

The legacy of ethnic cleansing: The international community and the returns process in post-Dayton Bosnia–Herzegovina

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Abstract

This paper examines the international community's post-war effort to promote the return of persons displaced by ethnic cleansing in Bosnia–Herzegovina. The war itself began as an extreme ethnonationalist project, seeking security through territorial separation. This created a massive displacement with more than half the country's population driven from their homes largely as a result of the terrorism of ethnic cleansing. The peace settlement at Dayton guaranteed the right to return for displaced persons but also effectively divided the country into ethnonationalist homelands. Thus, while the initial security dilemma for the international community was to separate the warring factions and keep the peace, they soon faced an added security dilemma created by the displaced exercising their right to return to homes in what had become hostile ethnonationalist territories. Faced with obstructions to returns put in place by local ethnonationalists who continued to run day-to-day government operations in places of return, the implementation of the right to return forced the international community to overcome its apolitical and accommodating stance. Changes in the international governance of Bosnia enabled a series of policies designed to promote returns—recognized as key to reconstruction—that employed localized spatial strategies of intervention in support of returnees. After a decade of displacement, the legacy of ethnic cleansing endures, forming

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limits to returns and persistent insecurity for returning communities, thus permanently altering Bosnia's human geography and political future.

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Introduction

The Bosnian war ended with the Dayton Peace Accords (DPA), signed in December 1995, but the conflict did not. Though sublimated into mostly non-violent confrontation and struggle, the on-going conflict in post-war Bosnia has occasionally erupted into overt violence. One typical example was a confrontation and brief firefight in April 1996 near the historically Bosniak (Muslim) village of Jusići in northeast Bosnia. Located in what the DPA had determined was the territory of the Bosnian Serb entity, *Republika Srpska*, Jusići was one of many Bosniak communities ethnically cleansed by Serb forces in the summer of 1992. With the cessation of open warfare, however, displaced survivors from settlements like Jusići were anxious to return to their homes to rebuild their lives. Jusići was unusual because, though it was on the *Republika Srpska* side of the inter-entity boundary line (IEBL) delimited at Dayton, it was close to the boundary and within the official demilitarized zone dividing Bosnia's entities (Fig. 1). Organized in exile as a displaced community and encouraged by the Bosniak political party, the SDA (*Stranka Demokratske Akcije* or Party of Democratic Action), Jusići's people decided to return to their destroyed and empty houses.²

They were not welcome back. Their attempt to restore the security of home in their lives was the trigger for an exaggerated bout of insecurity among the Bosnian Serbs in the area. Returnees were harassed by local Bosnian Serb 'police' who declared them 'Muslim extremists' who were trying to restart the war. The local Bosnian Serb media portrayed them as 'war criminals' who were 'occupying' part of *Republika Srpska* in an effort to undermine it. Local Bosnian Serb authorities accused the international community of permitting an attack on 'Serb territory' in an effort to 'erode the borders of the Serb Republic.'³

² Jusići's residents were organized as a displaced persons association, which typically comprised the local community governance structure—*mjesne zajednice* (MZ)—in exile. Jusići's village leaders, however, were rounded up and murdered in April 1992 along with neighboring Muslim village leaders. According to the association members we interviewed, the village residents were represented in their meetings by the male head of each household. Decision making, therefore, reflected the patriarchal rural culture in this part of Bosnia, though not all associations or MZs in Bosnia were structured along patriarchal lines.

³ These representations are those of Colonel Dragomir Vasic of the Zvornik public security center (BBC, 1996a, 1996b; Tadic, 1996). It should be noted that Bosnian Serb 'police' were often ex-military fighters in the VRS (*Vojeks Republike Srpske* or Army of the Serb Republic).

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