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Djordje Stefanovic & Neophytos Loizides
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**The Way Home:
Peaceful Return of Victims of Ethnic Cleansing**

Abstract:

This article examines how the right of return is negotiated and implemented in post-conflict societies. It focuses on cases of voluntary yet “difficult” returns and identifies the conditions under which victims of ethnic cleansing choose to return despite opposition from new occupants and hostile local authorities. The article provides a theoretical framework for the study of return and examines the importance of security provisions, material incentives, contact and ideology. Drawing on the experiences of Bosnian (Drvar) and Cypriot (Maronite) returnees, it emphasizes the role of social capital as manifested through refugee organizations and demonstrates how community effort resolves coordination and commitment problems, thereby facilitating a voluntary peaceful return.

Keywords: social capital, refugees, displaced persons, right of return, ethnic cleansing

Introduction

Conventional wisdom assumes that victims of ethnic cleansing are less likely to return to their former homes with the passage of time, especially if they have achieved similar or better standards of living in a secure environment next to co-ethnics or in the diaspora. Why do refugees and displaced persons who have long experienced conflict and dislocation decide voluntarily to return to contested territories, despite conditions that seem prohibitive? The article looks at why such people choose to return home and how they do so successfully without re-igniting violent conflict. It focuses on theoretically puzzling cases of voluntary return, distinguishing them from cases where returnees are forced to return home by governments or international organizations. It considers two cases of voluntary but difficult return: Drvar in post-Dayton Bosnia, and Maronite villages in the northern part of Cyprus following the failure of the Annan Plan.¹

We make a contribution to the study of refugee returns by bringing previously neglected insights of social capital research to bear on the successful returns in Bosnia and Cyprus. We highlight the significance of refugee communities' social capital (bounded solidarity, mutual trust and communal ties), that enables creation of refugee and displaced persons' organizations, in overcoming the coordination and security challenges to successful and durable returns. The experiences of Bosnia and Cyprus indicate that such associations, especially in collaboration with international agencies and moderates on the "other side" can dramatically facilitate the return process.

¹ The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was self-proclaimed in 1983; it is recognized only by Turkey, in violation of Security Council Resolution 541, November 18, 1983. For different legal approaches to the status of TRNC see Necatigil (1983); Loucaides (1995); Chrysostomides (2000); Yesilada & Sozen (2002).

While there are a number of policy-oriented studies of refugee returns, theoretical and comparative works are rare. The few that attempt to develop a more theoretical understanding of the issue generally assume that the return process is primarily a result of state actions (such as the forced return of Bosnian refugees from Germany to post-war Bosnia) or individual (and family) decisions of the refugees. While state policies and individual decisions are unavoidable factors in the return processes, an exclusive focus on these two sets of factors results in systematic neglect of the importance of the actions of refugee organizations. These can play a critical role: helping to preserve communal identity and institutions; stimulating a desire for return home from exile; putting political pressure on the state and international institutions to create conditions for safe return; coordinating and enhancing physical safety during the return; and recreating the pre-war social environment that ethnic cleansing sought to destroy.

While return is generally recognized as the preferred and durable solution of the refugee question (Loizides & Antoniadis, 2009), the actual repatriation of victims has been relatively neglected in the academic literature (Bradley 2007: 154). Once there is a realistic possibility of going home, what influences a refugee's decision to return or to stay away? On the basis of existing exploratory studies (such as Opacic et al 2005) and the UNHCR (2003) survey of displaced persons' return intentions, we postulate four sets of factors. Three are commonly accepted; the fourth is our own.

First, the *security thesis* states that the decision to stay away because of a fear of ethnic violence is likely associated with a sense of vulnerability (greater for single mother families and families with small children), traumatic war-time experiences (such as an individual's victimization or loss of a significant other), post-war ethnic harassment (such

as stoning of buses carrying returnees, rioting, looting, and burning of residential property), presence of ethnic others in the village (such as settlers or the military), and characteristics of the local police force (whether it contains a variety of ethnic groups or alleged war criminals). Second, the *economic thesis* argues that the potential returnee weighs the resources at the new place of residence (quality of job, housing, pensions, health services, and general economic opportunities) against those in the place of origin (such as value of property, economic opportunities). Third, the *education thesis* states that parents with young children will be influenced by the comparative quality and ethnic inclusiveness of educational services at both locations.

We agree that the above three sets of factors are likely to carry much causal weight. However, we argue for the significance of a fourth set of factors, what we call refugees' social capital.² We depart from Putnam's (1993: 167) influential definition of social capital as "features of social organization such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" and identify a context-specific form of social capital that could potentially be, or in the cases of Bosnia and Cyprus, has already been used by refugees to facilitate the return process. More specifically, we emphasize the importance of displaced persons' associations – putting forward what we call a *community effort hypothesis* to explain the decision to return or stay away.

² While the recognition of importance of sociability and social ties has been long established by social theorists (such as Tocqueville, Marx, and Durkheim), current research on social capital has been mostly inspired by the theoretical work of Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam in the late 1980s and early 1990s. By the late 1990s, initial enthusiasm for the concept had gradually been replaced by a more reserved and critical understanding of its limitations, which nevertheless acknowledge that in some situations it can be useful (Portes 1998: 2-5; Adam and Roncevic 2003: 156-7).

