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Becoming and Remaining *Izbjeglica*: Refugee Identifications and Shifting Self-Understandings in Bosnia and Herzegovina^{*,}**

Abstract: This article examines how displaced Serbs in Bijeljina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, engaged with the category *izbjeglica* (refugee) in the decades after the 1992–1995 war. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, it traces how identifications with this label shifted over time – at once inhabited, contested, and redefined – as displacement moved from temporary suspension to long-term settlement. By situating these dynamics within the Bosnian post-war context, where international policy privileged “minority return” while co-ethnic re-settlers were largely overlooked, the article shows how refugee labels endure beyond their legal status, acquiring new meanings in everyday life. It highlights how, in the absence of a “myth of return”, belonging was rebuilt through endurance, resourcefulness, solidarity, and difference, shaping what it means to be and remain *izbjeglica*.

Keywords: refugees, refugee label, identification, internal displacement, IDPs, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Introduction

“We are proud to be *izbjeglice*.” Marina, a 29-year-old woman I spoke with one summer afternoon in Bijeljina, offered this statement calmly and with quiet confidence. Sitting in their new family yard in 2017, more than two decades af-

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ter fleeing Sarajevo, she explained how the label *izbjeglica* (refugee; *izbjeglice* in plural) – so often avoided in polite conversation for fear it might offend – had, for her family, become something to be proud of. “We came from a community that was larger, more urban and more advanced than Bijeljina was at the time,” she said. “So, as far as my family is concerned, we say with pride that we came to Bijeljina as *izbjeglice* from Sarajevo.”

Her words stood in contrast to many other accounts I had heard, in which the same label was described as humiliating, imposed, or gradually silenced over time. Far from being a simple exception, Marina’s statement captured the layered and sometimes contradictory ways in which displacement is remembered and narrated in the long aftermath of the war. In Bijeljina, a majority-Serb town in northeastern Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter: Bosnia) that received a large number of displaced Serbs during and after the 1992-1995 conflict, the label *izbjeglica* continues to circulate. Formally, those who fled to Bijeljina from elsewhere in Bosnia held the status of internally displaced persons (IDPs). In local and everyday speech, however, they have widely been called – and often call themselves – *izbjeglice* (“refugees”). The word surfaces in politics – such as when counting how many *izbjeglice* sit in the municipal assembly – and in mundane conversations, where distinctions between “locals” and “refugees” appear in discussions about jobs, marriages, or community affairs. Neighbourhoods built by the displaced are still referred to as *izbjeglička naselja* (refugee neighbourhoods), and jokes and ironic remarks keep the category alive among younger generations. What the term means, however, varies: it can carry pride, shame, sarcasm, or nothing at all.

This article explores how displaced Serbs in Bijeljina engaged with the category *izbjeglica*, tracing how the label became woven into processes of identification that were continually renegotiated through lived experience and social encounter (Barth 1969; Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Jenkins [1996] 2008). The analysis foregrounds the role of refugee labelling, which functions less as a neutral descriptor than as a lasting category, reshaped over time and folded into self-understandings long after its formal designation expired (Zetter 1991, 2007). The study explores how the label was inhabited, resisted, or redefined in relation to everyday life, external ascriptions by institutions and communities, and new practices of settlement and community-building. Tracing how its meanings evolved from the wartime sense of temporariness, through the hardships of the immediate post-war decade, to later reinterpretations, the study asks what it has meant, more than two decades after the war, to become and to remain an *izbjeglica* in post-war Bosnia.

Ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Bijeljina between May 2016 and December 2017 provides the foundation for this article. During this period, I carried out thirty in-depth interviews with displaced Serbs and fourteen with local

residents, complemented by five interviews with individuals who had held positions as municipal officials, police representatives, or political actors during the wartime and immediate post-war period. The selection of interviewees followed snowball sampling, beginning with personal contacts and expanding through referrals that helped establish trust and familiarity. Interviews were conducted in Bosnian/Serbian, with all participants giving informed consent, recorded, and later transcribed and thematically coded. They took place primarily in participants' homes, allowing for open conversation and observation of domestic and spatial arrangements that reflected everyday practices of settlement and belonging. The sample included men and women of different ages, backgrounds, and places of origin, with all names changed to protect anonymity.

