

## Bordering and Bounding Identity: Rethinking the Notion of ‘Minority Return’

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### Abstract

This article examines the role of ethnic identity in the notion and practice of “minority return” in the ‘Western Balkans’ by combining a discourse analysis of scholarship on minority return with qualitative research among returnees minoritised at their place of origin in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia. It argues that – through fixing ethnic identity in time and space - minority return constitutes a bordered and bounded identity construction, which is more often imposed on than claimed by individuals and obscures situational, future-oriented and multiple forms of identification. Literature on minority return largely treats ethnicity and minority as self-evident analytical categories, (re)producing the ethnic boundaries related to wars and ethnic mobilisation. The empirical material, based on 76 interviews, demonstrates that ethnic identifications are highly contingent on institutional and interactional contexts. While respondents readily provided ethnic identifications where such categories were socially or institutionally meaningful, ethnicity was less prominent in individual accounts of belonging and absent from stated conditions for remaining after return. We conclude that minority return constitutes a specific ethnicised approach to return reflecting post-war legacies, stakeholder interests converging in the ‘return intervention-nexus’ and a broader Balkanist epistemology that privileges ethnicity as an explanatory framework for social dynamics. Return scholarship would be well-advised to interrogate ethnic identities from the perspectives of minoritised people themselves and as epistemological and institutional processes acknowledging individual identifications unequally.

**Keywords:** Minority return, identification, ethnification, Balkanism.

## Introduction

The notion of minority return emerged in the post-war context in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH). Between 1992 and 1995, over half the population of BH was forcibly displaced by violence guided – at least in parts – by the aim to create and control ‘ethnically pure’ territories and populations. ‘Minority return’ constituted a case of “unintended norm diffusion” away from previous peacebuilding paradigms, which considered ethnically unmixed populations to be more stable and secure, including for the displaced persons themselves.<sup>1</sup> International pressure resulted in some support for the return of displaced Serbs after the war in Croatia, but the international intervention in BH represented the first deliberate attempt by international actors, to reverse such displacements, re-create a multiethnic society and promote the return of minorities. The basis for this was created through the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), which enshrined the right to return including property restitution, not only to the country, but the place of origin as a political desideratum.<sup>2</sup> International support dedicated towards this aim was unprecedented, in terms of financial volume and personnel.<sup>3</sup> The guarantees of the DPA’s Annex 7 along with the assistance were envisaged to guarantee the quick return of the displaced persons, which – however – remained far below expectations.<sup>4</sup>

While displacement of people based on ethno-religious categorisations has continued around the globe, large-scale attempts to reverse this through targeted support have not. Our literature review shows that return migration scholarship has studied ethnic identities and social boundaries almost exclusively with a view to the former Yugoslavia, mainly BH and to lesser extents Croatia and Kosovo. Recent analysis of this Bosnian exceptionalism holds that the agenda for remixing or minority return was shaped by the confluence of interests of powerful stakeholders, including EU refugee receiving countries, the US administration and the Bosniak leadership (each individually pursuing different goals by aligning with this agenda).<sup>5</sup> The 1990s also marked a broader shift in international refugee governance towards the promotion of return and repatriations: UNHCR declared the 1990s the “decade of repatriation” and 1998 the “year of minority return”. In the specific context of the international intervention in Bosnia – governing and rebuilding the country with substantial international presence as a semi-protectorate – refugee return was attributed a legitimising function, expected to validate post-conflict regimes and maintain donor confidence.<sup>6</sup> As for the specific emphasis on minorities, after horrific cruelties were not prevented by the international presence, recreating a status quo ante appeared as morally good and “what policy makers believed displaced people wanted.”<sup>7</sup>

In this article, we analyse the roles and meanings of ethnic identity for the notion and the agenda of minority return. We start off by examining ‘minority return’ in light of scholarly literature on identity and ethnic minorities to interrogate and explicate its inherent epistemological claims by means of juxtaposition. Our analysis finds that minority return is

<sup>1</sup> Brubaker, Rebecca. 2025. *Reversing ethnic cleansing through minority returns*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Phuon, Catherine. 2000. ‘Freely to return’: Reversing ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 13(2), 165–183.

<sup>3</sup> Cox, Marcus. 1998. Strategic approaches to international intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Geneva & Sarajevo: Center for Applied Studies in Negotiation (CASIN); Brubaker, *Reversing ethnic cleansing*.

<sup>4</sup> Brubaker, Rebecca. 2013. *From the unmixing to the remixing of peoples: UNHCR and minority returns in Bosnia*. Research Paper 261. Geneva: UNHCR.

<sup>5</sup> Brubaker, *Reversing ethnic cleansing*.

<sup>6</sup> Black, Richard, and Saskia Gent. 2004. Defining, measuring and influencing sustainable return: The case of the Balkans. Working Paper T7. Brighton: University of Sussex.

<sup>7</sup> Brubaker, *Reversing ethnic cleansing*.

a bordered and bounded identity, reflecting assumptions, aspirations and interests of several stakeholders, however, rarely those of the displaced people themselves. We argue that the international pre-occupation with ethnicity and ethnic relations reflected stereotypical beliefs about the region summarised as Balkanism by Todorova,<sup>8</sup> a specific discourse viewing the Balkans as inherently violent and tribal. Minority return emerged in the context of this ‘return intervention-nexus’, meaning that its main proponents were neither particularly well-versed in minority rights nor in restoring multi-ethnic societies.

Building on the conceptual discussion, we will trace roles and meanings of ‘ethnic identity’ a) in the scholarship that emerged around this notion and programming and b) in migrants’ own understandings. Regarding the first, we analysed a body of literature identified through keyword-based search regarding its conceptualisation of ethnic identity and minority, its target group selection and the use of (de-)ethnification regarding the study of return. Subsequently, we will discuss the process of data collection from an ongoing research project on return and belonging focusing on minoritised populations and attempts to explore and interrogate the roles and meanings of ethnic identities rather than presupposing them.

### **Methodology: scope and limitations**

The empirical part of this article consists of two sections. Firstly, results of a keyword-based search of literature on ‘minority return’ are analysed. Table 1 below lists the respective data analysed as part of this discourse analysis. Adopting a visibility-based sampling strategy, we searched Google Scholar – an internationally established tool through which academic literature is accessed in a specific order – for keywords. Finding a strong regional bias in the search results for ‘minority return’ for the former Yugoslavia, we hypothesised that studies covering other world regions might use different terminology. We searched Google Scholar for the keywords ‘return migration identity’ and ‘return migration belonging’ and collected all publications among the first 50 results that carry the respective terms or slight modifications in their titles. The results are 9 titles mentioning identity and 20 titles mentioning belonging; however, all deal exclusively with ethnic return – diasporic return to an ancestral or ‘ethnic’ homeland – and will thus not be considered further in the analysis.

The first 50 results of a Google Scholar search for publications on ‘minority return’ featuring this notion in their title yielded 12 results. The selected publications were subsequently analysed conceptually in three stages. First, the analysis examined whether and how the notions of *identity* and *minority* were explicitly defined. Second, it investigated the ontological framing of ethnic identity – specifically, whether it was construed as static or fluid, stable or context-dependent, singular or multiple, and whether it was approached as an inherent attribute or as a performative construct. Finally, the analysis considered whether factors beyond ethnicity were acknowledged as relevant in shaping return migration processes. It deserves highlighting that the keyword-based search yields a higher representation of literature uncritically reproducing ethnifying perceptions within the sample and low inclusion of the more nuanced and critical, largely anthropological scholarship dealing with ‘minority return’ without using this keyword prominently. However, for the goal of examining conceptualisations and utilisations of ethnicity in a pertinent strand of literature characterised by high visibility the sampling provides a valid basis.

