

The socio-economic status of internally displaced people in South East Europe: The cases of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo¹

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to shed light on the 30-year problem of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the former Yugoslavia, specifically in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. While the number of IDPs is in decline, the problem and its consequences are felt by many. In this paper we will present the social, political and economic context of IDPs in these three case studies by analysing the existing legal framework and policies. In particular, we will focus on violations of the fundamental human right to an adequate standard of living, the complex dilemma of choosing between return and integration, and socio-economic discrimination against IDPs.*

Key words: *internally displaced persons; Serbia; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Kosovo; post-conflict societies*

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¹ References to Kosovo shall be understood within the context of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999) and the International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

1. Introduction

The Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001) – the series of ethnic armed conflicts that began after the secession of Slovenia and ended up with the dissolution of Yugoslavia into independent states – left an enduring mark on the region with the consequences still felt. The conflicts, accompanied with the political and social transformation of the socialist political system, produced a unique combination of issues making local societies at the same time post-conflict and post-socialist. The wars created a huge flow of internally displaced persons in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Serbia. Although “the public gaze of the media has long since moved on elsewhere and donors have shifted their resources” (Kett 2005, 199), the problems of refugees and internally displaced people in the former Yugoslavia remain an important issue for many who still feel the effects of the wars.

We use the internationally recognized term IDPs for people who were displaced from their homes during the wars in the former Yugoslavia, but we use it in the broadest possible term in order to include “floaters” — people of minority ethnicity living in their pre-war municipality but prevented from returning to their pre-war homes — and “domicile displaced persons” — those of the dominant ethnic group living in different property but still in their pre-war municipality (Philpott 2005). The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also states that “as regards Serbia and Montenegro, all citizens of this country whose homes were in Kosovo, regardless of their nationality or religious affiliation, are considered to be IDPs” (ICRC 2002).

According to the International Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC), in 2019 there were 98,574 internally displaced people in BiH due to conflict and 905 because of various natural disasters, while in Kosovo there were 16,000 internally displaced people, and in Serbia the number of IDPs was the highest, at 201,047 people (Commissariat for Refugees and Migration Republic of Serbia, n.d.(b)). The UNHCR 2019 fact sheet on Kosovo states that out of 16,204 displaced people within Kosovo, 412 were living in temporary collective shelters (UNHCR 2021b). In Serbia in 2021, there were five collective centres in which 186 people lived (Commissariat for Refugees and Migration Republic of Serbia 2022). In BiH, 8000 people who lost their homes during the wars in the 1990s are still in collective centres (UNHCR 2021a). Collective centres were shelters made during or immediately after the war for short-term accommodation, but which have remained permanent until today. By the end of this year, the government of BiH planned to close all temporary accommodations for displaced people within the country. IDPs require special assistance that requires coordinated action between higher levels of the state’s organisations and social work centres. In

BiH and Serbia, those organisations are the Commission for Displaced Persons and Refugees in the former and the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration in the latter.

There are also obstacles for the people who had the opportunity to return to their previous homes. Some houses are not completely restored and there is a lack of infrastructure including electricity. In addition, there are obstacles in claiming previously acquired rights including pension and tenancy rights. The former Yugoslavia had two main types of property rights: private and socially owned (Philpott 2005). Socially owned properties were mostly urban apartments in state owned buildings, while rural houses were privately owned. The transition from occupancy rights to private property had just started at the beginning of the 1990s and many people did not buy out their apartments before the war. In the immediate post-war period wartime allocations of property were mostly unchanged, but rather consolidated (Philpott 2005). New property laws enacted after the war in BiH allowed property right holders or their legal successors to apply for the restitution of property. However, access to property was not always the main obstacle to return. There are problems of reintegration in their communities, security concerns, and lack of education and employment opportunities (Philpott 2005). As Kett explained, “the decision whether to return to their homes is complex, with local and international political pressures adding to their uncertainties and insecurities” (Kett 2005, 199).

We explore the difficulties faced by internally displaced persons in the former Yugoslavia. Continued political and economic transformation of the countries in the region has affected housing rights, employment, social rights and provisions. Understanding these processes is an important part of the understanding of the complex web of problems faced by internally displaced persons in the former Yugoslavia. A multidimensional approach with focus on the views and experiences of internally displaced persons should help our understanding of their current predicaments and foster our knowledge of post-conflict management in general. An important contribution of the paper is to promote a better understanding of the protracted nature of conflict-induced displacement. In particular, the assumption that drives most post-conflict recovery is that as soon as conflict ends, normality returns. Often, the belief is that people are able to move forward in an upward trajectory in the aftermath of conflict. However, the reality is far more complex. It offers crucial lessons for post-conflict interventions that support the return, resettlement, and reintegration of IDPs, either in their post-conflict communities or in new areas of their choice.

2. Kosovo

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) started operating in Kosovo¹ in 1992 in order to support refugees and displaced people. According to the UNHCR's biannual fact sheet, there were 16,100 IDPs in Kosovo as at February 2021 (UNHCR 2021). According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), the number of people becoming internally displaced has been increasing globally over the last decade. However, the statistics portray a different trend in Kosovo, where the number of people internally displaced—mostly due to conflict – is slowly yet gradually decreasing. Over the last decade, the number of IDPs in Kosovo has dropped from almost 18,000 to 16,000.