Our hypothesis assumes that the victims of ethnic cleansing who stay in close and regular contact with people from the old village are more likely to contemplate joint return than those whose close networks now primarily include people in the new place of residence. Presumably, organized collective return brings safety in numbers, something unattainable in individual or family return. Both among Maronites in Cyprus and in several Bosnian townships – Zvornik, Drvar, and Prijedor – displaced persons’ organizations, based on the same place of residence prior to cleansing, were instrumental in organizing and facilitating the collective return process (Dahlman and Toal, 2005: 650; ICG 1998a; 1998c; Belloni, 2008).

Bosnia offers a wide range of within-country cases to refine theoretical perspectives on return. The war of 1992-1995 left deep wounds in Bosnian society. Out of the pre-war population of 4.37 million, about 110,000 were killed³ and 2.2 million driven from their homes (UNHCR, 2005:2). While no census has been conducted since 1991, the Bosnian Statistic Agency estimates that the 2003 population was 3.83 million (Toal and Dahlman, 2005: 13). Of the estimated 2.2 million driven out, 1,015,394 returned to the country by 2006, and a documented 457,194 repatriated under minority status in areas administered by another ethnic group (UNHCR, 2005:2, 2006; Belloni, 2001, 2006, 2008; Black, 2001).⁴ While policy-oriented studies are plentiful in the

³ The most reliable fatality figures on the Bosnian war have been compiled by the Research and Documentation Center (RDC) in Sarajevo. In June 2007, the RDC recorded 97,207 war fatalities and estimated that the count could rise by a maximum of another 10,000 with ongoing research. The head of the ICTY estimates the number of dead at 110,000 (BBC, 2007). The current RDC data indicate that 40.82% of the casualties were civilians; 83.33% of the civilian casualties were ethnic Bosniacs [Bosnian Muslims] (RDC, 2007). “Bosniac” is the self-selected ethnic identifier for the Bosnian Muslim community.

⁴ Updated numbers can be found at the UNHCR Bosnia website at <http://www.unhcr.ba/>. As we shall discuss later, there are certain methodological problems with the UNHCR estimates that need to be considered.

Bosnian case, theory-driven hypotheses of why displaced persons decide to repatriate remain rare.

Bosnia is important not only for the sheer numbers of returnees and the variations in responses across regions and municipalities but for the trial and error policies used by the international community to facilitate repatriation. The experience of Bosnia could inspire similar processes elsewhere, particularly where the international community is heavily involved with the process of return. A case in point is Cyprus.

Cyprus has experienced ethnic cleansing at various times in its recent history (Hadjipavlou, 2007; Yesilada & Sozen, 2002) and has one of the longest instances of displacement in post-WWII Europe. In their historical narratives, Turkish Cypriots emphasize the 1963-1974 period when their community was excluded from the government, forced into enclaves, and prevented from safe access to some parts of the island, including traditionally Turkish Cypriot villages and neighborhoods (Fisher, 2001:310; Patrick, 1976). Meanwhile, Greek Cypriots emphasize the time following the 1974 Turkish invasion when the island was *de facto* divided between Turkish army-controlled areas in the north and government controlled areas in the south (Joseph, 1997). During and after the invasion, approximately 165,000 Greek Cypriots were forced by the Turkish military to flee from their own areas, while around 45,000 Turkish Cypriots living in the south chose or were coerced to abandon their houses and move to the north (Fisher, 2001: 311; Attalides, 1979).

Since 1974, negotiations on the Cyprus problem have focused on the right of return for displaced persons. In general, Greek Cypriots aim at maintaining the right of return by citing international human rights law, the principles of the EU including the

acquis communautaire, and the need for the settlement to be perceived as just (United Nations, 2003). Turkish Cypriots, meanwhile, wish to consolidate their demographic presence in northern Cyprus, arguing that realities on the ground, distrust, security issues and the principle of “bizonality” dictate that the right of return should be strictly controlled (Ibid). Individuals and governments have taken this issue to court; since the late 1990s there have been a number of legal decisions by Cypriot, UK and European courts creating important legal precedents for other post-conflict societies.⁵

It Takes a Village to Return a Village: Refugees’ Social Capital and Displaced Persons’ Associations

Although studies demonstrate the effects of social capital on refugee adaptation in host countries (Williams, 2006; Anthias & Cederberg, 2009), no study has attempted to investigate its role in the process of return. Refugee and displaced persons’ associations in Bosnia and Cyprus have been extremely important in the coordination of mass returns, in the mobilization of refugee block voting to influence mediations and the state political system, and in the reduction of the security threat by forging ties with moderates on “the other side.” In several Bosnian cases, displaced person (DP) organizations, based on the same place of residence before cleansing, were instrumental in organizing and facilitating the return process. While some recent studies on Bosnia express disillusionment with the capacity of civil society to restore multiculturalism,⁶ the return process indicates that DP

⁵ However, these decisions have narrowed discussions on the legal aspects of return, sidelining other important political and sociological dimensions.

⁶ For example, Pickering’s recent study shows the common complaint against the advocacy NGOs in Bosnia is that they pay more attention to the demands of international donors than the needs of Bosnians and that they are often unable to help the minorities experiencing discrimination from nationalistic authorities (2006:90-91).

associations can enable ordinary Bosnians to prevail against ultra-nationalist authorities and unresponsive international organizations (Dahlman and Toal, 2005: 650; Belloni, 2008:180-181). For instance, the key to Bosniac return to Zvornik municipality was a quickly formed displaced persons' association (Dahlman and Toal, 2005: 650). Reports on Drvar (ICG 1998a; 1998c) and Prijedor (Belloni, 2008) also identify the significance of these associations. For instance, in Prijedor and Sanski Most, they successfully lobbied for return on the basis of reciprocity (Belloni, 2005: 441; Cox & Garlick, 2003:77). In short, bottom-up organizing and linkages have proven significant in cases where international incentives were not available.