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<sup>8</sup> Todorova, Maria. 1997. *Imagining the Balkans*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Table 1. Sources used for discourse analysis

| Year | Country / Region    | Source                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|------|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1998 | BH                  | International Crisis Group. 1998. <i>Minority return or mass relocation?</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 2001 | BH                  | Fischel De Andrade, José H. F., and Nicole Barbara Delaney. 2001. Minority return to south-eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina: A review of the 2000 return season. <i>Journal of Refugee Studies</i> 14(3), 315–330.                                                                              |
| 2001 | BH                  | Ito, Ayaki. 2001. Politicisation of minority return in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The first five years examined. <i>International Journal of Refugee Law</i> 13(1/2), 99–122.                                                                                                                    |
| 2003 | Kosovo              | Rabenhorst, Carol, et al. 2003. <i>“I was born in that village”: Prospects for minority returns and sustainable integrated communities in Kosovo</i> . Prepared for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The Urban Institute.                                      |
| 2004 | Balkans             | Ivanisevic, Bogdan. 2004. <i>Legacy of war: Minority returns in the Balkans</i> . Human Rights Watch World Report 2004.                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 2005 | BH                  | Ó Tuathail, Gearóid, and Carl Dahlman. 2005. Has ethnic cleansing succeeded? Geographies of Minority Return and Its Meaning in Bosnia-Herzegovina. <i>Geopolitics</i> 10(3), 613–634.                                                                                                         |
| 2007 | Croatia             | Mesić, Milan, and Dragan Bagić. 2007. <i>Sustainability of Minority Return in Croatia</i> . Zagreb: UNHCR.                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 2010 | Balkans             | Jenne, Erin K. 2010. Barriers to Reintegration after Ethnic Civil Wars: Lessons from Minority returns and restitution in the Balkans. <i>Civil Wars</i> 12(4), 370–394.                                                                                                                       |
| 2011 | Croatia             | Mesić, Milan, and Dragan Bagić. 2011. <i>Minority return to Croatia: Study of an open process</i> . Zagreb: UNHCR.                                                                                                                                                                            |
| 2013 | BH                  | Brubaker, Rebecca. 2013. <i>From the unmixing to the remixing of peoples: UNHCR and minority returns in Bosnia</i> . UNHCR Research Paper No. 261. Geneva: UNHCR.                                                                                                                             |
| 2016 | Croatia             | Mesić, Milan, and Dragan Bagić. 2016. Minority (Serb) returnees to Croatia: Reintegration or new immigration? in <i>Ethnic Minorities and Politics in Post-Socialist Southeastern Europe</i> , edited by Ramet, Sabrina P., and Marko Valenta. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 211–231 |
| 2019 | Cyprus, BH, Türkiye | Stefanovic, Djordje, and Neophytos Loizides. 2019. <i>Minority return: The way home</i> . <i>Forced Migration Review</i> 62.                                                                                                                                                                  |

Source: Author's own compilation

The second section draws on ongoing empirical research on the return of migrants minoritised at their place of origin. The respondents are people identifying or being identified with a minority, who have returned to their country of origin at least once. Through plurilocal qualitative data collection across three Western Balkan countries the research aims to shed light on their positionings vis-à-vis available identity categories<sup>9</sup> and whether and to what extent these constitute belonging or shape mobility decisions. The research is designed inclusively in the sense that minority categories are considered regardless of their salience in connection with warring factions, kin states, or the like, and locations were selected based on the principle of maximal structural variation. Data collection was conducted by one author (observer researcher) and by people based in and familiar with the respective localities (participant researchers), in most cases identifying with one of the minoritised communities. The present analysis draws on 76 interviews mainly conducted in suburbs of Tirana (ALB), in Mitrovica, Ferizaj and Plemetin (RKS), as well as in Struga and Shuto Orizari (MKD) between 2023–2024. To guarantee anonymity, interlocutors will be referred to by anonymized codes consisting of the country code, type of interview (semi-structured: SI), acronym for the researcher, and a number throughout the text.

Quite a large body of literature has dealt with “minority return” to Bosnia and Herzegovina, as is reflected in this article. The selection of interview locations in Kosovo, North Macedonia

<sup>9</sup> The data presented here constitutes an excerpt from a larger qualitative data collection covering many aspects of displacement, migration, return and minoritisation.

and Albania for an ongoing research project was motivated by the relative scarcity of research on the subject and the variation of contexts. It is crucial to underline, therefore, that the interview data is by no means directly juxtaposing the literature analysed in the first empirical section. Data collection was conducted recently, includes people with diverse migration trajectories (including displacement, asylum seeking and labor migration) and varied contexts in terms of historical development and institutionalisation of ethnic identities. The excerpts analysed are furthermore limited by not reflecting how having lived abroad reshapes identity constructions.

### **Conceptual framework: bordering and bounding displaced people**

*Identity* has been referred to as one of the most “overused and undertheorized” concepts in migration research.<sup>10</sup> Definitions in sociological and socio-psychological approaches underline its co-constituted nature between individual choice and social context, agency and relationality, for example the “creation of a self-concept”, partly self- and partly socially constructed, responding to “what is acceptable, whether embraced or resisted.”<sup>11</sup> Whereas the self-reflexive project of re-inventing and re-creating one’s identity has become installed as a permanent task of individuals,<sup>12</sup> the actual degree of choice remains disputed. Social psychologists argue that identifications are mainly shaped through shared meanings and the appraisal by relevant others.<sup>13</sup> Identity verification, i.e., to be acknowledged for who one wants to be seen as, is linked with a sense of approval and can increase self-esteem, while its failure can cause distress, hostility, and low self-esteem.<sup>14</sup>

Some approaches distinguish between self-hood and collective identities, social categories that individuals relate to.<sup>15</sup> The social construction of collective identities reflects historical processes that work to the advantage or disadvantage of individuals and groups.<sup>16</sup> Not only are collective identities hierarchically structured, but individuals also differ in their ability to control their respective identities.<sup>17</sup> People with a higher social status are better able to influence their appraisal by others as well as others’ self-view.<sup>18</sup> In that sense, identification emerges as a factor of social stratification between those who can compose and decompose their identities more or less at will and those who have potentially stereotyping or dehumanizing identities attributed to them.<sup>19</sup> In turn, individuals can change how they relate to certain identities, and identities can change, either in their meanings or by means of changing boundaries.<sup>20</sup> Catalysts for such changes range from small everyday decisions, changes in life circumstances, incongruity (different understandings of the same identity

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<sup>10</sup> Anthias, Floya. 2010. Belongings in a globalising and unequal world: Rethinking translocations, in *The situated politics of belonging*, edited by Yuval-Davis, Nira. London: SAGE, 17–31.

<sup>11</sup> Lumby, Jacky. 2009. Performativity and identity: Mechanisms of exclusion. *Journal of Education Policy* 24(3), 353–369.

<sup>12</sup> Giddens, Anthony. 2003. *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Stets, Jan E., and Michael M. Harrod. 2004. Verification across multiple identities: The role of status. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 67(2), 155–171.

<sup>14</sup> Stets and Harrod, *Verification across multiple identities*.

<sup>15</sup> Anthias, Floya. 2002. Where do I belong? Narrating collective identity and translocational positionality. *Ethnicities* 2(4), 491–514.

<sup>16</sup> Lumby, *Performativity and identity*.

