



## **Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program**

### **Research Report**

*The opinions, recommendations, and conclusions of the grantee are his/her own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IREX or the US Department of State.*

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**State-breaking/State-making: Returning Refugees, NGOs, and the Political Geography of Bosnia and Herzegovina**

#### 1. Topic of Research

My research is an ethnographic study of the intersection of two internationally-mediated processes in Bosnia-Herzegovina: state-building, in its legal, institutional, geopolitical and sociocultural dimensions; and the return of refugees to areas in which they come to be an “ethnic minority.” Bosnia-Herzegovina is home to on-going, at times contradictory attempts to shape Bosnia’s emergent state(s). Given that the placement of people, including their enforced sedentarization, is a principle form of statecraft, I originally proposed to focus on the practices through which “refugees” and “returnees” are discursively and institutionally constituted in ways that strengthen or undermine claims to sovereignty and territorial integrity. Once on the ground, the framework for the project expanded as it became clear that the refugee return process was principally *innovative*, a way for domestic and international actors to create and fashion, for example, new property regimes, legal and institutional axes of representation, standards of education, and economic relations. Rather than seeing refugee return as one set of practices shaping the country’s political future, my project now reflects the fact that refugee return has become the primary process of post-war statebuilding and post-socialist transformation in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

2. Relevance and contribution to field: a brief description of the scholarly impact and policy significance of the research.

My research is significant for the ways in which we understand post-socialist and state-building transformations; the dramatic shifts government itself is undergoing; the roles and possibilities of “refugees” in post-war areas; and the deeply embedded nature of international intervention in these processes in the post-Cold War era.

The unsettled condition of so many refugees, displaced persons, and returnees is indicative of a larger flux of the state in Bosnia. This flux points contradictorily to two trends in the scholarly literature on states: in the present era, states seem so real to participants and analysts alike that the most important theoretical strategy has been to de-reify the state as a unified entity. At the same time, scholars of all stripes have been declaring the failure and demise of the nation-state as an effective organizational form. Conditions in BiH complicate both of these approaches or assumptions. Not only is there no taken for granted “state” to de-reify in Bosnia, but in fact the state is hard to create, build up, and sustain. Moreover, the ways in which international efforts towards state-building in BiH are conceived and justified, especially regarding the pre-requisites for accession into pan-European institutions and the EU, suggest that the nation-state form is still fundamental to participation in the world and global markets. Proceeding from these observations, my research uses the refugee return process to ethnographically account for both the flux in the state and the patterns of social and political interaction that nevertheless form under such conditions. Understanding how ordinary people in BiH make sense of this flux, and the patterns which emerge as they set about going about their lives, requires placing these processes in the context of Yugoslav ideology and everyday experiences, as well as the ideological and material consequences of the war. By bringing together the question of how one “builds” a sustainable state with how people make sense of the present state of flux by drawing upon their experience of socialism and war, my research will speak to scholarship on the state, post-socialist transformations, and the effects of international interventions.

My research directly addresses how it is that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other non-state organizations ought to be understood as actors in the post-Cold War world. By virtue of operating across state boundaries and intervening in what would have been previously categorized as “internal affairs,” international NGOs are understood by activists and analysts as part of an emergent trend which reveals, if not causes, erosion in the practice of state sovereignty. Indeed, the task of governing Bosnia’s various and collective populations is carried out by institutions and organizations outside the state apparatus usually taken for granted in most scholarship on the state, “transition,” or “development.” However, my research points to the ways in which novel constellations of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), NGOs, and humanitarian organizations, interacting with various domestic actors, can support one state-building project at the same time that their actions break down the claims to sovereignty of others. My study of the refugee return process brings the practices of these many actors into one analytic framework, and tracks how returnees and others

navigate this institutional and ideological terrain, and work to make sense of it. In this way, my project fits into current debates on how government itself works in post-war areas that have a significant international presence, as well as on how to calibrate the goals with the effects of any NGO project or IGO program.

Finally, my research is of particular relevance to scholarship on refugees. As much contemporary scholarship now recognizes, rather than being an unfortunate by-product of an armed conflict, creating refugees and directing their movement and settlement are deliberate and fundamental war strategies. If refugees are so crucial to wartime strategy, it stands to reason that they are important also to post-war processes. This is particularly the case when the political aims of war are a re-ordering of people and territory. This underscores my point that post-war reconstruction and rebuilding is less a restoration of what was before and more the creation of something new. My research contributes to the burgeoning literature on the role of refugees in their countries after conflict has ceased. I do this by showing how central the process of refugee return has become to international efforts at fashioning a multi-ethnic nation-state and at implementing post-socialist reforms in Bosnia. One effect of this is that far from the powerless, passive subjects of need they are regularly portrayed as in the media, “refugees” and “returnees” are politically and economically effective agents in a variety of contexts. Rather than existing as marginalized populations, “refugees” and “returnees” are actively shaping Bosnia’s political future.

