS on Bosniak returnees, a field study was carried out in six municipalities located in East Bosnia: Zvornik, Bratunac, Vlasenica, Milići, Srebrenica, and Višegrad.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina, secessionism, refugees, IDPs, returnees, Republika Srpska

* Hamza Preljević, PhD is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations (PSIR) at the International University of Sarajevo (IUS), Bosnia and Herzegovina. Concurrently, he serves as the director of the Balkan Studies Center (BSC) at IUS (hpreljevic@ius.edu.ba).

** İbrahim Fevzi Güven, PhD is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Relations (IR) at Karabük University, Türkiye (ibrahimguven@karabuk.edu.tr).

Introduction: The *Leftovers* of the Dayton Peace Agreement

Two notable effects of the 1992-1995 aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina have occurred. The first involved a *de facto* division of the country, which was achieved by forming two entities that turned into ethnically more homogeneous zones and a complicated power-sharing system. The post-Dayton political organization of BiH, whose constitution appears in Annex 4 to the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), represents a politics of complexity, which weakens and mitigates the reform progress. The second main effect, which this article focuses on, involved the massive migration of approximately two million internally and externally displaced individuals — *the war-induced displacement*, as a result of the *wartime strategic objectives* pursued by the Serbian forces. The strategic objectives were: the creation of a border separation with the other two national communities, the creation of a corridor between Semberija and Krajina, the creation of a corridor in the Drina Valley, namely the elimination of the Drina as a border between Serbian states, the creation of a border on the Una and Neretva rivers, division of the city of Sarajevo into Serbian and Muslim parts and implementation of a compelling state government in each of these parts, and access of the Republika Srpska to the sea.¹

The paramilitary forces of Bosnian Serb Army, which were irregular forces on the territory of BiH, have carried out the violent persecution of Bosniak and Croat civilians from their homes, where they lived until the beginning of the war in 1992. Since the redrawing of borders and creating ethnically pure Serb territories in BiH could not be achieved through voluntary resettlement, violent means, including intimidation, expulsion, and mass killings of Bosniaks, were used to “liberate” imaginary Serb ethnic territories.² In fact, because of their dispersion, an

¹ Hikmet Karčić, *Torture, Humiliate, Kill: Inside the Bosnian Serb Camp System* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2022).

² Marko Attila Hoare, “The War of Yugoslav Succession,” in *Central and Southeast European Politics since 1989*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet and Christine M. Hassenstab (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 117–22; Klejda Mulaj, “A Recurrent Tragedy: Ethnic Cleansing as a Tool of State Building in the Yugoslav Multinational Setting,” *Nationalities Papers* 34, no. 1 (March 2006): 21–50, 35.

obstacle to establishing a Greater Serbia in the specific geopolitical context, Bosniaks in eastern Bosnia have been repeatedly targeted by Serb attacks, historically before the last instance of genocide during the 1992-1995 war. For example, during World War II, the Chetnik movement, led by Draža Mihailović, committed acts of genocide against Muslims in eastern Bosnia to establish a mono-ethnic Serbian state.³ The violent *ethnic homogenization* and *ethnic territorialization* (against the non-Serb population) during the 1992-1995 war brought about significant changes in the ethnic composition throughout the country, including the municipalities of Zvornik, Bratunac, Vlasenica, Milići, Srebrenica, and Višegrad. They lost their pre-war multi-ethnic composition, and Serbs became predominant.

The parties (*i.e.*, those that fought the war) to the DPA agreed to fully respect and promote fulfilling the commitments to returning refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their homes. Annex 7 to the DPA was designed to address the displacement, and it stressed that all citizens should be allowed to return to their homes of origin. Many argue that the success of DPA rests on the implementation of Annex 7, but it remains a concern and is far from being fixed. The importance of Annex 7 is also accentuated in the 2019 European Commission's Opinion on BiH's European Union membership application.⁴ Although Annex 7 specifically grants refugees and IDPs the right to return to their home of origin since 1995, the topic remains relevant and worthwhile to address almost thirty years after the war's end. The authorities have not made sufficient efforts to maximize the implementation intentions of Annex 7.

The article focuses exclusively on Bosniaks who suffered the most significant losses and have returned to their home of origin, now in RS.⁵

³ Sonja Biserko, *Yugoslavia's Implosion: The Fatal Attraction of Serbian Nationalism* (Oslo: Norwegian Helsinki Committee, 2012), 41; Norman Cigar, *Uloga Srpskih Orijentalista u Opravdavanju Genocida Nad Muslimanima Balkana* [The Role of Serb Orientalists in Justifying the Genocide of the Balkan Muslims] (Sarajevo: Institute for Study of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law, Sarajevo, and Bosnian Cultural Centre, Sarajevo, 2000), 21.

⁴ European Commission, "Commission Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's Application for Membership of the European Union" (Brussels, 2019), 16, accessed March 13th, 2024, <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-05/20190529-bosnia-and-herzegovina-opinion.pdf>.

⁵ Michael B. Bishku, "Bosnia and the Middle East: Current Political, Economic and Cultural Ties," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 36, no. 2 (April 2016): 202-18.

It scrutinizes not only the trajectories of returnees, but also their experiences with post-war livelihoods. By returning, Bosniaks expected to rebuild their lives in RS but witnessed once again secessionist tendencies and narratives in the place of return. BiH's RS entity, whose territorial space was claimed through large-scale ethnic cleansing and approved by the International Community with the DPA, currently exists in a state of ambiguity, operating simultaneously in opposition to and as an integral part of the state of BiH.⁶ Despite its lack of full sovereign status, it has effectively operated with considerable autonomy by invoking *ethnic sovereignty*. It uses all mechanisms to block the multi-ethnic state of BiH and attempts to operate as if it possessed sovereignty at the military, political, social, and institutional levels.⁷ Insisting on celebrating January 9 as a national holiday, "Republika Srpska Day," glorifying convicted war criminals, threatening to form parallel institutions in the areas of justice, defense, security, and taxation, blocking state-level legislative and executive institutions, adopting laws rendering state-level Constitutional Court decisions invalid in the RS and openly disregarding the decisions of the High Representative is among the several most prominent recent examples of RS secessionist tendencies.⁸

⁶ Roberto Belloni, *State Building and International Intervention in Bosnia* (London: Routledge, 2007); Rick Fawn and Oliver P. Richmond, "De Facto States in the Balkans: Shared Governance versus Ethnic Sovereignty in Republika Srpska and Kosovo," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 3, no. 2 (June 2009): 205-238, 215.

⁷ Fawn and Richmond, "De Facto States in the Balkans."

⁸ Annika Björkdahl, "Republika Srpska: Imaginary, Performance and Spatialization," *Political Geography* 66 (September 2018): 34-43, 40; Euronews, "Night Wolves and Praise for Putin Mark Milorad Dodik's Unconstitutional Fête," *Euronews*, 2023, accessed March 13th, 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/01/09/night-wolves-and-praise-for-putin-mark-milorad-dodiks-unconstitutional-fete>; Denic Džidić and Denis Džidić, "Karadzic 'Sacrificed Himself for Serbs', Says Dodik," *Balkan Insight*, 2013, accessed March 13th, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/04/04/karadzic-s-request-to-subpoena-oric-denied-again/>; Admir Muslimovic, "Bosnia: Serb Leaders Intensify Political Crisis After Genocide Denial Ban," *Balkan Insight*, 2021, accessed March 11th, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/24/bosnia-serb-leaders-intensify-political-crisis-after-genocide-denial-ban/>; Fawn and Richmond, "De Facto States in the Balkans," 217; Danijel Kovacevic, "Bosnian Serbs Condemned Over Blockade of State Institutions," *Balkan Insight*, 2020, accessed March 5th, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/02/12/bosnian-serbs-blockade-institutions-over-constitutional-court-ruling/>.