<sup>17</sup> Lumby, *Performativity and identity*.

<sup>18</sup> Stets and Harrod, *Verification across multiple identities*.

<sup>19</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt. 2004. *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi*. Cambridge: Polity.

<sup>20</sup> Burke, Peter J. 2006. Identity change. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 69(1), 81–96.

between individuals), and changing power relations.<sup>21</sup> A concern with one's identity often occurs in response to a sense of destabilization or exclusion.<sup>22</sup>

In everyday life, identities are enacted or activated situationally, with individuals possibly having to adapt their behavior, reflecting that some people's appraisal is more important to them than that of others.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, not all identities shape behavior to the same extent, or at all. The more abstract ones are more commonly expressed by endorsing certain values or beliefs than by situated behavior. Conflicting identities can also be activated simultaneously, requiring a decision which one to prioritise,<sup>24</sup> such as the former enemy combatants in post-war Bosnia, who were able to relate with each other via tropes of masculinity.<sup>25</sup> What we conclude from this review is that identity cannot be understood as a stable marker of sameness and difference. Instead, we may think of personal and collective identities as simultaneously including sameness and difference at multiple levels, in potentially contradictory forms, and through "power-related, dialogical ascriptions by selves and by others", which are "processually configured" to be enacted or transformed.<sup>26</sup>

*Ethnicity* is another "highly contested term."<sup>27</sup> It emerged as a research category during the 1950s and 60s,<sup>28</sup> classically defined by Max Weber as a "subjective belief" in a "common descent", without necessarily implying analytical value,<sup>29</sup> and is usually understood as emerging from pre-modern social relations and shared cultures.<sup>30</sup> Even though ethnicities are common explanations for violent conflicts, they lack an objectifiable definition.<sup>31</sup> In response, Barth shifted the emphasis to boundary making as producer of (different) ethnicities.<sup>32</sup> Brubaker and Cooper urged to not make assumed bounded groups the unit of analysis, and to disentangle the various processes of self-understanding, claims-making and networked as well as hierarchical social structures otherwise concealed by these labels.<sup>33</sup> Contestations over its meanings and its role in social dynamics run between disciplines (process of social organisation vs unit of social structure)<sup>34</sup> as well as across disciplines along the lines of *given vs chosen*, *stable vs situational*, and *subjectively felt vs interest-driven*.<sup>35</sup> Among the various approaches, only primordialism conceives of ethnic identity as innate,

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<sup>21</sup> Lumby, *Performativity and identity*.

<sup>22</sup> Anthias, *Belongings in a globalising and unequal world*.

<sup>23</sup> Stets and Harrod, *Verification across multiple identities*.

<sup>24</sup> Stets and Harrod, *Verification across multiple identities*.

<sup>25</sup> Jansen, Stef. 2010. Of wolves and men. *Focaal* 2010(57), 33–49.

<sup>26</sup> Gingrich, André. 2004. Conceptualising identities: Anthropological alternatives to essentialising difference and moralizing about othering, in *Grammars of identity/alterity: A structural approach*, edited by Baumann, Gerd, and André Gingrich. New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 3–17.

<sup>27</sup> Anthias, *Where do I belong?*

<sup>28</sup> Antweiler, Christoph. 2015. Ethnicity from an anthropological perspective, in *Ethnicity as a political resource: Conceptualizations across disciplines, regions, and periods*, edited by University of Cologne Forum Ethnicity as a Political Resource. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 25–38.

<sup>29</sup> Larin, Stephen. 2010. Conceptual debates in ethnicity, nationalism, and migration, in *The international studies encyclopedia*, edited by Denemark, Robert A. Malden & Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 438–457.

<sup>30</sup> Stamenova, Svetlana. 2017. The specifics of Balkan ethnic identity construction: Ethnicisation of localities. *National Identities* 19(3), 311–332.

<sup>31</sup> Chandra, Kanchan. 2006. What is ethnic identity and does it matter? *Annual Review of Political Science* 9(1), 397–424.

<sup>32</sup> Barth, Fredrik. 1969. *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organization of culture difference*. Prospect Heights: Waveland Press.

<sup>33</sup> Brubaker, Rogers, and Frederick Cooper. 2000. Beyond 'identity'. *Theory and Society* 29(1), 1–47.

<sup>34</sup> Adlparvar, Naysan, and Mariz Tadros. 2016. The evolution of ethnicity theory: Intersectionality, geopolitics and development. *IDS Bulletin* 47(2), 123–136.

<sup>35</sup> Wimmer, Andreas. 2008. The making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries: A multilevel process theory. *American Journal of Sociology* 113(4), 970–1022.

fixed and permanent,<sup>36</sup> thus making it a social *and* biological connection, somewhat naturalizing feelings of disdain and repulsion between ethnic groups.<sup>37</sup> Other schools of thought focus on how ethnicity is constructed, reproduced and changed;<sup>38</sup> towards which – often unrelated – ends ethnic affiliations are constructed, exploited and utilized (instrumentalism);<sup>39</sup> or viewing ethnicity in the context of class relations, either as (partly) constituting overlapping boundaries or as competing (horizontal vs vertical) forms of political organization and mobilization.<sup>40</sup>

A relevant distinction is that between ‘having an ethnicity’ as a part of one’s self-concept and ‘being placed within the social relations of an attributed ethnic group.’<sup>41</sup> To complicate matters further, five ways of determining ethno-national belonging can be distinguished: by self-identification, through other people identifying with that very community, majority perception, establishing “objective” criteria and by use of proxies such as names, residence, etc.<sup>42</sup> As this already indicates, *minority* is another term with no agreed upon definition.<sup>43</sup> Literature distinguishes definitions based on numerical and / or power relations and legal frameworks list various categories, based on indigeneity, kin-state, language, etc.. Minorities are usually defined vis-à-vis the state and from that perspective presuppose an inherently “static and statist” “demographic approach to understanding the topologies and complexities of a society,” usually introduced to sort and control populations top-down.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, “the conceptualization of communities by legal regimes takes place in a climate of political and linguistic ambiguity, as well as sensitivity and suspicion” and membership can be claimed and contested by various means.<sup>45</sup> Implications of being (made) part of a minority vary, as states’ concern for minority rights or repression may increase, for example with demands or grievances of a minority being assessed as a security threat.<sup>46</sup>

What runs through this conceptual discussion is the distinction between claiming and being attributed an (ethnic) identity or minority status and peoples’ differential ability to access preferred identities and exercise control over how they are being identified. Processes of labelling and categorising affect racialised and minoritised populations disproportionately, indicating underlying issues of material inequalities and exclusion.<sup>47</sup> Displaced persons have bureaucratic, ethnic or humanitarian identities ascribed to them by states, international organisations or social orders. In humanitarian discourse, refugee identity is tied to the loss of place of origin.<sup>48</sup> Refugee studies literature has long deconstructed claims linking place and identity, flagged uncritical assumptions of return as homecoming and a sedentary bias

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<sup>36</sup> Adlparvar and Tadros, *The evolution of ethnicity theory*.

<sup>37</sup> Yeghiazaryan, Laura. 2018. Which of the three main ethnic conflict theories best explains the ethnic violence in the post-Soviet states of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova? *Undergraduate Journal of Political Science* 3(1), 46–64.

<sup>38</sup> Yeghiazaryan, *Which of the three main ethnic conflict theories*.

<sup>39</sup> Jenne, Erin K. 2014. *Ethnic bargaining: The paradox of minority empowerment*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

<sup>40</sup> Bonacich, Edna. 1980. Class approaches to ethnicity and race. *Critical Sociology* 10(2), 9–23.