3. A concise summary of my approach and research methodology including a list of research sites.

To a large degree my research focuses on the practices and effects of NGO and IGO projects and programs in the refugee return process. My methodology proceeds from the recognition that *all* such projects have effects, consequences, and outcomes which are unintended and unexpected. In order to avoid framing my research in the terms of these projects, I seek to move beyond the intended/unintended calculus which too often reduces the meaning of research results to the interests of project donors, state governments, or powerful international organizations, and may elide important effects of any purposeful activity. In order to understand what is unfolding on the ground without prejudice to whether it is “intended” or not, I employed Foucault’s notion of “governmentality,” in which to govern is to “get persons to align their particular wills with ends imposed on them through constraining and facilitating models of possible acts” (Burchell 1991:119). This allowed me to track the meaningful “governmental” practices and effects of NGOs, IGOs, and domestic state institutions alike.

My methodology combines participant observation, formal and informal interviews, monitoring of print, legal, and broadcast media, and the collection of life history narratives. A particularly useful and important focus is on sites of interaction between various actors in the refugee return process (meetings, training sessions, beneficiary selection, etc.).

I carried out my research principally in the two neighboring municipalities of Prijedor in the Republika Srpska, and Sanski Most in the Federation. The towns which anchor these two municipalities are separated by 30 kilometers and a political border (the so-called Inter-Entity Boundary Line). Locating my research in these two sites was effective in allowing me to compare the different effects and experiences of return between different populations in differently-configured political entities (Serbs to Sanski Most began largely in 2000 and 2001, and Muslims/Bosniacs to Prijedor began in 1998/1999). For interlocutors, I focused in particular on the international and domestic NGOs active in the return process (such as the Lutheran World Federation, Local Democracy Agency, and Fondacija za obnova i povratak Prijedor 98), the IGOs also active there (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Office of the High Representative, UN High Commission on Refugees), and current, past, and potential returnees.

#### 4. A summary of findings and preliminary conclusions

As I am still in Bosnia conducting research, I have yet to formally analyze my ethnographic data into more definitive conclusions. I present here a few preliminary and general ideas.

The people among whom I have done my research have lived in conditions of insecurity for over a decade – from the crumbling institutional protections and guarantees of the Yugoslav system, to the poverty, fear and oppression of the war years and the sometimes-volatile changes in the post-war period. One major result has been the creation of mutually exclusive ethnonational collectivities and a politics of suspicion, fear, insecurity, and division between the peoples of Bosnia. Most international intervention aims to undermine the politics of ethnic difference as a divisive element in BiH and create a stable, multi-ethnic state. The effects of such intervention, however, often end up sustaining the divisive politics they seek to undermine.

First, at a time when the economic situation continues to deteriorate, everyday life for large segments of the population has grown less stable in the years since war ended and international intervention began, rather than more stable. While the causes for this are many and varied, they include the on-going and at times radical changes in the way governmental institutions function, the constant introduction of new laws, the removal of elected and appointed officials from office, the loss of housing, and the unsystematic privatization of state-owned companies. All of these changes are either directly imposed by internationals here or are the effects of policies they support, and one collective effect has been to reinforce fear and a general feeling of insecurity. These feelings are exploited subtly and explicitly by powerful domestic politicians and others whose positions of power are based upon a maintaining a passive public through governmental policies of ethnic difference. It is a paradox of international state-building that as internationals seek to wrest the institutions of state government away from merely functioning as instruments selective enrichment and political patronage, and create a multiethnic system which serves citizens rather than ethnonationals, they end

up reinforcing the social conditions which make the politics of ethnic difference and fear so effective.