While the victims of ethnic cleansing have returned home in significant numbers all over Bosnia, the Drvar region in western Bosnia is the most successful in peacefully reversing ethnic cleansing. In 1991, 97% of Drvar's 17,000 inhabitants were Serbs (ICG, 1998a: iii). After the September 1995 offensive by Croat forces, the only original inhabitants who remained were 83 older people in isolated villages (ICG, 1998a: 3). However, the International Crisis Group (ICG) estimates that by 2000, Serb returnees represented 70% of the local population, making Drvar the first municipality in which the pre-war majority was restored via peaceful returns (ICG, 2000:4-5). By 2005, the Drvar municipalities (Drvar, Bosansko Grahovo, and Glamoc) were reportedly the only Bosnian municipalities to achieve such a reversal (Dahlman and Toal, 2005:658).

This victory occurred despite the bitter resistance of Croat and Serb ultra-nationalist parties,⁷ and in spite of lukewarm international support (ICG, 1998a: iv).

While the Bosniac nationalist party argued (at least in principle) in favor of the right of

⁷ The SDS, the main Bosnia Serb ultra-nationalist party, strongly resisted the Serbian refugees' desire to return to Drvar, as it hoped to use these people to settle the parts of Republika Srpska from which non-Serbs were cleansed (ICG, 1998a:iii)

return, the main Serbian and Croat ultra-nationalist parties were openly opposed.⁸ The Croat ultra-nationalist HDZ fought the returns every step of the way, making hostile relocations of Croat DPs from central Bosnia into Drvar, issuing “looting permits” for the homes of Serbs who declared their wish to return (Ibid:5), and withdrawing monthly subsidies from municipalities where the returnees’ parties won local elections (Ibid:13). Ultra-nationalist Croat politicians even incited ethnic riots against returnees and international organizations in October 1997 and April 1998. This resistance was to no avail (Ibid: 5-6).⁹ Not only did refugees from Drvar region start returning in large numbers before the country-wide turn of the tide in 1999-2000, but they won municipal elections (Ibid:1-2,13), gained significant representation in the police force and local administration, and recovered the demographic majority status they enjoyed before the war.

While experts are still struggling to explain the successes of the citizens of Drvar in reversing ethnic cleansing, evidence suggests that the resilience, social capital, and organization of the community were key factors. The Drvar DP association (the “Coalition for Drvar”) was formed when it became clear that the nationalist governments ruling different parts of Bosnia were not truly interested in implementing the right of return. One of the first successes of the leaders of the organization was to convince followers to vote in their pre-war hometowns against the wishes of Serb nationalists who counted on those votes to consolidate control in ethnically-cleansed parts of Bosnia. In

⁸More specifically, SDS (Serbian nationalists) and HDZ (Croat nationalists) focused on consolidation of control over the territories their armies had captured and ethnically cleansed, trying to “right people” the territories under their control by permanently settling “their own” displaced people and preventing the ethnic others from returning. The Bosnian Muslim counterpart, SDA was formally committed to the returns, but in practice, it promoted Bosniac returns to the territories “lost” during the war, while discouraging the return of Croats and Serbs into Bosniac-controlled areas (ICG, 1999:16)

⁹ A particularly nice touch was making sure that the roads to villages with Serb returnees were not cleared of snow in the winter (ICG, 1999:14).

1997 Mile Marceta was elected as the mayor of Drvar due to election rules that permitted refugees to cast absentee ballots in their prewar home cities. Described by international media as a “symbol of hope in a land of hate”, the mayor convinced around 1600-2000 displaced persons to accompany him back to the municipality (Wilkinson, 1998; McDougall, 1998). Despite Croat resistance and an assassination attempt against Marceta himself, refugees managed to re-establish themselves back to their ancestral land. The organization not only helped to reverse ethnic cleansing, but also played a leading role in mobilizing support from the international community as well as locally from the multi-ethnic country-wide Coalition for the Return of the Expelled.¹⁰

The experience of Maronites in Cyprus points to similar work done by civic organizations. Analyses of the Cyprus problem have focused exclusively on Greek and Turkish Cypriots, ignoring other indigenous groups in the island, such as Cypriot Maronites.¹¹ There are around 6,000 Cypriot Maronites today, descendants of emigrants from Syria and Lebanon who arrived in the 8th century (Hourani, 1998). It is estimated that in 1224, there was a sizable Maronite community of approximately 60-72 settlements; this declined to only four villages in 1878, after waves of persecution by Ottoman rulers and assimilation pressure from the Greek Cypriot majority (Hourani, 1998; Dib, 1971; Hill, 1972; Varnavas, 2002). All four ancestral Maronite villages, Agia Marina, Asomatos, Carpasia, and Kormakites are located in the northern part of the island, with their native populations largely displaced, because of the 1974 Turkish

¹⁰ DP associations played a key role in the return process elsewhere in the country. For example, the Bosniac DP association facilitated return to Zvornik (Dahlman and Toal, 2005:350) and Prijedor (Belloni, 2008:163,181).

