

# “Crazy”, or Privileged Enough to Return?: Exploring Voluntary Repatriation to Bosnia and Herzegovina from “the West”

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## Abstract

This article presents the results of a small-scale research study with people who chose to repatriate to post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina from six countries of the so-called West. I analyze the narratives of the individual reasons and perceived conditions of the voluntary return, experiences, and reactions encountered, and reflections on the sustainability of such return, demonstrating that multiple important practical and emotional reasons need to come together for the return to occur and to last. The research shows the predominantly open-ended, and in many ways privileged, nature of the investigated repatriation: repatriation is a viable option only if returnees can benefit from it socially, economically and emotionally, and potential re-emigration is thus a common back-up plan. The article demonstrates the importance of examining how returnees' skills, savings, networks, and education – in addition to perceived ethno-national sameness “back home” – in understanding the reasons for and attitudes toward voluntary repatriation.

**Keywords:** Bosnia and Herzegovina, forced displacement, voluntary return/repatriation, privilege, nation-thinking.

## Introduction

At the end of the twentieth century, the displacement of population of Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter BiH) represented the largest so-called refugee crisis in Europe since World War II. After the devastating war (1992-1995) that followed this country's secession from Yugoslavia, forced displacement of an estimated 60% of the country's population both within and outside the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina resulted in around 2,2 million displaced people, out of which around 1,2 million had fled across the border of the country (see Kālin 2006, Porobić 2017). Presently, more than twenty years after the end of the war, a significant diasporic community still lives outside of the borders of BiH, predominantly people who escaped the war and never managed, or wanted, to return. The consequences of forced displacement and ethnic cleansing thus continue to influence lives, and determine the

place of residence for around 2.5 million people born in BiH who are living elsewhere.

In many migrant-receiving societies, people from BiH are considered to be among the most successfully integrated immigrant groups (see Valenta and Štrabac 2013, Valenta and Ramet 2011). However, the essentially nativist and sedentarist<sup>1</sup> idea of “returning where we came from” figures prominently in discourses of numerous migrants originating from BiH (Kovačević Bielicki 2016, 2017). Various other researchers also suggest that many displaced people from BiH maintain close social ties with their country of origin (Eastmond 2006, Valenta and Rammet 2011, Povrzanović Frykman 2009, 2011, Vrecel 2010, Franz 2000, 2005, Hanlin 2010, Al-Ali 2002, Kelly 2009, Delalić 2001, Grün 2009, Halilovich 2012,

<sup>1</sup> Jansen and Löfving (2008: 45) define sedentarism as discourse prevalent in refugee studies that naturalizes the link between people and place.

Farrel 2008, Colic-Peisker 2003, 2005). The fact that many displaced people from BiH, as well as many other migrant groups in “the West” nurture ethno-nationalist identifications is most often a reaction to exclusion the dominant logic of the nation-thinking omnipresent in, and imposed by the receiving societies in which they reside.<sup>2</sup> Many migrants encounter rising xenophobia and Islamophobia. In the receiving nation-states the migrants’ belonging is highly contested, and the success of the populists all over Europe and in the United States of America is often based on the anti-migrant rhetoric. This is the case particularly for obvious racialized migrant groups in Europe (see El-Tayeb 2011). However, although research on former Yugoslav migrants in Norway (Kovačević Bielicki 2017) and Bosnians in Australia (Colic-Peisker 2005) shows how migrants from former Yugoslavia clearly benefit from a certain degree of white privilege<sup>3</sup>, many also report getting regularly ethnicized, othered, and, in many cases, racialized as well (ibid.).<sup>4</sup>

In the context of post-war BiH, the constructed division between diaspora and homeland dwellers, stayers and leavers (Halilovich 2013), is fruitful ground for researching both new social cleavages and new solidarities in the region. Micinski and Hasić (2018) point to the many new social cleavages that were created as a result of con-

flict, displacement, and repatriation, and how they intersect with ethnic identities in unique ways. Diaspora and returnees in one sense often feel significantly excluded from “fully” belonging to their perceived ethnic groups “back home” due to them often being viewed as foreign, changed, and privileged, while in another sense, their experience of migration and alterity both home and abroad create a space for building new, transnational and inter-ethnic solidarities that intersect a rough general division between migrants and non-migrants.

As such, the post-war return to BiH of Bosnians living abroad is important to look into for at least two important reasons: First, when discussing long-distance nationalism in migration studies (e.g. Anderson 1992), the myth of return is a particularly important phenomenon, common to and nurtured in many diasporic “communities” (see for example Safran 1991 and Markowitz and Stefanssen 2004) and crucially related to nativist nationalist ideologies that strictly regulate individual belonging and limit individuals’ choices. Second, in the case of BiH in particular, sustainable return to pre-war residences is also, with good reason, seen as a crucial tool needed to reverse ethnic cleansing (Phuong 2000, Cox 1998). The long-lasting unstable and unfavorable political and economic situation in BiH following the end of the armed conflict has not been encouraging to any massive and sustainable return, despite the right of all forcibly displaced persons to return, guaranteed by Annex VII of Dayton Peace Accords that brought an end to the armed conflict. Selma Porobić notes that in practice, the decision to return is subject to changing global, regional and local political influences, including pressure from sending and receiving governments and the effects of international protection politics and trends (Porobić 2017). In the case of people displaced to Northern and Western Europe, Australia and North America, what is commonly seen as Western<sup>5</sup> countries or

<sup>2</sup> By nation-thinking I here understand a specific kind of group-thinking focused on a nation as a dominant identifier and a source of group identity, by evoking Arendt’s use of the term race-thinking in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and Calhoun’s (2007:27) definition of nationalism as a “talking, writing and thinking about the basic units of culture, politics, and belonging that helps to constitute nations as real and powerful dimensions of social life.”