This article aims to argue that reactionary right-wing and secessionist politicians, which have thrived in the political landscape of RS, hijacked the sustainable return and livelihood of Bosniaks. A permanent, safe, and dignified return to RS does not sound like a possible scenario under such a condition – *a repeated call for secession and unification with Serbia*. Importantly, the threats of secession of RS are not a strategy for achieving more limited goals but the centuries-old ideologies and projects – ‘Great Serbia.’ The roots of Serbian secessionism in BiH trace back to nineteenth-century Serbian nationalism and the formation of modern Serbia. Driven by the desire to revive the medieval Serbian Empire of the fourteenth century, Serbian secessionism is fueled by the idealization of a homogeneous Greater Serbia state. This concept gained prominence in Serbian foreign policy after it was articulated in 1844 as the “Načertanije” (or “Draft Plan”) by Ilija Garašanin, who served as Minister of the Interior in the government of Prince Aleksandar Karađorđević. Načertanije aimed to consolidate all territories inhabited by Serbs, regardless of their majority or minority status, into a unified state. It also sought to assimilate individuals from other ethnic groups and religions into the Serbian nation and the Orthodox Church. Another strategic document that outlined plans to expand Serbian influence throughout the region was “Serbs, all and everywhere” by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić in 1849. After a century, the resurgence of Serbian territorial ambitions to unite all Serbs in a single state was triggered by the emergence of Stevan Moljević’s concept of “Homogeneous Serbia” in 1941. This ambition persisted, as evident in the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (SANU) in 1986, almost five decades later. The Memorandum encapsulated the history of the Serbian people, documented their grievances, and delineated the guiding principles that would shape Serbian national policy, reaffirming their aspirations for territorial unification.⁹

⁹ Barbara Jelavich, *History of the Balkans: Twentieth Century* (Vol. 2) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 109-110; Mark Biondich, *The Balkans: Revolution, War, and Political Violence since 1878* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 199; Biserko, *Yugoslavia’s Implosion*, 33-34, 79-83; Cathie Carmichael, *Ethnic Cleansing in the Balkans: Nationalism and the Destruction of Tradition* (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2002), 17-18; Norman Cigar, *Genocide in Bosnia: The Policy of “Ethnic Cleansing”* (Texas:

Concurrently, the return programs tend to fall short of bringing Bosniaks back to RS. The conception of the RS territory as an exclusively Serb homeland,¹⁰ which was multi-ethnic before the conflict of the 1990s, and emphasizing symbols of statehood¹¹ have played a role in fostering ethnic nationalism, empowering groups unwilling to cooperate with the peace settlement, hindering peacebuilding efforts, post-war reconciliation and coexistence, and creating insecurity for non-Serb communities and ethnic minorities.¹² It generates an environment where non-Serbs, including minority returnees, are marginalized.¹³ In more extreme cases, their presence is often overlooked and unwelcome, met with rejection and hostility. Comparatively, the 1991 census recorded 441,077 Bosniaks (28.0 percent) and 144,129 Croats (9.2 percent) residing in the territory of today's RS. This indicates that by 2013, 269,241 individuals of Bosniak nationality and 114,484 individuals of Croat nationality were no longer present in that area, presumably due to various reasons such as wide spread atrocities, displacement, or relocation. According to the 2013 census, 171,839 Bosniaks (14.0 percent) and 25,640 Croats (2.1 percent) reside in RS.¹⁴

In line with the above discussion, this article is based on the assumption that the future of the returnees is not satisfied by restoring their homes of origin. Secessionist tendencies hinder the peaceful living conditions and sustainable livelihood of previously forcibly displaced persons by bringing uncertainty to their lives and affecting communal trust in RS. Accordingly, the objective has been to investigate the experience of Bosniaks, as returnees in the RS, *vis-à-vis* the existence of separatist tendencies and the threat of separatism. Secessionist tendencies

Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 23; Hamza Preljević, "The Role of the Islamic Community in Peacebuilding in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina: Case Study of East Bosnia," *Insight Turkey* 19, no. 3 (July 2017): 207-230, 218.

¹⁰ Dejan Stjepanović, "Territoriality and Citizenship: Membership and Sub-State Politics in Post-Yugoslav Space," *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 7 (August 2015): 1030-55.

¹¹ Björkdahl, "Republika Srpska."

¹² Fawn and Richmond, "De Facto States in the Balkans."

¹³ Lara J. Nettelfield and Sarah E. Wagner, *Srebrenica in the Aftermath of Genocide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 12.

¹⁴ Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, "Population by ethnicity and sex, by municipalities and settlements, 1991-2013 Census," accessed April 4th, 2024, <http://www.statistika.ba/?show=12&id=29800>.

pose a significant problem for politics and policy in both the domestic and international spheres. The central focus of this article was the domestic sphere, which is addressed in the research question, *How does the upswing of separatist agitations and tendencies in RS affect the Bosniak returnees?*. Returning to the home of origin in RS resembles the *Norman doors* among the Bosniaks. People are unsure whether to go for it – secessionism is still on the radar. Thus, the reintegration process, *i.e.*, bringing the Bosniaks to areas of prior lives in RS, represents a complex problem. The challenge lies, on the one hand, in bringing Bosniaks to RS, and keeping them living in the place of return, on the other hand. As the returnees, the Bosniaks did not remain living in their place of return in RS but looked for better life opportunities. Emigration is a widespread problem in RS, affecting all people but impacting Bosniak returnees (along with Croats) more, whose demographics were changed as a result of the 1992-1995 war.

Methodology

This study comprises intensive in-country data collection derived from six municipalities (towns) in BiH's entity RS: Zvornik, Bratunac, Vlasenica, Milići, Srebrenica, and Višegrad. A purposive sampling approach was used by selecting as participants Bosniaks living in these municipalities, to understand how the upswing of separatist tendencies in RS affects the peaceful living conditions and sustainable livelihoods of Bosniaks. It focused on these municipalities because of the large number of human lives and capital lost during the 1992–1995 war, but also because these municipalities have not received attention in describing and explaining the effects of secessionist tendencies on the livelihood of Bosniaks in their place of return.

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study. Two interviews with returnees were conducted in each selected returnee area (in total, twelve interviews). Snowball sampling, a suitable method for data collection in conflict and post-conflict regions, was used to identify interviewees.¹⁵

¹⁵ Nissim Cohen and Tamar Arieli, "Field Research in Conflict Environments: Methodological Challenges and Snowball Sampling," *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 4 (July 2011): 423-35.

Permission for recording the interviews was obtained from the research participants. The interviews were conducted in Bosnian between June 2023 and July 2023, translated into English and anonymized to ensure ethical considerations, such as the participants' privacy. Thematic analysis was utilized as the primary analytical tool to identify and interpret the qualitative data obtained from the in-depth interviews, generating meaningful insights and rich findings that were key to addressing the research objective.¹⁶ A systematic process of coding and identifying recurring themes was used to explore participants' perspectives, experiences, and underlying patterns.

Literature Review

The post-conflict settlement in BiH is one of the leading examples where the International Community has recognized the return of displaced populations as the most urgent imperative for reversing ethnic cleansing, building peace, restoring human rights, reconciliation, and transitional justice in the country.¹⁷ Following the peace agreement, the country

¹⁶ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (January 2006): 77-101.

¹⁷ Belloni, *State Building and International Intervention in Bosnia*; Richard Black, "Return and Reconstruction in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Missing Link, or Mistaken Priority?," *SAIS Review* 21, no. 2 (2001): 177-99; Richard Black, "Conceptions of 'Home' and the Political Geography of Refugee Repatriation: Between Assumption and Contested Reality in Bosnia-Herzegovina," *Applied Geography* 22, no. 2 (April 2002): 123-38; Barbara Franz, "Returnees, Remittances and Reconstruction: International Politics and Local Consequences in Bosnia," *The Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 11, no. 1 (2010): 49-62, 51; Daniela Heimerl, "The Return of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons: From Coercion to Sustainability?," *International Peacekeeping* 12, no. 3 (October 2005): 377-90; Catherine Phuong, "'Freely to Return': Reversing Ethnic Cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 13, no. 2 (June 2000): 165-83; Deniz S. Sert, "Reversing Segregation? The Property Restitution Process in Post-War Bosnia," *Ethnopolitics* 10, no. 2 (June 2011): 219-33; Sebina Sivic-Bryant, "Kozarac School: A Window on Transitional Justice for Returnees," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 2, no. 1 (March 2008): 106-15; Anders H. Stefansson, "Coffee after Cleansing? Co-Existence, Co-Operation, and Communication in Post-Conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Focaal*, no. 57 (June 2010): 62-76; Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Carl Dahlman, "The Effort to Reverse Ethnic Cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Limits of Returns," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 45, no. 6 (September 2004): 439-64; Gearóid Ó Tuathail and John

witnessed the largest return movement in Europe since World War II.¹⁸ Partial successes in the minority return process were achieved, especially from 2000 to 2005, through the policies of the OHR (such as the 1999 action plan of the Task Force for Reconstruction and Return), international pressure for property restitution, security assistance provided to returnees by NATO forces, and initiatives developed by various international actors such as the UNHCR, the IOM, and the World Bank to promote sustainable minority returns.¹⁹ Since the mid-

O'Loughlin, "After Ethnic Cleansing: Return Outcomes in Bosnia-Herzegovina a Decade Beyond War," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99, no. 5 (October 2009): 1045-53; Ondřej Žíla, "After Coming Home: Forms and Meanings of Return in Dayton's Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Glasnik Etnografskog Instituta* 67, no. 3 (2019): 523-43.

¹⁸ Richard Black and Khalid Koser, *The End of the Refugee Cycle?* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 3.