¹¹ In addition to Maronites, there are two other constitutionally recognized minorities, Armenians and Latins (non-Maronite Catholics are primarily descendants of Venetians). There are also Roma, particularly among Turkish Cypriots, as well as a growing number of immigrant groups in the south and post-1974 Turkish settlers in the north. Following 1974, the Turkish government encouraged tens of thousands of mainland Turks to settle in Cyprus. For precise figures, see Loizides & Antoniadis (2009).

invasion and partition of the island. Until recently, the villages were practically unpopulated, with Asomatos and Agia Marina serving as military stations for Turkish occupation forces. Maronites with the partial exception of Agia Marina remained neutral during the 1963-1974 bicomunal clashes and had close connections with foreign governments and the Vatican, which pledged to protect them. Nevertheless, they did not escape ethnic cleansing. As in the case of Drvar, until 2006 only 130 elderly Maronites had managed to stay, primarily in Kormakites, today the center of Maronite life and the only place where Cypriot Maronite Arabic is still spoken (Varnavas, 2002; Theodoulou, 2004; Athanasiadis, 2004).

Since 2003, an opening in the Green Line dividing Cyprus allows Greek Cypriots and Maronites to visit their villages. In 2003, Serdar Denktash¹² hinted that Maronites would be allowed to resettle to northern Cyprus, a decision ratified in 2006 (Leonidou, 2006). As in the case of Bosnia, displaced Maronites faced multiple problems, including delays in the implementation of resettlement laws, destroyed properties, military restrictions in entering two of their villages, and new occupants living on some of their properties. At the same time, the official Cyprus government maintained an ambiguous position as to whether Maronites should return, warning them to be careful in their dealings with Turkish Cypriot authorities and their promises which were, they said, aimed primarily at impressing the international community (Christou, 2003). Nevertheless, by 2007 the overwhelming majority of Cypriot Maronites had rebuilt their houses in Kormakites for permanent or temporary accommodation.¹³

¹² Turkish Cypriot Minister of Foreign Affairs and son of veteran Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktash.

¹³ Observed by second author during visits to Kormakites in December 2004 and July 2007; see also Zaman (2005).

The success of Maronite mobilization could be attributed to the strength of their community organizations while in exile. Cypriot Maronites retained their own ecclesiastical institutions, schools, sports teams and close networks of business groups. They avoided assimilation within the Greek Cypriot community although they actively participated in politics, directing their influence primarily towards the moderate wing of the center-right Democratic Rally (DISY) and nominally-communist AKEL. The strength of the community is demonstrated by the three Maronite MPs in Parliament, including Klavdios Mavrohannas, an elected representative in Kerynia with AKEL and former vice-president of the “Kormakitis” refugee association in Nicosia, Antonis Hadjirussos the formal constitutional minority representative of the Maronites in Parliament and Marios Garoyian, the speaker of the House who is half-Maronite. In addition, one of the vice-presidents of DISY, Socrates Hasikos, is supported primarily by Maronites in his Kerynia district.¹⁴ In the past members of the community were elected or appointed in key positions including the parliament, the Supreme Court and ministerial positions during the Clerides administration (Varnavas, 2002).

On negotiating return to Kormakitis, Maronite civic organizations are important for three reasons. First, they have lobbied the Vatican and “Catholic” governments to pressure Turkey and Turkish Cypriot authorities to allow and facilitate return. Second, their organizations have minimized Greek Cypriot reactions against perceived “preferential” treatment of Maronites and maintained rights for returnees internally displaced in the south while experimenting with return to the north. Third, through their associations, Maronites built close ties with Turkish Cypriot politicians across the political spectrum. Serdar Denktash’s photo decorates the main coffee shop of the village,

¹⁴ Authors’ field-research notes.

and Maronites have developed close personal and business networks with nearby Turkish Cypriot and settler villages. Finally, the associations put positive pressure on individuals to join the return process by sharing information and logistical support. The Maronite website (<http://www.kormakitis.net/>) for instance, provides information on return and often prompts members to return and restore their houses before Turkish Cypriot authorities demolish them for safety reasons.

Similar attempts at voluntary “difficult” return have taken place among Maronite refugees in the village of Biram in Israel and among Assyrian and Kurdish displaced persons in Turkey. In the case of Biram, refugee associations have successfully appealed to the Israeli Supreme Court for the return of their village and lobbied the Pope to use his diplomatic weight on Israeli officials to implement the decision. Unlike their Cypriot counterparts, they have not managed to get Israeli government approval for their return (Hadid, 2009). In the case of Turkey, grassroots displaced persons’ associations from Kurdish-populated regions have played a crucial role in assisting their members find lawyers and take their cases to the European Court of Human Rights, making the court part of the vocabulary of those Kurds who believe their rights have been violated (Celik, 2005: 986).

Despite supportive evidence, the community effort hypothesis cannot be argued in isolation from alternative hypotheses on why refugees return – fear of violence, rational and economic incentives, or types of contact and ideology should also be considered. As shown below, however, the community effort variable can complement and refine existing approaches.

