

The Bosnian War and Its Refugees: The Largest Displacement in Europe since the WWII

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The breakup of SFR Yugoslavia represented one of the most tragic events of the XX century, bringing back in Europe the memories of WW2's slaughter. During the 80's its successful multi-ethnic model, based on the principle of *Bratstvo i jedinstvo*¹, showed first signs of failure. The decade, in fact, was marked by the simultaneous death of the unifying leader Tito and by the widespread economic crisis caused by stabilization programs promoted by IMF². In particular, the imposed austerity brought sharply declining living standards, which corroded the rights and securities of the previous years³. Due to cutbacks and unemployment, it became easier to induce inter-ethnic conflict and competition among the Socialist Republics. This spiral of hatred triggered almost a decade of wars, which marred the Balkans and caused one of the largest refugee crisis of the century.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the particular situation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, namely the country which was scarred the most during the wars and counted the highest number of refugees and IDP⁴. The first part of the work will describe the historic background of BiH, comprehending the civil war (1992-1995); the second part will be devoted to refugee crisis, analysing the main flows of emigration during the 90's and briefly describing the difficult situation of returnees during the post-war years.

The ethnic make-up of Bosnia, due to country's peculiar history, can be described as an actual melting pot located in the core of Europe. Since the three main ethnicities speak more or less the same language⁵, the main discriminant in the Bosnian puzzle is religion. The latter plays a focal role since the century XV, when the Ottomans conquered Bosnia and a huge part of Bosnians converted to Islam. This "new" ethnicity, the Bosniaks⁶, lived alongside Bosnian Serbs (eastern orthodox church) and Bosnian Croats (roman catholic) for half a millennium in an unstable political structure. The Titoism, alongside to the recognition by the government in Belgrade of the "separate nationality" status in 1972⁷, led to a peaceful period for the Bosniak Muslims after the centuries-old struggle in affirming their own identity.

The situation worsened notably in January 1992, after Alija Izetbegovic's decision to hold a referendum for Bosnia's independence from SFRY⁸. This created a rift between Bosniaks, who wanted to secede in a unitary state, the Bosnian Serbs, who feared the creation of an Islamic State and pushed for reunification with the Serbian Motherland, and the Bosnian Croats, who wanted to

¹ Literally "Brotherhood and Unity".

² Franz, B., "Returnees, Remittances, and Reconstruction: International Politics and Local Consequences in Bosnia", *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy & International Relations*, New Jersey, XI:2010, pp. 49-50.

³ Parenti M., *To Kill a Nation. The Attack on Yugoslavia*, London, Verso, 2000, pp. 24-25.

⁴ Internally Displaced People

⁵ "Corpus-Based Comparison of Contemporary Croatian, Serbian and Bosnian"

[https://bib.irb.hr/datoteka/382519.FASSBL2008_paper_BB_SS_IS_v3.pdf]

⁶ The Slavs converted to Islam were usually part of landowning aristocracy.

In Robinson F., *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Islamic World*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p.111.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Pirjevec J., *Le Guerre Jugoslave. 1991-1999*, Torino, Einaudi, 2014, p. 124.

reunite to the new-born Croatia. In the next three years a war of all against all would have ravaged the country, with episodes of appalling violence such as the siege of Sarajevo, the destruction of *Stari Most*⁹ in Mostar and the massacre of Srebrenica. The civil war, which ended after the intervention of the UNPROFOR force and NATO's Deliberate Force operation, was eventually enshrined by Dayton Peace Agreement in late 1995. The treaty, signed by the prominent representatives of the three ethnicities (Milošević, Izetbegović and Tuđman) alongside USA and EU, maintained Bosnia's unity. The country, however, was split into two federal subjects: the *Republika Srpska* and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The entities were endowed with autonomous powers in several spheres, but BiH maintained a central government with a rotating State Presidency among the three nationalities¹⁰.