Participant observation was central: I joined social gatherings, commemorations, association meetings, and collective visits to pre-war towns and religious landmarks. To situate these accounts within broader narratives, I also reviewed 638 issues of the local newspaper *Semblerske novine* (and its wartime predecessor *SIM novine*), published between 1990 and 2012, along with archival materials and documents from four major IDP associations. Together, these sources reveal both the lived experience of displacement and the public discourse that surrounded integration and belonging. With this qualitative, ethnographic, and single-site research design, the findings are not intended to be universally generalised, but to contribute context-sensitive insights into how displacement and refugee labelling shape long-term processes of identification in post-war settings.

The next section situates the study within broader debates on identification and labelling, while also outlining the Bosnian post-war context in which these processes unfolded. The empirical analysis is organised chronologically, tracing how the meaning of *izbjeglica* was shaped across three phases: wartime flight, the post-war period of marginalisation, and more recent efforts to reinterpret or discard the label. The conclusion reflects on the shifting meanings of *izbjeglica* over time, and what they reveal about belonging and categorisation in post-war Bosnia.

Social Identification, Refugee Labels, and the Bosnian Context

This article approaches identification as an ongoing, relational process rather than a fixed property of individuals or groups: not something people simply *have* once and for all, but something they continually *do* (Jenkins [1996] 2008). At its core, collective identification involves a sense of belonging to a group and connection with a social category that informs self-understanding and behaviour (Korostelina 2007). It emerges in everyday encounters where people define who they are in relation to others, drawing boundaries between “us” and

“them,” and deciding who belongs and who does not. Importantly, this is never a one-sided process: self-definitions are always negotiated alongside external ascriptions, as people are recognised, accepted, or rejected by others (Jenkins [1996] 2008; Côté and Levine 2002). Seen this way, identifications remain fluid, contextual, and open to contestation and reinterpretation as circumstances change (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Hogg and Abrams 1998; Eriksen 2004; Jenkins 2006, [1996] 2008).

As Barth (1969) showed in his work on ethnicity, what defines a group is less a set of cultural traits than the boundaries that separate it from others. Identification emerges across these boundaries: people establish who they are by defining who they are not, invoking similarities to bind themselves together and differences to distance themselves from outsiders (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Eriksen 2004; Jenkins 2006). What matters is not whether such distinctions rest on objective traits, but that they are meaningful to those who invoke them. Shared symbols such as language, customs, or memories can create a sense of similarity while reinforcing difference, even when interpreted in diverse ways (Cohen 1994, 2001). Identification therefore always involves both inclusion and exclusion: it generates cohesion through perceived commonality while sharpening distinctions from others, sometimes amplifying even very small differences into socially powerful divides (Blok 1998; Brewer 2001; Elias and Scotson [1965] 1994).

Such dynamics are especially visible in displacement, where people are caught between past attachments and new social environments. Labels such as “refugee” or “IDP” are not neutral descriptors but social and political constructs that carry moral and political weight (Malkki 1995; Zetter 1991). Produced by states, international organisations, and media, they can open access to aid and rights, but also impose hierarchies of legitimacy, distinguishing “deserving” from “undeserving” or “real” from “lesser” refugees (Zetter 2007). Comparative cases underline this ambivalence: in Cyprus, the label carried dignity but also created “lesser-victim” categories (Demetriou 2014); in Greece, Asia Minor refugees became a celebrated group, while later co-ethnic arrivals were met with suspicion (Voutira 2003). These examples show how the same label can confer belonging in one context while producing exclusion in another.