To Return or To Stay Away? Alternative Explanations

Fear of Violence

The research on ethnic violence has emphasized the importance of security concerns and credible safeguards in conflict situations (Van Evera, 1994; Lake & Rothchild, 1996; Walter, 1999; Fearon, 1998). At the individual level, more vulnerable Bosnians and Cypriots (the elderly, women whose male family members were killed,¹⁵ families with small children) are more likely to be afraid to return to a potentially dangerous environment. At the same time, the elderly, women, and families are more likely to be tolerated in “rival” communities, as they pose less of a threat to those communities. For instance, the first version of the Annan Plan for Cyprus proposed that priority among Greek Cypriot returnees should be given to those above the age of 65.

On the one hand, a sense of vulnerability is likely to be enhanced by personal traumatic experiences during the war (assault, torture, loss of a close friend or family member) (UNHCR, 2005: 3), or repeated and severe ethnic harassment after the war (stoning buses carrying returnees, rioting, looting, and burning residential property). The sense of vulnerability to attack may be increased by a village’s geographic position (villages surrounded by ethnic others are more vulnerable to attack than those surrounded by co-ethnics), the residence of ethnic others in the village, and in the case of Cyprus, the presence of foreign troops.¹⁶ There is some Bosnian evidence that the presence of alleged war criminals (especially in the municipal government and police), and control of the municipal government by ultra-nationalist parties, tends to heighten victims’ sense of

¹⁵ Studies (such as Belloni, 2008: 170) of Srebrenica women show that the mass murder of male community members exacerbates a feeling of vulnerability among surviving female family members.

¹⁶ Returns in Bosnia indicate that the easiest returns are to ethnically homogenous villages into which no settlers were brought after the cleansing of original inhabitants (ICG, 1999: 8).

security risk (Nalepa, 2007). Intensity of inter-communal fighting and a local cycle of revenge during the war also increase fears of renewed ethnic violence.¹⁷

On the other hand, in the case of Bosnian returnees, several contextual factors, such as arrests of alleged war criminals, the active presence of international troops, or the multi-ethnic composition of the local police force, appear to reduce fears of physical attack (ICG, 2002:26; Belloni, 2008:179,182; Nalepa, 2007; Dahlman and Toal, 2005:651). In the case of Maronites in Cyprus, international guarantees, particularly pledges of support by the Vatican, and the changing environment after the accession of Cyprus to the EU and Turkey's candidacy status, appear to foster a sense of security among returnees.¹⁸

Yet in the absence of such security mechanisms, refugee community organizations can often provide substitute mechanisms. For one thing, community organizations could secure a critical mass of returnees, making individual vulnerability less of an issue. In addition, refugee organizations could negotiate and help enforce agreements, working with local authorities and associations from other communities in an attempt to control violence. In particular, when these community organizations develop links with civil society groups across ethnic lines, it becomes much easier to manage and resolve tensions (Varshney, 2001:363). Community organizations help monitor and "police" ingroup members (Fearon & Laitin, 1996, 715-35), while information-sharing within institutionalized intercommunal networks reduces conflict and makes ingroup policing more credible (Varshney, 2001:395).

¹⁷ "There seems to be a general rule that, if nobody in the family or neighborhood died of violence during the war, then returnees are accepted back more easily than if a direct loss was suffered" (ICG, 1999:7-8).

¹⁸ Interview with Parliamentary Representative of the Maronite Community, Antonis Hadjiroussos, 2007

Rational Incentives and Economic Calculations

Several studies have demonstrated that incentives are powerful instruments in turning conflict into cooperation, and this insight is relevant in the study of return (Dorussen, 2001). From the conventional rational choice theory perspective, calculations of potential benefits and costs of return should heavily influence the decision-making process of ordinary Bosnians and Cypriots.

Factors in the perceived economic benefits of return include the value of the property, perception of economic opportunities, and concerns about the loss of refugee benefits, pensions, and health coverage due to existing regulations in the place of return (Opacic, 2005:68; Nalepa, 2007:23; ICG, 2002:11,31). It appears that displaced persons with more resources are more likely to return (Holtzamn and Nezam, 2004; Zetter, 1994), even though the perceived costs of return are higher for potential returnees who have jobs and permanent accommodation in the new place of residence. In some cases, Bosnian returnees keep jobs in the other Bosnian entity and commute daily across inter-entity borders (Belloni, 2008), something quite likely to occur in the future among returnees in Israel/Palestine or Cyprus. One would assume that the perception of the comparative economic opportunities in the place of origin and the current place of residence is another factor. Belloni, for instance, argues that Bosniac DPs from rural Eastern Bosnia appreciate the advantages of urban life in Sarajevo and are less interested in return (2008:171-2).¹⁹

A key concern with rational incentives is the changing needs of the sides over time, and difficulties in the renegotiation of incentives once initial steps fail. Trial and

¹⁹ Ethnic intolerance and continued local rule by Serbian ultra-nationalists in Eastern Republika Srpska must also be serious factors for these Bosniac victims of ethnic cleansing.

error efforts are essential, as it is hard to envision the efficacy of incentives before their implementation. In the case of Bosnia, these concerns have been addressed through the involvement of the international community. The Office of the High Representative (OHR), entrusted with overseeing the implementation of the Dayton Accord which ended the war, had the authority to impose solutions when local parties fail to agree. The partial success in reversing ethnic cleansing in Bosnia can partly be explained by the authority exercised by OHR, especially its capacity to readjust policies and incentives to encourage refugee return (Black 2001; Cox & Garlick 2003; Dahlman & Ó Tuathail, 2005).