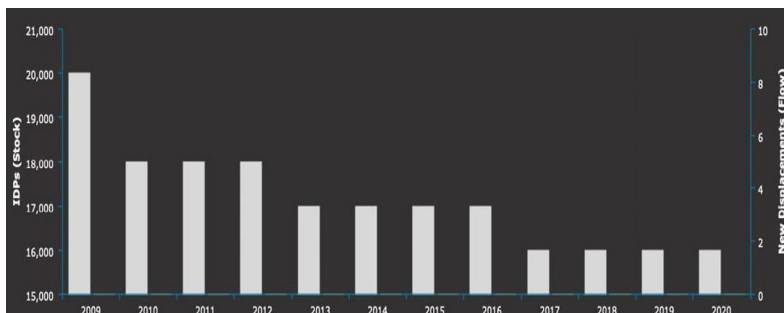


Figure 1: IDPs in Kosovo IDMC data | Source: IDMC

IDPs face diverse issues and obstacles including property rights violation, access to courts, access to public services, lack of employment opportunities and systemic discrimination (Matijević 2013, 2014). The violation of their socio-economic rights, such as the right to adequate housing and education, prevents IDPs from returning to their countries of origin. According to data presented by the IDMC and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) in 2012, around 60 percent of IDPs in Kosovo belong to ethnic, national, language and religious minority communities, mainly Serbian-speaking Christian Orthodox ethnic Serbs (IDMC and NRC 2012). As a result, IDPs often fall prey to intersectional discrimination due to their displacement status and the minorities to which they belong, such as displaced Roma citizens (Matijević 2013).

According to a 2016 study, IDPs in Kosovo portray lower access to education and home ownership in comparison to the average Kosovo rate; live in difficult conditions like makeshift shelters, informal settlements or collective centres; reside in accommodations which are not connected to

the sewerage system; cannot access running water; have difficulty entering health facilities; rely on social benefits; are jobless or make less than the general population if employed; while only few have managed to regain access to their properties (Danish Refugee Council et al. 2018).

2.1 History background

The 1998-99 Kosovo war between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) and the Kosovo Liberation Army triggered one of the most massive forced displacement tragedies in contemporary Europe, affecting as many as 1.5 million people. The NATO aerial bombing campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which was not approved by the UN Security Council and was organised in the name of combating humanitarian catastrophe and mass refugee flows, resulted in further large-scale displacement (Davies and Glanville 2010, 113–17). The forced displacement of people reappeared in 2004, when 4,200 people gained IDP status following a conflict (re)escalation (IDMC and NRC 2012). Since the war, a focal point of Kosovo's and UNHCR's policy has been the unconditional return of refugees and IDPs into and within Kosovo, dismissing any other considerations or alternative solutions (Danish Refugee Council et al. 2018).

UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999) highlights the importance of IDPs' safe return and states that the UNHCR is in charge of ensuring that all refugees and displaced people return to Kosovo (UN Security Council 1999). Article 156 [Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons] of Kosovo's constitution focuses on the safe return of IDPs and refugees (Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo 2008, 60).

The Ministry for Community and Return (MCR) in Kosovo is in charge of stabilising communities and the sustainable return of all displaced citizens. The MCR twice adopted a four-year "Strategy for Communities and Returns", in 2009-2013 and 2014-2018, focusing on the sustainable return of IDPs, conducting surveys and drafting a policy on durable solutions (Danish Refugee Council et al. 2018). The program of the Kosovo government for 2021–25 announces the drafting of a new law for IDPs and assistance to those wishing to return to their homes, especially "displaced persons living in collective centres, private homes and the return of Albanians to North Mitrovica" (Republic of Kosovo 2021, 24–25).

IDPs remain a vulnerable group in Kosovo and their displacement negatively interferes with their effective socialisation with citizens of different ethnic groups (Matijević 2013). Matijević argues that the

vulnerability and special needs of IDPs should be reflected within the Kosovar legal framework. Instead, they are blatantly ignored: when it comes to property rights, for example; or in Kosovo's Anti-Discrimination Law, which makes no reference to IDPs whatsoever (Matijević 2013, 2014).

2.2 Conflicting data

Existing data on IDPs tend to vary. In this subchapter two different reports are contrasted in order to illustrate the incompatible results that data showcase in regard to IDPs in Kosovo. In 2012, the IDMC presented a report titled "Kosovo: Durable solutions still elusive 13 years after conflict", which included the mapping of about 17,850 displaced people by region within Kosovo based on UNHCR data (IDMC and NRC 2012). Almost 80 percent of the IDPs in Kosovo are based in the segregated region of Mitrovicë/a. Most IDPs live in regions where the majority of the population is of the same ethnic group.

In November 2016, a breakthrough data collection survey on IDPs in Kosovo was jointly conducted by international, Kosovar and Serbian parties (Danish Refugee Council et al. 2018). According to their findings, there were 22,900 IDPs in Kosovo in 2016: namely, 16,383 Serbs, 5,879 Albanians and 638 Roma/ Ashkali/ Egyptians. These data differ from the report presented by the IDMC and the NRC in 2012. The national database of IDPs in Kosovo that the IDMC uses is supported by the MCR and updated both by the UNHCR and third partners (IDMC 2020). The 2012 report estimates a total of 17,850 IDPs, while the 2016 one argues in favour of 22,900.