Over time, labels can become embedded in social life, shaping and being reshaped by refugees’ own self-understandings long after the legal status has expired (Vigil and Abidi 2018). Cypriot refugees continued to identify as *prosfiges* decades after 1974, with the label evoking shared loss and disrupted community (Loizos 1981, 2008). Asia Minor refugees in Greece similarly turned “refugee” into both trauma and pride, transmitting it across generations through memories and cultural practices (Hirschon [1989] 1998; 2003; Stelaku 2003). Among Russian-speaking minorities in the former Soviet Union, displacement forged solidarities expressed in the idea of a “single pain” that bound people together

(Pilkington 1998). These identifications were never static: they shifted across time and generations, as meanings were contested and re-signified (Hirschon [1989] 1998; Loizos 2008, 2009). Once adopted, the refugee label can take on a symbolic life of its own, carrying layers of memory and moral worth far beyond its legal definition.

Encounters with host populations further shape both self-understandings and external categorisation. Competition over housing, jobs, and welfare often reinforced divisions, with displaced persons seen either as an economic burden or unfairly privileged through aid (Brun 2003, 2010; Duncan 2005). Cultural closeness did not guarantee acceptance: after the 1923 Greco-Turkish exchange, Asia Minor refugees were mocked as *Tourkosporoi* (“Turkish seeds”) in Greece, while Muslim newcomers in Turkey were derided as *yari gavur* (“half infidels”) (Clark 2006; Hirschon 2003; Köker 2003; Koufopoulou 2003). Similar dynamics were evident in the Balkans in the 1990s, where co-ethnic newcomers were dismissed as backward or uncultured, while locals were criticised in return as arrogant or corrupt (Čapo Žmegač 2007; Dragojević 2010; Duijzings 1996). The interplay between external perceptions and displaced people’s own strategies of adaptation and solidarity gives the refugee label its enduring symbolic power: at once imposed from outside and mobilised from within.

The Bosnian case illustrates both the commonalities and the specificities of refugee labelling and identification. Through widespread violence and campaigns of ethnic cleansing aimed at producing ethnically homogeneous territories, the 1992–1995 war displaced more than two million people, nearly half the country’s population (UNHCR 2000). Signed in November 1995, the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA)¹ effectively partitioned the country into two entities – the Bosniak- and Croat-dominated Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska (RS), along with the ethnically mixed Brčko District. The DPA institutionalised ethnic divisions, yet international policymakers simultaneously promoted a vision of reintegrated multiethnicity. This tension gave rise to the policy of “domicile return,” with particular emphasis on “minority returns,” whereby people were expected to reclaim homes across the new ethnic boundaries in areas controlled by another ethnic group and former warring party (Belloni 2007; Black 2001; Phuong 2000; Ste-

¹ The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Dayton Peace Agreement, DPA) was reached at Wright–Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio, on 21 November 1995 and formally signed in Paris on 14 December 1995 by the presidents of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia. The agreement consists of a General Framework Agreement and eleven annexes, including Annex 4, which serves as the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Unusually for a peace agreement, the DPA remains in force as the country’s constitutional framework, with lasting consequences for governance and continued international involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

fansson 2006; Toal and Dahlman 2011). Implemented within a political environment dominated by ethnonational projects that favoured territorial consolidation over return, these policies generated a wide array of post-war social categories: refugees, internally displaced persons, returnees, minority returnees, “stayees” – those who remained in their towns throughout the war and chose not to flee, and “re-settlers” – those who remained in their places of displacement and chose not to return. These categories did not remain neutral descriptors but became central to the ways people identified themselves and others, structuring post-war boundaries in everyday life (Armakolas 2007; Kolind 2008; Maček 2009; Pickering 2007; Sorabji 2006; Stefansson 2004a, 2004b, 2007).