¹⁹ Black, "Conceptions of 'Home' and the Political Geography of Refugee Repatriation"; Huma Sebina Sivic-Bryant, *Re-Making Kozarac: Agency, Reconciliation and Contested Return in Post-War Bosnia*, Palgrave Studies in Compromise after Conflict (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Djordje Stefanovic and Neophytos Loizides, "The Way Home: Peaceful Return of Victims of Ethnic Cleansing," *Human Rights Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2011): 408-30; Selma Porobič, "Bosnian 'Returnee Voices' Communicating Experiences of Successful Reintegration. The Social Capital and Sustainable Return Nexus in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Südosteuropa* 64, no. 1 (January 2016); Florian Bieber, *Post-War Bosnia: Ethnicity, Inequality and Public Sector Governance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 112; Sean Metivier, Djordje Stefanovic, and Neophytos Loizides, "Struggling for and Within the Community: What Leads Bosnian Forced Migrants to Desire Community Return?," *Ethnopolitics* 17, no. 2 (March 2018): 147-164, 148; Gerard Toal and Carl Dahlman, *Bosnia Remade: Ethnic Cleansing and Its Reversal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Black, "Return and Reconstruction in Bosnia-Herzegovina"; Heimerl, "The Return of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons," 381-82; Ayaki Ito, "Politicisation of Minority Return in Bosnia and Herzegovina - The First Five Years Examined," *International Journal of Refugee Law* 13, no. 1 and 2 (January 2001): 98-122; Lynn Hastings, "Implementation of the Property Legislation in Bosnia Herzegovina," *Stanford Journal of International Law* 37, no. 2 (2001): 221-54; Stef Jansen, "Refuchess: Locating Bosniac Repatriates after the War in Bosnia-Herzegovina," *Population, Space and Place* 17, no. 2 (March 2011): 140-52; Charles Philpott, "Though the Dog Is Dead, the Pig Must Be Killed: Finishing with Property Restitution to Bosnia-Herzegovina's IDPs and Refugees," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 18, no. 1 (March 2005): 1-24; Anders H. Stefansson, "Homes in the Making: Property Restitution, Refugee Return, and Senses of Belonging in a Post-War Bosnian Town," *International Migration* 44, no. 3 (August 2006): 115-39; Belloni, *State Building and International Intervention in Bosnia*; Djordje Stefanovic and

2000s, however, the return process has stagnated and even shown signs of *reverse returns*, with returnees increasingly choosing to leave their places of origin again due to unfavorable living conditions.²⁰ Current circumstances suggest that returns are insufficient to reverse ethnic cleansing, nor are the conditions for sustainable minority returns met.²¹

Despite concerted efforts, for many, a major shortcoming of the International Community has been the inadequate recognition of the complex and multifaceted nature of the sustainable return, which encompasses not only the physical act of relocation but also the post-return period, requiring substantial improvements in the socio-economic and political conditions in the areas of return, as well as a comprehensive and dynamic approach to the long-term viability and integration of returnees into their communities.²² Moreover, the limited

Neophytos Loizides, "Peaceful Returns: Reversing Ethnic Cleansing after the Bosnian War," *International Migration* 55, no. 5 (October 2017): 217-234, 219; Toal and Dahlman, *Bosnia Remade*; Black, "Conceptions of 'Home' and the Political Geography of Refugee Repatriation;" Huma Haider, "(Re)Imagining Coexistence: Striving for Sustainable Return, Reintegration and Reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 3, no. 1 (2009): 91-113; Selma Porobić, "Daring 'Life-Return Projects' to Post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina," *International Migration* 55, no. 5 (October 2017): 192-204; Žila, "After Coming Home."

²⁰ Petr Čermák, "Minority Refugee Return as a Tool to Reverse Ethnic Cleansing: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Forum Za Sigurnosne Studije* 2, no. 2 (2018): 6-45; Patricia Weiss Fagen, "Peace Processes and IDP Solutions," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (January 2009): 31-58, 44-45; Jansen, "Refuchess"; Žila, "After Coming Home;" Jasmin Agić, "Šta Se Desilo Sa Povratkom: Ima Li Bošnjaka u Republici Srpskoj?," [What Happened to the Return: Are There Bosniaks in Republika Srpska?] *Al Jazeera*, 2021, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net teme/2021/1/30/sta-se-desilo-sa-povratko-m-ima-li-bosnjaka-u-republici-srpskoj>; Metivier, Stefanovic, and Loizides, "Struggling for and Within the Community," 149.

²¹ Porobić, "Daring 'Life-Return Projects' to Post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina," 196; Sert, "Reversing Segregation?"; Ondřej Žila, "Managing Mass Migration after the War: The Case of Sarajevo's Unification in 1996," *Political Geography* 96 (June 2022).

²² Richard Black and Saskia Gent, "Sustainable Return in Post-Conflict Contexts," *International Migration* 44, no. 3 (August 2006): 15-38; Patricia Weiss Fagen, "Refugees and IDPs after Conflict: Why They Do Not Go Home," Special Report (New York, Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2011); Stef Jansen, "The Privatisation of Home and Hope: Return, Reforms and the Foreign Intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina," *Dialectical Anthropology* 30, no. 3-4 (2006): 177-99; Stef Jansen, "Troubled Locations: Return, the Life Course, and Transformations of 'Home' in Bosnia-Herzegovina,"

success in facilitating minority returns has also been attributed to the contradictory nature of the DPA, intended to facilitate returns to reverse ethnic cleansing, yet divided the country into largely autonomous entities whose territorial and demographic composition was closely linked to the campaign of ethnic cleansing, thereby cementing ethno-nationalist divisions, and impeding the return process.²³

The experience of violence and trauma during the conflict, the risk of post-conflict violence against returnees, and how displacement unfolded are significant predictors that play a critical role in shaping the outcomes of post-conflict repatriation efforts.²⁴ A further important

Focaal – European Journal of Anthropology, no. 49 (June 2007): 15-30; Philpott, "Though the Dog Is Dead, the Pig Must Be Killed"; Porobić, "Bosnian 'Returnee Voices' Communicating Experiences of Successful Reintegration. The Social Capital and Sustainable Return Nexus in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 64, no. 1 (2016), 5-26, <https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2016-0002>; Porobić, "Daring 'Life-Return Projects' to Post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina;" Stefansson, "Homes in the Making;" Žila, "After Coming Home;" Marita Eastmond, "Transnational Returns and Reconstruction in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina," *International Migration* 44, no. 3 (August 2006): 141-66; Haider, "(Re)Imagining Coexistence;" Porobić, "Bosnian 'Returnee Voices' Communicating Experiences of Successful Reintegration."

²³ Sophie Albert, "The Return of Refugees to Bosnia and Herzegovina: Peacebuilding with People," *International Peacekeeping* 4, no. 3 (September 1997): 1-23; Belloni, *State Building and International Intervention in Bosnia*; Carl Dahlman and Gearóid Ó Tuathail, "The Legacy of Ethnic Cleansing: The International Community and the Returns Process in Post-Dayton Bosnia–Herzegovina," *Political Geography* 24, no. 5 (June 2005): 569–99; Franz, "Returnees, Remittances and Reconstruction," 52; Haider, "(Re)Imagining Coexistence"; Toal and Dahlman, *Bosnia Remade*; Žila, "After Coming Home," 527-28; Rob Aitken, "Cementing Divisions? An Assessment of the Impact of International Interventions and Peace-Building Policies on Ethnic Identities and Divisions," *Policy Studies* 28, no. 3 (September 2007): 247-67; Jelena Golubović, "Beyond Agency as Good: Complicity and Displacement after the Siege of Sarajevo," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 35, no. 3 (October 2022): 1344-1363, 1346; Argyro Kartsonaki, "Twenty Years After Dayton: Bosnia-Herzegovina (Still) Stable and Explosive," *Civil Wars* 18, no. 4 (October 2016): 488-516.

²⁴ María Alejandra Arias, Ana María Ibáñez, and Pablo Querubin, "The Desire to Return during Civil War: Evidence for Internally Displaced Populations in Colombia," *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy* 20, no. 1 (January 2014): 209-33; Faten Ghosn, Tiffany S. Chu, Miranda Simon, Alex Braithwaite, Michael Frith, and Joanna Jandali, "The Journey Home: Violence, Anchoring, and Refugee Decisions to Return," *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 3 (August 2021): 982-98; Metivier, Stefanovic,

domestic factor influencing the repatriation process is the change in the population structure due to the armed conflict. As the case of BiH shows, after a displacement process that has deepened ethnic divisions, changed demographic dynamics, and thus worsened the political and socio-economic conditions for potential returnees, people are less likely to return to their places of origin, to areas where they would be in the minority.²⁵ Instead, a notable trend observed among many returnees is their preference to settle in areas where their ethnic group has a demographic majority.²⁶ Nevertheless, Metivier and colleagues have shown that people who are still more likely to return where they would be a minority are those who would return to rural and often mono-ethnic townships or villages rather than urban areas. These people would return as a community rather than individually, and have less nationalistic tendencies.²⁷ Furthermore, Jansen has observed that older displaced persons are more committed to return than young people who have little memory of pre-displacement life.²⁸

The influence of national policies and local authorities in facilitating or impeding the repatriation process has been mentioned as a relevant issue with a significant impact on the outcome of minority returns. Since it is closely linked to the fragile and controversial political

and Loizides, "Struggling for and Within the Community," 151; Akisato Suzuki, Djordje Stefanovic, and Neophytos Loizides, "Displacement and the Expectation of Political Violence: Evidence from Bosnia," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 38, no. 5 (September 2021): 561-79; Abbey Steele, "Civilian Resettlement Patterns in Civil War," *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 1 (January 2019): 28-41.