In fact, the international organizations' return policy in Bosnia went through several distinct phases. In the early post-war phase (1995-1999), attempts to facilitate returns were either half-hearted or unsuccessful, and met with strong ultra-nationalist resistance which included of a set of policies designed to solidify the effects of ethnic cleansing: the refusal to implement property laws, incitement of riots against returnees, open discrimination in judicial systems and employment, and promotion of ethnically intolerant school curricula for returnees' children (ICG, 1999:1). The ultra-nationalists also used "hostile relocation"²⁰ to create a constituency of co-ethnics with a vested interest in the prevention of the returns (ICG, 2000: 12; ICG, 1998c:20). Given this resistance, and concerned that involvement of international troops in the return process might embroil them in renewed violence, many NATO commanders insisted they had no mandate to protect returnees from violence (Belloni, 2008:176). As a result, expensive programs (such as the "Open Cities" initiative) aimed at providing economic incentives to municipalities that welcomed the returnees produced few returns (ICG, 1998b).

²⁰ "Hostile relocations" consist of "deliberate placing of groups of displaced persons in housing that belong to other ethnic groups to secure control over territory and prevent minority returns" (ICG, 1998a:6).

Overall, nationalist resistance to returnees was successful. By January 1999, only 86,741 of the minorities had returned.²¹ As disappointment with the return rates and donor fatigue set in (ICG, 2000: i), Bosnia seemed destined to repeat the failure of many other post-conflict societies to reverse ethnic cleansing.

However, by 1999, international organizations found the will and developed the capacity to break resistance to returns. The UN High Representative for Bosnia introduced a set of laws to facilitate repossession of residential property. The shift in approach reframed the issue of returns from a heavily politicized exchange of economic aid to municipalities for minimum tolerance to the minorities, into an ethnically-blind exercise of individual property rights and the rule of law (ICG, 1999:23). The Constitutional Court with the participation of foreign judges actively promoted re-integration by deciding in 2000 that the federal entities could not be considered exclusively Serb, Croat, or Bosnian Muslim. Rather, they must guarantee legal equality to all citizens, including minority returnees (Belloni 2008: 58-62).

The international agencies also set up a Reconstruction and Return Task Force – a specialized agency with a set of field offices to facilitate the return process at the local level (ICG, 1999:i). The OHR was given the power to remove officials who were not fulfilling Dayton’s commitments, including the right of return (Dahlman & Ó Tuathail, 2005:586). In particular, ultra-nationalist mayors who tried to block the repossession of property were dismissed by the UN High Representative (ICG, 1999:6). Furthermore, the international community introduced a Property Law Implementation Plan, which allowed

²¹ Source: <http://www.unhcr.ba/return/T5-092006.pdf>. “Minority returns” refers to Bosnians who return to their pre-war place of residence in a municipality now dominated by another ethnic group. For example, while Bosniacs returning from Germany to Sarajevo would count as “majority returns,” Bosniacs returning from Sarajevo to home in Republika Srpska would count as “minority returns.”

forced evictions of those who were illegally occupying refugees' property (UNHCR, 2005: 7; Belloni, 2008:186-8).²² Finally, international troops showed greater willingness to provide physical security for the returnees (Dahlman and Toal, 2005: 651).

The outcome was a success, surprising many international administrators (ICG, 2002: 39). Estimated minority returns in a number of municipalities rapidly went well beyond 30% of their pre-war presence (Toal and Dahlman, 2005:12). A senior UNHCR officer in Bosnia concluded that UNHCR largely met its responsibilities in terms of refugee returns in Bosnia (ICG, 2002:39).²³

These examples suggest that one cannot rely exclusively on the role of local actors, including community groups, in securing return. Yet the latter can support and direct international peacekeepers by legitimizing policies in favor of returnees, by coordinating local and international resources, and by providing critical information and feedback for the implementation of relevant policies.

Contact and Resentment

Research by Petersen (2002) and Kolsto (2002) indicates that beliefs about the positions of ethnic groups in a "pecking order" will influence preparedness to live under the domination of the ethnic "other." Living under the relatively benign domination of an

²² The evictions of illegal occupants sent a clear message that those illegally occupying the property had to return to their homes, which led to a modification of their long term expectations. This created a "virtuous circle," in which increasing numbers of illegal occupants voluntarily turned back the property, and the returns of some DPs opened up space for the return of others; see ICG (1999:6); Belloni (2008:187).

²³ Other observers remain skeptical about the long-term sustainability of returns (ICG, 2002; Belloni, 2008:163). Returnees are often discouraged by the continued presence of alleged war criminals in the local government, employment discrimination, nationally exclusive school curricula, and barriers to payment of pensions and health care provisions (ICG, 2002: 3,11, 15). Anecdotal evidence indicates that the majority of the returnees are elderly and retired persons who came back to destroyed and abandoned villages. Returns of young families with children and urban returns are rare (ICG, 2000:3; ICG, 2002: 4,10,11,16,24.).

ethnic group perceived as “inferior” may be “humiliating,” while harsher domination by a group seen as “superior” might be seen as “legitimate” (Petersen, 2002: 4-2, 51; Kolsto and Melburg, 2002; Kolsto, 2002:26). Petersen’s comparative historical analysis shows that the resentment thesis has a predictive and descriptive fit in a variety of 20th century ethnic conflicts in Eastern Europe (Petersen, 2002:21, 256). Contact hypotheses²⁴ and resentment considerations are important in designing policies for refugee return. A pressing question is whether under conditions of perceived resentment, returnees will be better off integrated or left to return in smaller territories under their exclusive control. The resentment thesis implies that victims of ethnic cleansing who believe that the group which now dominates their region is inferior are less likely to in the first place return, and, if they manage to return, more likely to remain segregated.

