



BETWEEN NARRATIVE AND REALITY:

Life in Returnee Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina



Research Report

Analysis of media reporting and field research in returnee communities
(2020–2026)

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ABOUT THE ORGANISATION

The Youth Initiative for Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina (YIHR BiH) is a non-governmental organisation founded in 2007 in Sarajevo, as part of the regional Youth Initiative for Human Rights network, which has been operating in Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo since 2003.

YIHR BiH empowers young people through non-formal educational programmes in the areas of human rights, critical thinking, and dealing with the past. The organisation works to engage youth in human rights activism and promotes democratisation and regional cooperation on the issues of transitional justice, respect for human rights, and the rule of law.

The core values of the organisation are truth, justice, accountability, equality, freedom, democracy, and peace — not merely as the absence of war, but as an ongoing process that involves confronting the past and sustaining cooperation between states and peoples in the region.

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND KEY TERMS

Annex VII / Annex 7	Annex VII of the General Framework Agreement for Peace in BiH (Dayton Agreement) – the Agreement on Refugees and Displaced Persons, guaranteeing the right of return.
BHRT	BH Radio-Television – the public radio-television service of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina.
EUFOR	European Union Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
FBiH	Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina – one of the two entities in BiH.
FMROI	Federal Ministry of Displaced Persons and Refugees – the key institutional actor supporting return in FBiH.
HVO	Croatian Defence Council – the armed forces of Herzeg-Bosnia during the 1992–1995 war.

OHR	Office of the High Representative – the international institution responsible for overseeing implementation of the civilian aspects of the Dayton Agreement.
Returnee	A person who, after the war and displacement, returned to their pre-war place of residence in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this research the term is used as an analytical category, with the note that community residents themselves often reject it as a label that keeps them in a state of being temporary.
RS	Republika Srpska – one of the two entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
RTRS	Radio-Television of Republika Srpska – the public broadcaster of RS.
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
YIHR BiH	Youth Initiative for Human Rights Bosnia and Herzegovina.
Annex VII / Annex7	Aneks VII Općeg okvirnog sporazuma za mir u BiH (Dejtonski sporazum) – Sporazum o izbjeglicama i raseljenim osobama koji garantuje pravo povratka.
BHRT	BH Radio-Televizija – javni radio-televizijski servis Bosne i Hercegovine.
BiH	Bosna i Hercegovina.
EUFOR	Evropske snage u Bosni i Hercegovini (European Union Force).
FBiH	Federacija Bosne i Hercegovine – jedan od dva entiteta u BiH.
FMROI	Federalno ministarstvo raseljenih osoba i izbjeglica – ključni institucionalni akter podrške povratku u FBiH.
HVO	Hrvatsko vijeće obrane – oružane snage Herceg-Bosne tokom rata 1992–1995.
OHR	Ured visokog predstavnika (Office of the High Representative) – međunarodna institucija nadležna za nadzor provedbe civilnih aspekata Dejtonskog sporazuma.
Povratnik/ca	Osoba koja se, nakon rata i raseljenja, vratila u predratno mjesto boravka u Bosni i Hercegovini. U ovom istraživanju pojam se koristi kao analitička kategorija, uz napomenu da ga sami stanovnici zajednica često odbacuju kao oznaku koja ih zadržava u statusu privremenog.
RS	Republika Srpska – jedan od dva entiteta u Bosni i Hercegovini.
RTRS	Radio-televizija Republike Srpske – javni servis RS-a.
UNHCR	Visoki komesarijat Ujedinjenih nacija za

izbjeglice (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees).

YIHR BiH

Youth Initiative for Human Rights Bosnia and Herzegovina –
Inicijativa mladih za ljudska prava Bosne i Hercegovine.

I. INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEXT OF RETURN IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Historical and Demographic Framework

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995) resulted in one of the largest humanitarian catastrophes in Europe since the Second World War. It is estimated that between 2.2 and 2.7 million people were displaced during the war — approximately half of BiH's pre-war population. Of these, around 1.2 million people left the country as refugees, while the remainder became internally displaced persons within BiH. The destruction of war, ethnic cleansing, and mass atrocities fundamentally altered the demographic structure of almost every municipality in the country.