<sup>3</sup> “We need to be able to name the subtle and often unspoken role that whiteness plays in systems of de facto racial injustice so that it does not become even less visible and more insidiously convoluted than it already is. The term “white privilege” attempts to make these systems visible and to decrypt their code words.” (Sullivan 2017)

<sup>4</sup> “According to Foucault, othering is strongly connected with power and knowledge. When we other(v) another group, we point out their perceived weaknesses to make ourselves look stronger or better.” (see Rismyhr 201)

<sup>5</sup> I refer in this research to the term “West” because its BCS counterpart *zapad* it is widespread and com-

*zapad*<sup>6</sup> in the everyday discourse in the region in question, the majority of the displaced people (re)built their lives and they do not consider that the return would be a favorable step for them and their families. Thousands of Bosnian refugees were forcefully repatriated back to BiH after December 1996, when UNHCR declared the end of temporary protection, and it was originally expected that the majority of the returns will be spontaneous (Walsh, Black and Koser 1999).<sup>7</sup> It was clear already in 1997 that this spontaneous voluntary return is not at all massive, and many countries, most notably Germany, initiated and conducted so-called assisted return programs through which people were often repatriated against their own wishes.<sup>8</sup>

According to Al-Ali, Black, and Koser (2010) Bosnian refugees from the 1990s that have “stayed on” after the end of conflicts and reside all over the world, are new and emerging “transnationals”. As noted earlier, in many countries former Bosnian refugees have obtained permanent residence rights and (re)built their lives. This is the case particularly for the new generations of people who grew up abroad, having escaped the war while they were children and young adults, and for those born abroad to parents who were refugees. The main trend seems to be for these young and relatively young gen-

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mon word in BiH used to refer to countries in Northern and Western Europe, North America and Australia. What is considered Western or not, where, and why, is a highly contextual and complex issue, for which reason I tend to put the English term in quotation marks.

<sup>6</sup> All words and sentences in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian language (hereafter BCS) in this article will be written in *cursive*.

<sup>7</sup> In this article I use the term repatriation interchangeably with return, which is particularly useful as defined by the Merriam Webster online dictionary, where it is stated that **repatriate** means to restore or return to the country of origin, allegiance, or citizenship (Merriam Webster online 2018). Re-emigration is here used to refer to the case when people who repatriate once again move back to the host country they repatriated from, or emigrate to another country.

<sup>8</sup> Before repatriations, Germany temporarily hosted what is commonly assessed to as many as 350,000 refugees from BiH.

erations to get education, work abroad and to not return to the country of origin, based on my insights from last seven years of intense research on migrants from former Yugoslavia. Voluntary return from those countries that did not undertake any extensive forced repatriation of Bosnian refugees is rare, but it is not an insignificant phenomenon. It is hard to quantify this return due to its open-ended and unregistered character, however there are certainly many more than a few isolated cases of people who voluntarily repatriated. Field observations and informal conversation conducted by Selma Porobić over the period of six years in BiH have shown the substantial increase in self-organized return of refugees settled in Western Europe (Porobić 2017); she labels this return as unrecorded return, as opposed to assisted and organized return. Voluntary return is largely unrecorded, precisely because it is self-organized, often open-ended, and people keep their residence abroad and often commute between the countries, thus living bi-nationally and transnationally.

The case study I present, although very limited in its scope, gives a voice directly to people who chose to return, looks into reasons why they did, and considers how sustainable they think their return can be in future. Many valuable research studies addressed different aspects of return to BiH (Porobić, 2016, 2017, Dahlman and O’Tuathail 2005, Black 2001, 2002, Jansen 2011, Halilovich 2011, Harvey 2006, Philpott 2006, Williams 2006, Čukur et al 2005). However, most of the previous literature focused on the *how* of the return dynamics, namely either on the policies and legal mechanisms available, or ways in which they are used, typically from the top-down perspective. My study directly and explicitly focuses on the *why* of the return from the bottom-up perspective, namely, on the individuals’ agency and choice. Keeping in mind the fact that the majority of Bosnians abroad have refugee background and thus had very little or no choice when it came to their original emigration, the focus on their ability to return by choice confirms the resilience and empow-

erment of former refugees. In another sense, due to the importance of studying the effects of ethnic cleansing, researchers of BiH tend to discuss mainly minority return, the cases of persons returning to areas where they would now belong to the minority group (Phuong 2000). In the case study presented here, I found that voluntary returnees tend to repatriate to the areas where they are perceived as members of an ethnic majority. This holds true despite that many of them have original homes in areas dominated by another ethnic group after the war. In addition to other findings that will show how voluntary returnees seek to maximize their privilege and advantages, the practice of majority return also shows how ethno-nationalism is clearly the framework within which returnees choose to function. In that sense, whether they personally subscribe to this ideology or not, they contribute to reproducing and strengthening of the dominant framework of nation-thinking.