DPA¹¹ brought an end to the hostilities, nevertheless failed to effectively address the political conflict over Bosnia and Herzegovina and formalized the *de facto* ethnic division of the previously multi-ethnic republic. Furthermore, during the conflict, around 2.3 million people were forced to leave their homes. In early 1996, a huge amount of 1.3 million people had fled abroad¹². The 40 percent of them (mostly Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats) went to neighbouring countries, where their co-ethnics lived. Bosniaks suffered a worse fate because they could not rely on "co-ethnic country" where to flee. Their temporary and final destinations became predominantly the Western countries (Germany, Austria, Scandinavia, and USA), with some exceptions (namely Turkey and Pakistan)¹³. Moreover, besides the refugee's grievous situation, an additional 1 million people had been internally displaced.

According to the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the BiH worldwide diaspora numbers nowadays about 2 million people¹⁴ spread across more than 50 countries. They usually refer to themselves as *iseljeničtvo*, *izbjeglištvo*¹⁵—the categories referring to temporary forms of mobility and absence from "real" home.

Looking more closely to receiving countries' approach towards Bosnian refugees we can underline quite different reactions and decisions in the field of migratory policies. In the next lines, 3 examples of the multifaceted approaches will be analysed, describing the reception policies of Germany, Sweden, and USA.

Germany's relationship with the countries of former Yugoslavia dates to the 1960's in the context of economic migration. During the 1990s, Germany accepted the highest numbers of refugees from the fledgling country, approximately 320,000¹⁶. By the time of the Bosnian crisis, Germany had come to narrowly define what constituted a refugee and tightened their asylum laws (i.e., the amendment

⁹ Literally "Ancient bridge".

¹⁰ Each presidential term lasts eight months, according to the principle of *primus inter pares*.

¹¹ Dayton Peace Agreement

¹² Franz, B., "Returnees, Remittances, and Reconstruction: International Politics and Local Consequences in Bosnia" *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy & International Relations*, New Jersey, XI:2010, p. 49.

¹³ Coughlan R., Owens-Manley J., *Bosnians Refugee in America. New Communities, New Cultures*, Berlin, Springer, 2006, p.91.

¹⁴ "Migracioni Profil Bosne I Hercegovine za 2016 godinu" (April, 2017)

[http://mhr.gov.ba/iseljenistvo/Publikacije/MIGRACIONI_PROFIL_2016_BOSv2.pdf]

¹⁵ Literally "emigration" and "exile".

¹⁶ Valenta M., Strabac Z., "The Dynamics of Bosnian Refugee Migrations in the 1990s, Current Migration Trends and Future Prospects", *Oxford, Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 32: Issue 3, 2013, pag. 9.

of German Constitution's Article 16)¹⁷. The first step to face the BiH refugee's crisis was to adopt a TPS policy to overcome the massive flow of people. Germany, nevertheless, was struggling with the social, political, and economic effects of reunification; thus, the historical formula for xenophobia grew alongside social unrest, and far right-wing movements quickly rose. In consequence of this, while the federal government maintained a policy of voluntary return, more German states were deciding to forcibly repatriate Bosnian refugees (usually with a "pay to go" policy). By the end of the 1990s, Germany repatriated the 75% of Bosnians present on its territory, namely the 70% of total Bosnian repatriations in Europe¹⁸.

A totally different approach was adopted by Sweden, that in the early 90's was well on its way towards becoming a multicultural society. Several studies have placed the number of Bosnians in Sweden at an estimated 80,000 individuals. Most have established residency and citizenship since the mid-1990s thanks to Swedish policy towards Balkan refugees¹⁹; more specifically, 96% of the Bosnian refugees who arrived in Sweden during this period have stayed. The BiH community, despite the initial concerns about the integration in such a different country, represents one of the largest transnational populations of Bosnians in the world and is generally considered as a model of integration within Sweden, especially in terms of employment; in particular Bosnians' wages are relatively high in comparison not only with other migrants, but also with native Swedes.