Three decades after the end of the war, the question of the return of displaced persons remains one of the most important and most sensitive issues in Bosnian-Herzegovinian society. According to estimates from the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of BiH, approximately one million people have returned to their pre-war places of residence to date — a significant result, but one that also serves as a reminder that a considerable number of displaced persons remain without a durable solution.

Legal Framework: Annex 7 of the Dayton Peace Agreement

The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, known as the Dayton Peace Agreement, was signed on 14 December 1995 in Paris, following negotiations conducted at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio. This agreement ended the war and established a complex state structure that continues to define the political, legal, and institutional framework of BiH.

Annex 7 of the Dayton Agreement (the Agreement on Refugees and Displaced Persons) is one of the legally most binding elements of the peace framework. This annex guarantees the right of all refugees and internally displaced persons to freely return to their pre-war homes and to have their property restored or compensated. The key provisions of Annex 7 include:

1. The right to return is inviolable — all displaced persons have the right to freely choose their place of residence on the territory of BiH, without discrimination. No one may be denied the right of return on the grounds of ethnicity, religion, or nationality.
2. Restitution of property — all displaced persons must have property that was confiscated or destroyed during the war returned to them, or must receive fair compensation.
3. Prohibition of discrimination — the entities and state authorities are obliged to ensure that returnees enjoy all rights and freedoms without discrimination, including the right to work, education, and social and health protection.
4. Obligation to cooperate — the parties are obliged to actively cooperate in implementing the provisions of Annex 7, including the removal of administrative and legal barriers to return.

Despite clear legal obligations, the implementation of Annex 7 has been the subject of criticism for decades. The Revised Strategy of BiH for the Implementation of Annex 7, adopted in 2008, noted that in the five-year implementation period of the previous strategy (2003–2007), approximately 618 million KM was invested in reconstruction and the sustainability of return, supporting around 130,000 families. However, the same documents indicate that in this period there still remained 125,000 confirmed internally displaced persons, many of whom lived in extremely difficult conditions. The BiH Return Fund and the BiH Commission for Refugees and Displaced Persons are the key institutions responsible for coordinating the implementation of Annex 7 at the state level. The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, known as the Dayton Peace Agreement, was signed on 14 December 1995 in Paris, following negotiations conducted at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton,

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Institutional Framework for the Protection of Returnees

The institutional architecture for the protection of returnees' rights in BiH is complex and often fragmented along entity lines. At the state level, the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of BiH coordinates return policy, while the two entities — the Federation of BiH and Republika Srpska — have developed their own institutions and mechanisms.

The Federal Ministry of Displaced Persons and Refugees (FMROI) is the primary actor supporting return in FBiH, and also a significant funder of projects supporting the return of Bosniaks to Republika Srpska. By contrast, the Ministry for Refugees and Displaced Persons of RS shows considerably less financial engagement in terms of supporting return to FBiH — an asymmetry that is reflected in the pace and quality of return in the communities we visited.

At the level of human rights protection, the Institution of the Ombudsman for Human Rights of BiH has jurisdiction over violations of returnees' rights. The Constitutional Court of BiH has been pivotal in rulings relating to discrimination in education and other areas. International actors, above all the Office of the High Representative (OHR) and EUFOR, retain a certain role in overseeing the implementation of the Dayton framework, but their direct engagement in protecting returnees is largely limited to monitoring and publicly responding to incidents.

Social and Political Dimension: Consociational Democracy and Marginalisation

Bosnia and Herzegovina functions as a consociational democracy, meaning that the political system is based on the sharing of power among the constituent peoples — Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. This model, theoretically conceived to prevent the dominance of any one group, has in practice led to an institutional framework that rewards ethnic homogeneity and numerical size. The Bertelsmann Transformations Index (BTI) report from 2022 notes that more than 90% of citizens of BiH strongly identify with their ethnic group and that trust between ethnic groups is extremely low.

For returnees who live as an ethnic minority in an entity or municipality where other peoples are in the majority, this system has direct consequences: political representation is minimal, access to public institutions and employment is impeded, and the sense of civic exclusion is profound. It is precisely this structural marginalisation that represents the key challenge for sustainable return in the contemporary Bosnian-Herzegovinian context

About This Research

This report was produced within the framework of a project by the Youth Initiative for Human Rights BiH supported by the Embassy of the Republic of Austria in BiH, dealing with the position of returnee communities in contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina. The research encompasses two complementary parts: a content analysis of media reporting on returnees for the period 2020 to 2025, and field research conducted in ten returnee communities during 2025 and 2026.