The main research question I pose in this study is: Why do (relatively) young, skillful and educated people displaced by war, who grew up in “the West”, return to Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a general intention to settle there? How do these returnees talk about future plans and the sustainability of their return? Through which lens do they think about their return – economic/practical or ethnic/emotional? I show throughout the analysis that, based on the interviews, the actual return happens when several practically and emotionally motivated reasons come together and make the repatriation a desirable and viable option, which will allow returnees to benefit socially and economically. In the following section, I identify a list of potential and actual reasons people return. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it composes some of the most common reasons as identified by the interlocutors. Where potential re-emigration is concerned, all of the interlocutors considered that they permanently resided in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the time when the interviews took place and had no concrete plans to re-emigrate to “the West” in the near future, but nevertheless, a large

number of these people still seemed to see their return as open-ended.

The next section provides the details on where and how the research was conducted. Following this, I present my findings. The first and main group of research relates to the reasons for return, and the experiences and feelings after return. The second group discusses the interlocutors’ views on their future residence and sustainability of their return. The last section of this article presents the conclusions.

### Methodology

The research presented in this article was originally inspired by a two-part special episode of Norwegian official public channel NRKshow *Migrapolis*<sup>9</sup> In one of the episodes aired in 2012, the host, himself a Norwegian Bosnian, interviewed young Norwegian-Bosnian professionals who voluntarily returned from Norway to post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, with stated plans to stay, work, and live there. I decided to trace down and interview other such young, educated people who returned, not only from Norway but also other “Western” societies, and find out what inspired them to make this perceivably unexpected move. It was clear from the abovementioned TV show that people whose stories were told make active use of different skills and privileges to be able to settle in BiH and build what they personally see as good lives there. This skills and privileges that people use include, for example, foreign education, fluency in several languages, citizenship of a “Western” country, social and professional networks home and abroad, as well as financial power and security in terms of anything from their personal savings acquired while working abroad to the fact that their families are well off for one reason or another. Returnees’ unmarked ethno-national belonging comes an additional advantage that they make use of in BiH, but lack in the countries they returned

<sup>9</sup> NRK (“Norsk rikskringkasting”) Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation.

from.<sup>10</sup> I refer to this opportunity to go ethnically unmarked, together with advantages that are found in the perceived ethno-national sameness with the majority as ethno-national privilege which is a form of social capital<sup>11</sup>. Based on my research, the highly skilled voluntary returnees tend to repatriate to the areas of BiH where they are perceived as belonging to a majority ethnic group and see a clear advantage in the fact that they are seen one of the co-ethnics.

The article analyses a selection of directly quoted and retold narratives from recorded, transcribed and coded interviews. I kept a detailed fieldwork diary where I noted my observations, thus my participant observation and unrecorded conversations in the field supplement and inform my insights and analysis. The interviews were conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina in spring and fall 2013, focusing on individual return from several countries considered to be Western societies, in this case: Sweden, Norway, United Kingdom, United States of America, Italy and Switzerland. Throughout 2013, fifteen selected individuals were located and interviewed as returnees from “the West”, using the snow-ball method and personal contacts. All interviewed people were naturalized refugees abroad, meaning they obtained citizenship in the countries from which they returned. I conducted interviews and fieldwork in Sarajevo and Banja Luka, while Selma

<sup>10</sup> People who return to the areas of BiH dominated by another ethno-national group than their own are certainly in a disadvantageous and challenging position. These returns to ethnically-cleansed areas are most typically assisted, and not self-organized. There were not any such cases in this concrete study, as those interlocutors who were in fact originally displaced from now ethnically-cleansed areas did not return to the towns and villages of origin, but to larger centers such as Mostar, Sarajevo, et cetera.

<sup>11</sup> This in no way means that the privilege and advantage extend to all spheres of voluntary returnees’ lives, in fact, many people with whom I conversed reported numerous disadvantages, contestations, and stigmas they faced, both as diaspora members and as returnees. Diasporic identity and returnee identity and the labels attached to those are quite loaded and problematic for many people. Unfortunately, I cannot explore this complex issue in this article.

Porobić interviewed people in Sarajevo in Sarajevo Canton and surroundings, Mostar and Tuzla. The selected interlocutors were born within the span of 1965 and 1985 and were either children or young people, in their late teens and early twenties, at the time that they escaped war. Due to their age at the time of displacement, they had good preconditions to learn new languages, integrate, and socialize in their new countries. All of the interviewees were highly skilled and fairly well-educated professionals, typically with professional or university degrees.

### Findings: Reasons for Return and Post-Return Experiences

In this section I exemplify how the repatriated interlocutors narrated the main reasons for the decision to move back from six different migrant-receiving societies. The reason I repeatedly label the voluntary repatriation as unusual and unexpected because the majority of people with whom I discussed the return either claim their own or report others’ surprised reaction to the fact that anyone raised, educated and settled in what they call *zapad*, “the West”, would want to return to BiH.<sup>12</sup> This surprise reportedly comes from considering precariousness and economic instability that a large number of BiH’s residents face, continued ethnically-framed tensions and other kinds of political tensions, and perhaps most importantly, because there are so many people who state they want to emigrate from the country. This latter claim was confirmed by my observations prior to and during this research. The “why” of the return is a crucial point in my research. Namely, the interviewees’ desire to return is met by skepticism and surprise, and they are often questioned or confronted about this topic. The people interviewed reported that they were directly asked questions in the sense of “Are you crazy?” and “What were you thinking?” by the people they encountered upon