²⁵ Kara Ross Camarena and Nils Hägerdal, "When Do Displaced Persons Return? Postwar Migration among Christians in Mount Lebanon," *American Journal of Political Science* 64, no. 2 (April 2020): 223-39; Jansen, "Refuchess;" Sandra F. Joireman, "Ethnic Violence, Local Security and Return Migration: Enclave Communities in Kosovo," *International Migration* 55, no. 5 (October 2017): 122-35; Lloyd Lyall, "Diverse Neighbors and Post-Conflict Recovery at the Village Level: Evidence from Iraq after ISIL," *Journal of Peace Research* 59, no. 4 (July 2022): 543-61; Tuathail and O'Loughlin, "After Ethnic Cleansing."

²⁶ Albert, "The Return of Refugees to Bosnia and Herzegovina;" Franz, "Returnees, Remittances and Reconstruction," 51; International Crisis Group, "Preventing Minority Return in Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Anatomy of Hate and Fear," ICG Balkans Report (Sarajevo: International Crisis Group (ICG), 1999), 11.

²⁷ Metivier, Stefanovic, and Loizides, "Struggling for and Within the Community."

²⁸ Jansen, "Troubled Locations."

and demographic dynamics in the post-war period, the issue of minority return has become part of the political and territorial struggle between three constituent nations.²⁹ As representatives of the population disproportionately affected by forced displacement during the conflict, the Bosniak political parties have taken a comparatively more favorable stance toward the minority return movement.³⁰ The main motive behind this attitude is that the minority return is intended to reverse the demographic shifts due to ethnic cleansing during the war, thus preventing the RS from consolidating its political power as a Serb territory with an almost homogeneous population.³¹ Consequently, the repatriation of Bosniaks has often been motivated by a sense of patriotic duty – as a way of reversing ethnic cleansing and reclaiming homeland territory after the demographic shifts resulting from such atrocities during the war – and has been actively encouraged. Conversely, the attitudes of the Serbs and Croats, but especially the Serb authorities in the RS, driven by the desire to preserve their respective demographic dominance gained during the war, tend to oppose the return of displaced persons of their ethnic groups to their pre-war territories while vehemently blocking the minority return of other groups, mainly Bosniaks, to their pre-war locations.³² Although it is acknowledged that

²⁹ Golubović, "Beyond Agency as Good;" Joanna Harvey, "Return Dynamics in Bosnia and Croatia: A Comparative Analysis," *International Migration* 44, no. 3 (August 2006): 89-144; Ito, "Politicisation of Minority Return in Bosnia and Herzegovina," 106-11; Maja Pupovac, "Dvadeset Pet Godina Poslije: Uticaj Rata i Prisilnog Raseljenja Na Kolektivne Identitete Semberaca i Izbjeglica u Bijeljini," [Twenty-five Years Later: The Impact of War and Forced Displacement on the Collective Identities of Semberans and Refugees in Bijeljina] *Tragovi: časopis Za Srpske I Hrvatske Teme* 3, no. 1 (2020): 203-47; Sivic-Bryant, *Re-Making Kozarac*; Stefanovic and Loizides, "Peaceful Returns," 219; Stefansson, "Homes in the Making," 128; Ondřej Žíla, "The Flight of Serbs from Sarajevo: Not the Dayton Agreement's First Failure, but Its First Logical Consequence," *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 5 (September 2021): 967-85; Žíla, "Managing Mass Migration after the War;" Ondřej Žíla, "'Exodus': The Serb Flight from Sarajevo, Its Legacy, and Its Role in the Political Memory of Republika Srpska," *Nations and Nationalism* 29, no. 3 (2023).

³⁰ Jansen, "Refuchess," 143.

³¹ Toal and Dahlman, *Bosnia Remade*, 167-76.

³² Erin K. Jenne, "Barriers to Reintegration after Ethnic Civil Wars: Lessons from Minority Returns and Restitution in the Balkans," *Civil Wars* 12, no. 4 (December 2010):

the Federation of BiH has also posed challenges to minority return, these obstacles have been comparatively less pronounced than in RS.³³

The apparent hostility of ethno-nationalist authorities to minority returns, and discouragement of repatriation efforts, for example through administrative obstacles to the property restitution process and legal complexities, have been identified as prominent political causes of the unsatisfactory level of repatriation.³⁴ In conjunction with these political barriers, a growing body of literature addresses the challenges of

370-394, 379; Sead Selimović, "Sprječiti Povratak: Provođenje Aneksa VII Dejtonskog Sporazuma Za Mir u Bosni i Hercegovini (1995-2020)," [Prevent Return: Implementation of Annex VII of the Dayton Peace Agreement in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1995-2020)] *Historijski Pogledi* 4, no. 6 (November 15, 2021): 206-32; Toal and Dahlman, *Bosnia Remade*; Black, "Return and Reconstruction in Bosnia-Herzegovina," 191; Carl Dahlman and Gearóid Ó Tuathail, "Broken Bosnia: The Localized Geopolitics of Displacement and Return in Two Bosnian Places," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 3 (September 2005): 644-62; Franz, "Returnees, Remittances and Reconstruction;" Metivier, Stefanovic, and Loizides, "Struggling for and Within the Community," 149; Toal and Dahlman, *Bosnia Remade*, 169-85; Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Carl Dahlman, "The 'West Bank of the Drina': Land Allocation and Ethnic Engineering in Republika Srpska," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 31, no. 3 (September 2006): 304-22; Žila, "Exodus."

³³ Golubović, "Beyond Agency as Good;" Pupovac, "Dvadeset Pet Godina Poslije: Uticaj Rata i Prisilnog Raseljenja Na Kolektivne Identitete Semberaca i Izbjeglica u Bijeljini;" Žila, "The Flight of Serbs from Sarajevo;" Žila, "Managing Mass Migration after the War;" Žila, "Exodus;" Selimović, "Preventing Return."

³⁴ Belloni, *State Building and International Intervention in Bosnia*, 170-76; Franz, "Returnees, Remittances and Reconstruction," 54; Jansen, "Refuchess," 145; Phuong, "Freely to Return"; Tuathail and Dahlman, "The Effort to Reverse Ethnic Cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina;" José H. Fischel De Andrade and Nicole Barbara Delaney, "Minority Return to South-Eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Review of the 2000 Return Season," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 14, no. 3 (September 1, 2001): 315-30; Philpott, "Though the Dog Is Dead, the Pig Must Be Killed"; Charles Philpott and Rhodri C. Williams, "The Dayton Dialectic: The Significance of Property Deprivation and Repossession in the Context of Ethnic Cleansing," in *Deconstructing the Reconstruction: Human Rights and Rule of Law in Postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina*, ed. Dina Francesca Haynes (London: Routledge, 2008), 149-76; Rhodri C. Williams, "The Significance of Property Restitution to Sustainable Return in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *International Migration* 44, no. 3 (August 2006): 40-61; Franz, "Returnees, Remittances and Reconstruction," 52; Heimerl, "The Return of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons," 379; International Crisis Group, "Preventing Minority Return in Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Anatomy of Hate and Fear"; Phuong, "Freely to Return."

returning displaced persons to their original residences. These include security concerns of returnees due to intimidation and violent attacks by ethno-nationalist groups; destruction or occupation of displaced persons' homes and vandalizing of properties of the Islamic Community, including mosques; discrimination in the judicial and public administration systems; unfavorable socio-economic conditions such as unemployment, or discrimination in employment; social exclusion, problems in access to education, schools, as well as politicized curricula reflecting the nationalist views of the majority group; and in some cases even lack of access to essential services such as water and electricity.³⁵

While the existing literature on returns in the BiH has addressed numerous aspects of the obstacles in and after the return process, given returnees a voice through valuable fieldwork, and has investigated the features and motivations of individuals who decide to return to their pre-conflict areas of residence, even in the face of discouraging circumstances, limited scholarly attention has been paid to investigating the impact of separatist discourses and the threat of separatism on Bosniaks at the place of return in the RS.³⁶ This research is intended to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by addressing and exploring the ongoing challenges faced by Bosniak returnees, with particular attention to the intersections between returnee experiences

³⁵ Michael J. Boyle, *Violence After War: Explaining Instability in Post-Conflict States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); Dahlman and Tuathail, "The Legacy of Ethnic Cleansing;" De Andrade and Delaney, "Minority Return to South-Eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina;" Guy Hovey, "The Rehabilitation of Homes and Return of Minorities to Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Forced Migration Review*, no. 7 (2000): 8-11; Selimović, "Preventing Return;" Björkdahl, "Republika Srpska," 41; Stjepanović, "Territoriality and Citizenship;" Eastmond, "Transnational Returns and Reconstruction in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina," 143; Selimović, "Preventing Return;" Sivic-Bryant, "Kozarac School;" Black, "Return and Reconstruction in Bosnia-Herzegovina," 192.