The central research question is the gap between the public narrative about return — as constructed and reproduced by the media — and the actual experiences that returnees live every day. It is the gap between the formal rights guaranteed by Annex 7 and the Constitution of BiH, and what happens in cadastral offices, school classrooms, hospital corridors, and at local elections.

II. ANALYSIS OF MEDIA REPORTING ON RETURNEES (2020–2025)

Methodology and Selection of Media

A content analysis was conducted on a sample of media reporting for the period 2020 to 2025. The following media outlets were analysed: BHT, FTV, Dnevni avaz, Večernji list, Glas Srpske, Srpska Info, RTRS, and Bljesak Info. The selection of media was designed to cover different ethnic perspectives, geographic areas, and types of media — public broadcasters, daily newspapers, and online portals.

The key research questions were: whether returnees are primarily depicted as victims, political instruments, security issues, or agents of reconciliation; whether media from different entities and ethnic communities differ in tone and emphasis; and whether the narratives changed over the period, particularly in the context of electoral cycles or political crises.

Segmentation of media Discourse Along Ethnic Lines

One of the most striking findings of the analysis is that different media report on the same topic in strikingly different ways, and that these ways are consistently shaped along ethnic lines. Media headquartered in the Federation of BiH predominantly focus on Bosniak returnees in Republika Srpska, while media from Republika Srpska primarily report on Serb returnees in the Federation of BiH. This logic almost literally reflects the entity division of the state.

What is paradoxical and analytically important is that despite this clear segmentation, the underlying narratives themselves are strikingly similar across all media. Regardless of which side approaches the problem, media reporting focuses on the same recurring themes: discrimination, violence, security threats, and the challenges of everyday life. The key difference is not in how these issues are

framed, but in who they are attributed to. Each side emphasises the vulnerabilities and grievances of 'its own' returnee population, while largely overlooking or marginalising the experiences of others.

Croat returnees are noticeably less represented in the media space. The number of articles focusing on them is significantly smaller in comparison with reporting on Bosniak and Serb returnees, and most such articles are concentrated in Večernji list. The question remains open as to whether this difference is the result of demographic reality (Croats are numerically the smallest of the three constituent peoples) or of deeper patterns of selective attention within the media landscape.

Frequency and Dynamics of Reporting

Despite the fact that returnees in BiH are broadly understood as a highly politicised topic, the analysis shows that the number of articles about them does not follow electoral cycles in the expected way. Instead of spikes in pre-election periods, most of the analysed media show a more linear trend — a gradual increase in the number of articles over the observed period. This suggests that the returnee issue is not activated exclusively for the purposes of electoral mobilisation, but is structurally embedded in public discourse as a permanent topic.

Nevertheless, this finding should be approached with caution. A definitive conclusion on the relationship between electoral cycles and media reporting would require a broader data set and a longer time frame, which will be addressed in an expanded phase of this research.

Annex 7 in Media Discourse: Symbolism Without Substance

Annex 7 of the Dayton Peace Agreement regularly appears in media reports about returnees. However, the analysis shows that its presence in discourse functions mainly as a form of political signalling — when politicians and interested parties invoke the Annex to demonstrate awareness of returnees' problems and to position themselves as actors who react, rather than actors who act.

What is almost entirely absent from the media is substantive discussion of the content of Annex 7, its implementation mechanisms, and its practical significance in the contemporary context. Questions about how the provisions of the Annex are implemented in practice, how effective it has been in guaranteeing sustainable return, and what its structural shortcomings are, are rarely addressed in a systematic way. This gap is not merely a media phenomenon; it points to a broader deficit in public understanding of the legal framework that is supposed to protect returnees.

Legal Framework: Fragmentation and Superficiality

Media reporting often touches on the legal dimensions of the position of returnees, but generally in a fragmented and inconsistent manner. In addition to Annex 7, articles raise concerns about the absence of harmonised legislation at the state level and the uneven application of legal standards between entities and cantons.