Perceptions of the ethnic “other” influence heavily how victims of ethnic cleansing see their return. For instance in an interview with the authors, former Cypriot President George Vasiliou argued that the opening of the checkpoints in 2003 contributed to the failure of the peace process in the following year, as Greek Cypriots visiting the north lost their hitherto idealistic view of northern Cyprus. During these visits, potential returnees realized the differences separating them from Turkish Cypriots and resented the socio-economically marginalized Turkish settlers. Likewise, Christou and King (2006) observe the difficulties and often disappointments of Greek-American returnees to Greece as the homogenous society they left decades earlier has become a *de-facto* multicultural society.

²⁴ Allport (1954) states that under appropriate conditions, interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice between majority and minority group members.

To address this issue in the cases of victims of ethnic cleansing, community organizations could greatly facilitate the adaptation of a refugee community to a “new” environment. Community representatives might negotiate reserved lands, including family houses, village squares, churches, and schools, as well as surrounding land designed to attract returnees and destined primarily for their use. Kymlicka suggests that an effective way to protect communities (particularly previously victimized communities) is to establish reserve territories where land cannot be alienated without the consent of the community as a whole (Kymlicka, 1995:43). Yet reserves fail to resolve major problems or satisfy the needs of Aboriginal communities in North America. Social psychologists are divided on this issue, with those favoring inter-group contact pointing to the benefits of some form of integration at the business, social, or residential level (Wagner et.al, 2006).

Nationalist Ideology

Victims of ethnic cleansing who do not want to live with other ethnic groups are less likely to return than those who can accept multiethnicity. ICG studies claim that the belief that “we cannot live together after all that has happened” is strongly related to rejection of return (for example, ICG, 2002). Presumably, displaced persons with very negative visions of others or the tendency to blame all others for injustices are less likely to return. Alternatively, strongly nationalist individuals might be more likely to return if such return is perceived as a way to regain lost territory for the ethnic group.²⁵

²⁵ According to ICG, this is how the conservative Bosniac SDA party perceives Bosniac returns to Serb-dominated Republika Srpska (ICG, 1999:16).

Nationalist ideology can help determine the responses of refugee groups. Turkish and Greek Cypriots developed uneven responses to their refugee experience, reflecting the major tenets of their community's official ideology. As noted above, Turkish Cypriots aim to establish a new homogeneous or predominantly Turkish/Turkish Cypriot entity, while Greek Cypriots retain a strong desire to reverse partition and return to their ancestral homelands (Loizos, 1981; Zetter, 1994, 1999; Kliot & Mansfeld, 1994; Anastasiou, 2002:584; Broome, 2004:203).

Similar considerations appear in Bosnia and Israel/Palestine (and elsewhere), with Israelis and Bosnian Serbs (and Croats) aiming to consolidate control of new territories while Bosnian Muslims and Palestinians aim (at least in principle) to re-establish the right of return. In Bosnia, the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) guaranteed the victims of ethnic cleansing the right to return, but the exercise of that right was fiercely resisted by ultra-nationalists. If opposition to the right of return becomes embedded in the ideology and organizational structure of a group, social capital of the ethnic group that now controls the captured territory could turn into impediment to returns. Community groups could easily turn into effective pressure groups opposing the right of return, spoiling the peace process, and influencing decisions at the state level.²⁶

Conclusion: Limitations and Policy Recommendations

Although social capital is an innovative and valuable way to analyze the process of return, this approach also several limitations. To begin with, victims of ethnic cleansing

²⁶ Haklai identifies two modes of state penetration that can negatively influence a peace process: first, having members of the group appointed to various decision-making positions (e.g. in the local police authority opposing return) and second, having officials whose loyalty to the laws of the state is matched or surpassed by their sympathy to the community organization's objective (Haklai 2007:718).

who stay in close and regular contact with people from the same village may be more likely to contemplate joint return than those whose close networks include non-refugees in the new place of residence. But causal arrows might equally well point in the other direction: a review of literature indicates that those thinking of return are more likely to maintain networks based on their areas of origin, and those who intend to integrate are more likely to develop networks in the current area of residence (Holtzamn and Nezam, 2004: 142).

Moreover, it is important to identify conditions that lead to the emergence of specific forms of social capital. The host (or “rump”) state’s decisions can have an impact on the creation of refugee social capital. On the one hand, the decision of the state to settle all refugees from single regions together could facilitate maintenance of their communal life and, thus, emergence of village-specific refugee organizations. On the other hand, a decision to disperse refugees could reduce refugee social capital by making joint communal life considerably more difficult. Furthermore, as demonstrated in our cases, the state could dramatically enhance the influence and legitimacy of refugees’ formal organizations by allowing local elections in exiled communities and recognizing elected leaders as their legitimate representatives. However, the refusal to recognize such elections and institutions might dramatically reduce the social capital – especially strength of formal institutions – of the refugees.