³⁶ Eastmond, "Transnational Returns and Reconstruction in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina;" Metivier, Stefanovic, and Loizides, "Struggling for and Within the Community;" Nettelfield and Wagner, *Srebrenica in the Aftermath of Genocide*; Selma Porobić, "'Invisible' Returns of Bosnian Refugees and Their Psychosocial Wellbeing," in *Return Migration and Psychosocial Wellbeing: Discourses, Policy-Making and Outcomes for Migrants and Their Families*, ed. Zana Vathi and Russell King (London: Routledge, 2017), 108-25; Stefanovic and Loizides, "Peaceful Returns;" Tuathail and O'Loughlin, "After Ethnic Cleansing."

and increasing separatist agitation tendencies in the RS. It posits that secessionist tendencies and persistent calls for secession and unification with Serbia are significant obstacles to achieving a sustainable, safe, dignified return for Bosniaks in the RS. Such tendencies may cause insecurity and uncertainty in the lives of Bosniaks and undermine communal trust within the entity, thereby hampering their prospects for peaceful living conditions.

The Early Return Process

The period following the DPA in 1995 was a critical time for BiH, particularly for Bosniak returnees in RS. Despite the agreement's goal of establishing peace and stability, Bosniak returnees in RS faced significant challenges that hindered their reintegration and reconciliation efforts. Security concerns were paramount for Bosniak returnees, who feared reprisals or discrimination from the local Serb population. The scars of war exacerbated tensions and mistrust between communities, making the return process daunting. Property issues added another layer of complexity, with many Bosniaks encountering obstacles in reclaiming their pre-war properties, often occupied, or confiscated during the conflict. Infrastructure and public services posed further challenges, as areas of return lacked adequate resources to support returning populations. The lack of essential services hindered reintegration efforts and exacerbated economic difficulties for returnees, who struggled to find employment opportunities in the war-ravaged economy.

Efforts to promote reconciliation faced resistance due to deep-seated ethnic tensions and mistrust between Bosniaks and Serbs. Despite international assistance and support, progress was slow, and sustainable reconciliation remained elusive. Over time, modest progress was made in addressing some obstacles to the return process. However, the challenges persisted, with continued calls for secession in the RS, especially after the first decade of the post-war period,³⁷ exacerbating the concerns of

³⁷ James Ker-Lindsay, "The Hollow Threat of Secession in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Legal and Political Impediments to a Unilateral Declaration of Independence by

Bosniak returnees. This was present regardless of the international interventionism strongly contained through the institution of the OHR, and it further worsened when the International Community decided to empower local politicians in the decision-making process.

As of 2010, the concept of “local ownership” over international decision-making (through the OHR) was emphasized. It refers to the idea that the people and institutions within BiH should take responsibility for their own development and governance, rather than relying heavily on the International Community. Through embracing local ownership, the OHR also discreetly reduced reliance on the Bonn Powers. However, the implementation of local ownership in internationally driven peace operations proved to be unsuccessful, leading to domestic crisis. BiH, as a post-conflict country, did not have the capacity to bring about its own democratic reforms without outside influence. Instead of progress, local ownership resulted in a step backwards, with ethno-politics intensifying and the RS entity becoming more vocal in its secessionist aspirations.³⁸

The threat of secessionism could have heightened security concerns, contributed to political uncertainty, and complicated efforts to reclaim property and assert legal rights. Despite these challenges, tens of thousands of Bosniaks returned to RS between 1995 and 2005, marking an important step towards reconciliation and the implementation of the DPA. The return of Bosniaks between 1995 and 2005 marked a significant step towards reconciliation, yet the persistence of discriminatory policies and the threat of secessionism by Serbs underscored the disproportionate burden shouldered by Bosniaks in the reconciliation process.

Republika Srpska,” LSEE Papers on South Eastern Europe (London: LSEE – Research on South Eastern Europe, 2016), 10-13, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/LSEE-Research-on-South-Eastern-Europe/Assets/Documents/Publications/Paper-Series-on-SEE/KerLindsay-Hollow-Threat-of-Secession-in-BiH.pdf>; Soeren Keil and Anastasiia Kudlenko, “Bosnia and Herzegovina 20 Years after Dayton: Complexity Born of Paradoxes,” *International Peacekeeping* 22, no. 5, (2015): 471-489, 482.

³⁸ Sung Yong Lee and Alpaslan Özerdem, *Local Ownership in International Peacebuilding: Key Theoretical and Practical Issues* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

Secessionist Resurgence and the Refugees' Journey

BiH has been grappling with secessionist tendencies that have an indelible mark on the returnees. The secessionist claims are once again reviving in RS. Although much time has passed since the war ended, evidence suggests that the more time passes since the DPA was signed in BiH, the more complicated the situation becomes. This observable trend may signify a confluence of factors, including a perceptible erosion of the International Community's sway and a palpable waning of interest in ameliorating the protracted issue. However, it would not be alarming if the deterioration did not directly impact the lives of returnees and the provisions of what was anticipated in Annex 7 of the DPA. Not all people in BiH are affected equally by the separatist upsurge. Returnees face significant challenges, particularly in areas where horrific crimes were perpetrated through violent ethnic homogenization and ethnic territorialization. It is crucial to shed light on the experiences of those who have chosen to return to their pre-war homes since their lives are impacted by the flow of secessionist policies that (re)emerge. There is concern that Bosnian Serbs are systematically attempting to complete the unfinished ethnic homogenization and ethnic territorialization that was attempted to be established through violence on the territory of the current RS, which is the result of violence committed during the 1992-1995 war.

In a recent example of this ethnic territorialization in the RS, the Municipal Assembly in Srebrenica, composed predominantly of ethnic Serbs, voted to rename several streets in the town and a nearby village, commemorating their community's wartime suffering while ignoring a significant historical event: the 1995 genocide of Bosniaks. Despite objections and a boycott by Assembly members representing other ethnic groups, particularly Bosniaks, the proposal to rename 25 streets was approved on April 15th, 2024, drawing criticism for what was seen as an attempt to erase Europe's worst atrocity since World War II. This situation underscores deep tensions, where Serb members of the Assembly, in the absence of Bosniak representation, made a decision that seemed designed to insult others, particularly Bosniaks. The Serbs disregarded an earlier agreement made in 2002, upon the return of the

Bosniaks, to restore the old pre-war street names, and instead chose names reminiscent of the period when they had sole representation in the Srebrenica Municipal Assembly between 1995 and 1996. The adopted decision by the Srebrenica Municipal Assembly included the renaming of Maršala Tita Street to Republika Srpska Street, Mihajlo Bjelaković Square to Republika Srpska Square, and Srebrenica City Park to Major Kosta Todorović Park.³⁹ Particularly controversial was the proposal to change Reuf Selmanagić Crnog Street to Dubrovnik Street. This change was met with numerous condemnations because in July 1995, after the RS army entered Srebrenica, war criminal Ratko Mladić personally ordered the removal of the name of this street, instructing, “Take down this sign, Selmanagić Reuf-Crni Street. Take it off, come on. Climb up, man, do not tell me ten times and take it with you.”⁴⁰ It could be said that history repeats itself. During the 1992-1995 aggression and the attack on a “safe area” under UN protection, war criminal Ratko Mladić gave the order, and now, a similar situation occurred in a time of peace. There is a very strong symbolism in this, especially because the order to remove the table with the name of the street was recorded and documented. This poignant echo of past atrocities underscores the ongoing tensions and unresolved trauma within the community and amplifies the significance of the decision to rename the streets. Such actions not only reopen old wounds, but also perpetuate divisions and hinder reconciliation efforts in the region. This decision is, among other things, evidence of how Bosniaks, as an ethnic group that faced genocide and other major atrocities, are being treated in their place of return.

Thus, in addition to the non-enforcement of Annex 7 of the DPA, the lives of those who returned are made difficult to the point that it causes them to consider *voluntarily* leaving behind their homes, which were formerly violent. The outcomes are the same, and they cause the Serbs’ ethnic homogenization and territorialization. Neither the RS reflects what it was like before the war nor what was predicted in Annex

³⁹ RFE/RL’s Balkan Service, “Srebrenica To Rename Its Streets...Without Any Mention of The Genocide,” Radio Free Europe, 2024, accessed April 16th, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/32906304.html>.

⁴⁰ “The Mladic Files: Mladic Entering Srebrenica – 11 July 1995,” YouTube, 2011, accessed March 14th, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QflnjINoT4Q>.

7 of the DPA. The possessive adjective *Srpska* in the name RS (*i.e.*, the Serb Republic) has profound psychological effects. It initially determines *who* owns or the entity's owner. This impacts the sense of belonging to that region of BiH, and it will have worse impacts once generations who do not remember the war (or life in that region of BiH before the war) will predominate in the country's demographic profile. The future of BiH will be negatively impacted when and if that occurs. Additionally, the degree to which Bosniaks identify with each part of the RS will determine the country's future. The policies of RS are doing everything to make Bosniaks lose their love for this part of BiH and see it exclusively as the *Serb Republic*. If they succeed, the Serbs will strengthen their negotiating position for BiH's peaceful dissolution.