While minority returnees attracted scrutiny from international organisations and scholars (Belloni 2005; Dahlman and Ó Tuathail 2005; Eastmond 2006; Jansen 2006, 2007, 2011; Pickering 2003; Sivac-Bryant 2016; Stefanović and Loizides 2017; Žila 2019), displaced persons who resettled among co-ethnics received far less attention, with only recent exceptions (e.g. Pupovac 2020; Žila 2022a). Their choice of resettlement went against the international preference for return and was seen as reinforcing ethnic separation. At the same time, because they settled among people who shared the same language, religion, and cultural traditions, they were assumed to face an easier path to integration and therefore regarded as less vulnerable and less deserving of assistance. This was the context in which Bijeljina became a major site of Serb resettlement. Situated in the northeastern agricultural region of Semberija, Bijeljina was captured by Bosnian Serb forces in 1992 and subjected to ethnic cleansing of its non-Serb population, as documented by international human rights organisations (AI 1994; HRW 2000; ICG 2000) and later established in judgments of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).² In the aftermath, it became a major reception area for displaced Serbs from the FBiH, turning it into a central site of resettlement. By the late 1990s, IDPs accounted for more than one-third of its population (Pašalić 2004), and by 2013 nearly 30 percent of residents had at some point held IDP status (Agency for Statistics of BiH 2016). Their arrival reshaped both physical and social landscapes: new refugee neighbourhoods spread on the outskirts, schools and workplaces adjusted to an influx of newcomers, and distinctions between “locals” and “refugees” became woven into everyday life (Pupovac 2020).

² See findings on persecution, deportation, and forcible transfer of non-Serb civilians in eastern Bosnia, including Bijeljina, in judgments of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), *inter alia* Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić (IT-95-5/18), Prosecutor v. Momčilo Krajišnik (IT-00-39), and Prosecutor v. Ratko Mladić (IT-09-92).

Becoming *Izbjeglica*: From Escape to “Endgame”

In the earliest phase of displacement – a short period from wartime flight to the signing of the DPA in late 1995 – it can hardly be said that IDPs in Bijeljina shared a common identification as *izbjeglice*. While many formally held the legal status of IDPs, it rarely functioned as a salient marker in how people understood themselves. Scattered arrivals, unstable accommodation, and the urgency of survival made displacement less a passage into a defined social category than a rupture marked by improvisation and suspension.

Most of my interlocutors fled abruptly, carrying little more than essential belongings and a vague intention of reaching a safer place. Uncertainty continued upon arrival in Bijeljina: people did not know where their family members were, what had happened to their homes, or how long their displacement would last. Boris (36) recalled a situation he described as “really crazy,” when for about a week no one knew where the others were: “We lived in the same house with our grandparents, and we didn’t know where they escaped.” Mihajlo (39), then a teenager, described wandering silent streets of an unfamiliar town, following church bells and meeting other displaced Serbs doing the same – all searching for someone they might recognise. With channels of information collapsed, churches became spaces of orientation where people gathered to confirm who had survived, where others had ended up, and what might come next.

Living conditions deepened the shock. Families found shelter wherever they could: with relatives, in reception centres, or in homes offered by locals, who often showed compassion by opening spare rooms, summer houses, or other available dwellings. Many IDPs who had lived in towns and cities, accustomed to urban apartments and stable jobs, suddenly found themselves in rural homes that bore little resemblance to what they had known. “We lived in an apartment with central heating, we had jobs and good salaries... and here, we didn’t have a toilet in the house,” Tijana (30) remembered. However, amid the chaos – with men sent to the front and women left to care for households – there was little time to mourn material losses. Olga (49) described that time as a dark period in her life, though she admitted she had little space to dwell on it: “I was just praying to God that my husband remains alive, and that our children are healthy – that was all I worried about.”

Many displaced Serbs found themselves moving into houses left behind primarily by Bosniaks, as well as by other non-Serb residents who had fled Bijeljina. Sometimes the arrangements were made through local political or military authorities, but often they came from hurried and fragile agreements between families. For the IDPs, freshly confronted with their own material losses, stepping into another person’s home – wardrobes still full, photographs on the walls – was unsettling and filled with shame. For Bosniak owners, agreeing to let

Serbs in was rarely a matter of choice; it was also a way to keep their homes from being seized or vandalized in their absence. In some cases, Serb displaced families ended up sharing the same roof with their Bosniak hosts who remained in town. Such coexistence was fraught and uneasy, yet in those uncertain days it offered both sides a measure of safety in a city that no longer felt predictable or secure.