In the Federation of BiH, the highly decentralised structure means that cantonal administrations play a crucial role. The analysis shows that Sarajevo Canton and Tuzla Canton are most frequently mentioned as examples that provide more visible support to return programmes, but this visibility is accompanied by recurring concerns regarding the transparency of aid distribution and allegations of misuse of funds.

A particularly sensitive legal issue is the property rights of Bosniak returnees in Republika Srpska. Media reports, including *Dnevni avaz* (2024), mention cases in which property in the pre-war ownership of individuals was transferred, under disputed legal circumstances, to entity authorities or other actors — raising questions about the consistency and fairness of the legal standards applied.

Another recurring legal issue concerns the classification of violence against returnees. Several reports highlight demands that such incidents be recognised as a distinct legal category, rather than being treated under general provisions such as assault or property damage, precisely in order to capture their specific context and implications.

As BHRT (2024) notes, nearly three decades after the war, certain individuals continue to be formally or informally categorised as returnees or displaced persons, despite effectively living as ordinary citizens. This persistence of the ‘returnee’ category indicates unresolved institutional frameworks in which an administrative classification outlasts its original temporal and legal purpose.

Framing of Returnees: Victims, Politics, and Security

One of the central research questions was how returnees are framed in the media: as victims, political instruments, a security issue, or agents of reconciliation. The analysis shows that all of these framings are present, but with clearly unequal emphasis.

The dominant narrative frame is one that places returnees within a broader security context — and that in the sense which Barry Buzan defines as freedom from threats across multiple sectors, including political, economic, and social dimensions (Buzan, 1991). The threats described by the media are not only physical: economic insecurity, a lack of employment opportunities, discrimination in the practice of public institutions, and political disengagement appear as equally significant themes alongside incidents of physical violence.

Targeted violence and concerns for personal security are among the most frequently reported problems, with reporting on violence against Bosniak returnees appearing more frequent in quantitative terms. The economic dimension is particularly prominent: the problem of insufficient employment opportunities for returnees appears consistently across all the analysed media, with the Federal Ministry of Displaced Persons and Refugees frequently cited as the institution taking concrete steps to facilitate employment.

Many returnees rely on agriculture as their primary means of subsistence, creating an additional layer of economic vulnerability, as their survival becomes directly dependent on weather conditions and crop yields, without a stable alternative source of income.

Politicisation: Between Genuine Concern and Electoral Capital

Media reporting on returnees includes frequent visits by political actors and public statements about their problems. The analysis, however, points to the ambivalence of this engagement: it is not always clear whether such engagement is driven by genuine political concern or by a desire for symbolic capital within an ethnically structured electoral dynamic.

This ambivalence is particularly evident in the fact that the same parties and the same actors who publicly speak of protecting returnees simultaneously fail to advocate for the systemic reforms that would make such protection real — such as changes to the education system, harmonisation of legal standards, or more effective protection of property rights. The media rarely explicitly name this contradiction.

The Role of Religion and Ethnic Identity

One of the sociologically significant dimensions of media reporting is the strong and consistently present link between the ethnic and religious dimensions in narratives about returnees. In reporting about Bosniak returnees, the media regularly show community visits accompanied by imams or representatives of the Islamic Community, with particular emphasis on the preservation of religious identity as a key marker of differentiation from the majority population in the entity of return. Federalna (2025) records statements by religious leaders who emphasise their determination to strengthen ties with returnee communities.

The same pattern is present in reporting on Serb and Croat returnees, where community visits are accompanied by representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. What is analytically important is not merely the presence of this pattern, but that the media actively reproduce it rather than simply reflecting it. Religious identity is foregrounded as the central element of the returnee experience, thereby reinforcing the link between ethnicity and religion, which is itself one of the key structural features of Bosnian-Herzegovinian society.

International Actors: Selective Engagement Along Ethnic Lines

The analysis of media reporting also reveals a pattern in which different returnee groups attract the attention of different foreign actors, often along ethnic and religious lines. Croat returnee communities are portrayed as receiving support and institutional cooperation from the Republic of Croatia; Serb returnees are similarly positioned in relation to the Republic of Serbia; while Bosniak returnees are more frequently shown in the context of support from more distant actors. Dnevni avaz (2025) records, for example, humanitarian support from the state of Qatar to returnee families in RS.

This differentiated pattern of engagement suggests that returnee communities also function as channels through which external actors project their influence within BiH, positioning BiH as a space of overlapping and sometimes competing external agendas.