Taking into consideration that the last time Kosovars were massively displaced was during the re-escalation conflict in 2004, the possibility of a rise of displaced people from 2012 to 2016 is a fallacy. To this effect, we would argue that this numeric discrepancy has resulted from different institutions on the field closely collaborating to compile data in innovative ways. However, reports conducted after 2016 by the UNHCR and IDMC did not use the numbers agreed on in the 2016 report. The most commonly used data are the ones presented by IDMC. As a result, the accuracy of the data presented in both cases remains open to debate.

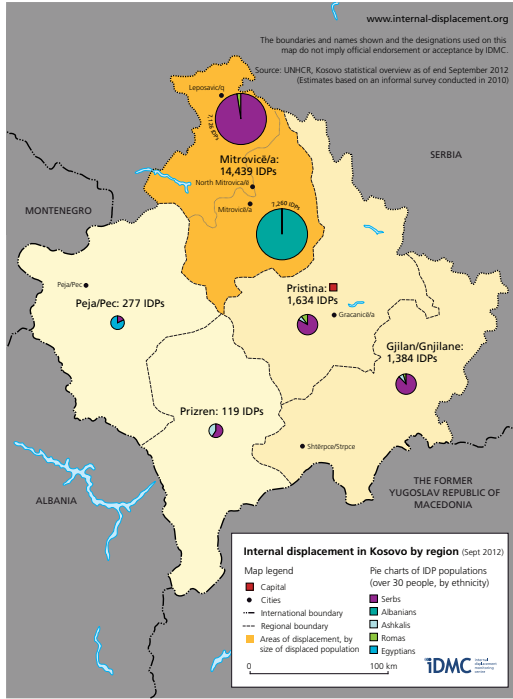


Figure 2: IDPs in Kosovo | Source: IDMC

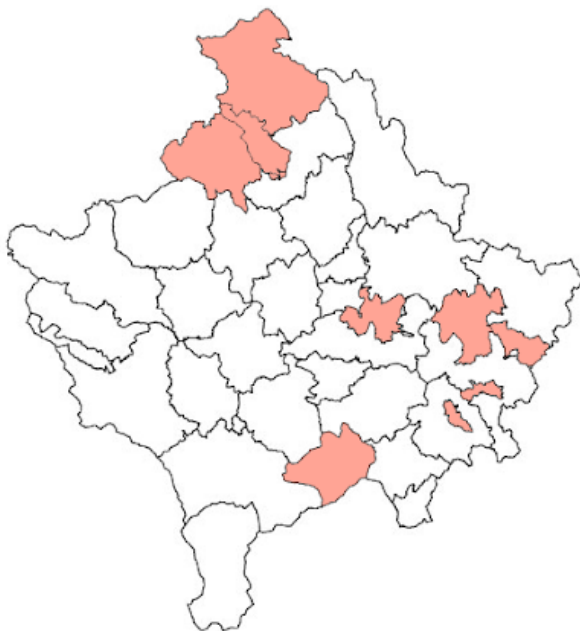


Figure 3: Majority-Serb population in colour | Source: The Dialogue

Another logical explanation for the differing data is connected to politics, especially relations between Pristina and Belgrade relations which have been strained over Kosovo's independence. Keeping in mind that the 2016 survey's contributors included institutions from both Kosovo and Serbia, the (political) question of who was eligible to be recognised as an IDP in Kosovo was revisited. This agreement regarding the number of IDPs was reported as an accomplishment (Danish Refugee Council et al. 2018, 4). Interestingly enough, UNHCR, which was a contributor to this report, does not use the data from the report, and publicly states that "there is no accurate number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Kosovo" (UNHCR n.d.).

Conflicting Data on Kosovo IDPs	Serb	Albanian	Roma/ Ashkali/ Egyptians	Total
IDMC, NRC - 2012	10,000	7,200	650	17,850
DRC, KAS, MCR, CRM and UNHCR - 2016	16,383	5,879	638	22,900

Figure 4: Conflicting data on IDPs in Kosovo from the two surveys

2.3 Integration versus return

Today, the Serb-majority areas are inhabited predominantly by an ethnic Serbian majority and are heavily influenced and controlled by Serbia, which seeks to enhance its leverage on the Serb-majority municipalities across Kosovo (Balkans Policy Research Group 2017). Ethnic Serb IDPs in Kosovo are currently based mostly in majority-Serb municipalities and most of them are not interested in moving back to their place of origin (Danish Refugee Council et al. 2018). The underlying factor that affects the return and reintegration of the conflict-affected communities in Kosovo relates to the deep-seated ethnic divide between ethnic Albanians and Serbians. This ethnic difference makes it almost impossible for durable solutions to exist in order to address IDP issues in the region.

Regarding the plight of those unsure whether to stay or move, it was found that 62 percent of Albanians, 5 percent of Roma/ Ashkali/ Egyptians, 1.4 percent of Serbs who reside in private accommodation and 1.5 percent of Serbs living in collective centres would prefer to relocate to their place of origin; 22 percent of Albanians, 80 percent of Roma/ Ashkali/ Egyptians, 93 percent of Serbs in private accommodation and 83 percent of Serbs in collective centres favour local integration within the place of their displacement (Danish Refugee Council et al. 2018). "Within the

place of their displacement” refers to the broader geographical region and not necessarily their current accommodation facility. For example, most Serb IDPs live in Serb-dominated regions, and those Serbs (93 percent of those in private accommodation and 83 percent in collective centres) who favour integration in the place of their displacement are not referring to their household, but to living in the same (Serb-dominated) region.