<sup>41</sup> Anthias, *Where do I belong?*

<sup>42</sup> Pap, Andras L. 2025. Legal challenges in defining minority communities and membership: Overview and introduction, in *Identity, belonging, and the law*, edited by Pap, Andras L. et al. Paris & Budapest: L’Harmattan, 7–24.

<sup>43</sup> OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights). 2010. *Minority rights: International standards and guidance for implementation*. New York & Geneva: United Nations.

<sup>44</sup> Ouahes, Idir, and Paolo Maggolini. 2021. Introduction: Minorities, minoritisation and (Trans-)Jordan, in *Minorities and state-building in the Middle East: The case of Jordan*, edited by Maggolini, Paolo, and Idir Ouahes. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 1–24.

<sup>45</sup> Pap, *Legal challenges*.

<sup>46</sup> Pap, *Legal challenges*.

<sup>47</sup> Anthias, *Where do I belong?*

<sup>48</sup> Agier, Michel. 2010. *On the margins of the world: The refugee experience today*. Cambridge: Polity.

in return programming.<sup>49</sup> The paradigm of return as preferred ‘solution,’<sup>50</sup> in essence denies acknowledging any new or alternative identities that displaced persons may create for themselves,<sup>51</sup> making it a *bordering or containing identity*, an imposed claim about the “rightful belonging” of a person. This relates more to securitising than to humanitarian discourses (in fact, UNHCR advocated against early and forced returns after the war in BH, especially for minorities); however, both converge in acting on, categorising and identifying people rather than asking if and how place-based or collective identities matter to the individual.

The other takeaway is that individuals engage with a multiplicity of identities, whose salience varies situationally and over the life course. In contrast to that, the notion of minority return fixes one specific identity, one possibly linked with negative, if not traumatic experiences, that of belonging to an ethnic minority at the place of origin, across time and space, thereby turning it into a static, permanently salient attribute. It also represents an instance of ethnification, a process by which generic activities are reclassified as ethnic ones.<sup>52</sup> This is through assuming that an ethnic categorisation from before the displacement maintains relevance for and during return or even that an assumed return aspiration is shared by an ethnic collective. By presuming the existence of bounded collectivities in the place of origin of displaced persons and claiming a continued belonging to these collectivities even after forced displacement, minority return is a bounding identity construction. Meanwhile, this ethnification as well as the allocation of resources towards furthering ethnified activities changes the conditions under which people identify, possibly incentivising ethnic identifications.<sup>53</sup> The following section is going to briefly reflect on why the ethnification of return, unlike the return agenda in general, is specific to post-war Yugoslavia.

### **Ethnicity and interventions in the Balkans**

In the Balkans, ethnicity emerged in the process of nation building during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when political and intellectual elites constructed national identities out of local ones which were defined as ethnic in the process.<sup>54</sup> Otherwise, populations were multilingual; double religious identities or religious conversion<sup>55</sup> as well as situational and changeable belongings were common.<sup>56</sup> So-called ethnic markers used to be intersecting demarcations relating to social status, religion, language, descent, profession, and rural vs urban residence.<sup>57</sup> Rising nationalisms were not the revival of “more primary” or pre-modern identities, but emerged as historical and linguistic identities during modernisation of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century and became imprinted onto the population in politically initiated processes, often through assimilation or expulsion.<sup>58</sup> Ethnicity does not match established categorisations in local languages, while for example *narod* and *narodnosti* (institutionalised in the Yugoslav

<sup>49</sup> Malkki, Liisa H. 1995. Refugees and exile: From ‘refugee studies’ to the national order of things. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24, 495–523.

<sup>50</sup> Chimni, Bhupinder Singh. 1999. From resettlement to involuntary repatriation: Towards a critical history of durable solutions to refugee problems. Working Paper No. 2. Geneva: UNHCR.

<sup>51</sup> Delpla, Isabelle. 2004. Is there a right to return? *Filozofski godišnjak* 16, 121–144.

<sup>52</sup> Cukut Krilić, Sanja. 2011. The role of ethnicity in qualitative migration research. *Migracijske i etničke teme* 27(2), 161–175.

<sup>53</sup> Kuran, Timur. 1998. Ethnic norms and their transformation through reputational cascades. *Journal of Legal Studies* 27(2), 623–659.

<sup>54</sup> Stamenova, *The specifics of Balkan ethnic identity construction*.

<sup>55</sup> Mazower, Mark. 2002. *The Balkans: A short history*. New York: Modern Library.

<sup>56</sup> Duijzings, Ger. 2000. *Religion and the politics of identity in Kosovo*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>57</sup> Stamenova, *The specifics of Balkan ethnic identity construction*.

<sup>58</sup> Stamenova, *The specifics of Balkan ethnic identity construction*.

context) are not fully captured by English translations such as nation and nationality and used colloquially with conflicting and multilayered meanings.<sup>59</sup> Ethnic identities were turned into effective means of mobilisation though, when political disagreements between representatives of the Yugoslav republics were increasingly framed in ethnic terms, evoking threats to “our people” and victimisation narratives reviving past grievances, which were amplified by the economic recession and mass mediasation.<sup>60</sup> Despite of the different historical background, for Albania it was similarly found that ethnicity has “taken on a singularly political tone” without much relevance for social relations among ordinary people, unless mediated through politics.<sup>61</sup>

Outside the region, popular, political<sup>62</sup> and academic<sup>63</sup> understandings and responses to developments in the Balkans are often informed by ethnification, the idea that essentialised and primordial identities play a causal role in social dynamics. This reflects what Todorova famously referred to as Balkanism, a discourse stigmatising the region as inherently violent, tribal and less developed.<sup>64</sup> In conflict studies, combinations of constructivist and instrumentalist or neorealist approaches to ethnicity have received significantly more validation in explaining violent conflict<sup>65</sup> than primordialism, the logical and empirical flaws of which were highlighted in relation to wars in Bosnia<sup>66</sup> and elsewhere.<sup>67</sup> But regardless of numerous historical and anthropological accounts problematising the ethnic bias and the disconnect with local lived realities and conceptualisations,<sup>68</sup> those ethnic categories that had gained salience through the wars and related mobilisations were carried into the post-war time as exclusive categories at the expense of all others.<sup>69</sup>

Balkanism also attributes an in-between status, as different, but European and with the potential to become ‘almost Western’, displaying gradations of orients and otherness.<sup>70</sup> This may explain post-war endeavors to ‘civilize the tribalism’ through externally-driven consociational state-building. Crucially, many of the Western powers involved in recreating multiethnicity in the Balkans have forcibly created national populations and territories by similar means (expulsion and assimilation), but earlier, and lacked experience with or tested frameworks for multiethnicity,<sup>71</sup> towards which minority return was meant to be a key

<sup>59</sup> Hromadzic, Azra. 2012. ‘Once we had a house’: Invisible citizens and consociational democracy in post-war Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Social Analysis* 56(3), 30–48.

<sup>60</sup> Denich, Bette. 2000. Unmaking multi-ethnicity in Yugoslavia: Metamorphosis observed, in *Neighbors at war: Anthropological perspectives on Yugoslav ethnicity, culture, and history*, edited by Halpern, Joel M., and David A. Kideckel. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 39–55.

<sup>61</sup> Barjaba, Kosta. 2004. Migration and ethnicity in Albania: Synergies and interdependencies. *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 11(1), 231–239.