Despite the violations of *jus cogens* (peremptory norms), the RS entity was *de facto* established within BiH in 1995. Importantly, three out of the four criteria for statehood outlined in the Montevideo Convention (1933) – government, population, and territory – were technically achieved during the war in BiH, despite significant violations of international law and *jus cogens* principles. The government was established within the RS entity, formed as a result of the war, while the population and territory were shaped through processes of violent ethnic homogenization and territorialization. However, it is essential to emphasize that the RS entity violated *jus cogens* norms by committing atrocities and lacks a legitimate claim to self-determination as a justification for their actions.

Problems in the Return Process

The ethnic demographic profile of BiH before and after the war is incomparable. It results from mass killings, including crimes against humanity and the forced displacement and expulsion of civilians. The area of Eastern Bosnia was particularly affected by this. Although it was stressed in the peace accord that ended the war in BiH, the return process did not occur. The return of IDPs and refugees falls short of success in BiH.

“Bosniaks lived in patriarchal families before the 1992–1995 war, particularly in Eastern Bosnia, where the father’s position (*i.e.*, the man) was paramount. The consequences of the war affected the traditional family.” – Interviewee 5

“They thoroughly cleaned this region and made the rest of us (*i.e.*, those who remained) – the Bosniaks – «second class» citizens in RS. Our political influence is minimal because there are not enough Bosniaks in this part of BiH. Without our participation, Serbs can bring everything with their votes. It indicates that something built on mass atrocities wins the battle to shape post-war BiH.” – Interviewee 1

Several years after the mass crimes, the return process began. Beginning in the year 2000, IDPs and refugees began to return in sporadic waves. It is surprising how quickly, after the war and genocide, the return began (Interviewee 6), and the Bosniaks can find some satisfaction in the fact that the return process took place at all, considering the atrocities they endured and the obstacles that hindered its success (Interviewee 3). It was anticipated that the return process would never take place. However, because Bosniaks returned to the locations from which they had been exiled and where serious atrocities had been committed against them, the process of return after 1992-1995 is a phenomenon in the history of Bosniaks. This has never happened before (Interviewee 3). An illustration is given for the 1830-1867 persecution of Muslims from Belgrade, Šabac, and Užice. These were areas where 58% of the local population was Muslim. In the historical context, the return is much more significant than its results. Despite their comeback, Bosniaks can no longer play an important political role in RS, given their demography. War atrocities have caused this specifically (Interviewee 9).

However, the interviewees regarded the return process as needing more organization. There needed to be a robust and well-planned strategy. There were omissions in the return process, but there is no way to make up for them (Interviewee 4). There still needs to be a comprehensive strategy for Bosniaks’ position in RS (Interviewee 6). Additionally, the requirements of the refugees needed to be fully taken into account by the state’s programs or foreign donations. The weak status of Bosniaks might also be attributed to the unplanned squandering of funds (Interviewee 9). The returnees have been deceived. Little of what was promised was carried out. After that, the distrust

grew, affecting the return process (Interviewee 7). It was challenging to persuade anyone to return after witnessing the plight of the returnees in East Bosnia (Interviewee 1). The responders also point out that there currently needs to be more foreign donations and return mechanisms for Eastern Bosnia. In today's context, Bosniak returnees in Eastern Bosnia feel neglected by their community and the state's institutions. Political leaders visit regions where Bosniaks have returned less frequently. No one comes to see what life is like for the returnees (Interviewee 3). The interviewees voiced concern that this would be misinterpreted as a sign that the Bosniaks were giving up on their fight.

"We expect that our needs are primarily heard and that our needs are considered. About our true needs, what are our needs? We have some wishes and aspirations to ensure that we can enjoy our rights, which are guaranteed to us by the Constitution, and we expect some help with some finer things. Not to reduce us to a cow and a tiller, but to do something for us. To raise ourselves culturally or with some other performances of life. I usually say, «We squeeze a stone and live from the juice we squeeze.» That is right, and then you are reduced to a tiller. On July 11th, the politicians posed declarative queries on our needs." – Interviewee 4

"Everything suggests that the political messages that were given on July 11th were targeted at FBiH voters. Why am I saying that? We are forgotten every day after that, but on July 11th, we are suddenly in the spotlight. The existence of BiH depends on every day up until July 11th, and our politicians must do more to help returnees in RS. If returnees are not given greater attention, Bosniaks will not continue to reside in this area." – Interviewee 7

Most interviewees argued that the return process was carried out with heart, spite, nostalgia, and patriotism. There was no sense of self-interest. The return to East Bosnia did not mean a return to safety and dignity (Interviewee 12). The Serbs showed significant resistance to the Bosniaks' return. Numerous assaults took place, including the stoning of buses and the murder of Bosniaks. The 1,200 physical assaults and the thirteen murder cases involving Bosniak returnees remain unsolved. Despite these depressing figures, the interviewees stressed the significance of international forces present in the first few years of return. The returnees felt secure because of their presence. They should have stayed in BiH until Annex 7 of the DPA was fully implemented (Interviewee 8).

In contrast to the 2000s, when there were attacks and Bosniaks who wanted to return, now there are neither attacks nor Bosniaks who want to return (Interviewee 2). As a result, safety is increased, but is left alone.

“When people ask me how, 35 months after the concentration camp, I still had the heart to come back here [in East Bosnia], I explain that it’s because I came back to my father’s and grandfather’s home, not theirs [of the Serbs].” – Interviewee 3

According to one respondent (Interviewee 6), “a fool lives where his heart takes him, whereas a wise man lives where he is better off” (adding that he decided to be a fool). The return process meant fighting for the homeland (Interviewee 4). It conveyed a message: “Bosniaks exist in East Bosnia” (Interviewee 2, Interviewee 9 & Interviewee 12). Although there are now fewer Bosniaks in Eastern Bosnia than ever before, there would be no Bosniaks if there were no return process (Interviewee 10). After the battle, RS would have won the war if no Bosniaks remained. However, the interviewees all concurred that it was difficult to decide to come back. Some decided to stay away from this region (Interviewee 4, Interviewee 7 & Interviewee 11). The interviewees named three primary explanations. First, returning after suffering from war trauma was not an easy decision. It is not easy to judge someone for making such a choice. Those people had numerous deaths of close family members, including children, and rapes of women. They wish to put the traumas behind them. Second, others in FBiH or the diaspora established new lives outside of eastern Bosnia. They were referred to as the *conformists*. Instead of the war trauma, this group usually decides not to return because of the new life. Nevertheless, it is unlikely to anticipate that someone will return to Eastern Bosnia from Germany, Austria, or France. Third, the interviewees also addressed the International Community’s hypocrisy in the return process. People were given the choice to emigrate to EU countries in addition to the return process. Many people decided to leave BiH and not go back to Eastern Bosnia. Thus, the open access to Western countries was a deterrent to the return process to East Bosnia (Interviewee 6).

Annex 7 of the DPA, which deals with the resettlement and return of refugees and displaced people, is among the most essential parts of

the peace agreement. This Annex was excellent in concept but needed to be revised in execution. The interviewees concurred that the return process is cumbersome and that the process is now over. The return process is completed, not because Annex 7's conditions have been fulfilled, but because no one can return. Even though everyone in BiH knows this, none dares speak about it (Interviewee 12). Never was the return process treated seriously, and today, we see the consequences (Interviewee 1). The current focus should be on enhancing Bosniaks' standing in RS rather than the return process. The return will only occur after things for Bosniaks improve (Interviewee 9).

"The implementation of Annex 7 could have been much better. Returnees would have more rights, and BiH as a state would be stronger. The omissions are massive, to the point where they may have been intended. It is now too late to discuss Annex 7 implementation. We must consider ways to empower Bosniaks in the RS. Once Bosniaks genuinely depart from RS, BiH's story will end. Also, if RS remains without Bosniaks, secession is unnecessary. It will be an ethnically clean area." – Interviewee 2

Nevertheless, the younger generation's alienation from Eastern Bosnia remains a problem to this day. The parents of this generation had been forcibly displaced and started new lives in FBiH or elsewhere. Eastern Bosnia was not the birthplace of this younger generation. They do not feel as strongly connected as individuals born and bred in East Bosnia, because they did not grow up there. They are bound by nothing but stories and memories of the war crimes of the 1990s. However, this new generation is crucial for the Bosniak people's future in East Bosnia and perhaps the whole of BiH. They are the inheritors (*i.e.*, the new owners) of a sizable plot of land in the towns of East Bosnia. Due to the perpetrated genocide and ethnic cleansing, they are the heirs of their parents' property and their immediate and extended relatives. Bosniaks are still the majority landowners in Eastern Bosnia, even though they are outnumbered because of war crimes (Interviewee 5 & Interviewee 9). The interviewees consider it essential to preserve Bosniaks' property. Demographics and cadaster are two elements that are significant to Serbs in RS (Interviewee 7). War atrocities have left a long-term mark on the demographics. In Eastern Bosnia, Bosniaks used to be the majority

but are now a minority. The following phase would be to seize control of the land in Eastern Bosnia, where the Serbs would predominate. The interviewees voiced concern that those not born in Eastern Bosnia, who have no ties to the region and only know it due to the horrific war atrocities, may be more inclined to sell the property. This will be true for the offspring of this new generation, in particular (Interviewee 8). The interviewees think that Bosniak politics must prioritize resolving this critical issue. It is necessary to raise awareness regarding Eastern Bosnia among the diaspora (Interviewee 10). A precursor to secession is the rise in Serb land ownership in BiH's entity RS (Interviewee 7).