OHR and EUFOR appear in the media as actors whose engagement is reactive: they respond to incidents of violence or discrimination but do not take more direct action. OHR, according to media reports, has emphasised that primary responsibility for ensuring the safety of returnees lies with domestic institutions (Federalna, 2023). This position, while formally justified, reinforces, in the perception of returnees, the sense of institutional abandonment.

Resilience and Rootedness: The Counter-Narrative Rarely Heard

Positive portrayals of returnees, though rare in comparison with narratives framed around security problems, carry consistent and sociologically significant content. Večernji list (2021) reports on Ćamil from the village of Borač who, despite living without electricity and in minimal conditions, remains determined not to abandon his pre-war home. SrpskaInfo (2020) carries the story of Goran, who spent years living in London but decided to return to Majkovac. Common to these narratives is an emphasis on a deep attachment to the place of origin that transcends material calculation.

These examples point to a broader phenomenon that appears across ethnic lines: rootedness and an identity-based attachment to the pre-war home as an enduring motivation for return and staying, even in difficult conditions. This counter-narrative — in which the returnee is presented as an active agent of their own life, not merely as a victim of the system — is almost entirely absent from the dominant media discourse, yet it is precisely this narrative that, as the field research also shows, perhaps most accurately describes the reality.

Absence of a Reconciliation Narrative

Finally, one of the most significant findings of the analysis is what does not exist in the media: a narrative of reconciliation and long-term integration. Only a small number of articles highlight examples of positive inter-ethnic cooperation, joint initiatives, or functional coexistence. The media follow conflicts and incidents, while the everyday life in which neighbours of different ethnicities cooperate at the market or in the field remains invisible.

As a result, returnees consistently appear in the media space as a problem to be solved, rather than as part of the solution. This construction has real consequences: it shapes public opinion, influences political solutions, and — as the field research shows — is deeply felt in the communities themselves, which become aware of how they are portrayed.

III. FIELD RESEARCH: VOICES FROM RETURNEE COMMUNITIES

Methodological Note

As part of the second section of this research, field visits were conducted in ten returnee communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina during 2025 and 2026. The communities visited were: Kozarac, Janja, Zvornik, Foča, Višegrad, Srebrenica, Novi Grad, Stolac, Ljubuški, and Drvar.

The field visits were not structured as formal interviews or focus groups. They were conducted through informal conversations with residents, predominantly younger people, as well as with representatives of civil society and local institutions in the selected communities. Notes were kept during and immediately after the visits by a single researcher, ensuring consistency in the manner of recording across all communities.

This approach is not conceived as representative research nor as the systematic collection of data. The goal of the field work was to document experiences and perspectives that are not visible in media discourse, and which were identified through the analysis of media reporting in the first part of this research. The accounts of interlocutors are paraphrased with the protection of anonymity — the communities from which they come are named, but not the identities of the individuals.

The material is organised into three analytical layers that reflect different levels at which the everyday life of returnee communities unfolds: structural and institutional barriers; the experiences of actors working on sustainable return; and everyday life and the perspectives of young people.

1. Structural and Institutional Barriers

One of the most consistent findings of the field research is that returnees encounter in their everyday lives a series of structural barriers that are not the result of individual incidents, but of systemic patterns that repeat themselves across different communities and different levels of institutional life.

Administrative Discrimination

In Kozarac, returnees describe long-standing problems with cadastral documentation — missing papers, records that cannot be found, processes unnecessarily prolonged. Particularly indicative is the case of the refusal of documents written in the Latin script at the Prijedor municipality. Although both the Latin and Cyrillic scripts are equal according to the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, interlocutors state that documents not in Cyrillic were not accepted. This pattern of administrative barriers was confirmed in Janja as well, where interlocutors describe similar problems with permits and procedures being unnecessarily delayed.

The Institutional Trap of Civil Society

The most concrete and best-documented example of structural barriers comes from Zvornik, where the association Srcem za Podrinje (With the Heart for Podrinje) operates, registered at the level of Bosnia and Herzegovina with its headquarters in Republika Srpska. This humanitarian organisation finds itself in a legal and financial trap that reveals the fundamental problem of cross-entity civil society in BiH.