<sup>62</sup> The journalistic travelogue “Balkan Ghosts” by Robert Kaplan for example significantly influenced the assessment of members of the Clinton administration on the region and the wars. See: Kaplan, Robert D. 2005. *Balkan ghosts: A journey through history*. 1st ed. New York: Picador.

<sup>63</sup> Blumi, Isa. 1998. The commodification of otherness and the ethnic unit in the Balkans: How to think about Albanians. *East European Politics and Societies* 12(3), 528–569.

<sup>64</sup> Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*.

<sup>65</sup> Jonas, Gareth. 2019. Were ‘ancient hatreds’ the primary cause of the Yugoslavian civil war? *E-International Relations*, 22 May 2019.

<sup>66</sup> Harvey, Frank P. 2000. Primordialism, evolutionary theory and ethnic violence in the Balkans: Opportunities and constraints for theory and policy. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 33(1), 37–65.

<sup>67</sup> Yeghiazaryan, *Which of the three main ethnic conflict theories*.

<sup>68</sup> Jansen, Stef. 2006. The privatisation of home and hope: Return, reforms and the foreign intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Dialectical Anthropology* 30, 177–199.

<sup>69</sup> Markowitz, Fran. 2007. Census and sensibilities in Sarajevo. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49(1), 40–73.

<sup>70</sup> Petrović, Tanja. 2008. Serbs, Albanians, and those in between: The gradations of otherness and identity management in the nation-building process. *Dve Domovini / Two Homelands* 27, 67–81.

<sup>71</sup> Deets, Stephen. 2002. Liberal pluralism: Does the West have any to export? *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* (4), 1–24.

steppingstone. As Deets finds, the EU's claim to represent and to export liberal pluralism was "more normative than empirical".<sup>72</sup> It was mainly through the global codification of minority rights and discourses on multiculturalism coinciding with the Yugoslav wars that the EU (EEC at that time) made recognition of newly independent eastern European states dependent on ethnic and national minorities rights.<sup>73</sup> Application of these principles was a different matter: Germany unilaterally recognized Slovenia and Croatia in 1991 based on the principle of national self-determination (i.e. majoritarianism, in the case of Croatia, for example disregarding the opposition of the Serb minority to independence), before the responsible Commission had formed its opinion.<sup>74</sup> During the wars, the EU equally lacked a strategy, simultaneously trying to reduce the number of minorities (in order to minimise the 'problem') and trying to protect the remaining ones.<sup>75</sup>

During negotiations over conflict settlements and post-war orders, the "lack of a coherent approach to managing ethnic conflicts" became even more apparent.<sup>76</sup> Ethnicity and ethnic relations were the cross-cutting themes of all post-war international projects and programs in BH, without, however, creating clarity about the goals or means of operationalisation.<sup>77</sup> The DPA exemplifies this paradox by simultaneously cementing the ethnic divisions produced by the war (territorially and in terms of power-sharing), and setting the goal of "minority return," encouraging displaced persons to return to their pre-war residence in a sub-state administrative unit within which they are part of an ethnic minority.<sup>78</sup> Consociational, i.e., ethnicity-based power-sharing arrangements and group-differentiated rights were forged through externally driven state-building not only in BH but also in Kosovo and North Macedonia as the result of the international culturalisation or ethnification of the conflicts.<sup>79</sup> Curiously, minority return aims to restore one of the key features perceived as "pre-modern" about the Balkans, the co-existence of diverse ethno-religious populations within a single polity, while simultaneously reflecting the agenda of unmixing the societies of refugee-receiving EU member states. In terms of outcomes, the multiculturalism that this created was largely declamatory, as none of the agreements included a workable combination of citizens' and collective rights beyond simply including them both.<sup>80</sup> As they address political subjects first and foremost as members of their ethnic communities, they perpetuate ethnicity as the main identity signifier.<sup>81</sup>

### Discourse analysis of literature on 'minority return'

As outlined in the methodological approach above, we now turn to the results of the discourse analysis based on literature found by the keyword-based search for minority return, revealing both geographical and content-related regularities.

Publications on minority return focus unanimously on individuals considered to be part of an ethnic minority at the place of return. Almost all studies cover countries that were part of

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<sup>72</sup> Deets, *Liberal pluralism*.

<sup>73</sup> Krasniqi, Gezim. 2010. The international community's modus operandi in postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo: A critical assessment. *Südosteuropa: Journal of Politics and Society* 58(4), 520–541.

<sup>74</sup> Deutsche Welle. 2016. When Germany recognized Croatia and Slovenia. *Deutsche Welle*, 25 June 2016.

<sup>75</sup> Ahrens, Geert-Hinrich. 2007. *Diplomacy on the edge: Containment of ethnic conflict and the Minorities Working Group of the Conferences on Yugoslavia*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>76</sup> Cox, *Strategic approaches*.

<sup>77</sup> Cox, *Strategic approaches*.

<sup>78</sup> Brubaker, *From the unmixing*.

<sup>79</sup> Barry, Brian. 1998. The limits of cultural politics. *Review of International Studies* 24(3), 307–319.

<sup>80</sup> Krasniqi, *The international community's modus operandi*.

<sup>81</sup> Krasniqi, *The international community's modus operandi*.

the former Yugoslavia (BH, Croatia and Kosovo), with BH serving as case study for half of the publications. The only exception is Stefanovic and Loizides, who study Cyprus and Türkiye in addition to BH.<sup>82</sup> The principal conclusion which can be drawn from these quantitative observations is that the literature on minority return is essentially limited to the former Yugoslavia and, in a narrower sense, to BH.

A qualitative analysis further reveals recurring patterns. Although explicitly focusing on ethnicity/ethnic identity, these terms are generally not defined. Rather, the concept of identity is treated as given and static. This tendency is particularly pronounced in publications from the immediate post-war period<sup>83</sup>, which talk about ethnic identity in terms of clearly defined dividing lines between the major ethnicised populations (Bosniaks, Croats, Serbs) and the territory attributed to each as determining minority or majority return. While equally neither defining identity nor ethnicity, later publications tend to recognize that identity is rather fluid and diverse, indicating that belonging and identity are not restricted to/defined by collective rootedness in a particular place.<sup>84</sup> They mention factors like the specific social environment and community composition prior to displacement, the relations to and in the country of refuge, and other identity markers such as age, gender or marital status as highly relevant for both the return decision and the contentment upon return.<sup>85</sup>

Similarly, minority is neither explicitly defined nor critically examined in the publications. Rather, it is typically employed in numerical terms, with minority return commonly framed as return to a locality where the returnee does not belong to the ethnic majority. One exception is Ito, who sees minority return as a direct challenge to wartime leaders' power monopoly, arguing that 'minority return' refers to displaced persons resettling in pre-conflict homes where they are politically and socio-economically dominated.<sup>86</sup> In the Bosnian context, minority status would be best conceptualised through asymmetries of power rather than numerical inferiority alone.<sup>87</sup> Despite this emphasis on the complexity of 'minority return', Ito continues by adopting the concept of return set out by Annex 7 of the DPA for his paper.

This example reveals a distinct underlying pattern. Most authors acknowledge the complexity of ethnic ascriptions and identifications and consider a range of additional factors and contextual conditions influencing return possibilities and decisions. Some implicitly adopt and thereby naturalise the ethnic mobilisation and boundaries of the wars which made ethnicity "the only politically relevant identity".<sup>88</sup> Others refer to the constructed nature of ethnic identities, while still treating the constructed units as bounded and solid and invisibilising processes and meanings of identification and group-making (cliché

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<sup>82</sup> Stefanovic, Djordje, and Neophytos Loizides. 2019. *Minority return: The way home*. *Forced Migration Review* 62, 46–47.