"Another issue is the 2008-adopted immovable property tax law in RS, which was enacted on January 1, 2012. The legal terms of this law should not have been enforced in communities where genocide and ethnic cleansing were committed, even though it could have been passed before Annex 7 ended. So, even if the prerequisites for return were not fulfilled, the entity chose to tax immovable property, and the OHR did nothing. Due to their large ownership and absence from East Bosnia's towns, Bosniaks are the group least favored by the legislation. As a result of being away from BiH following the 1992–1995 war, some Bosniaks are not even aware of their tax liabilities. Some people also have sizable amounts of land that they inherited, but they cannot pay the annual tax since they do not have a reliable source of income or a job. Bosniaks are insufficiently aware of this law or its potential repercussions as individuals and then as a group. A penalty will be applied to anyone who fails to pay the tax on time. Future generations who might not have strong ties to Eastern Bosnia may choose to sell their property due to this law. This is most likely the law's ultimate objective." – Interviewee 9.

The property tax is calculated by multiplying the assessed tax rate, which is 0.20% of the total assessed value of the property, by the property's market value. When the objection period has passed, the tax invoice has the same legal standing as an executive document. It can be enforced through compulsory collection efforts or by placing a lien on the assets subject to unpaid tax invoices. In addition, if it is not paid by the due date, it must also be accompanied by what is known as tax interest, which is equal to 0.03% every day.

The Returnees' Life in RS

The emphasis on Annex 7 should still be applicable today, even if the DPA was signed almost thirty years ago. Although discussing the return process is still vital, more attention must be paid to the lives of returnees. The interviewees are aware that there are some discussions about returning without considering how individuals who chose to do so live in RS. The latter is more crucial and is overlooked (Interviewee 12).

Even if some Bosniaks have resided in RS for twenty years or longer, we frequently refer to them as *returnees* when discussing the Bosniak population there. Most interviewees were dissatisfied with being referred to as *returnees*. Since their return occurred so long ago (up to twenty-one years), they objected to the title *returnee*. They acknowledge that some Bosniaks living in RS could be considered returnees, but these are the ones who have recently decided to return. That someone might think of someone else as a *returnee* for their whole life is humorous and sad (Interviewee 8). Both Bosniaks who just decided to return and those who did so more than twenty years ago are marginalized in the socio-political sense (Interviewee 3). If Bosniaks had more rights in RS, they would no longer be referred to in social contexts as *returnees* (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 7 & Interviewee 9). However, Bosniaks are forced into a “political ghetto” in RS and cannot defend themselves politically due to their low population (Interviewee 1).

“Every effort is being made to convey to Bosniaks that there is nothing they should be looking for in RS. The fight against Bosniaks in RS equals the fight against BiH. This is crystal clear. It appears they [the Serbs] are winning the battle against the Bosniaks.” – Interviewee 5

“I went back to where I was born. However, as I go through the town, I notice it has changed. They severely altered the demographics and rendered us [Bosniaks] helpless. Unlike before the war, I no longer pass by my friends or acquaintances when I stroll. The town’s culture and spirit have been obliterated. That is culturicide. Not only did they destroy our religious and cultural sites during the 1992-1995 war, but they also destroyed the town’s identity. You do not experience the town as before. In the town, there is hardly any evidence of Bosniak identity. Mosques and graves are our [the Bosniaks’] remains. They attest to the presence of Bosniaks in this area. Of course, people who have lived in this town before and

after the war can notice it. It seems to foster an atmosphere where you will begin to experience feelings of being a «stranger» in your town.” – Interviewee 2

“It is not about the continued challenges the Bosniaks as returnees face in what is now known as RS, but about policies that do not favor us [the Bosniaks] in this area. Challenges are produced, not formed by themselves. Even twenty years after their return, Bosniaks still do not have equal rights. The consequences are inexplicable, and our authorities in Sarajevo and the OHR have done little to mitigate them. We appear to be on our own. After the genocide and ethnic cleansing, we have no demographic capability for a political battle.” – Interviewee 7

“Democracy, in which the majority makes decisions, was abused in East Bosnia. The Serbs make decisions. Bosniaks’ voices are not important. During the war, Serbs grew to be the majority; nevertheless, the population before the war was very diverse. War crimes are to blame for this. Bosniaks are now in a precarious situation. Bosniaks suffered politically at the hands of democratic mechanisms.” – Interviewee 4

The interviewees identified several issues that the returnees are confronting in East Bosnia, including (1) subsistence challenges, (2) discrimination, (3) educational system challenges, (4) social exclusion, (5) the lack of intellectual stimulation and opportunity, (6) the perniciousness of democracy in places that have experienced ethnic cleansing and genocide, and (7) uncertain youth future. These problems make it difficult for the returnees in East Bosnia to resume their normal lives. To address these issues, very little has been done (Interviewee 3). The OHR and the local politicians are responsible for addressing these problems. However, OHR ought to have taken a more active role once it became clear that “local ownership” was not a practical option for the return process. Conditions in East Bosnia did not improve politically, socially, or economically enough to entice voluntary return (Interviewee 1). Because of the unresolved problems, few individuals have returned, and of those who have, many opt to go to FBiH or abroad (Interviewee 4 & Interviewee 5). Families with children will not want to return under these conditions (Interviewee 8). By resolving these problems, the Serbs’ ethnic homogenization in RS would have been lessened (Interviewee 7 & Interviewee 9). In addition, the interviewees argued that there cannot be reconciliation without trust and that in the circumstances of these problems, trust cannot exist.

“Furthermore, when some progress was demonstrated, indicating that something was being done for the returnees in East Bosnia, it always ended up being «one step forward, two steps backward.» As a result, nothing has improved the circumstances of the returnees, who continue to face enormous challenges. The major challenge is that there needs to be someone to whom the returnees can complain.” – Interviewee 8

The number of returns has decreased due to unemployment and challenging living conditions. Returnees frequently need help with severe economic difficulties and worse financial positions when they return. Even though East Bosnia has a generally high unemployment rate, the interviewees claimed that Bosniak returnees are more affected by unemployment than Serb residents of East Bosnia. Therefore, the decision of Bosniaks to remain in or return to Eastern Bosnia is influenced by unemployment. The threshold of tolerance for this injustice is lower for families with children since it is challenging to resist when one cannot meet the children’s demands (Interviewee 8). In East Bosnia, life had been reduced to “bare survival” (Interviewee 3). According to the interviewees, Bosniaks are hardly, if ever, employed by the institutions of RS or businesses that are held by this entity. The interviewees claim that this discriminates against Bosniak returnees and is an effort to make their lives more challenging. Another problem brought up by the interviewees was the need for more economic investments. They asserted that while Bosniaks are more negatively impacted by unemployment than Serbs, both groups are highly unemployed. They also claimed that investments are needed in East Bosnia.

“Because of your [the Bosniak] «first and last name,» you are instantly disqualified if you seek a job in East Bosnia. Your first and last names are holding you back. You cannot advance, fulfill your potential, or build a successful career. As a Bosniak, you are not welcome.” – Interviewee 10

“With investments, there is a sustainable return and a sustainable way of life for all citizens. Emigration was also recorded among Serbs. The return can no longer be like it was in the 2000s. When you go with your heart today, you go with your interest. If there is investment, there will be jobs, and when there are jobs, there will be more people in Eastern Bosnia.” – Interviewee 6

For Bosniak returnees, difficulties in the educational system are mentioned as a further issue. The interviewees claimed that Bosniak returnees

experience ongoing discrimination in the educational system. There are three issues with the educational system. First, there are only eighteen primary schools that teach the group of Bosniak national subjects. That is not a right that all Bosniak children have in RS. A class must have more than eighteen Bosniak pupils to introduce the “national group of subjects.” Due to the artificially and forcibly defined demography, Bosniak returnees in many areas cannot attain this condition (Interviewee 4). Furthermore, the Bosnian language is referred to in schools as the “language of the Bosniak people.” The discrimination regarding the ban on the name is unconstitutional and illegal, but it nevertheless occurs without consequences (Interviewee 7). Second, the interviewees raise concerns that Bosniaks are hardly ever employed in the educational sector. Bosniaks make up a very small minority among teachers. Third, the interviewees spoke about the spread of *Svetosava nationalism* through education. Svetosava nationalism, an extreme right-wing political philosophy, combines Serbian nationalism and Orthodox clericalism (Interviewee 9).