The decision to accept such living arrangements reflected not only lack of choice, but a widespread belief that displacement would be brief. Many expected to return as soon as the war ended, and this sense of temporariness influenced how they spoke, made decisions, and remembered those early months. Mihajlo (39) recalled people burying their dead in cemeteries near the frontline bordering their pre-war municipality of Tuzla, intending to move the remains back once peace came. Others, like Tijana's family, endured the loss of privacy, status, and familiar routines by convincing themselves it was only temporary. Such coping, rooted in pragmatism and belief in imminent return, recalls Loizos's (1981) observations of Greek Cypriot refugees who saw themselves not as refugees but as "temporary evacuees."

This belief in imminent return collapsed with the signing of the DPA in November 1995 – the political "endgame" of the war, which ended not only the fighting but also the expectation of going back. Pre-war homes remained under Bosniak and Croat control, where return meant becoming minorities in an environment marked by fear, memories of violence, and the loss of neighbours and familiar social worlds. By contrast, Bijeljina offered safety among co-ethnics and the possibility of rebuilding lives in a place where their presence was not contested. Almost all of my interlocutors marked this as the real turning point: the war had ended, but the possibility of going back ended with it. For displaced Serbs from Sarajevo and its surroundings who arrived in Bijeljina in early 1996, the DPA was not just the end of war but the reason for their flight (Žila 2021, 2022b).³ From then on, being *izbjeglica* in Bijeljina was no longer a temporary status but a reality that would define their lives for decades.

³ The exodus of Sarajevo's Serbs took place in early 1996, following the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement and the transfer of several Serb-held suburbs (including Grbavica, Ilidža, Vogošća, Hadžići, and Ilijaš) to the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to the 1991 census, Sarajevo was home to approximately 160,000 Serbs. In the period of post-Dayton reintegration, a large share of the Serb population left areas that came under Federation control, while others remained or resettled in what later became East Sarajevo. Although officially framed as voluntary relocation, these departures were shaped by fear, uncertainty, and political pressure, reinforced by campaigns from both Serb and Bosniak authorities and by insufficient guarantees from the international community (see Žila 2021; 2022b).

Living as *Izbjeglica*: From Marginalisation to Resistance

In the years after the signing of the DPA until the mid-to-late 2000s, thousands of displaced families gradually turned their temporary exile into a permanent, if reluctant, reality. It was a period marked by intense hardship: struggles for housing, employment, and dignity, but also one in which new forms of group belonging began to take shape. This process was neither entirely imposed from above nor solely self-defined, but emerged through the interplay of public narratives and personal experiences: between how *izbjeglice* were perceived by others, and how they came to understand and represent themselves.

Although Serb IDPs in Bijeljina were formally embraced as co-ethnics and citizens of Republika Srpska, in this period the label *izbjeglica* acquired ambivalent, often derogatory, meanings. As tens of thousands arrived in the early 1990s, Bijeljina was frequently referred to by officials and journalists as *grad izbjeglica* (the city of refugees) – a phrase that recognised demographic change while marking it as a socio-economic burden.

Seen from the Outside: Politics, Media, and Local Perceptions

As Voutira (2003) notes in her study on Asia Minor refugees in Greece, re-framing refugees as “one of us” requires sustained material and symbolic investment by the receiving state. In the case of Republika Srpska, authorities broadly promoted an “ideology of remaining” (Stefansson 2006, 128), presenting RS as the natural and permanent homeland for Serbs displaced from elsewhere in Bosnia. At the local level, however, the practical incorporation of IDPs unfolded unevenly and under significant constraints, driven less by a lack of political commitment than by limited resources, administrative capacity, and experience in managing prolonged mass resettlement.