According to the Danish Refugee Council survey, the main barrier IDPs within Kosovo face concerning the dilemma of returning to the place of origin or integrating in the place of displacement is housing (in) security. Regardless of the IDPs’ decision to either relocate or integrate, accommodation safety is highly prioritised. Other reasons concern their overall safety in the area of residence, their freedom of movement and their language skills – for instance, the knowledge of Albanian by Serbian IDPs (Danish Refugee Council et al. 2018). Lastly, most IDPs have been living away from their place of origin for more than 20 years, which means that numerous people have been born and raised in displacement. As a result, relocating for families with children and young people in their household is considerably harder because the place of displacement constitutes their children’s home, where the latter have developed their social networks (Danish Refugee Council et al. 2018).

Matijević argues that the significant barriers which IDPs in Kosovo face (property rights, security fears, lack of a sustainable return framework, access to judicial and public services, unemployment, and systemic discrimination) prevent them from taking sustainable and informed decisions on whether to return to their place of origin or integrate into the place of displacement (2013). Here, we would also stress the importance of ethnic segregation as a social, political and economic component which discourages the relocation of displaced citizens. As long as certain municipalities in Kosovo remain ethnically, linguistically and religiously divided, IDPs are encouraged to stick within their respective communities. This viewpoint also explains why the number of IDPs in Kosovo is slowly decreasing (UNHCR 2017a).

2.4 Property rights

Kosovo’s reconstructed cadastral system lacks a remarkable number of records, which were displaced in Belgrade when Serbian forces left Kosovo at the end of the 1998-99 conflict (Haxhiaj and Rudic 2019). A crucial element of the EU-facilitated “Brussels dialogue” was the Agreement on Cadastral Records signed in 2011, under which Serbia would return cadasters to Kosovo (Bashota and Hoti 2021). This agreement will allow

Kosovo to establish a trustworthy official cadastral system, which can protect citizens' legitimate property claims and eventually resolve ongoing legal property disputes. For this action to occur, Serbia was first required to scan copies of all original pre-1999 cadastral books which would then be compared to Kosovo's reconstructed cadaster system by a technical agency monitored by Kosovar, Serbian and EU representatives. However, only minimal progress has been achieved so far and recent Kosovar reports accuse Serbia of blocking the cadastral registries agreement (Bashota and Hoti 2021). The slow progress in the dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade is attributed by a group of experts on Kosovo-Serbia relations both to the fear that comparing properties within Kosovo would challenge its current cadastral system and to Serbia's scepticism that Serb representatives would be included in the process (The Dialogue n.d.).

The agreement required Kosovo to introduce a legal framework with the aim of synchronising the comparison of cadastral records, which resulted in the Draft Law on the Kosovo Property Comparison and Verification Agency. The Draft Law aims to serve justice in conflict-related property cases: whenever a mismatch occurs between cadastral records and property claims, the Agency has to rule which one of them is accurate. In such cases, the person named in the record or their heirs should be notified either physically at their registered property or via an announcement in an official publication of the Agency's Secretariat (Matijević 2015).

Matijević argues that the process of identifying and communicating with the interested parties indirectly excludes IDPs, as they often rent properties and become internal nomads due to financial reasons, which essentially means they have no registered property. Properties belonging to IDPs are either illegally occupied or remain empty due to their displacement. Also, IDPs cannot afford to keep track of the Agency's official publication, nor are they aware that they should do so. This was the basis of the EU's advice for Kosovo in its 2013 Progress Report, which urged it to further expand its strategies in order to effectively notify IDPs about the expropriation of their properties (DG NEAR 2013).

IDPs have special needs regarding the safeguarding of their property rights in their place of displacement. Post-conflict immovable property repossession remains an unresolved issue in Kosovo, while the properties of IDPs are to a large extent illegally occupied. Therefore, the IDPs cannot exercise their property rights, and the weak justice system and their physical absence further exacerbate illegal occupation of their immovable properties in the place of origin (Matijević 2014). However, some progress has been made in regard to the property rights of IDPs. In 2020, Kosovo

official institutions performed eighteen evictions and demolished one illegal structure which was constructed on land which was property of a displaced person (DG NEAR 2021). Lastly, the lack of accommodation stability prevents IDPs from returning to their residence, and many rent low-quality accommodation in their place of displacement, which perpetuates intergenerational poverty and social exclusion (Matijević 2014).

3. Serbia

In the case of Serbia, the largest proportion of internally displaced people are refugees from Kosovo, known as “Kosovo and Metohija” by Serbian authorities. Kosovo is not recognized as a country by the Republic of Serbia, which treats the region as a part of their country. The latest data show that the number of IDPs in Serbia, excluding the territories of Kosovo and Metohija, was 209,021 at the end of 2005 but currently stands at 201,047 people (Commissariat for Refugees and Migration Republic of Serbia n.d.(b)). Most IDPs are now living in Raška, Šumadija, Toplica, Nišava, Pčinja and Podunavlje districts, while a minority of IDPs are living in collective centres. Most of the collective centres, four of them, are located in the territory of Kosovo and Metohija, while there is one outside these territories, where sixty-nine people are living. Several mechanisms have been established to cope with this problem. One of them is the “Local Action Plans” (LAP), which have been implemented since December 2008 “to address the issues of refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs) and returnees under the readmission agreement”(Commissariat for Refugees and Migration Republic of Serbia n.d.(c)). These plans have been developed and adopted in 135 municipalities or cities, of which twelve are in the territory of Kosovo and Metohija. Also, since 2008, IDPs have been beneficiaries of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) programs, which aim at resolving the housing problems that are one of the biggest obstacles that IDPs are facing. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the latest national strategy of Serbia regarding IDPs is the National Strategy for Resolving the Problems of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons for the Period 2015-2020 (Government of the Republic of Serbia 2015). This National Strategy especially puts emphasis on addressing housing needs and improving the economic prospects of the IDPs, also with the help of local action plans.