When they apply for public calls in the Federation of BiH, they are rejected because their headquarters are in Republika Srpska. When they apply for calls in Republika Srpska, they are rejected because they are perceived as a Bosniak association, even though the association is not ethnic in character or in registration. The result is complete exclusion from public funding, despite the fact that they legally exist and are actively working.

Employment in the Public Sector

The pattern of exclusion from public institutions was confirmed in several communities. In Zvornik, interlocutors state that Bosniaks can barely find employment in public institutions, with one indicative exception — in sectors where there is an acute shortage of workers, such as hospitals and health institutions, employment takes place regardless of ethnic affiliation. This exception itself speaks to the nature of the problem: discrimination in employment is not absolute, but selective and conditioned by the needs of the majority system.

Note: The Special Report of the Institution of the Ombudsman for Human Rights of BiH on employees in police and security agencies shows that at the end of 2017 there were only 18 Bosniaks in managerial structures of the RS Ministry of the Internal Affairs, representing less than 3% of the total number.

Symbolic Space and Political Marginalisation

In several communities, interlocutors describe the symbolic space as a source of everyday discomfort and exclusion. In Skelani near Srebrenica, at the entrance to the settlement there is a monument to members of the Army of Republika Srpska bearing the emblem of the four ocila (Cyrillic Cs), while an earlier monument in the shape of a machine gun was replaced by the current one, which local Bosniaks describe as ‘better than the previous one’ — which itself speaks to a low threshold of expectations.

In Stolac, the symbolic situation is particularly complex. In front of the municipal administration building, the flags of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the HVO, the city of Stolac, and Herzeg-Bosnia — an unconstitutional entity whose symbols are formally banned — are simultaneously displayed. Interlocutors describe an atmosphere in which unconstitutional symbolism is normalised and institutionally protected, and any attempt to react to it results in sanctions for those who react, rather than those who place it there.

2. Return Actors and Implementation Experiences

While the first layer describes the barriers that returnees face in their relationship with institutions, the second layer brings the perspective of those who have directly worked or are working on the process of sustainable return (representatives of local institutions, civil society, and support programmes).

Institutional Framework for Support to Return

The key institutional actor in the return process is the Federal Ministry of Displaced Persons and Refugees (FMROI). The Ministry implements continuous support programmes for returnees that include infrastructure reconstruction, scholarships for returnee students, co-financing of pupil transport costs, employment programmes, and one-time assistance. In 2025 alone, FMROI secured more than 1.3 million KM for the preservation of employment of returnees in RS, thereby supporting 691 employed returnees in 31 municipalities. In earlier years, for example in 2011, FMROI implemented projects in the RS area worth 6.4 million KM.

Republika Srpska has the Ministry for Refugees and Displaced Persons of RS. However, available data show a significant asymmetry in the scale of activities. While FMROI has continuously funded return projects for Bosniaks in RS in amounts running to several million, the RS ministry in certain years allocated as little as 450,000 KM for return to FBiH. This financial asymmetry is not merely a statistic; it is directly reflected in the quality and pace of return in the communities we visited.

Kozarac – Reconstruction as a Collective Project

Kozarac represents one of the most striking examples of physically successful return. Interlocutors note that they themselves did not expect that so many people would return nor that investment would be on such a scale. The settlement today is largely reconstructed, and the key actors of that reconstruction were the returnees themselves and the diaspora, not institutional support. This example raises an important question for the overall return policy: to what extent is sustainable return the result of systemic support, and to what extent is it the result of the individual and collective resilience of the returnees themselves and their networks?

Višegrad – The Political Invisibility of Small Communities

Interlocutors in Višegrad articulate a problem that is structural but rarely named in public discourse: a small number of returnees means a small number of voters,

and a small number of voters means political invisibility. Officials do not come, projects are not implemented, the community feels neglected — not necessarily due to active discrimination, but because the democratic system itself marginalises communities that are not sufficiently numerous to be politically interesting.

This political invisibility also has concrete legal consequences. Interlocutors note that since 2001 there have been dozens of unresolved cases of attacks on returnees in Višegrad and its surroundings. The police, according to their accounts, are correct and do their job, but the perpetrators largely do not face accountability before judicial institutions.