Many of these destabilizing changes are carried out in the name of supporting a system that enables or sustains refugee return. A case in point are the recent constitutional changes handed down by the international community in accordance with decision of the Constitutional Supreme Court of BiH. The changes are far-reaching and principally affirm the equality and constitutiveness of Bosnia's three main *narodi* (nations or peoples) in all areas of BiH; previously, Bosnia's two political entities made reference to particular ethnonational groups as making up the sovereign polity to the exclusion of others. These changes are clearly intended to secure the rights and participation of all Bosnians across the entire territory of BiH and to prevent public institutions from governing to exclude and oppress individuals or populations on the basis of their ethnicity – in other words, an attempt to effectively remove ethnic difference as an exploitable source of political conflict. However, the way in which these changes are being implemented is to create a system of required ethnic slots in all public institutions, from parliaments and ministries to the post office and public utilities. Not only does this reflect official government policy in Bosnia directly preceding the war. At the state and entity levels it has already reinforced ethnicity as the most important element for political representation and has aided the three nationalist parties who were governing BiH when the war broke out to resume power. Moreover, at the municipal level, conditions are even more unsettling. Not surprisingly in a time when the unemployment rate is well over 50% and the only real secure job is working for the state, returnees have begun to mobilize the new constitutional changes to gain jobs in the public sector. And this is coming at a time when there is an overall push to cut bloated bureaucracies. While these changes have yet to be implemented at the municipal level, in practice is anticipated that people will lose jobs because of their ethnicity, and other will get jobs because of their ethnicity. Rather than making ethnic difference less important, it will continue to be a principle of governing institutions. Rather than providing a foundation for equality and security among peoples in areas with significant return, these constitutional changes promise to destabilize relations between returnees and their neighbors.

This also reinforces a second, on-going dynamic in the refugee return process. The enormous focus of symbolic, financial, legal, and institutional resources has led to the formation of a whole political and moral economy of "return" that heavily influences the everyday life practices and choices of returnee populations and their neighbors. From the rebuilding of houses and the repossession of property to the creation of new school curricula and the formation of income-generation and micro-credit programs designed to economically aid returnees, the return process has become increasingly complex and wide-ranging in its goals. One effect of the moral, political, and financial force lent to the return process by international and domestic actors, is to reinforce the importance of being a "refugee" or "returnee" of a particular, ethnicized minority, rather than the gradual replacement of this social category by others, such as citizen.

## 5. Suggestions for future research agendas in my field for the scholarly community.

Much more attention needs to be focused on the economic transformations going on in BiH. In particular it will be important to look at the effects of the shift from locating one's rights and membership in the political community as a *worker*, to locating those rights (minus the crucial right to work) and membership in the political community as an (ethnicized) *citizen*. There is plenty of evidence that people of all backgrounds are resisting this. As Burchell has noted,

Because individuals attach a value to their 'self-image,' they are most deeply affected by political power when it impinges on this relation they have to themselves. They are most profoundly affected when the way they are governed requires them to alter how they see themselves as governed subjects (1991: 119).

The laments of returnees and others in Bosnia about the lack of work and other "problems of the state" are in part protests about the new regimes of government—Bosnian and international—that do not make room or space for the governed subjects they would like to be (such as laboring producers, cosmopolitan consumers, or other Yugoslav-era ways of experiencing and inhabiting the social world). How this shift is negotiated and experienced will have far-reaching effects for both post-socialist state formation and economic transformation and peace.

## 6. Recommendations for the US policy community.

The report thus far entails its own lessons for international intervention and the US policy community. It is clear that when the various IGOs, NGOs, and international policing bodies arrived to mediate the implementation of the Dayton Agreement, there was no model. Whatever the hope and intent was for quick implementation of Dayton when the war ended, international authorities—including a wide variety of US actors and authorities—are far too deeply embedded with how politics and economics operate in Bosnia to remove themselves quickly. There has been a consistent tendency by international authorities and donors to underestimate the financial and time commitment necessary to manage the substantial effects of their policies and practices. While social instability may be inevitable as institutions reform and laws change, the international authorities that push through these changes are morally obliged to stay engaged as long as it takes for these changes to take effect in the everyday lives of all Bosnians.

It is also fundamental that the various governing international authorities in Bosnia face a paradox underlying their interventions: they claim to be for democratization, and yet are totally unaccountable to average Bosnians. They make decisions that affect the everyday lives of Bosnians, and yet these people have no say in the matter. Moreover, it is all too easy for the very Bosnian politicians that are supposedly accountable to their citizens to avoid accountability for their corruption and failures by pointing to the international community as the dictatorial culprit for the current situation of ordinary

Bosnians. Solving the puzzle of international accountability would go far to rousing a dispirited and passive Bosnian public and making the divisive politics of ethnic difference less effective.

### Reference

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