<sup>83</sup> International Crisis Group. 1998. *Minority return or mass relocation?*; Fischel De Andrade, José H. F., and Nicole Barbara Delaney. 2001. Minority return to South-Eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina: A review of the 2000 return season. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 14(3), 315–330.

<sup>84</sup> Jansen, Stef. 2016. Home and return in the foreign intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina: An anthropological critique, in *Deconstructing the reconstruction: Human rights and rule of law in postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina*, edited by Haynes, Dina F. London & New York: Routledge, 31–53.

<sup>85</sup> For example: Brubaker, *From the unmixing*; Mesić, Milan, and Dragan Bagić. 2016. Minority (Serb) returnees to Croatia: Reintegration or new immigration? in *Ethnic Minorities and Politics in Post-Socialist Southeastern Europe*, edited by Ramet, Sabrina P., and Marko Valenta. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 211–231.; Stefanovic and Loizides, *Minority return: The way home*.

<sup>86</sup> Ito, Ayaki. 2001. Politicisation of minority return in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The first five years examined. *International Journal of Refugee Law* 13(1/2), 99–122.

<sup>87</sup> Ito, *Politicisation of minority return*, 99.

<sup>88</sup> Gagnon, Valere P. 2004. *The myth of ethnic war: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s*. Itaca & London: Cornell University Press.

constructivism' in the words of Brubaker and Cooper).<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, through leaving their understanding of ethnic identity implicit, the crucial questions whether these are acclaimed or imposed identities, whether of nostalgic, present or future relevance to the displaced people, remains unaddressed. In this sense, this strand of literature entails problematic truth claims<sup>90</sup> which naturalise specific and constructed returnee subjectivities/identities, rather than highlighting conditions of their emergence. Another pattern is the selection bias regarding the 'ethnic groups' addressed. Besides the larger ethnified populations like Albanians, Bosniaks, Croats or Serbs, many publications also consider populations like Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians, Jews, or Gorani. However, the latter are – if at all – typically mentioned peripherally or used for comparative purposes, whereas those 'ethnicities' linked with conflict parties are positioned at the center of analysis, thereby reproducing inequalities and a securitising lens on minority rights and representation.

Ultimately, the focus on the ethnicity of returnees presupposes ethnicity as a relevant category in the context of mobility decision-making. Critical theories, especially post-colonial theory, highlight that such ethnifications do not occur universally but refer to specific 'groups' and regions of the world. The ethnified populations of scientific interest are usually non-White and *being* located in, inter alia, the East, the Orient or the Global South.<sup>91</sup> A growing body of literature analyses the distinctive, yet ambiguous racialisation of 'Eastern Europeans' and degrees of whiteness both as a product of the historical peripheralisation of Europe's East and more recent neoliberal policies.<sup>92</sup> The study of ethnic identities thus not only reproduces constructed differences between researched populations as bounded groups but also establishes a hierarchy between the unmarked – *normal, neutral, invisible* researcher and the *different*, ethnicised Other.<sup>93</sup> And by imposing ethnicity as an empty but salient variable it reproduces balkanising interpretations in the place of research on motives and experiences pertaining to return migration.

Ethnographic work on former Yugoslavia avoids these simplifications and openly criticises the identitarianist paradigm of the literature analysed above,<sup>94</sup> with some studies, for example, looking at how ordinary people either enact or resist nationalism,<sup>95</sup> others exploring individual differences in respondents' positionings vis-à-vis ethnically charged labels.<sup>96</sup> It also covers other relevant aspects, such as the massive political and economic transformations caused by the transition to a market economy and the rise of clientelism enabled by the confluence of war economies, international intervention and rapid privatisation in relation to return.

<sup>89</sup> Brubaker and Cooper, *Beyond 'identity'*.

<sup>90</sup> Foucault, Michel. 1980. Truth and power, in *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977*, edited by Gordon, Colin. Brighton: Harvester Press, 109–133.

<sup>91</sup> Narayan, Kirin. 2003. How native is a 'native' anthropologist?, in *Feminist postcolonial theory: A reader*, edited by Lewis, Reina, and Mills, Sara. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 285–305.

<sup>92</sup> Lewicki, Aleksandra. 2023. East-West inequalities and the ambiguous racialisation of 'Eastern Europeans'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 49(6), 1481–1499.

<sup>93</sup> Hall, Stuart. 1996. Introduction: Who needs 'identity'?, in *Questions of cultural identity*, edited by Hall, Stuart, and Paul du Gay. London: Sage, 1–17.

<sup>94</sup> Jansen, Stef. 2016. First as tragedy, then as teleology. *Conflict and Society* 2(1), 164–180.

<sup>95</sup> Jansen, Stef. 2003. 'Why do they hate us?' Everyday Serbian nationalist knowledge of Muslim hatred. *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 13(2), 215–237; Bartulović, Alenka. 2013. *'Nismo vaši!': Antinacionalizam u povojnem Sarajevu*. Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete.

<sup>96</sup> Lichnofsky, Claudia. 2013. Ashkali and Egyptians in Kosovo: New ethnic identifications as a result of exclusion during nationalist violence from 1990 till 2010. *Romani Studies* 23(1), 29–59.

### **Ethnic identities during data collection**

This section presents excerpts from and reflections on empirical data collection with minoritised people after their return from migration or displacement, which was conducted more recently (2023–2025). It illustrates the importance of considering the complex and contingent nature of identification processes as outlined above during data collection and analysis. Towards this aim, it discusses (a) the influence of the interactional setting of data collection on its outcomes and (b) the salience given to ethnic identifications in the context of belonging as well as in connection with mobility decision-making by the respondents.

Regarding the first point, we compare data collection by participant and observer researchers in how they influence speaking about ethnic identities. Participant researchers are people living in the respective localities and mostly identifying with one of the communities of interest. Some people involved in this research did not fit neatly into pre-conceived categories, for example, by being from so-called mixed families, having been socialised into an ethnic or national identification different from the ‘ancestral’ one, or having converted to a different religion, thereby adding some nuance to the notion of participant researcher.

The interview guideline applied by the participant researchers contains a section with personal details of the respondent including ethnicity and religion at the beginning. Both are optional and allow multiple mentions. There, all respondents provided one ethnic and almost all (over 90 %) one religious identification. According to the briefings with the researchers, speaking about ethnicity and identifications was an easy and natural part of the interviews. Enumerators contacted the respondents mainly through their own private or professional networks. Thus, the relationship between researcher and respondent was one of kinship, neighborhood, wider networks (such as mediated through colleagues or friends), or between staff member and beneficiary of a community-based organisation. Agreeing on one and, in most cases, a shared ethnic identity then becomes a means of establishing or renewing the connection between researcher and respondent in an atmosphere free of the fear of negative appraisal. Previous experiences with census and survey data collection have likely shaped the assumption that data collection requires producing one straightforward identification. Furthermore, the participant researchers are also likely to engage in strategic essentialism.<sup>97</sup> As community activists, they often deplore under-reporting of their communities during census, for example, and they are simply part of a social environment where such identifications matter. Kosovo and North Macedonia had ethnic quota systems for public administration or scholarships at the time of data collection, while Albania has limited public programs to promote inclusion of Roma and Egyptian minority, thereby – with different intensities and frequencies – requiring the production of an ethnic identity in institutional settings as routine practice for many of the respondents.