The same level of refugees' integration can be observed in the US, which counts between 200,000 and 300,000 Bosnian people. It should be highlighted that much of BiH migration to the US occurred in late, rather than early 1990s, because of European countries repatriation policies. For instance, several refugees from BiH were initially resettled in countries such as Germany before moving to the US²⁰. The reception of BiH diaspora in the US has been very positive; self-sufficiency was encouraged and many quickly found jobs and houses, placing their children in schools. An additional factor favouring resettlement was that refugees in the US could obtain permanent residence status, or "green card", after one year of residence, followed by application for citizenship after five years. St. Louis (Missouri)²¹ is a good example of an established ethnic enclave of migrants from BiH. The city and the surrounding area have the largest Bosnians diaspora outside of BiH, increased by secondary resettlement and family reunification programs.

After the exodus period, starting from the 2000's, almost the 40% of the Bosnian refugees returned to their homeland. The authors of DPA, in fact, placed a particularly high priority on the return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their pre-war homes²². The peacemakers hoped that such return might one day reverse the territorial, political, and national partition of the country that the

¹⁷ Hailbronner K., "Asylum Law Reform in German Constitution", Washington D.C., American University International Law Review, Vol.9: Issue 4, 1994, pp. 159-179.

¹⁸ Hageboutros J., "The Bosnian Refugee Crisis A Comparative Study of German and Austrian Reactions and Responses", Swarthmore, Swarthmore International Relations Journal, Issue 1, 2016, p.57.

¹⁹ Halilovic H., Hasic J., Karabegovic D., Oruc N., *Mapping the Bosnian Herzegovinian Diaspora: Utilizing the Socio-Economic Potential of the Diaspora for Development of BiH*, Sarajevo, International Organisation for Migration/Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2018, p. 162.

²⁰ Coughlan R., Owens-Manley J., *Bosnians Refugee in America. New Communities, New Cultures*, Berlin, Springer, 2006, pp. 81-95.

²¹ Zurcher A., "America's 'invisible' Muslims", (30 Oct. 2016)

[<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-37663226>]

²² International Crisis Group, "The Continuing Challenge of Refugee Return in Bosnia & Herzegovina", (13 Dec. 2002) [<https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/balkans/bosnia-and-herzegovina/continuing-challenge-refugee-return-bosnia-herzegovina>]

DPA otherwise recognised²³. Most returns take place in conditions of profound change, mostly due to Bosnia's widespread poverty. They had to endure transitions to new social, economic, and political environments. Furthermore, the repatriation programs offered insufficient support for return and, like property restitution, came too late to constitute a real incentive.

Drawing the conclusions, Bosnian 1990's turmoil represented one of the most ambitious post-Cold War international initiatives to curb intrastate conflict and foster reconstruction. Nevertheless, the international action was not as effective as expected, despite two-thirds of all UN peacekeepers in the world were deployed in the region; even Kofi Annan atoned for UN's failures, defining the experience in Bosnia as "one of the most difficult and painful in [UN] history"²⁴. Despite this, a few times Bosnia rediscovered its national unity, especially during the 2014 FIFA World Cup. The Bosnian national team, mostly composed by 1990's refugees of the three ethnicities, managed to temporarily put aside all the antagonisms. Sports diplomacy, like so many times before, proved to be more effective than the traditional one, and gave hope to a nation that more than any other endured in the post-WW2 period²⁵.

²³ Fruscione G., "Bosnia: Dayton, Quindici Anni Dopo. La chiave etnica non funziona più." (14 Dec. 2010)
[<https://www.eastjournal.net/archives/4169>]

²⁴ Annan K., "Press Release SG/SM/7168", (11 Oct. 1999)
[<https://www.un.org/press/en/1999/19991011.sgsm7168.doc.html>]

²⁵ Vulliamy E., "How Edin Džeko United Bosnia" (8 Jun. 2014)
[<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/08/edin-dzeko-united-bosnia-world-cup>]

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