As one former senior official recalled in an interview conducted during the fieldwork, local authorities struggled to manage mass resettlement while simultaneously navigating mounting international pressure to facilitate minority return. During the war and its immediate aftermath, Republika Srpska legislation had granted displaced Serbs temporary housing rights, including access to abandoned Bosniak-owned homes, and promoted their long-term resettlement within RS. However, from the late 1990s onward, the international community placed property restitution at the centre of the return agenda, enforcing the right

of all displaced persons to reclaim pre-war homes and tenancy rights through a comprehensive legal and administrative framework.⁴

This shift exposed a profound asymmetry: while many Bosniak homes in Bijeljina remained intact and return could occur relatively quickly, the properties of Serb IDPs in the FBiH were often destroyed or uninhabitable, requiring time, capital, and alternative housing solutions that local authorities were ill-equipped to provide. Although most Serb IDPs also reclaimed their pre-war properties through restitution – often selling, exchanging, or renting them rather than returning – this did little to ease the immediate pressure of eviction from occupied homes in Bijeljina. Promised resettlement often lagged behind restitution, leaving families legally required to leave occupied homes while still lacking any viable housing alternative.

As a result, anger accumulated in multiple directions: towards Bosniaks whose return symbolised the prospect of renewed housing insecurity; towards the international community whose return-centred policies prioritised minority and domicile return while marginalised resettlement; and towards their own political representatives, whose ideological commitment to permanent settlement in RS was not matched by the material means needed to deliver timely and adequate housing solutions. Even when municipalities in Bijeljina allocated plots of land or temporary accommodation, these measures were uneven, slow, and frequently contested. Most interviewees emphasised that they rebuilt largely on their own, often mistrusting official allocations and instead organising collectively to secure land or housing outside formal channels. While these practices represented pragmatic strategies of survival and mutual support, in public discourse they were interpreted as evidence that *izbjeglice* were difficult to integrate, reinforcing their portrayal as a “problem population”: legally protected, yet administratively and socially hard to accommodate.

Material constraints and unresolved housing pressures thus defined the limits within which any form of symbolic inclusion could take place. If local authorities struggled to provide stable housing, land, and long-term resettlement for

⁴ Property restitution in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina was institutionalised through the Property Law Implementation Plan (PLIP), launched in 1999 by the Office of the High Representative (OHR) in cooperation with key international organisations. Widely regarded as one of the most effective post-war reforms, the PLIP enabled refugees and IDPs to reclaim pre-war private property and tenancy rights across ethnic lines, with the vast majority of claims formally resolved by the early 2000s. At the same time, restitution did not necessarily result in physical return. Many beneficiaries, including Serb IDPs in Bijeljina, recovered property only to sell, exchange, rent, or periodically use it, rather than resettle permanently, revealing the limits of legal restitution as a mechanism for restoring pre-war patterns of residence and multi-ethnicity (see Black 2001; Stefansson 2006; Toal and Dahlman 2011).

thousands of displaced families, they were even less equipped to sustain meaningful forms of social and symbolic incorporation. Some attempts at inclusive framing did exist and can be traced in local media. Municipal representatives occasionally employed the language of social embrace – most notably a 1998 mayoral address in Semberske Novine (349/1998) referring to IDPs as *moj dragi semberski narod* (my dear Semberian people), or a later statement identifying the building of respect and trust between locals and *izbjeglice* as a key municipal task (360/1998). Yet such gestures remained episodic and largely performative. Often tied to electoral moments, they lacked the institutional depth, continuity, and material backing required to counter the everyday experiences of marginalisation that shaped displaced people's lives.

It was within these constraints – where material insecurity persisted and symbolic recognition remained fragile – that public discourse, and especially local media, came to play a central role in producing and stabilising *izbjeglice* as a social category. Local media coverage in *Semberske Novine* through the late 1990s and early 2000s largely focused on the most urgent aspects of the displacement crisis: housing shortages, evictions, humanitarian aid, and incidents with returnees. While not overtly negative, this emphasis on urgent events portrayed IDPs primarily through need, instability, and misfortune. For instance, an article on protests against evictions (*Semberske Novine* 422/2001) emphasised logistical complications and public order concerns while offering little sense of the displaced population's perspectives. Such coverage contributed to an image of *izbjeglice* as defined less by agency than by dependency, eliciting suspicion, resentment, or pity.