Drvar – An Example of When Conditions Exist

Drvar is the only community in this research where returnees — in this case Serbs who returned to FBiH — are in a position to hold local power and control public institutions. Drvar is simultaneously the community with the largest number of Serb returnees in the Federation of BiH. These two factors are not independent: the demographic mass of returnees created the conditions for political representation, which in turn enabled institutional support for return. FMROI in cooperation with the municipality funds scholarships, support for mothers, employment programmes, and one-time assistance, while the diaspora from Serbia and the Government of Serbia have invested significant resources in infrastructure and community development.

Drvar as an example poses the key analytical question for the entire research: it is not sufficient to have only the will to return and a legal framework — structural conditions are needed to make that return sustainable. Where there is a critical mass of returnees, political representation, and institutional support, return functions. Where one of these elements is missing, the entire system becomes fragile.

3. Everyday Life and Youth Perspectives

If structural barriers describe the system that impedes return, and the experiences of actors show how that system functions in practice, the third layer reveals what

neither can show: how all of this is lived from the inside, every day, especially for young people who have grown up or are growing up in returnee communities.

Through conversations in all the communities visited, a consistent pattern emerges: within the community itself, interpersonal relations are relatively functional; the problems come from outside — through institutions, the symbolic space, or actors who are not part of the local everyday life. This is an important distinction that is lost in media reporting which places its focus on incidents.

Education: Parallel Realities

The education system represents perhaps the deepest and most long-term problem for young people in returnee communities in Republika Srpska. Education in BiH falls under the jurisdiction of the two entities, or rather the ten cantons in FBiH, which means there is no unified curriculum for the entire state. In practice, this means that children of returnees in RS learn history, language, and other national subjects according to the Serb curriculum, with no possibility of studying Bosnian language or subjects from the national group in their own language.

This abstract systemic problem takes on a concrete face in the stories we heard in the field. In Kozarac, a young man who is the only Bosniak in his class at a secondary school in Prijedor told us that his history teacher said to him:

„I know this is not your history – we will find something else for you to study and get a grade.”

The young man told us this as a positive example of the teacher's goodwill. To us, that same sentence sounded different: it describes a situation in which a child accepts in advance that the history taught in school is not their history, and in which the individual goodwill of one teacher appears as a substitute for a systemic solution that does not exist.

In Višegrad, a father of returnee children des

“I tell them the truth at home. There is only one truth. And they learn what they must at school to get a good grade.”

This sentence encapsulates the everyday reality in returnee communities when it comes to education. There is a formal history and a home history, which the child must simultaneously carry and navigate between.

Communities have also developed collective strategies for coping with this problem. In Zvornik, most Bosniak children from surrounding villages do not attend secondary school in Zvornik but in Kalesija, on the territory of the Federation. This quiet strategy of avoidance is neither dramatic nor visible in the media, but it has its own cost and sends an implicit message that in your own town you are not safe or welcome.

Institutional Discrimination in Everyday Life

Young people in Novi Grad show a different attitude from most of the communities we visited. While interlocutors in other places mostly described adaptation or avoidance, young people from Novi Grad emphasise resistance:

“Our parents taught us to stand up for ourselves and not to let anyone push us around.”

From the same community comes one of the most distressing stories in this research. A young man one night called an ambulance for his mother who had fallen ill. The dispatcher first asked for a name and surname — and when they heard a Bosniak name, they said the ambulance could not come and that he would have to bring his mother himself. The young man did not have a driving licence. There was no one else to help.

Note: We present this account as testimony from an interlocutor that cannot be externally verified, but which illustrates a pattern of institutional discrimination appearing in different forms across several communities we visited.

In Zvornik, a similar, systemic pattern was documented: Bosniaks can barely find employment in public institutions, with one characteristic exception — in health institutions where there is an acute shortage of staff, employment takes place regardless of ethnic affiliation. Discrimination is thus conditioned by the needs of the system.

Symbolic Space and Political Exclusion

In Kozarac, interlocutors describe a sense of exclusion from political life that is not merely abstract but deeply personalised. When we asked them whether they vote in elections, the answer was:

„You feel like you have no business getting involved – that belongs to them.”

This sense was reinforced by public statements from certain politicians in high positions that directly targeted Bosniaks, which interlocutors cited as a reason for further withdrawal from political life.