3.1 Legal framework

As to a legal framework that specifically targets IDPs in Serbia — there is none. Consequently the status that they hold is the same as the status of Serbian nationals. Their rights are not protected by any special regulations.

However, there is one document that is not legally binding, but is of great importance for the IDPs and their status. That is the National Strategy for Resolving the Problems of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons for the Period 2015-2020. But, as we can see, the duration of this strategy ended two years ago, and in the meantime no new strategy has been made. The former strategy contained proposed measures whose goal was to improve the status of IDPs. There are several other strategies which do not pertain to the specific target group of IDPs, but are connected to it. The Strategy of Social Inclusion of Roma for the Period from 2016 to 2025 (Government of the Republic of Serbia 2016) concerns the Roma population, which is an extremely vulnerable group of IDPs due to the poor status that Roma people have in society; and the Migration Management Strategy of the Republic of Serbia deals with migrations. However, even though the previous strategy is not in force anymore, it is important to note that it did not include an action plan to define funding for the implementation of the strategy, therefore its implementation and future programs were from the start questionable (Trifković and Ćurčić 2018).

The institutional framework regarding IDPs is defined by the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection from 2018 and the Law on Migration Management from 2012. These laws are tightly connected to the work of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (CRM): a key institution for matters concerning the IDPs, this is a separate organisation within the public system. At the head of it is a commissioner, a deputy and two assistants (Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia n.d.(a)). The work of the CRM consists of: registration and reception of refugees; recognition and cessation of refugee status; provision of accommodation and assistance to refugees and ensuring balanced and timely assistance; taking measures for the return of refugees; meeting the housing needs; keeping records of their responsibilities and the establishment of databases; and international cooperation.

3.2 Social status

The social status of the IDPs is in general worse than that of the rest of the population. Reasons for this are multiple. They represent a vulnerable group which is often the target of prejudice and discrimination. IDPs tend to be perceived as over-privileged, financed by the state and living off welfare and state subsidies, due to some of the refugees and IDPs from Kosovo taking advantage of their misfortune. This results in poor living conditions for a significant number of IDPs, who can feel outcast and unwanted.

IDPs are generally poorer than the majority. Data for Serbia from 2010 obtained from UNHCR show that 45.2 percent of IDPs were classified as poor, while the share classified as poor in the whole population was 9.2 percent (Allen 2016).

Several studies about the status of IDPs in Serbia have been undertaken. They show that this population is vulnerable, having worse social status than the rest of the population. IDPs have a 22.1 percent higher unemployment rate, and are more likely to be working illegally, or at part-time or seasonal jobs, while their wages are low or even below the minimum wage (Vladislavljević 2011). The state, to cope with the financial issues this vulnerable population is suffering, is offering IDPs welfare, which is not solving this problem in the long-term.

According to the data collected by the UNDP, IDPs in Serbia are also one of the most discriminated-against groups in the country, next to Roma, women, elderly people and persons with disabilities (CeSID et al. 2012). One of the main reasons behind their discrimination is related to the fact that they are from Kosovo, as a not insignificant number of people see them as parasites who live on state subsidies. There is a widespread belief in Serbia that people who come from Kosovo receive extra benefits because of their origin and because of their status as IDPs. Of these IDPs, those that are also Roma are suffering from double discrimination. Studies and analyses showed that the problems which IDPs are facing have still not been solved, primarily when it comes to obtaining economic and social rights, with housing being one of the biggest issues (Trifković and Čurčić 2018).

The unfavourable status of IDPs manifests itself in their assessment of their own health. The trauma that displacements cause to IDPs can over time have impacts on their health, but also on their ability to rebuild their lives, keeping them in a circle of poverty. Thirteen years ago, a study found that almost 25 percent of those interviewed described their health condition as poor or extremely poor and more than 35 percent need to take medications on a daily basis, which also includes 10 percent of IDPs that do not have health insurance (Grupa 484 2009), which is in close correlation with the fact that approximately 12 percent of them do not have any sort of documentation (UNHCR et al. 2011), and therefore they do not have access to medical care. We could not find data about the rest of the population for that year, but if we take the available data from the National Health Insurance Fund of the Republic of Serbia for 2017, which says that there were 6,901,482 citizens with health insurance, and compare it to the census from 2011 according to which Serbia had a population of 7,186,862, excluding Kosovo and Metohija, we can see that there was around 1 percent of citizens that did not have health insurance.