Data collected in a different interactional setting might look different, however. As one respondent stated: “I belong to Roma minority, but I don't say that everywhere”<sup>98</sup>. In interviews and conversations with the observer researcher, who is not used to providing an ethnic identification for herself, ethnicity did not serve the purpose of connecting; it was not among the situationally activated identities, and the expected appraisal is different. Therefore, access to the topic was less natural and outcomes were quite diverse, ranging from multiple and situational (regarding salience and type) ethnic identifications to disinterest or refusal to address the topic. Particularly for stigmatised and politicised identities the

<sup>97</sup> Bell, Avril. 2021. Strategic essentialism, in *The Blackwell encyclopedia of sociology*, edited by Ritzer, George. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1–2

<sup>98</sup> Interview ALB-RH-SI-02, returned migrant, conducted by RH, Durres, 16 January 2024.

responses differed a lot. Some felt it was important to claim an identity, even one used to discriminate, and others preferred to avoid the subject altogether, or engaged in universalising strategies (“we are all human beings” / “all are one”),<sup>99</sup> sometimes vaguely referring to negative experiences and showing no willingness to dive deeper into the subject. In the case of politicised identities, people’s positioning is also shaped by their political affiliations. People disagreeing with nationalist instrumentalisation of ethnic identities may prefer to provide a civic identity, or emphasize alternative categorization (‘for me, there are only good people and bad people’) and generally disapprove of attempts to divide people according to ethnicity or religion, attributing this to the realm of politics, often with considerable contempt. Learning about complex and ambivalent identifications required several meetings and establishing a closer relationship with the person than one interview can provide whereas even after several meetings and a certain trust based relationship having been established ethnicity remained off-limits in other cases. While we would not conclude that one context provides a more truthful picture of an individual’s identification than the other, the obvious differences in outcomes require a lot more sensitivity from the perspective of research ethics and methodology regarding the attribution of identities based on proxies, for example, and the pitfalls inherent in assumptions that take relationally embedded identifications as singular and static.

Regarding the question of whether and in how far minoritised ethnic identities constitute belonging to returned migrants, we turn back to the semi-structured interviews (n=76), i.e., data collected by participant researchers. They contain, at a later point, the question whether people feel they belong to a certain social group or community. The largest group of respondents answered this with “no”/“none” (27). 18 mentioned both social/ethnic as well as religious communities as important for their belonging (with varying emphasis), 8 referred to their ethnicity OR religion respectively and smaller numbers (2–4 each) expressed belonging to a professional network, their family, their neighborhood, their age group (young people), political party, sports association, as poor (“I feel like I belong to a social group, which I understand as a group of people who don’t have financial resources,”<sup>100</sup> and one respondent mentioned belonging “to my people” (referring to people living in the kin state). Thus, while all provided an unambiguous ethnic identification in the beginning, the number of respondents who assess ethnicity and / or religion as relevant for their sense of belonging is smaller than that of the ones who don’t feel belonging to any social formation. Some responses directly speak to perceived ambivalences by indicating that belonging is not permanent or can be challenged by others, as expressed in the following quotes: “I belong to a religious and social group, although there are times when I feel left out”;<sup>101</sup> “I feel I belong to Kosovar Romas, Muslim. Kosovar Roma cannot really feel like Macedonian Roma because people make labels, but the common religion connects us”.<sup>102</sup>

And while some respondents define belonging in positive terms such as “feeling accepted”, being “where you feel that you have happiness in your heart”<sup>103</sup> or through receiving and providing support when needed, belonging is also described as a burden by some: “Roma community. It means nothing. We are just different color, and we suffer more than white

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<sup>99</sup> Wimmer, *The making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries*.

<sup>100</sup> Interview MKD-MS-SI-03, returned migrant, conducted by MS, Skopje, 29 December 2024.

<sup>101</sup> Interview MKD-MS-SI-05, returned migrant, conducted by MS, Shuto Orizari, 29 December 2024.

<sup>102</sup> Interview MKD-MS-SI-12, returned migrant, conducted by MS, Skopje, 23 December 2024.

<sup>103</sup> Interview RKS-SI-EZ-01, returned migrant, conducted by EZ, Mitrovica, 27 July 2024.

people”.<sup>104</sup> Importantly, intra-ethnic distinctions are also brought up (e.g. examples of co-ethnics engaging in harmful/exploitative behavior such as smuggling), underlining the limitations of ethnicity as a category for belonging.

For the issue of mobility decision-making, we focus on re-migration aspirations after return rather than on return, as most respondents were not in the position to decide freely about their return. Mobility decision-making is complex and can never be related to one isolated factor. Among the responses to the question “Under which conditions would you stay here?” there is not even one that touches upon ethnic or community relations or identity politics. Very few refer to the statehood of Kosovo as a factor; however, from different angles, e.g. in Mitrovica, where a Bosniak respondent states that “Kosovo has never been my country, even without the war I wouldn’t want to stay here”,<sup>105</sup> while an Ashkali respondent in Ferizaj notes that “it is hard when you have to leave your own country because it does not allow you to provide for a family”.<sup>106</sup> The most mentioned conditions for being able to stay are employment, better salaries, housing, health insurance or access to (quality) health care, and better prospects, especially for the children. These concerns are also reflected in the notions of home expressed by respondents, which are place-based in some cases (country, municipality, my father’s house), but more often not: “any place that gives me security, especially financial security and a better future for my children”.<sup>107</sup> However, many also report that they will stay despite lacking many of these things, either after having made negative experiences during migration, ‘having nowhere else to go’ or feeling too old to migrate and hoping for the children to be able to leave; the only ones who mention having returned for reasons such as belonging, own culture or the homeland are those who returned for retirement. Without denying the role that discrimination or differential access to influential networks may play in unequally shaping access to prospects and livelihoods, we can conclude that the concerns driving mobility aspirations for marginalised parts of majority and minority populations in the case study countries are largely identical, thereby confirming previous research on the role of livelihoods and possible futures.<sup>108</sup> In this sense, the different case study contexts compare despite of the different conditions as shaped by history and ethnic institutionalisation. The main difference between the case study countries is that restricted access to rights or resources are more likely interpreted as ethnically motivated in Kosovo and North Macedonia and as relating to general scarcity (of jobs or rule of law) in Albania.

To conclude, during qualitative research, ethnic identities are produced through institutional and interactional processes, thus “[s]ocial actors ‘do’ racial and ethnic presentations by drawing on and assembling signifiers that are available to them and which they interpret as meaningful to the social context.”<sup>109</sup> Identities are also imposed onto people, with potentially detrimental and disempowering consequences, and available ethnic identities are hierarchically structured. Identifying or being identified as minority can have diverse ramifications, from protection to marginalisation<sup>110</sup> or worse. People emphasise ethnic classifications over alternatives when there are reasons to do so.<sup>111</sup> Legal and political

<sup>104</sup> Interview ALB-RH-SI-06, returned migrant, conducted by RH, Tirana, 11 January 2024.

<sup>105</sup> Interview RKS-SI-AH-03, returned migrant, conducted by AH, Prishtina, 10 August 2024.

<sup>106</sup> Interview RKS-SI-BB-05, returned migrant, conducted by BB, Ferizaj, 4 December 2023.

<sup>107</sup> Interview MKD-MS-SI-17, returned migrant, conducted by MS, Shuto Orizari, 27 December 2024.

<sup>108</sup> Jansen, *The privatisation of home and hope*.

<sup>109</sup> Andrade, Lélia Lomba de. 2000. Negotiating from the inside: Constructing racial and ethnic identity in qualitative research. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 29(3), 268–290.