In Skelani near Srebrenica, interlocutors describe the specific dynamics of the symbolic space in which the boundary between coexistence and tension becomes visible at certain moments. Everyday relations between neighbours are functional, but they say every January is difficult because of the commemoration of significant dates in that month.

Segregation as a System: Stolac

Stolac represents the most complete example of institutional and everyday segregation that we recorded in this research. In Stolac there are two primary schools under one roof, two health centres, two kindergartens — one for Bosniaks, one for Croats. It is known where each group exits and which cafés they frequent. The local government is entirely Croatian and there are virtually no Bosniaks in public institutions.

Two schools under one roof is not an informal practice — it is judicially established discrimination. The Cantonal Court determined that the segregation of pupils along ethnic lines continued even ten years after the first rulings. Pupils enter through separate doors in different shifts, without any contact with each other.

In Ljubuški the situation is different. There are not many Bosniaks and interlocutors note that everyone behaves correctly and that there are no complaints. This difference in relation to Stolac is not coincidental: where Bosniaks are not numerous enough to be perceived as a threat, tensions are almost non-existent.

This pattern — that tension grows in proportion to the number of returnees — appears in other communities we visited as well.

Provocations, Incidents and the Media Image

One of the most consistent findings of the field research is the gap between the media image of violence in returnee communities and what the residents themselves describe. In almost all communities, interlocutors state that there are not as many violent incidents as the media portray, but that provocations do exist and are frequent, especially around the commemoration of important dates. Even more important is the observation that recurs in several communities: provocations most often do not come from local residents but from people coming from outside, coming precisely with the intention of causing unrest.

Identity: Beyond the Category of “Returnee”

The most powerful message that came from the field is not related to concrete barriers or incidents, but to identity. In Kozarac, interlocutors said at the end of the conversation:

„We are not returnees. We were returnees for the first few years when we had just returned. Now we are ordinary citizens like everyone else and we need to be treated as such.”

This sentence is more than a personal statement. It is a political and human stance that directly contrasts with the way in which the media, institutions, and research — including this one — inevitably categorise them. The category of ‘returnee’ may be useful for analysis and policy, but for the people who live in those communities every day, it is also limiting. It places them in a permanent state of something temporary, unfinished, still in process. What they ask for is simple: to be citizens.

IV. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research, encompassing both an analysis of media discourse and field experiences from ten returnee communities, reveals a picture considerably more complex than the one that most often appears in the public space. Returnee communities are not passive victims, nor are their problems reducible to sporadic incidents. What we documented is a system of barriers — administrative, institutional, educational, symbolic — that daily depletes the energy and resources of people who have decided to live in their own homes.

At the same time, the media discourse that accompanies these communities to a large extent reproduces divisions rather than calling them into question. Returnees appear in the media as victims and as a political argument, rarely as active citizens who build communities, develop strategies of resilience, and demand equal treatment.

At the same time, these communities have developed their own strategies of survival and resilience: from reconstruction through the diaspora in Kozarac, to the avoidance of schools in Zvornik, to active resistance in Novi Grad. Drvar shows that return can function when there is a critical mass of returnees, political representation, and institutional support.

Key Recommendations

On the basis of the documented findings, we identify several key areas requiring the attention of donors, institutions, and policy-makers:

1. The education system in BiH remains one of the deepest structural barriers to the integration of returnee children. The absence of a unified curriculum, particularly for national subjects, places returnee children in a position in which they must choose between formal and home history. This is not only a pedagogical problem — it is a question of civic equality.
2. Civil society operating across entity lines faces a systemic legal vacuum that excludes it from public funding in both entities. The case of the association *Srcem za Podrinje* is not an exception; it is a structural problem affecting

every association whose geographic scope of work crosses the entity boundary.

3. The political marginalisation of small returnee communities is a direct consequence of a democratic system that rewards numerical size. The mechanisms for protecting minority communities at the local level are insufficient and insufficiently applied.
4. The impunity for violence against returnees, documented particularly in Višegrad, sends a message to the entire community — both to those who have returned and those considering it. Judicial reform and the effectiveness of the prosecution of such cases directly affects the prospects for future return.

Finally, models of segregation in education, healthcare, and public life such as those that exist in Stolac must not be treated as local specificities or a matter of cultural preference. These are violations of constitutional and legal norms that require a systemic response, not merely court rulings that are not enforced.

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