3.3 Housing

One of the biggest issues that IDPs are dealing with is housing. Although today only a fraction of the IDPs live in the one remaining collective centre (the “Salvatore” collective centre in Bujanovac, where 52 residents live according to the Commissariat for Refugees), housing remains an issue. Most IDPs either rent their homes (about 30 percent, which is a much higher rate than in the general population), or they live with their relatives (UNHCR et al. 2011). This is one problem that truly needs a solution, since the right to adequate housing is one of the basic human rights. Solving this would also help to solve other problems that are affecting the process of integration. Strategic Goal 4, item 6 (page 31) of the National Strategy for Resolving the Problems of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons for the Period 2015-2020 also recognizes this: “Addressing housing needs is one of the most important issues to improve the living conditions of IDPs.”(Government of the Republic of Serbia 2015.)

The Commissariat for Refugees and Migration states that there are 16,644 internally displaced households in Serbia with 68,514 persons living in them. Roma IDP households are also very vulnerable, with 1,435 of them being in need, that is 10,188 people. Moreover, the data collected by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration show that the majority of IDPs, 85 percent, live either with their relatives, friends or in rented apartments. Additionally, 5.11 percent of the total households in need live in structures that are not intended for housing. All of the residents that live in the only collective centre in Serbia are Roma, where they are living in inadequate living conditions. And more than 90 percent of Roma IDPs live in terrible living conditions, in households that lack water, sanitation and other utilities (Government of the Republic of Serbia 2015, Strategic Aim 4, item 6). This issue was pointed out in reports made by UN treaty bodies and the Special Rapporteur for the right to adequate housing, and a solution to the problem was called for by the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (2018).

Lack of funding is one of the reasons why the housing issue remains, as was last stated in the National Strategy for Resolving the Problems of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons for the Period 2015-2020. Still, it must be said that there were some housing programmes through which around 4,500 homes were provided for IDPs from Kosovo. However, one of the criteria that prevent people from being granted state housing is the number of family members, which is disadvantageous to small families because larger families have an advantage. Another problem relating to this is that IDPs that live in informal settlements cannot obtain legal addresses, and

without an address they are unable to get an ID card, which is a condition for getting an IDP card, which perpetuates the problems they are facing; this problem is intergenerational (Džuverović and Vidojević 2017, 64).

3.4 Return

The return of IDPs who fled from Kosovo is probably not a realistic solution now. Most of them are reluctant and afraid to return, which is supported by statistics: only 28,111 out of 220,000 persons had returned to Kosovo by the end of 2018 (OSCE 2019). Even those IDPs that returned — both Serbs and non-Serbs, such as Roma, Montenegrins, Bosniaks and other ethnic minorities (non-Albanians) — returned predominantly to northern Kosovo, which is mostly populated by Serbs, and even the numbers of these returnees are very low. One of the key documents, which was supposed to enable the safe return of refugees and IDPs to Kosovo, is the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and its Annex 1 from 1999. However, this resolution was never implemented as it was supposed to have been, which can be seen from the fact that a vast majority of people did not return, as well as from the tensions that still exist in Kosovo.

Even though voluntary return would be the best solution, it is far from reality. Only a small number of IDPs are capable, or even open to the option, of returning. Several factors are contributing to that. The biggest one is the feeling of fear: many of them believe that they would not be safe at their place of origin in Kosovo and that their rights would not be respected there. Moreover, as has been mentioned, a significant number of IDPs lost their homes in Kosovo or they were destroyed (OSCE 2018). They were even prevented from entering the homes in which they used to live before the war (Džuverović and Vidojević 2017, 10). For example, from March 2014 to 2018, a total of only nineteen evictions of illegal occupants were performed by the Kosovo Property Comparison and Verification Agency, and sixteen cases of illegal reoccupation of properties were recorded (OSCE 2019). Access to employment is another obstacle, as well as access to public services and generally low living standards (Human Rights Council 2014). One of the key reasons for non-return is hatred and discrimination based on ethnicity, which causes further problems such as fear of violence, inability to enforce court decisions, property usurpation, lack of access to educational and economic opportunities, not enough public services in the Serbian language, and poor representation of minorities in public institutions and enterprises (United States Department of State 2021).

Social exclusion is another problem that IDPs are facing in Serbia and one of its biggest aspects is social and psychological insecurities. These are

often associated with the want to return, but also the fear of doing so and the consequences they might face if they return to their homes. This is often caused by the treatment IDPs receive from other citizens, but also by the state and local authorities that are preventing mass return (Džuverović and Vidojević 2017, 64). Tensions are still present in Kosovo, and Serbs living in Kosovo are often being discriminated against because of their ethnicity and have difficulties in everyday life.

Having in mind that the reasons for a near-zero rate of return to Kosovo include lack of security, limited freedom of movement, limited access to public services, lack of economic prospects and difficulties in reclaiming their property which is often destroyed (Human Rights Council 2014 and OSCE 2019), it is hard to expect there will be any change. As time goes by and new generations are born outside of Kosovo, it is highly unlikely there will be a greater rate of return. The only kind of return to be expected, and even that in small numbers, is the return of an older population which is sentimentally tied to Kosovo.

4. Bosnia and Herzegovina

When it comes to the issue of the IDP in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is more common within the state to use the term “displaced person” (“*raseljena lica*”): *de facto*, it applies not only to those who are formally registered under entity displaced person legislation, but, in general, to people who were displaced from their pre-war homes (Philpott 2005). For instance, these two sub-categories are taken into account as “displaced persons”: 1) representatives of the ethnic minority who were prevented from returning to their pre-war homes, but managed to stay in their pre-war municipality (“floaters”), and 2) “domicile displaced persons” from the ethnic majority who left their homes and remained in the same municipality because their houses were destroyed during the war.