<sup>12</sup> The same fact was mentioned by several interviewees in the earlier mentioned special edition of Norwegian national TV channel NRK’s show “Migrapolis” (part 1 and 2) in 2012 (NRK 2016)



the return. For example, an interlocutor stated: "No one ever told me that I was smart to return, everyone always tells me I am a fool."<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the variety of reasons the interlocutors provided for returning, even in a small sample, I also found that they prepared for their return in various ways.<sup>14</sup> Preparations ranged from a spontaneous, sudden decision to a well-prepared and premeditated move. While many interlocutors narrate how they went through a long decision-making process, and often also a long preparation phase once the decision was made, one interlocutor explicitly labels her return as an impulsive and even an irrational action: "I decided to do that impulsively, I came and I stayed. I do a lot of things without a plan, if I weren't like that I would probably never have returned, if I were to think rationally, I would have never returned."<sup>15</sup>

I identified three main groups of reasons for return:

1. Personal relationships and sociability. This group of reasons revolves around personal connections and socializing, including concrete romantic relationships, kinship and friendship, and general assessments of the quality of social and family life.
2. Nostalgia, nationalism, patriotism (including local patriotism) and similar convictions related to personal emotional attachment to a constructed group identification, place, or an idea of a place.
3. Work, career and status-related reasons, related to favorable socio-economic positioning and advantages.

<sup>13</sup> "Nikad mi niko nije rekao da sam pametan jer sam se vratio, svi mi uvijek kažu da sam budala."

<sup>14</sup> Super-diversity denotes internal diversification and complexity within diverse groups (Vertovec 2007, 2013), and I see super-diversity as relevant to acknowledge even in very small selected groups of people.

<sup>15</sup> "Implusivno sam odlučila da to uradim, došla i ostala. Dosta stvari neplanski radim, da nisam takva vjerovatno se nikad ne bih ni vratila, kada bih racionalno razmišljala ne bih se nikad vratila."

#### *Personal relationships and sociability*

My previous research (Kovačević Bielicki 2016) showed many examples of how young people raised abroad follow the practice several interlocutors in that research called "dovesti nekog odozdo" (to bring someone from back home). Namely, in cases when these people get romantically involved with a person who resides back home in the "original homeland", people tend to help those partners migrate to join them abroad. This was reportedly a logical, expected step. However, some of the examples in this case study demonstrate that returnees witness that the opposite practice happens as well: a person in diaspora may repatriate in order to join a romantic partner. One of the interlocutors stated how soon after graduating from high school abroad, where she also grew up, she decided to move to Bosnia and Herzegovina, saying: "Then I enrolled into a faculty in X and met my now husband and that was a reason for return."<sup>16</sup> Her husband resided in Bosnia and Herzegovina and she moved to join him there, although, in own words, she conveyed a feeling of being socially accepted and fulfilled abroad where she grew up and resided. Besides this romantic relationship as her main reason, she, as well as numerous other interlocutors, also stressed the fact that social life is richer and public life in BiH is experienced as more active, eventful and lively than in the country from which they returned. The interlocutor in question specifically refers to streets full of people and how people get together and socialize. Other interlocutors also praise the positive atmosphere in the streets, and what they see as specific spirit of people in BiH, for example an interlocutor that said: "I realized that it was very nice here because also foreigners that come to Sarajevo and walk around Baščaršija, there is this sensation of peace, and that peace

<sup>16</sup> "Onda sam upisala fakultet u X i upoznala svog sadašnjeg muža, i to je bio razlog povratka." In this quote and in the future text, X stands for a host country a particular interlocutor returned from, in order to avoid any possibility to for any of the interlocutors to be identified based on this fact.

and serenity of soul, there is no such thing in the world.”<sup>17</sup>

To illustrate, an interlocutor that returned to reside in Mostar lists many reasons why she finds it better where she is now: Most of them revolve around assessed different quality of family and social relations in the two societies, stating also that she personally never felt she fit in abroad where she lived, and felt that she missed her near family and social life in BiH. “It is all individual, I have never fit in, they are colder, we are warmer. Family was not there with me, our way of going out has nothing similar to theirs. Social life – (I was) completely unsatisfied. The kids arrived, we had no social life.”<sup>18</sup>

The interlocutor did not specify whether she felt that her lack of social life in the country she returned from had to do with her being othered by the majority, or perhaps she thought that also connections between the members of majority is of a different quality due to *their* coldness. It can be speculated that her statement reflects both of these feelings: She states that she personally could not fit in, arguably and probably due to feeling excluded and being othered. At the same time, the account seems to narrate that “they” are colder in general, arguably also one to another, and not only to “the different ones”. In this sense, the interlocutor’s words include both an implication of being othered herself and her explicitly othering perceived members of host nation. The interlocutors’ ingroup, or “we”, “the Bosnians”, are here contrasted to “them”, the nationals of the country she returned from. The positive characteristics she attributes to the ingroup are opposed to those attributed

<sup>17</sup> “Shvatio sam da je ovde veoma lijepo zato što i ljudi koji su stranci kad dođu u Sarajevo i prošetaju Baščaršijom, osjeti se jedan mir, i taj mir i ta smirenost duše, to nema u svijetu.”

Baščaršija is an old bazaar in Sarajevo originating back to 15th century. It is a historical and cultural center of this city.