A parallel narrative complicated the public perception of *izbjeglice* by introducing a distinction between “true” refugees and those accused of exploiting wartime displacement for personal gain. During the war, Bijeljina gained a reputation as a major hub of smuggling and informal trade – described by Jansen (2003, 225) as “one of the capitals of the post-Yugoslav black market.” Local media amplified this portrayal: *SIM Novine* referred to the town as a “Serbian Hong Kong” (17–18/1993), highlighting the influx of goods through “unknown channels” and pointing to newcomers as key actors in these operations. In 1995, a senior municipal official warned that while many IDPs deserved support, others had “used this war to get rich,” acquiring housing or business opportunities through privileged connections and blocking access for those in genuine need (*SIM Novine* 38/1995). This rhetoric reinforced a binary between *običan narod* (ordinary people) and *ratni profiteri* (war profiteers) (see e.g. Grandits 2007; Hromadžić 2013; Kolind 2007, 2008) – a moral distinction that ultimately transcended the IDPs/non-IDPs divide and remained a persistent feature of post-war public discourse in Bijeljina (Maksimović 2019; Pupovac 2020).

Beyond public narratives, this social distance was reproduced in everyday dynamics, where both real and symbolic power largely remained in the hands of the local population. Many locals viewed displaced persons, especially those who rebuilt quickly or acquired property, as opportunistic rather than deserving. Such perceptions grew in a context of economic hardship, where disrupted livelihoods, overstretched resources, and rural households under pressure were further strained by the arrival of tens of thousands of newcomers competing for employment, housing, and social recognition. As noted elsewhere (Brun 2003, 2010; Čapo-Žmegač 2007; Dragojević 2010; Duncan 2005), initial hospitality – sharing homes, offering guidance, helping newcomers navigate daily life – was difficult to sustain once resettlement proved permanent.

Although Serb IDPs and locals shared ethnicity, religion, and language, IDPs were often marked as socially and culturally different – by dialects, religious customs, or everyday habits. For many locals, these distinctions reinforced perceptions of *izbjeglice* as not only needy, but socially and culturally inferior. “When we came here and I started the school, they perceived me as if I was some lower race, some lower class,” recalled Nikola (36), remembering his first school years in Bijeljina as an IDP from the Tuzla area. The perceptions of cultural inferiority were reinforced by economic dependency. Many IDPs, including those from urban backgrounds, soon became a vital labour force in Semberija’s agricultural economy, going to *nadnica* – temporary, informal work paid by the day – cutting wheat, harvesting vegetables, or cultivating corn. While crucial to sustaining local livelihoods, these arrangements were marked by hierarchy and tension. IDPs found the work exhausting and humiliating, while locals sometimes perceived them as too selective or ungrateful when they declined certain jobs or asked for better pay. Land transactions caused further friction. As displaced families searched for plots on which to build homes, some locals were accused of exploiting their urgency by inflating prices. “Guys, rip them off, they have a lot of money,” Miloš (58) recalled overhearing a municipal official tell a group of locals. Although only a minority engaged in such practices, generalisation attached negative traits to the group as a whole, reflecting a broader dynamic in which people emphasise similarities within their own group while exaggerating the flaws of outsiders – sustaining a positive image of “us” by casting “them” in a negative light (Tajfel and Turner 1986).

*Lived from the Inside:
Meanings of Izbjeglica in Everyday Life*

While the label was shaped by legal categories and public narratives, it was also lived, negotiated, and reshaped by those to whom it applied. In Bijeljina it became a visible marker embedded in spatial arrangements, economic precarity,

and marginal social status. Many displaced families were scattered across different neighbourhoods, while others ended up in collective centres or temporary accommodation, often deprived of privacy and the most basic amenities. These living arrangements were not only physically harsh, but also symbolically loaded. Ksenija (39) recalled returning home with friends after an evening out and feeling “humiliated” when they could see “the darkness, the poverty” of her neighbourhood. For many younger IDPs, the visibility of poverty and displacement translated into a lasting feeling of being set apart, as the label *izbjeglica* came to carry not only memories of wartime loss but also the sense of being outsiders in their new surroundings.

