

4. From Temporary Protection to Permanent Residence: Bosnian Refugees in Scandinavia

The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina forced more than two million people to flee from their homes. While the majority fled to neighbouring countries, many are also internally displaced. More than 100,000 arrived in Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Norway as refugees. The majority of these came during 1992 and 1993. This paper will deal with Bosnian refugees who have come to these four Nordic countries. My focus is on the personal aspects of the refugee experience, with particular emphasis on the relationship between integration and return.

THE BACKGROUND

Nordic researchers have followed Bosnian refugees through various phases of their lives in exile. The refugees we have met are a diverse group of individuals. They are men and women, old and young and single and in families. Many lived in cities, some lived in the country. Their education and vocational backgrounds are different, and they have various ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, the refugees came to different countries and to different communities. The Bosnians who came to Denmark in 1993 were placed in reception centres, without being entitled to instruction in the Danish language, schooling or other qualifying programmes. Those who came to Sweden at the same point in time were eventually offered housing in Swedish municipalities, instruction in the Swedish language and the opportunity to take paid employment. The situation in Norway was similar to Sweden – with one important exception: residence in Norway was temporary. Having always emphasised that any return to Bosnia would be voluntary, Finland's attitude has been virtually identical to Sweden's. However, there are major differences regarding group composition and the number of refugees in each country. Sweden has received approximately 70,000 refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Denmark 25,000, Norway 13,000 and Finland 1,500. The majority of Bosnians in Finland have arrived as resettlement refugees, while the Bosnians arriving in the other countries generally have come as individual asylum seekers.

An important aim of the Nordic study has been to ascertain the extent to which and how these different national and local contexts have influenced the refugees' attitudes to return. Our main objective has been to acquire knowledge about how refugees experience their situation in exile, how they assess the situation in their homeland and what they believe about the future. In what way has the integration policy impacted the individual refugee's decision to stay or return? Has an active return policy led to the return of a large number of refugees? It is difficult to provide the answer to this latter question. Only a small number of refugees have returned – and only a small number of refugees have been *able* to return. Thus the question of return depends more on the local situation in the homeland than the exile situation. The impact of the integration policy also depends on the situation in Bosnia. As long as cities and villages are 'ethnically clean', the refugees feel they have no choice. Facing skyrocketing unemployment, housing shortages and a pronounced degree of pessimism regarding the future, the 'choice' is simple for most – at least in the short run. In the long run, however, many hold tightly on to the dream of eventually returning to their home, even if they are gradually establishing a permanent home in their country of exile.

This paper is based on interviews and supplementary conversations with approximately 200 Bosnian families in various parts of the Nordic countries, that were carried out from June 1996 to January 1998 and constituted part of the comparative Nordic study (Berg 1998; Schwartz 1998; Ålund 1998). Our empirical material spans the range from media studies to participant observations and personal interviews with refugees and people working with refugees. The fieldwork has been carried out by sociologists and anthropologists who have all been engaged in the project. The material reflects variations in the Nordic countries' policies regarding the Bosnian refugees, while it also shows how the refugee experience fundamentally has similar features – regardless of the policies of the host country and local variations in the implementation of these policies. However, in order to explain the similarities and differences, I will outline the Nordic countries' policies regarding refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The policies of four countries: from differences to harmony

In their policies for Bosnians all of the Nordic countries emphasised the *return perspective*. The residence-in-exile would last as long as there was a need for protection. When this need for protection ceased, the Bosnians would go back to their homeland. This focus on return was an expression of a general policy shift, not only in the Nordic countries, but also in Western Europe in general:

This shift has been triggered by the situation in the former Yugoslavia, but must at the same time also be considered as part of a larger whole. The authorities have wished to establish a greater range of types of protection, and to make implementation more flexible.

(Brochmann 1995; my translation)

An often-heard argument in the Norwegian debate was that a stronger focus on return would mean that a larger number of people could be helped. It was also pointed out that assistance to refugees in exile and proactive assistance in the local areas would need to be considered as a whole.

Even though clear points of similarity can be discerned in the approaches of the Nordic countries to the refugee group from Bosnia-Herzegovina we also find significant differences. In Sweden the majority of the Bosnian refugees received permanent residence permits on humanitarian grounds. Thus the Swedes chose to follow their normal practice in refugee policy, which includes settlement in a municipality and generally the same rights for refugees as for Swedish nationals. Denmark granted temporary residence permits on collective grounds, initially choosing to keep the refugees in special reception centres – so-called Section 15 centres. Norway adopted what has been called a ‘dual-track strategy’, granting temporary protection on collective grounds, while also focusing on full integration in the municipalities (Brochmann 1995: 7–12).

Hence we may summarise the different policies in the countries as follows: Sweden and Finland chose full integration, while also ensuring that voluntary return would be feasible when the situation allowed it. Denmark opted for a virtually pure return strategy, with no room for integration into Danish society. Norway took the middle road, accepting both of the above: full integration as long as the need for protection existed, but forced return when the war was over. It must be added that both Denmark and Norway established deadlines for such a forced return.

This ‘freeze frame’ from 1994–5 does not, however, provide a proper description of the situation in 1997–8. By that time, the Bosnian refugees in Denmark had left the reception centres, received instruction in the Danish language and attended other integration-enhancing programmes. Bosnian refugees in Denmark also eventually received permanent residence permits. In Norway, temporary protection was similarly replaced by permanent residence permits for all those who were already in the country. Thus, all four countries have offered permanent residence permits to Bosnian refugees, and there are programmes for integration in the municipalities. The return concept is still alive, but in the sense of *voluntary* return. It must, moreover, be added that all the countries have groups and individuals among the Bosnian refugees who have not been granted permanent residence permits. A case in point is Bosnian refugees with Croatian passports in Sweden: their situation has been uncertain throughout the entire exile period (Slavnic 1998).