4.1 Background

The IDP status is often seen as more fragile than the refugee’s position and may cause insecurities to some of the sub-categories of its holders. For example: in June 1999, a protest of Bosnian-Croat floaters took place in Vareš, a town 45 km from Sarajevo, in which municipality the Croat population was estimated as being the dominant group (40.61 percent) immediately before the war in 1991 (Central Intelligence Agency 2002). People who were against an upcoming meeting between municipal authorities and Bosnian-Croat refugees living in Croatia gathered in front of the municipal hall. The floaters (IDPs) were united by the fear that the refugees would be given a privilege in property restitution, as beneficiaries

of repatriation programs and better economic opportunities abroad. The perception of the protesters was based on the following idea: while those who had crossed the border could enjoy some perks both in the host entity and the country of origin, IDPs had had to face all the privations of war as well as the subsequent conditions on the edge of survival.

During the first years after the end of the Bosnian war, the property restitution laws provided displaced persons with the right to receive alternative accommodation as a form of material compensation for damage caused by the war. However, the December 2001 amendments separated the status of the IDP from the issue of alternative accommodation entitlement and transformed it into a right to emergency accommodation in collective centres (The Law on Displaced-Expelled Persons and Repatriates in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, FBiH Official Gazette Amendment Nos. 19/00 & 54/01, and the Law on Displaced Persons, Refugees and Returnees in the Republika Srpska, Amendment Nos. 33/99 & 65/01, entered into force on 4 December 2001). As a result, internally displaced persons who had not received accommodation by 2002 were deprived of adequate dwelling and still today do not have access to an adequate standard of living, which violates their fundamental human right to an adequate standard of living as stated in the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25.1.

The UN refugee agency has estimated that more than 1.3 million people became internally displaced as a result of the Bosnian war and the systematic campaigns of ethnic cleansing which took place throughout it (UNHCR 1999). In 2021, almost twenty-seven years since the end of the war, more than 96,000 people are recognized as holders of an IDP status, and around 8,000 of them still live in collective centres (UNHCR 2021). These collective centres were supposed to be temporary accommodation for families, with the initial intention of relocating them to new housings, but in some cases it turned out to be a long-term and, eventually, even permanent solution.

There are 158 collective centres in the country, and they all face a lack of good hygienic-sanitary conditions and medical assistance. Such environments have become a framework for poverty and crime: people living there are marginalised by society and have to survive on the brink basic needs shortages (Le Quiniou 2020). A new generation is growing up in collective centres, and they have not seen any other life: being born and raised in these conditions, they have no other life pattern and have severely limited access to proper education and job markets. This also negatively affects the future of the state. The issue requires immediate

action from the authorities of BiH in order to heal already existing patterns of intergenerational trauma which only prolong the devastating effects of armed conflict.

An effort to re-house residents of the collective centres was launched in 2013, via the Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB), a Paris-based body originally established to house refugees after World War II. The bank's project for Bosnia, nicknamed CEB II, envisaged spending 104 million euros on new social housing that would replace 121 of the 158 collective centres still in use (Marković 2022). More than half those funds, or 60 million euros, were raised by CEB member states – mostly European Union countries – and offered via the bank as an interest-free loan. The remainder was meant to be raised by local authorities in Bosnia. However, the project is running at least five years behind schedule. So far, only eight of the 121 collective centres have been closed.

The core reason for the majority of social and economic issues in BiH lies in the complicated political system built upon the Dayton Agreement, which has divided BiH into two entities of roughly equal size – the Republika Srpska (RS), where Serbs are the majority, and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), made up mainly of Bosniaks and Croats. In 2000, District Brčko was also formed as a single administrative unit of self-government under the sovereignty of BiH. Entities form an intermediate level of administration between the central government and local government. In that sense, the issue of internally displaced persons will be analysed separately in the contexts of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska as two of the biggest administrative units.

4.2 Legal framework of BiH

Both the two entities and the district have the authority to organise all three branches of power and to adopt their own laws, which must in turn be in accordance with the state constitution. The same is applied to any law regarding IDPs, thus it is necessary to briefly present the overarching legal norms which must shape the approach of the local legal frameworks. At the state level, the first legal standard is defined through Annex VII of the Dayton Peace Agreement, which is an agreement on the return of refugees and displaced persons (1995). By 2003, the state had adopted the official “Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for the implementation of the Annex VII of the Dayton peace agreement” (UNHCR 2017b), which was further revised in 2010.

“The revised strategy identifies needs of the IDPs and the returnees which should serve as a starting point for all actors involved to create mechanisms of support and evaluation” (UNHCR 2017b). Since Annex VII is an agreement on the return of refugees and IDPs, and is the first post-war document on the issue, it needs to be present in the strategy focus on basic human rights and adequate standard of living. At the same time, the Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General on the human rights of internally displaced persons, from 2005, points out the lack of data on the gender of the returnees, preventing any possible gender analysis of the process of return (Kálin 2005).

At the state level, BiH also adopted the “Law on Refugees from BiH and Displaced Persons in BiH” (2005), which defines IDPs and returnees through articles 4 and 8 and further states that all human rights apply equally to both the IDPs and the returnees, while they also have the rights which are prescribed within local legal frameworks (Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees 2005).