<sup>18</sup> “To je sve individualno, ja se nikad nisam uklopila, oni su hladniji mi smo topliji. Familija mi nije bila sa mnom, naši izlasci nisu ni slični njihovim. Socijalni život – totalno nezadovoljna. Došla su i djeca, nikakav socijalni život nismo imali.”

to the outgroup. The othering she engages in can be understood as a reaction to having been excluded by the society she returned from and the fact that belonging continues to be framed in nativist terms.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Nostalgia, Nationalism, Patriotism*

For one of the interlocutors, although return was dependent upon finding a favorable job, she narrated how she purposefully looked for a job in BiH out of a desire to live in the place from which she originated. She first and foremost decided she wanted to live in what she considered her homeland, and, in the process, she looked for a job that could make this move possible. She returned, however, when she got a concrete job in an international organization: “I did not know that I would get this job, but I had a wish to work in this area. Whether it would be in five or ten years, I would probably come with another organization.”<sup>20</sup> While this interlocutor links patriotic tendencies with job-related considerations into a combined main reason to return, several other interlocutors identify *čista nostalgija* (pure nostalgia) as a sole and crucial reason.

Further on, there is an example of an interlocutor’s statement that intertwines what can be seen as local patriotism with explicit patriotism as his main reason(s) for a wish to resettle:

“Firstly, I love this city, I was born in it and grew up in it, I almost gave my life for it. I consider that I deserve to live in this city and for me it is nice here ... The key thing, which was the reason for my return, in my case that was patriotism, a pure love for the country and the wish to give it some of the things I have learned.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> It is not uncommon for immigrants in “the West” to engage in strategic, grouping and othering, directly ad as a reaction to being regularly racialized and in other ways othered.

<sup>20</sup> “Nisam znala da ću biti primljena na ovaj posao ali sam imala želju da radim na ovom području. Da li bi to bilo onda za 5 ili 10 godina, vjerovatno bih došla sa drugom organizacijom.”

<sup>21</sup> “Prvo, ja volim ovaj grad, u njemu sam se rodio i njemu sam odrastao, za njega sam zamalo život dao. Smatram da sam zaslužio da živim u ovom gradu i meni je u njemu lijepo...Ključna stvar je, šta je bio razlog povratka, kod mene je bio patriotizam, čista

Another interlocutor returned to Sarajevo already in the early 2000s, in this case also her hometown, after around seven years spent abroad. This interlocutor also explicitly identifies nostalgia as a main reason, although certainly not the only one to make such a decision.

“Total nostalgia, total... We really did come back... we all thought that it would be quite different. Since I was an asylum seeker, I was not able to travel to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and only once I got the citizenship, that was in 2000... I have not been (here) for eight to nine years, because I could not travel and that was a big shock for me. I truly felt like a foreigner, it was terrible for me, I have been dreaming of Sarajevo for years.”<sup>22</sup>

In this interview in general, there was much more focus on Sarajevo as a place of longing and object of her pre-return nostalgia, than on Bosnia and Herzegovina as a country and a reference for her belonging. Being a child from a so-called ethnically mixed marriage, the interlocutor reportedly felt alienated to and annoyed by exclusive ethno-religious nationalisms now dominant in the region, particularly pronounced after the war. In her understanding, which is also not uncommon among people from Bosnia, Sarajevo is seen as different than the rest of the country in terms of tolerance and acceptance of difference, multiethnic and multicultural values, as people refer to them. The interlocutor also narrates how the vacation turned into a permanent stay without previous plan to stay exactly that time, due to the fact that she met a man who was to become her husband, which according to her own words made her “brave enough” to return and remain. This example additionally confirms that a combination of main clusters of reasons is identified as a condition for both returning and remaining.

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Ijubav prema zemlji i želja da joj dam nešto od onoga što sam naučio.”

<sup>22</sup> “Nostalgija totalna, totalna..Mi smo se stvarno vratili ...svi smo mislili da će biti sasvim drugačije. Pošto sam bila azilant, nisam mogla putovati u BiH, i tek kad sam dobila državljanstvo, to ti je bilo 2000 ...Nisam bila 8-9 godina, zato što nisam mogla putovati i to mi je bio veliki šok Zaista sam se osjećala kao stranac, strašno mi je bilo, ja sam Sarajevo sanjala godinama.”

### *Work, Career and Status*

A young woman that grew up in the United States explained in the interview how she temporarily returned to join her sister and did not think she would stay permanently. However, she stated that she eventually found a good job and ended up staying. This example in itself exemplifies the unclear and shifting borders between different clusters of identified reasons to return, as well as the importance of both practical and emotional concerns for one’s choice of residence. This last group of identified main reasons revolves around economic and career opportunities and considerations as highly important incentives to return. In cases when economy and career are not direct reasons to undertake the return, they certainly impact the decision whether to remain or not. In the example just described, these reasons are combined with the earlier discussed emotionally-motivated types of reasons. However, although family ties were crucial for her initial return, the opportunity to live a comfortable lifestyle most clearly contributed to the longevity of this return. Although family reunification, romantic reasons, and other emotionally motivated concerns might chronologically or even hierarchically come first in some cases, it would be hard for people to remain where they are, had it not been for the fact that soon after the return they manage to secure their livelihood in ways that benefit their favorable social standing and economic power.