Several factors brought about this harmonisation of the Nordic policies. There is no room here for an exhaustive examination of this. Nonetheless, it is important to point out one matter which doubtless played an important part – *the time factor*. In 1992–3 it was generally assumed that the war would be over quite quickly, and the authorities saw this as justification for a policy of temporary residence and forced return. As the war dragged on for a number of years, it became more difficult to uphold the idea of temporary residence.

The 1995 Dayton Accord¹ marked a turning point, but no lasting peace was born out of its provisions. Ethnic boundaries were embedded in the accord, making large-scale return impossible. Even those who in principle could return to their homes found political, financial and social obstacles in their way.

A TEMPORARY LIFE

Let us go back to 1992–3 when the Nordic countries experienced the first influx of refugees in several decades. Almost 100,000 Bosnians fled from war and ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia. How did the refugees experience the situation before they left Bosnia, and what did they meet when they came to the Nordic countries?

‘Mirna’ from Sarajevo described the situation for herself and her children as follows:

When the war broke out, lots of people left the town almost in panic. I didn’t really want to leave. The town was occupied. A brother of mine and a brother-in-law had been taken prisoner. They’d been sent to concentration camps. The women had to leave town ... Our next-door neighbour was one of the Serb leaders. He called the family and told us we would have to leave town if we wanted to survive. Now, looking back, it’s hard to say whether this was right or not. I think that really it was a threat ...

(Interview with Bosnian refugee in Norway, Berg 1998)

‘Mirna’ and her children took the threats seriously and fled to friends in Croatia. They believed their stay would amount to a couple of weeks. It turned out to last for several months. They lived in a provisional refugee camp, but their material situation was relatively acceptable. However, in the winter of 1993 the situation intensified, and conflicts arose between Bosnian refugees and Croats. ‘Mirna’ tells us:

We were threatened, and life-threatening situations arose. We decided to leave Croatia. Croatian friends helped us to buy airline tickets to Norway. At this point in time, Norway was the only open country. It was a difficult situation for me. I had to decide for the children. Their fates were in my hands. We were going to a country and a situation unfamiliar to me. What is asylum? What is it like to be a refugee? Croatia was closed. What if Norway rejected us?

(ibid)

¹ In November 1995, the parties in the war in the Balkans signed the Peace Accord in Dayton, U.S.A. The Accord was meant to bring an end to the hostilities and signal that the parties agreed on the distribution of land. According to the agreement, all the parties were to contribute to the return of the refugees to their homes in Bosnia, even if these were now under the control of an ethnic group other than the refugees’ own. However, it was quickly evident that in practice the Accord meant the division of the country into three parts.

'Mirna's' case illustrates a situation in which many people found themselves at this point in time. In no way had they planned to leave Yugoslavia, but the situation was forced on them as the ethnic conflicts came to a head in Croatia. At the same time, not everyone was able to leave. 'Mirna' had friends who were able to help out. Many did not.

Thus 'Mirna' and her children came to Norway. They received 'temporary protection on collective grounds', and after almost a year in a reception centre they were allocated a dwelling in a suburb in a medium-sized Norwegian municipality. While still in the reception centre 'Mirna' was offered instruction in the Norwegian language, and her children started to attend school in the vicinity of the reception centre. Once settled in the municipality 'Mirna' completed the Norwegian language course, while her children continued school in the neighbourhood. They found friends fairly quickly, and eventually they also joined the local sports club.

TRAPPED BETWEEN THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

'Mirna's' story may serve as an example of what we in Norway have labelled a 'dual-track policy'. Refugees are to be integrated in the Norwegian community as long as they live in Norway, but must return to their home as soon as the war ends, not only voluntarily, but (if necessary) by force. Let us imagine that 'Mirna' and her children had arrived in Denmark instead of in Norway in 1993. What would have happened to them then? At this point in time the Danish authorities practised a distinct return strategy when it came to the Bosnian refugees. They were placed in so-called Section 15 centres, which were large and located in remote places. As the intention was that the refugees would be returning shortly, they were not offered instruction in the Danish language or ordinary schooling. Nor did the set-up offer Bosnian refugees any significant contact with the Danish local communities or greater society.

Danish researchers have called the Danish policy prior to the so-called 'condition improvements' *temporary humanity* (Steen and Vedsted-Hansen 1994). Looking back, it is easy to criticise the Danish policy. It caused isolation, created frustration and left the Bosnian refugees in a vacuum, as it were. Programmes which are designed for the short term may have brutal consequences if they live on beyond their intended lifetime.

The temporary element constituted a major uncertainty factor for the Bosnian refugees in Denmark. However, this aspect has clear parallels to the situation for the Bosnians who came to Norway. Susanne Utsigt's descriptions of the situation at a Norwegian reception centre confirm some general characteristics: 'The temporary nature of the refugees' lives creates nagging uncertainty and for some of them also anxiety. A number of them pointed out that the uncertainty was what bothered them the most' (Utsigt 1998: 101). One of Susanne Utsigt's informants had this to say: 'We really don't live here, because it's so uncertain whether we can stay or not' (ibid). Other researchers have