<sup>110</sup> Magazzini, Tina. 2024. When ethnicity is ‘national’: Mapping ethnic minorities in Europe’s framework convention for the protection of national minorities. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 47(9), 1812–1833.

<sup>111</sup> Wimmer, *The making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries*.

attributions are highly relevant for expressing, understanding and framing lived experiences of (ethnic) belonging or discrimination.<sup>112</sup> Against this background, the question of whether ethnicity should be studied from the participant or observer perspective (or both) is underexplored given its potential implications.<sup>113</sup>

### Conclusion

In this article, we questioned the notion of “minority return” as an apparently self-evident category for understanding return migration in the Western Balkans, mainly by interrogating the roles and meanings of ethnic identity in literature and qualitative research on the return of minoritised populations. We conceptualised the notion of minority return as a bordered and bounded identity construction, which rests on assumptions of stable, territorially bounded ethnic identities and refuses to acknowledge future-oriented identifications and the complexity of factors underlying mobility decisions. The article thus shifts the study of minority return from asking how ethnic minorities return to asking how and when people become constituted as ethnic minority returnees in the first place and to what implications.

In a visibility-based review of the literature on minority return, we found a strong regional bias on the former Yugoslavia, especially Bosnia and to a smaller extent Croatia and Kosovo, reflecting the policy aim and unprecedented effort of reversing “ethnic cleansing”, but also a symbiotic alignment of interests between refugee-hosting and militarily intervening states as well as the prevalence of a Balkanising explanatory framework. We find that key concepts such as ethnicity and identity are frequently invoked without being defined, while ethnic identities associated with the Yugoslav wars receive disproportionate analytical attention. Our intervention by no means denies displaced people the wish to return or to identify as members of an ethnic minority and acknowledges the significant level of obstructionism against ‘minority returns’ for example in BH. Our main contribution is to highlight how the analytical decision to study people through ethnic categories is itself part of the process through which ethnicity becomes salient. We also ask what the emphasis on ethnic identity conceals, such as the economic and system transition that coincided with the secession wars or the relevance of life-cycle stage and related aspirations beyond return.

By highlighting insights and experiences from ongoing qualitative research dealing with ethnic identity and identifications, we emphasize contingencies and situatedness of individual identifications and their nature as social doings by social actors influenced by individual and social preferences, institutional and structural (dis)incentives, and hierarchically structured social relations and identities. We further disentangle and question often presumed links between identifying with ethnicity as a label, a research output or in the context of identity politics vs feelings of belonging; and between belonging vs motives for mobility decision-making. Ethnic categories may mediate access to rights, resources and social networks, and may also impose boundaries and reproduce marginalisation. Importantly, respondents’ accounts of belonging and their conditions for staying after return rarely centered on ethnicity. Livelihoods, social security, housing, healthcare and prospects for the future were considerably more prominent. When research focuses on ethnicity – especially in relation to another subject, such as (im)mobility – ethnicity is not only the subject, but also the product. Particularly when studying individuals selected due to their

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<sup>112</sup> Magazzini, *When ethnicity is ‘national’*.

<sup>113</sup> Larin, *Conceptual debates*.

ascribed ethnic identity by a researcher, it is not only relevant *why* this individual was attributed this identity, but also *how* this attribution occurred and how it affects the knowledge produced on this basis. And without denying the existence of ethnic discrimination or ethnically structured inequalities, there is a need for more precise analysis of the processes of exclusion and life's exposure to violence beyond identitarianism. A starting point, as Anthias has suggested, can be to let ethnic identity emerge from individual narration rather than reducing it to (pre-supposed) labels.

While we criticize minority return for its reductionist approach to diversity, disregarding all other types of historically, socially and politically produced inequalities, we acknowledge that the agenda for minority returns in BH was perhaps the closest refugee governance ever came to establishing a sensible approach of dealing with diversity. Similar patterns of violence, targeting ethno-religiously defined populations, for example in the Middle East, have yielded similar criticism of the analytical fixation on ethnic and religious hatred.<sup>114</sup> But despite the extensive experiences with return programming in contexts of wars perceived as mainly identity-motivated, no valid approach on how to deal with minoritised populations in such situations has yet been developed. Deportations of Yazidis back to Iraq are implemented in full awareness that they will end up in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps without tangible efforts to reverse or undo the horrific violence they have experienced.<sup>115</sup>

Regarding future research on ethnicity, some authors have advocated abandoning the concept altogether due to the lack of analytical value,<sup>116</sup> and others generally criticise the over-ethnicized interpretation of social reality.<sup>117</sup> Some authors have called for more analytical clarity regarding ethnicity,<sup>118</sup> while others have encouraged more research on why “ethnicity appears in such variable forms”.<sup>119</sup> Our analysis suggests that ethnicity is neither irrelevant nor uniformly salient. Rather, its meaning and significance are produced and negotiated in specific institutional and interactional contexts. We argue that it is worthwhile interrogating notions of ethnic identity and identification to understand what people aim to do with them and what is done to people through them, without, however, mistaking lay and essentialising understandings of identity for an analytical concept and while making sure to not miss more elementary issues.<sup>120</sup> Rather than abandoning the notion altogether, research should examine how identities and belongings are produced, attributed and made consequential, and under which conditions they matter for mobility decision-making and return. Such a perspective also draws attention to the power relations involved in categorising people as minorities and to the institutional settings in which particular identities become salient.

As we have attempted in this article, rather than treating minority return as the return of pre-existing ethnic collectivities, one can conceptualise it as a process through which ethnic identities are bounded and made consequential by institutions, scholarship and interaction.

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<sup>114</sup> Al-Haj Saleh, Yassin. 2022. From genocide to permanent security and from identity to politics. *International Politics Reviews* 10, 26–31.

<sup>115</sup> Ancite-Jepifanova, Aleksandra. 2026. ‘We ran from monsters’: Once welcomed by Germany after IS genocide, Yazidis are now deported to a life of limbo in refugee camps. *The Conversation*, 31 August 2026.

<sup>116</sup> Adlparvar and Tadros, *The evolution of ethnicity theory*.

<sup>117</sup> Comaroff, John L., and Jean Comaroff. 2010. *Ethnography and the historical imagination*. Boulder: Westview Press.

<sup>118</sup> Jenkins, Richard. 2014. *Social identity*. 4th ed. Abingdon & New York: Routledge.

<sup>119</sup> Wimmer, *The making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries*.

<sup>120</sup> Anthias, Floya. 2008. Thinking through the lens of translocational positionality: An intersectionality frame for understanding identity and belonging. *Translocations: Migration and Social Change* 4(1), 5–20; Anthias, *Where do I belong?*

The article's contribution to the theorisation of return migration lies in demonstrating how "minority return" conflates ethnic identification, belonging and mobility aspirations, and by reconceptualizing the category itself as an institutional and epistemological process through which particular identities are made salient and attributed to returnees. What emerges from our discussion are methodological and ethical challenges of dealing with the contingencies of ethnic identity constructions during qualitative research and the need for tracing historical developments of ethnic labels in a study region, including their changing scope and meanings over time, to not take presently found shapes for granted. We conclude that while references to identity-based social formations as "constructed social forms",<sup>121</sup> or "imagined communities"<sup>122</sup> have become commonplace, the implications of such an understanding and the role of research in the co-construction of ethnicity need to be spelled out much more clearly.

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<sup>121</sup> Brubaker and Cooper, *Beyond 'identity'*.

<sup>122</sup> Anderson, Benedict. 1990. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.

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