One of the interlocutors answered the question why he returned in following words: “The main reason is work, definitely. Considering that we as a family own a construction business.”<sup>23</sup> Another particular interlocutor identified a specific convenient business opportunity he found and established in Sarajevo, as the main reason to return repeatedly throughout the conversation. Further on he claimed that for his line of work and business plans, it is even better and more convenient to work in Bosnia than in the country he left: “I came back because of the firm,

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<sup>23</sup> “Osnovni razlog je posao, definitivno. S obzirom da imamo familijarno posao koji se bavi građevinom.”



the wish to make something happen, and now I have an opportunity to build more than I could in X. You keep trying in business, and you can achieve more here than up there, it is possible...<sup>24</sup> This business opportunity seems to be the interlocutor’s primary reason, in his own words. He readily admits that he has a safety net in the country he left, in case he finds his current choice of residence not sustainable and his business expectations not met. Details on why exactly this person thinks he can succeed more in BiH than the country he returned were not explored in the interview. Potentially, this can have a lot to do with the so-called glass ceiling effect in many migrant-receiving societies, when in particular first generation of migrants find it harder to get prestigious jobs and advance their careers past a certain level. Language proficiency and the privilege (or at least lack of disadvantage) found in ethno-national sameness upon return could be another potential explanation for having more open and available opportunities in BiH.

Whatever the explanation is for each of the individual cases, based on the interviews and fieldwork observations, most of people who returned upon the return secured and keep maintaining a quite favorable socio-economic positioning. They work in jobs that provide them with status and money. In some cases, in line with the words of the interlocutor abroad, I heard and observed that jobs and positions many of the interlocutors have in BiH seem more prestigious and their careers more successful than the ones they describe they had prior to the return. Several interlocutors describe BiH as a place where life is good if and when one has good income, as it is the case for most of them. The reported awareness of fact that not many residents of the country share their good fortune and a comfortable way of life is also reoccurring in the interviews. At times people describe their own positioning in terms of a perceived specific privilege,

<sup>24</sup> “Vratio sam se zbog firme, želje da nešto ostvarim, i sada imam mogućnost da stvorim više nego što bih stvorio u X. Vrtiš stalno u biznisu, i možeš postići više ovdje nego gore, može se ...”

that they either themselves admit, or they report how it gets ascribed to them by others. This is exemplified by the two following accounts:

Example 1.

“I did not return because of patriotism. The very MA degree from X qualified me for some jobs here ... there came a job offer in the international community.”<sup>25 26</sup>

Example 2

“[...] there was a lot of talk how all of us who returned brought back money, bought apartments, provided jobs for ourselves, those stories were there... in difference to people who remained during the war in BiH. I think there were a lot of people who commented, “now it is easy, it is easy for those of you who lived abroad.” That is either jealousy or dissatisfaction, if they had the same things, they would not be commenting, it is difficult for them.”<sup>27</sup>

As an argument against the belief that a foreign, “Western” education and work experience brings advantage, a third interlocutor explicitly stated: “A foreign degree was not an advantage for me.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> “Nisam se ja vratila zbog patriotizma. Sam magistarski iz X me je kvalificirao za neke poslove ovdje... došla je ponuda posla u međunarodnoj zajednici.” This interlocutor directly labels her return as accidental (she used the English word), and connected with career. After the return she met and got married to a person residing in BiH, and her sibling returned as well, which both further influenced long term character of her residence in BiH.

<sup>26</sup> In particular in years right after the end of the conflict, and to a certain degree to the present day, there has been a strong international presence in BiH. Many local people and returnees found employment with international employers, and those people typically used to earn a higher income that way than the average income in BiH.

<sup>27</sup> “[...] bilo je dosta priče da smo svi mi koji smo se vratili donijeli pare, kupili stanove, obezbijedili sebi poslove, bilo je tih priča .... za razliku od ljudi koji su ostali tokom rata u BiH. Ja mislim da je dosta bilo ljudi koji su komentarisali, “i sada je to tako, lako je vama koji ste živjeli vani”. Ili je to ljubomora ili nezadovoljstvo, da oni imaju isto tako, ne bi tako komentarisali, teško im je.”

<sup>28</sup> “Strana diploma nije mi bila prednost.”

She further explains that this isn't because the degree is from abroad, but because she has a particularly art-related degree, which is reportedly seen as something that is not useful there where she lives. In BiH she has not worked in any position that could make use of that degree, but typically had positions international NGOs, that were contract based and not seen as a permanent solution.

Besides NGOs and international governmental agencies, most people whose interviews are included in the research tend to either own their own business (personally or through family), or work in banks and other types of financial institutions. All these jobs tend to provide for a higher income than the average in BiH, which certainly influences the decision whether or not to remain in the country and proves my hypothesis that many people who return enjoy various privileges and seek economic and social advantages, otherwise they would not want to remain in BiH.

#### **After the return: Disappointment, Open-Endedness, and Future Possibilities**

The next topic to be explored is whether the political, social and economic developments in BiH make many people consider eventual re-emigration to "the West", and whether they believe life and situation in general will improve or not in BiH. I treat this question as an additional and subordinate to the main question why people return.

An interlocutor refers to an earlier hope and belief that the situation in the country of origin would get better and different, as a strong reason that used to keep her persistent in her original decision to move back. This hope she has largely lost, according to the interview, however she remains where she is, as she says "za sada" (for now). Another interlocutor similarly stated: "My suffering and the longing to go back was larger than this situation. It will once get better."<sup>29</sup> By referring to *ovo stanje* (this situation) this interlocutor acknowledges the fact that many per-

<sup>29</sup> "Moja patnja i čeznja da se vratim je bila veća od ovog stanja. Biće nekad bolje."

ceive the life and political situation in BiH as hard and problematic, however, her strong longing to return and live there overrides this disadvantageous fact for this particular interlocutor.