4.3 Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, created in 1994 as a result of the Washington Agreement which ended the Croat–Bosniak War within the Bosnian War, comprises 51 percent of BiH’s area and consists of 10 autonomous cantons with their own governments and legislatures. Bosniaks are the major ethnic group (more than 70 percent), while Croats are the second largest one (approximately 22 percent).

According to the Strategic Plan developed for 2019-2021, the main strategic goal of the Federal Ministry of Displaced Persons and Refugees was to ensure reconstruction of housing units for the needs of IDPs, closure of collective centres and alternative accommodation for returnees, and construction of social housing and housing for younger returnees’ families (Federalno ministarstvo raseljenih osoba i izbjeglica 2019). About 350,000 housing units have been renovated in BiH, 250,000 of them in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The work is in progress, but it does not display much urgency in solving the issue. The lack of the right to adequate housing leads to an extremely high level of poverty among the IDPs: 83.1 percent of the IDPs based in FBiH have an average monthly income of less than 200 BAM (the Bosnian Convertible Mark) per family member, while 59.1 percent of them live on less than 100 BAM per month (UNHCR 2017b). These numbers lie far below the average net monthly wage of Bosnian citizens which was estimated at 1,059 BAM in February 2022 (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2022).

4.4. Republika Srpska

Republika Srpska is the second most populous entity, with 1,228,423 people at the 2013 census, and its own judiciary, executive and legislative bodies and legal framework which would be further analysed in the context of IDPs (Al Jazeera 2016)

When it comes to the IDPs, the first official registration and data collection on IDPs at the state level was conducted in 2000, when 556,214 persons were registered as IDPs. By 2017, the Report on the Revised Strategy stated a significant reduction of IDPs — a total of 96,830 people were registered as IDPs, 61.4 percent of whom were within the territory of RS (Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees 2017).

4.4.1 Legal framework of RS

Within the government of Republika Srpska there is a Secretariat for Internally Displaced and Migrations (formerly known as Ministry for Refugees and Internally Displaced), which is the main legal body dealing with the issue of IDPs. The legal framework of the RS consists of state law and the entity law on displaced persons, returnees and refugees. The law regulates the rights and entitlements of the IDPs in line with the Revised Strategy, focusing on cash benefits, health care, education and temporary accommodation. It further proscribes terms of cessation of the IDP status in the event of a person's return to their pre-war place of residence or voluntarily permanent settlement in another place (Kalin 2005).

4.4.2 Return

Reports from 2017 stated that more than one million people were registered as returnees, of whom 58 percent belonged to the IDP group. Furthermore, almost all of the returnees are defined as minority returnees (UNHCR 2017b). In order to understand the possibility of minority return, it is necessary to briefly present the situation of IDPs within the entities and attitudes of post-war authorities.

Data from the re-registration in 2005 showed that the majority of re-registered persons on the territory of the FBiH were displaced from the ten municipalities of RS. In fact, these ten municipalities were the source of almost half the IDP population in FBiH (Nenadić 2005). This situation is due to the mass war atrocities committed against them, culminating in the Srebrenica genocide in July of 1995. In that sense, RS could be perceived as a unique source of IDPs which in turn requires extra effort in the process of return. However, the situation is rather dire. Post-war local

authorities were in many instances people who took active participation in the war, which made many of the IDPs unwilling to return to places governed by the ones responsible for their displacement. Further, due to mass ethnic cleansing within the territory, there have been drastic changes in the ethnic composition of these municipalities, which also impacted the decision of the IDPs on whether or not to return (Nenadić 2005).

4.4.3 Socio-economic status

Unemployment is a general issue for the IDPs, affecting a majority of cases. Data from 2017 show that more than 70 percent of the total IDP population are unemployed (UNHCR 2017b). In addition to lack of financial support there is also an issue of quality of living conditions, which was not resolved over the past two decades with several thousand registered IDPs still living in so-called collective centres which were supposed to be temporary solutions. There are governmental reports on the annual construction of new permanent housing for IDPs, but the final date for the closure of all collective centres keeps getting postponed. It is also necessary to point out a significant lack of transparency in the activities taken to resolve IDP issues, and the majority of the information on the status of IDPs is obtained through independent news outlet reports, because the majority of the foreign agencies dealing with the issue have been losing interest in it as time passes (Marković 2022).

5. Conclusion

As has been shown through a brief overview of the contexts, the issue of IDPs in the former Yugoslavia is not only a complex one, but also a persistent and continuous one. It has been explained how this issue is interacting with several layers of discrimination, while it further perpetuates additional marginalisation of the people affected by it.

We have observed several similarities between the case studies. The fact is that no country has managed to resolve this issue, even several decades after the wars ended. Further, there is a lack of a broad, coherent approach which would tackle all of the issues which IDPs face, with initiatives usually just focusing on limited cash infusion or slow and unreliable programs of housing. As we have shown, returning is still not an option for the majority of people for various reasons. Looking into specific situations and contexts in the region, there is an implication that the underlying cause for the majority of the issues is absence of political will to resolve them and politicisation of the issue through the nationalistic approaches of authorities in the region.

It is undeniable that the status and the experience of being an IDP is a position of specific vulnerability which should be handled by taking into consideration all of the particular needs, discriminations and characteristics of the people. Resolving the issue of IDPs will not only help the people affected by that status but it will also be the necessary step towards reconciliation and the building of just societies in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo.

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