A number of studies on refugee adaptation in Cyprus (Loizos, 1981; Zetter, 1994, 1999; Klot & Mansfeld, 1994) and the refugee return process in the Balkans (Belloni, 2001, 2006, 2008; Black, 2001; Cox & Garlick, 2003) demonstrate limitations in the empirical evidence used. Some quantitative studies show limited understanding of the

meaning of return numbers.²⁷ In the case of Bosnia, UNHCR reports are based on the returnees' self-registrations, but as registration leads to problems in the reception of pension and health benefits, many returnees choose not to register (Belloni, 2008:162-3; ICG, 2002, 4). In the case of Cyprus, there are no data-driven studies concerning the intentions of displaced persons to return home despite the declared policy of both leaders to negotiate a settlement "for Cypriots by Cypriots." Assumptions in the negotiations or the secondary literature concerning security, economic incentives, prejudice, or ideology are often unsubstantiated or refer to the whole population (Lordos, 2006) and are not informed by surveys of the displaced persons themselves.

Better grounded studies show awareness of major limitations of existing "return statistics." In the Bosnian case, several institutions have collected this type of data, but each has used a different (and limited) methodology (ICG, 2000:5). Large scale quantitative studies of returnees and displaced persons are rare, and a recent comprehensive regional study by several Belgrade University scholars suffers from clearly unrepresentative samples and a lack of multivariate analysis of the data (Opacic et al, 2005:57, 138). A series of studies produced by major international agencies (such as the ICG), while careful in the use of evidence and analytically sophisticated, remain overwhelmingly descriptive and policy-oriented, with no serious attempt to develop or test theoretically informed explanations.²⁸ These and other studies also tend to make limited use of micro-level evidence and analysis. The focus on official documents and

²⁷ An otherwise innovative and interesting recent study by Napela (2007:20) misinterprets data on UNHCR registrations as an indicator of "returns."

²⁸ The most analytically interesting document in this genre is the ICG report *Preventing Minority Returns in Bosnia and Herzegovina: the Anatomy of Hate and Fear* (1999). On the basis of anecdotal evidence, the report proposes several "common types" of returnees and "return resisters." However, it attempts neither to ground these claims in the comparative and theoretical works on ethnic conflicts nor to systematically test them by using Bosnian evidence.

statistics, newspaper articles, and the views of international officials and local politicians, leaves little space for the experiences and decision-making processes of the actual victims of ethnic cleansing, the people who, at the end of the day, decide whether to go back or stay away.

Future research could overcome some of the key limitations of existing studies. Research on refugee return could become more theory-driven by assessing the explanatory power of theoretically derived competing hypotheses and by collecting and analyzing evidence on the observable implications of each hypothesis. A focus on the micro-level dynamics of ordinary people and their organizations would also be helpful.

While our analysis indicates that strong social capital can be a key resource to facilitate the return, it is important neither to exaggerate its causal significance nor to ignore its potential harmful effects on individual refugees and their communities. To start with, strong social capital of the refugee communities cannot be used as a substitute for a basic level of security from hostile institutions and groups, such as ultra-nationalist paramilitaries on the “other side.” While the presence of social capital does increase the capacity for organization of communal effort, it does not guarantee that this resource will be used by refugees.

Furthermore, strong social capital could be both a blessing and a curse. For example, a strong sense of communal obligations and closure of network ties could severely limit opportunities of refugees for upward mobility and successful individual integration into the host society. Refugees might end up ignoring opportunities for integration, spending their lives waiting for a day of return that never comes. Younger members of the communities who decide to pursue their own happiness outside the

community through advanced education or marrying out might be perceived as “selfish” or even “traitors,” and thus subjected to ostracism and loss of valued communal ties. Understandable idealization and romantization of village life before the catastrophic expulsion might make refugee communities refuse to change any major communal traditions that existed before the war. Sticking to patriarchic (and outmoded) traditions could severely restrict the freedoms and opportunities of women and youth. Even worse, as determined and well-organized refugee communities wait for the chance to return, they might become bitter, even extremist. The social capital of the refugee communities could then be used by extremists to sabotage the peace process – if, for example, the unconditional right to return is not included in the peace treaty. Strong refugee social capital could become a recruitment ground and safe haven for extremists.

Finally, empathy for victims of ethnic cleansing should not blind researchers to the danger that the injustice victims suffered might radicalize them and turn them into perpetrators. Arguably, the return home is the best solution for the refugee question, as it reverses ethnic cleansing and shows potential ethnic cleansers everywhere that their criminal tactics will fail.²⁹ The worst possible outcome is if victims of ethnic cleansing neither return to their old home nor integrate into the new one, but stay in a permanent limbo, isolated from the host society, and thirsty for revenge against those who wronged them. In such cases, the refugee population can turn into a “festering wound” in the host society, a hotbed of militancy, and the natural political constituency for ultra-nationalists who promise a military return and the revenge ethnic cleansing of the “other,” as

²⁹ Belloni (2008) uses Bosniac returns to Prijedor to argue that refugee voters can undermine ultra-nationalist parties and bring about the cooperation of moderates across ethnic lines.

suggested by experiences of Palestinians in the Middle East or Tutsis and Hutus in Central Africa.

Our cases demonstrate that there is no reason to let desperation become extremism, as viable peaceful alternatives certainly do exist. The combination of supportive state and international policies, combined with the efforts of refugee communities, can ensure the peaceful return of victims and a reversal of ethnic cleansing, even in the most difficult cases.

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