As mentioned earlier, people are not only questioned by others in their surroundings about whether the move back is a good idea or not: Interlocutors themselves seem to constantly reflect on the choice they made and often find themselves reconsidering the wisdom of such a move, whether asked about it or not. Several interlocutors explained that since they had a continuous wish to give return a try, that they went through with this makes them able to reassess their future more realistically. While assessing, many of them make use of the fact that they have open possibilities and privileged options, or as one interlocutor explicitly put it: "In principle, there for nothing for me to lose: There, I was doing well, I can go back, my job awaits, I have an apartment, I have citizenship." Despite this safety net, many explicitly claim they are disappointed with how things are developing in BiH in general.

While only a few people explicitly mention regret, disappointment seem to be a general feeling and a term often mentioned. For some interlocutors, feeling of that disappointment came immediately after they return, and the impressions got a bit better after a while. Others report a more gradually developed feeling of disappointment that seems to be getting worse and not better. To illustrate the first case, the following quote makes a striking example:

"The return was terrible at first, I returned to something that was not the same picture as 14 years ago when we left. I did come in the meantime, but coming during summers was nothing but fun, I was not familiar with the real life... more and more I realize how hard it is to do anything positive in this country."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> "Povratak je prvo bio užasan, vratio sam se u nešto što nije bila ista slika kao prije 14 godina kad smo otišli. Dolazio sam u međuvremenu, ali dolazak ljeti bio je samo zabava, odmor, nisam bio upućen u stvarni život. ...sve više spoznajem koliko je teško raditi nešto pozitivno u ovoj državi."

The interlocutor, who was discussed at the beginning of the previous section, described returning in order to join her husband to be in Bosnia. After graduating from high school abroad, she explains and reassesses her initial decision by using the term *“mladost ludost”* (craziness of youth). This common expression in BCS language commonly used to convey the view that in their youth people can make passionate, emotional, and unwise choices due to their young age, which that they might regret later. The interlocutor continues to explain that her hopes as well have not been fulfilled, despite the optimistic views she used to hold at the time: “If I knew then what I know today, I would had never returned. You keep hoping, but it turned out thirteen years after, that situation on Bosnia keeps getting worse and worse.”<sup>31</sup> For another interlocutor, ethno-nationalism and group divisions in BiH would be a strong reason to migrate again, and she stated: “The level of nationalism here is shocking.”<sup>32</sup> There was one other interlocutor who explicitly mentioned nationalism in BiH in negative terms as well, by stating the contrast between satisfaction with her own life she built in BiH and dissatisfaction with the political situation in that country. “Now again we built a great life, here where nationalism is terrible, a terrible political situation.”<sup>33</sup>

Such explicit expressions of disappointment are, as already argued, quite common among people who returned although this does necessarily mean they are disappointed enough to leave again. The reasons for opting out of repeated (e)migration are multiple, for example awareness that life is not ideal in “the West” either, in particular not for immigrants: “My husband does not work, he would like to leave more than I do. However lately he realized that it is not all peachy there either.”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> “Sad da mi je ova pamet, ne bih se vratila. Sve se nešto nadaš, no pokazalo se nakon trinaest godina, da je situacija u Bosni sve gora i gora.”

<sup>32</sup> “Nivo nacionalizma kod nas je šokantan.”

<sup>33</sup> “Sad smo opet izgradili super život, tu gdje je užasan nacionalizam, užasna politička situacija.”

<sup>34</sup> “Muž ne radi, on bi više volio otići nego ja. Nego je u zadnje vrijeme shvatio da ni tamo ne cvjetaju ruže.”

Several interlocutors also stated their dissatisfaction with political developments in BiH without explicitly mentioning nationalism, and they seemed to agree that they would leave again if they or their life partners had no job. Otherwise, many clearly and explicitly leave their future options open, by saying, for example<sup>35</sup>:

“We will see if this will keep sinking.”<sup>36</sup>

“It is not excluded that this time next year we will be (up) there.”<sup>37</sup>

“For example, I cannot tell you that I returned 100 percent.”<sup>38</sup>

“I truly do not know where I will be in three years.”<sup>39</sup>

In general, many of the interlocutors and many other people who have an experience of forced displacement claim to be open to changes and moving as they were forced to get used to changes. Despite reported wish to, as some put it, stabilize their lives, their future options and their return are seen as open-ended. This openness of options is their privilege and advantage, but also a result of their earlier traumatic life experiences.

### Conclusions

The small selection of interviews included in this study showed that the main reasons for repatriation can be classified into the following three main categories:

1. Personal relationships and sociability
2. Nostalgia, nationalism, and patriotism
3. Work, career, and status-related reasons

The distinctions above are only conditional, and are frequently overlapping. For example, having a family network and help of family can be seen as a practical concern as well, as having family

<sup>35</sup> Each of the four statements come from a different interlocutor.”

<sup>36</sup> “Vidjećemo da li će ovo nastaviti da tone.” By *this*, the interlocutor here refers to the general situation in BiH.

<sup>37</sup> “Nije isključeno da ćemo u ovo vreme slijedeće godine biti gore”. By “up there” the interlocutor refers to the country he repatriated from.

<sup>38</sup> Na primjer, ja tebi ne mogu reći da sam se ja 100 posto vratio.”

