

## Book Review

**Aida Ibričević. 2024. *Decided Return Migration. Emotions, Citizenship, Home and Belonging in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Cham: Springer (IMISCOE Research Series). 257 pp., ISBN 9783031583469 (hardcover), ISBN 9783031583493 (softcover), ISBN 9783031583476 (eBook), € 53.49 / € 39.99 / Open Access**

Reviewed by **Amina Smajlović**, Department of East European History, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland, E-mail: [amina.smajlovic@hist.uzh.ch](mailto:amina.smajlovic@hist.uzh.ch)

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Although emigration from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is still more the rule than the exception, there are several cases of “decided return migration” among Bosnians who had built secure lives abroad. The book under review examines this form of voluntary return, with the term “voluntary” denoting a freely made decision, that is without external pressure or institutional support, not driven by urgent personal obligations, and despite secure legal status abroad, the prospect of financial uncertainty on their return, and a past marked by displacement and trauma. The goal of Ibričević’s book is “both to explain the reasons behind the decision to return to and remain in Bosnia and Herzegovina and to explore the concepts of emotional citizenship, home, and belonging in relation to voluntary return” (4). The author, a postdoctoral political scientist and migration researcher at Linköping University in Sweden, and herself of Bosnian heritage, argues that the motivation for return to BiH is predominantly of an emotional nature.

The study is based on a wide range of interdisciplinary methods (Chapter 2) and 35 in-depth interviews conducted in 2017 with working-age voluntary returnees to BiH. To capture diverse experiences and decision-making processes, the author sought to involve a wide variety of interviewees in terms of nationality, gender, host country, ethnicity, and current place of residence in BiH. It should be noted, however, that the interview participants comprised a higher number of Bosniaks (15) than Croats (2) and Serbs (5), with the remaining 13 identifying either with other (ethnic) categories or simply as citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Chapter 3 outlines the motivations for return. The interviewees largely rejected material or economic gain as key drivers, although the author does acknowledge that a basic level of financial security – often achieved through self-employment – was a prerequisite for return (76). Most of the participants in the study described their decision to return as having been prompted by metaphysical and emotional reasons, such as the higher purpose of giving back to their homeland – a kind of mission to improve and contribute to the country’s advancement (77). Many interviewees cited closeness to relatives and stronger social cohesion as key motives for return. Some

identified the desire to live in a religious environment as playing a central role, contrasting this with the relative marginalisation of such an environment in the respective host countries. The wish to reintegrate their children into Bosnian social and religious life was also a significant factor. Equally importantly, returning offered a means to confront and heal from personal war traumas by re-engaging with the sites of past events.

Ibričević shows how many returnees were initially enthusiastic, but often became disillusioned with the dysfunctional political, bureaucratic, and economic system in BiH. Key challenges included widespread corruption, nepotism, burdensome bureaucracy, and difficulties in doing business. Ethnic divisions and discrimination, as well as a general apathy and sense of victimisation, further hinder the reintegration of returnees. Political and economic instability remains a major obstacle. To overcome these difficulties, returnees used strategies of self-reliance, resilience, and creativity. Of the 35 individuals interviewed, only three reported being dissatisfied with their return experience. The author found that while the “decidedness” of return is a necessary condition for success, it is the “preparedness” that ultimately makes the return sustainable (110). Nonetheless, a significant number of returnees have an alternative plan in case their return proves unsuccessful.

Given that the decision to return was predominantly shaped by emotional factors, the author found it pertinent to explore the emotional dimensions of Bosnian citizenship for return migrants. The emotions that the participants feel about being Bosnian citizens range from anger, guilt, denial, sorrow, and disappointment to nostalgia, patriotic love, pride, hope, and the well-known Bosnian *inat*, meaning defiance or stubbornness. The emotions associated with Bosnian citizenship are largely shaped by the country’s recent history, ethnic division, and the state framework established by the Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995. Closely connected to this is the difficulty returnees experience in developing a sense of belonging across the whole country. Only two participants reported feeling at home throughout the entire territory of BiH, while the rest perceived their family, current residence, house, or the natural landscape as their true home – reflecting an emotional attachment that often transcends ethnic boundaries. The interviewees also experienced a “neither here nor there” status, feeling excluded from belonging in both their home and host countries (251).

Throughout her analysis and the interviews, the author succeeds in capturing the complexity, emotional depth, and varied impacts of return migration and reintegration. While each narrative of return is unique, she skilfully draws broader insights from these individual experiences. Through her approach and perspective – that “whether Bosniak, Croat, Serb, or ‘Other,’ what they feel as BiH citizens is expressed in the universally understood language of human emotions” (248) – she incorporates voices from all ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina,

weaving together diverse yet overlapping notions of “homeland” within an ethnically divided state and its widespread diaspora. The author is highly attentive to the language used by her participants, carefully explaining linguistic and cultural nuances. She handles sensitive data with great care and respect. Despite the diversity of the individual stories, the interviews reveal a shared mindset, characterised by courage, creativity, and a post-materialist orientation – as identified by the author.

The empirical base, particularly the interviews, proves to be rich and insightful, offering valuable perspectives on the experiences of Bosnian return migrants. While the integration of existing theories and conceptual frameworks is meticulous and well-informed, the author’s endeavour to achieve this occasionally takes precedence over her own analytical voice. Considering how exceptional Bosnia and Herzegovina is in many respects, Ibričević’s findings would have been even more original had she chosen to focus on a select few concepts or created a single coherent analytical framework for her material. As it is, by positioning her study within the interdisciplinary conceptual research landscape, she enriches the reader’s perspective and provides a valuable framework for understanding Bosnia’s unique context within broader debates. However, I feel that she could have produced an even richer study had she incorporated more content from her reflective journal or field notes (24) in her analysis.

Formally, attentive readers will notice a few minor inconsistencies in punctuation, though these have no real impact on the overall readability or flow of the text. The table of contents may appear somewhat overwhelming and fragmented; in some sections, a more concise structure would have benefitted the reader. Nevertheless, by adding concluding sections at the end of each chapter, Ibričević presents her key findings in a clear manner. This not only enhances the overall coherence of her work but enables readers to engage selectively with the wide range of topics according to their individual interests.

With this publication, Ibričević lays essential groundwork for the study of return migration and reintegration – areas often neglected in Southeast European migration research but set to gain importance in academic and public debates. Moreover, she makes a valuable contribution to the often overlooked field of (political) emotions, which shape our daily lives and decisions more profoundly than most scholars are willing to acknowledge. This topic is especially relevant in 2025, which marks 30 years since the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Srebrenica genocide. This anniversary brings unresolved questions to the fore: What lies ahead for return migration? What strategies can individuals adopt to navigate life within a persistently dysfunctional political system? And how might citizens collectively contribute to making Bosnia and Herzegovina a more liveable and inclusive state? It is to be hoped that some of the insights offered in this study will inform future research, prove valuable for the design of resettlement and reintegration initiatives, and perhaps ultimately encourage some Bosnians to return to their homeland.