“Although the education system is secular in RS, it is burdened internally with the iconography and symbolism of Serbian Svetosava nationalism. In the secondary and primary schools here, you have icons of the Serbian, or Saint Sava, founder of the Serbian Orthodox Church, in every classroom and hallway. In addition, there are schools named after Saint Sava. Also, the Day of Educators in RS is the Day of Saint Sava. Various activities are organized for the needs of this event, among which the students are asked to participate in creating artistic and literary works on topics related to Saint Sava. Although Bosniak students ask to be exempted, they are surrounded by this promotion in the classrooms.” – Interviewee 9

Another problem is social exclusion, which the interviewees defined as the lack of resources for activities, whether in cultural or social areas. Bosniak returnees are consequently marginalized socially and politically. There is a need for various social events for the returnees to develop culturally. This is vital for the youth in particular (Interviewee 2). More events than those for religious holidays should be held in East Bosnia. These events would be *social demonstrations* that Bosniaks reside in this region. For such events, FBiH needs to provide more resources and personnel (Interviewee 5, Interviewee 7 & Interviewee 11). The interviewees’ other concern was the absence of “intellectual stimulation and opportunity” among the Bosniak returnees in East Bosnia.

“There are a lot fewer intellectuals in Eastern Bosnia today than there were before the war. Our society needs more intellectuals. Many people who continue their studies do not return after receiving their university degree. They either decide to remain in FBiH or return briefly until they land a job abroad. With intellectuals, society can advance. If the Bosniaks continue to live in this region, it is unclear who will serve as their leader.” – Interviewee 2

Along with the issues mentioned earlier, interviewees were concerned about the state of youth in East Bosnia. The problems faced by Bosniaks do not inspire young people to choose to live in this region. Young people only have a few opportunities, so the main issue was how a young person would start a family in a given situation. The interviewees asserted that Bosniaks aged sixty and older comprise most of the population and that younger generations lack perspective. While this trend is not unique, as it is also observed in other parts of the Western Balkans, its impact is particularly pronounced among Bosniaks in the RS. This is due to their diminishing influence in key positions and institutions within the entity, driven by population decline. This outcome cannot necessarily be generalized to other areas of the Western Balkans.

“The lack of perspective for returnees in East Bosnia provides no perspective for young people. Young individuals decide to emigrate more readily than older generations do when they lack perspective. As a people, Bosniaks will gradually disappear from this area. For Eastern Bosnia, significant investments are required to avoid this.” – Interviewee 4

“As older generations die off and young people emigrate, the future of Bosniaks in East Bosnia is not looking good. We can only slow this process down, but not halt it. It is irrevocable.” – Interviewee 12

The Impact of Separatist Threats

Through the interviewees’ perspectives, the previous sections described the return process and the ongoing difficulties and challenges Bosniak returnees encounter in RS. The interviewees explained the challenges and how they would pave the way for a potential RS secession. Challenges produce adverse conditions for returnees’ lives in RS but increase the

likelihood of secession. Consequently, the outcome should be considered while analyzing the difficulties faced by the returnees in RS. However, the returnees found it even more challenging to live in East Bosnia due to persistent secession threats. The interviewees also claimed that Bosniak returnees in RS face a greater risk of the secession threat than Bosniaks in FBiH.

“More than ever, there is a secession threat. This is not some political bluster, but it is a danger because it has repercussions for those who have returned. However, there would likely be fewer opportunities for such policies if Bosniak returnees were politically more potent in this region. The consequences of disregarding Bosniak returnees in RS are what is occurring right now.” – Interviewee 5

“That unfair peace accord was signed in 1995. Years went on, and new generations emerged. The message is the same, in any case. The Serbs appear to say, «Hello, we do not want to be with you,» to the Bosniaks. Therefore, the state is the problem, and the Serbs want the land. I do not hold out much hope because things can only worsen.” – Interviewee 3

“The separatist movement’s efforts to win support abroad impact how it is viewed at home. The acceptance at the domestic level will increase if the support is higher. The RS is toughening up its separatist agenda despite the lack of international support – at least in the eyes of the public. There is not much public pushback to this. Election victories have gone to secessionists.” – Interviewee 9

“The prospect of secessionism tells us that the security we see in East Bosnia is only temporary. You never know when it might become violent because there is no such thing as a «peaceful» secession. Then, it will be critical to get out alive from this region.” – Interviewee 6

The interviewees identified several implications of the secessionist threat, ideas, and actions toward Bosniak returnees in RS. First, the returnees are terrified and panicked by the possibility of secession. A legitimate concern is what would happen to the returnees if independence is declared. Second, Bosniaks are deterred from choosing to return by the danger of secessionism because everyone is avoiding an unstable environment. Making a return would result in uncertainty (Interviewee 3). So, in addition to all the issues the interviewees encountered, the possibility of secession also made it less likely for Bosniaks to return to Eastern Bosnia. Third, the returnees’ choice to leave their homes is

influenced by the threat of secessionism. The threat of secession was seen to be an intimidation tactic. As a result, some returnees decided to emigrate permanently from East Bosnia, particularly families with children. Others temporarily fled their homes in search of security but later returned. The interviewees claimed that while the prospect of secession is one factor that prompts returnees to leave their homes, the general atmosphere in RS, which is averse to Bosniak returnees, also plays a significant role. Fourth, the reconciliation process in Eastern Bosnia is hampered by the possibility of secession.

“I would not go, but if it meant my family would be safe, I would. We all have alternatives or can develop new ones, but what would happen to BiH if it were to occur? Although I still live here with my family, I cannot promise to be here forever.” – Interviewee 2

Conclusions

Despite the DPA ending the war in BiH, the consequences of the war continue to cast a long shadow, especially in eastern Bosnia. One of the most prominent post-war challenges has been the return of displaced persons to their pre-war homes. While Annex 7 of the Dayton Peace Agreement granted the right to return, the enduring demographic consequences of violent ethnic homogenization and territorialization between 1992 and 1995 still loom large in Eastern Bosnia. Nearly three decades after the DPA, with a return process marked by limited success and organizational shortcomings, the plight of Bosniaks within the RS entity remains a complex and critical issue today. This issue affects those directly affected and has broader implications for peace, stability, and the entire country's security.

The inability to establish a sustainable return process hampers transitional justice and lasting peace, while the secessionist inclinations of RS authorities create a fragile and unpredictable political environment. Bosniak returnees in RS, who have reclaimed their homes after being forcibly displaced during the war, face ongoing insecurity and uncertainty due to this secessionist threat. The secessionist policies propagated by

RS authorities evoke memories of the war and raise fears of a possible recurrence of such circumstances.

The study's main findings align with previous research highlighting the complex challenges facing Bosniak returnees in the RS, including economic difficulties, discrimination, and insecurity. Bosniaks in the region, whose right to reside in their homeland was violently seized during the war, were treated as *second-class* citizens by the RS entity authorities when they returned to their homes after the war. Consequently, a primary deterrent for people contemplating repatriation or those who have returned but are pondering emigration is the poor living conditions, particularly the economic challenges, notably unemployment and discriminatory employment practices.

Nevertheless, insights from the field study reveal a deep connection between the challenges returnees face and the RS authorities' pursuit of ethnic homogenization and secessionist agendas. Returnees have indicated that efforts at ethnic cleansing, previously attempted through genocide during the war, continue through political and socioeconomic means. In other words, the deliberate engineering of political and socioeconomic conditions by RS authorities aims to make the region inhospitable and unsafe for Bosniaks, thereby laying the groundwork for a future Serbian homeland without a Bosniak presence. Thus, the Bosnian Serb leadership appears to be striving to accomplish the unfinished objective of establishing an ethnically homogenous Serbian territory, this time through political means rather than military force. In terms of Galtung's analysis, direct violence against Bosniaks, which drastically changed the demographic landscape of the region, has now transitioned into structural violence against returnees.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the recurring physical attacks against Bosniaks, documented in the post-war period and recently escalated, indicate that the specter of violence has not been wholly dispelled and remains a concern within the Bosniak community.

Efforts to reverse ethnic cleansing by allowing displaced persons to return are obstructed by the RS authorities' policies to turn the entity into an exclusively Serb territory. The dwindling Bosniak presence in the

⁴¹ Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167-91.

region, a consequence of the numerous challenges outlined, marks a significant step toward the ambitious goal of *Greater Serbia*. Ultimately, the fate of Bosniaks in the RS entity is not solely a matter of sustainable return but also a litmus test for the viability of BiH as a diverse, united nation. Therefore, the International Community and local actors must collaborate to steer the country toward stability, foster its multicultural identity, and break the cycle of recurrent political crises and deadlocks. In this context, discussions on reforming the controversial power-sharing model established by the DPA, which underlies many ongoing problems, including the return issue and the questioning of top-down peacebuilding approaches involving institutions such as the OHR, deserve further attention. As another avenue for future research, analyzing how NATO, the EU, and other global and regional actors can effectively address the RS entity's political, socioeconomic, and security challenges could contribute substantially to the existing literature.