<sup>39</sup> “Ja stvarno ne znam gdje ću ja biti za tri godine.”

members nearby can help one organize one's life better and make practical matters more convenient. Career choices, again, can have a lot to do with feelings, as people can and do choose jobs they like and enjoy, or jobs where they consider that social connections and relations between coworkers are good, and they can put these concerns over purely practical concerns such as salary or status. Indeed, the reasons for return people have and offer in their narratives are complex, mixed and intertwined in almost all of the interviews; rarely only one of the listed reasons is chosen as the dominant main reason to return, and never as an only one. In all cases there are multiple reasons people choose as important, whether they rank them hierarchically by importance, or list them side by side as equally relevant.<sup>40</sup>

The decision-making and reasoning of the pre-return process and the practice of the return itself are, of course, highly complex and hard to grasp and clearly classify. It is important to note that many of the important reasons remain personal and intimate, accessible only to the individual and often unspoken. For example, while rising xenophobia and contestations of belonging might very well figure prominently in identification processes and feelings of (non)belonging for Bosnian or any other migrants in the ethno-centric and mostly nationalist "Western" societies, xenophobia, racism and similar exclusionary ideologies in host societies were not in any way explicitly mentioned as concrete or main reason to decide return to BiH, by any of the interlocutors. This is why the experiences with and feelings of exclusion are not among the main reported reasons, and this issue will be explored

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<sup>40</sup> In addition to three main identified groups of reasons, a nicer and warmer climate was occasionally mentioned as an additional reason for choosing life in BiH, in particular in case of the returnees from Scandinavian countries. However, this reason seems to regularly get mentioned only as something that comes in addition to more important and crucial other factors and reasons, and thus it is not separately considered and listed in this article.

separately.<sup>41</sup> It seems surprising no one referred to feelings of being different and racialized in "the West" as one of the main and direct reasons for return, while many did in fact talk about such feelings and experiences in other contexts. It is challenging for me to explain here why this was the case, but I speculate that it is partially due to the distance in time and space of their memories of being othered; these recollections may be less prominent and hurtful because of the time that's elapsed since their experiences.

Their perceived ethno-national sameness with the majority in the newly chosen places of residence is strategically used as an additional advantage and a form of an added social capital, whether an individual personally subscribes to nationalist ideologies or not. The perceived sameness, if not adding to the privilege, certainly "evens the field" in the sense that people are not disadvantaged due to their names and origin as they often are abroad where they grew up. Many of the statements in the interviews directly reproduced nativist and sedentarist beliefs on homeland, origins, and the reproduction of the myth of return. A few of the interlocutors directly challenged and criticized some aspects of this ideology, however, as they still saw clear advantages in being ethnically unmarked and accepted as a member of an ethnic ingroup in the place where they repatriated. While this insight primarily shows the prevalence of nation-thinking, it additionally supports my finding that the investigated voluntary return is in many ways a form of privileged and privilege-seeking repatriation.

Although reasons for undertaking return certainly must be seen as individual, complex and multiple, ultimately, the return itself as a choice and an action, sustains the myths of "real home-

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<sup>41</sup> These exclusionary ideologies were mentioned and implied by interlocutors in other context than as concrete reasons to return, and for this reason can potentially and indirectly be linked to return as well, but no interlocutor has explicitly pointed to those ideologies as main or direct reasons. The connection-making would have to happen through closer analysis of returnees' narratives about (non) belonging in the host societies.

lands”. While going back where “we” come from” from somewhere where “we” do not fully belong and feel othered might play a role in returning and settling, based on this research, it is reasonable to conclude that these belonging- and othering-related concerns typically do not suffice as sole incentives for migrants to go back to the place from which they originate. People who have choices, skills and advantages will not return unless belonging-related concerns align with ability to have living conditions, economic power and social connections and privileges. This is also why most people tend leave the option to re-emigrate if these main required conditions seize to exist. It can be hypothesized that this is precisely why long-distance nationalist tendencies widespread among members of the Bosnian diaspora do not result in any massive return: ethno-nationalism is, I argue, a framework within which people in focus here need to function in their double role as migrants abroad and returnees “back home” but it is not necessarily a direct reason to return. The privileges potential returnees would obtain by not being ethnically othered in BiH in the same way that they are abroad are not enough of an incentive, unless people see other advantages from which they could benefit upon their return, for example: satisfaction with social life, job and career opportunities, family ties, socially rich lives and so on. For the interviewed returnees and many other people in similar positions, it is possible to live better and happier individual lives in a society that is commonly seen as less developed and “poorer” than in those that many see as wealthier. The interlocutors were all educated professionals who managed to at least maintain or preferably even elevate their relative social and economic status upon return, in comparison to their relative social positioning during their life abroad.

Based on the study, the voluntary return of Bosnian refugees from “the Western” societies is predominantly envisioned as open-ended return, which additionally confirms its privileged nature. Those people who had access to citizenship and residence rights in the foreign countries where

they resided keep those rights in mind as an exit strategy, as they are aware of challenges, obstacles and disadvantages of life in society to which they were returning. This safety net is needed in particular because, as explained earlier, most returnees report post-return disappointment and regretting their decision to a degree, though not (yet) enough to leave the country. This latter fact is understandable, as I did not interview people who re-emigrated at the time that I conducted the interviews. I do not know if any of the interviewees left afterwards.

The returnees I encountered are not simply, or not at all, “crazy enough” to return. They can rather be described as many other things: skillful, privileged, or, in some cases, simply nostalgic enough to return. As anyone else, these are people that are looking to, as Jansen puts it, maximize life opportunities (Jansen, 2008). This tendency can be also framed in terms of people looking to maximize their privilege, where the privilege is found in, for example ethno-national sameness, financial power, international mobility, or business, family and friend networks that the voluntary returnees can (re)establish and maintain.

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