The sense of exclusion was intensified by the experience of living in someone else’s home. The prolonged occupation of Bosniak-owned homes – which continued well into the 2000s – was particularly difficult for women, for whom domestic space carried moral value and social worth. As Bringa (1995) observed, in Bosnian culture the house is more than a dwelling: its structure symbolises a man’s hard labour and his commitment to family’s well-being, while the interior reflects a woman’s virtue, showing she is *čista* (clean) and *vrijedna* (industrious, worthy). To inhabit a space shaped by another woman’s care meant losing not only control over the household, but also recognition of one’s own role and worth. Loizos (1981, 177) described this among displaced Greek Cypriot women as feeling dependent, vulnerable and exposed, just like “snails without shells.” “All I was doing, I was crying, I was completely depressed,” said Olga (49), recalling the prospect of moving into a Bosniak house. For men, too, displacement disrupted this symbolic economy: the inability to provide or rebuild a home undermined their social value as workers, fathers, and heads of households. “You must provide for your family, but you simply can’t find a way to do it... That’s the worst feeling of all,” said Miloš (58), recalling sleepless, anxious nights. For both women and men, displacement was not only a matter of material hardship but a deeply gendered loss of recognition, self-worth, and social role.

Amid such hardship and social distance, daily life demanded improvisation, as displaced families in Bijeljina had to adapt quickly to an unfamiliar and harsh post-war economy. Many came from urban centres where formal employment had been the norm and now relied on informal, physically demanding labour. “We *Zeničani* (people from Zenica) were people of industry,” recalled Olga (49). “I had never even heard of *nadnica*, let alone imagined doing it myself.” Yet, she hoed fields, raised pigs, rented land, and exchanged labour for tractor services to feed her children. Others turned to small trade or smuggling, selling fuel, shoes or clothes across borders and at the local *buvljak* (flea market). These activities were rarely seen as opportunity but as improvised responses to pressing need. As McKinnon and Cannell (2013) note, kinship often reasserts itself in periods of instability, and in Bijeljina too, families organized around these

micro-economies – buying, transporting, selling, accounting – each member contributing according to age and ability. “We weren’t really talented for that kind of work, but everybody was doing it, so we did it, too,” Ana (36) explained. Such efforts reflected necessity and resilience, often aimed at gathering enough resources to build, settle, and regain control over their lives.

A turning point came by the mid- to late-2000s, when many IDPs moved from temporary shelter to permanent housing. For displaced families, building homes marked a moment of profound transformation, both material and symbolic. They were no longer reliant on charity or absent owners but could claim their own space and make plans. This shift marked not only dignity regained, but also a redefinition of self – from victims of exile to actors rebuilding from scratch. House-building was also a deeply social process, rooted in reciprocal labour and mutual aid. The *moba* – customary communal labour for house-building or harvests (Bringa 1995) – was reactivated in displacement, with neighbours and extended kin helping each other raise walls, pour foundations, and secure roofs. People from the same regions or hometowns often gathered together first, drawn by shared wartime experiences and cultural familiarity. Many bought neighbouring plots of land and built side by side, reproducing networks of origin that fostered strong regional identifications and a sense of groupness. At the same time, the shared hardship of displacement, together with the solidarity and mutual help that grew out of it, created common symbols and values of unity that, for many, came to define refugee belonging and an identification shaped from within.

This growing self-confidence, however, unfolded alongside persistent reminders of social distance. Rather than respect, IDPs often provoked envy among the local population. Accusations of profiteering or unfair success circulated easily, particularly as some displaced families managed to secure jobs, launch small enterprises, or move into new homes. Milenko (48) recalled with a laugh how resentment sometimes coloured local attitudes toward the displaced: “*Semberci* (people of Semberija) would say in jealousy: ‘Look at these *izbjeglice*, they’ve all built *new* houses!’” He added that they would jokingly reply it was only natural – starting from nothing, they had no *old* houses to rebuild. But beyond such jokes, many IDPs described a deeper sense of being excluded from meaningful participation in local decision-making and public life. “Municipality is treated like hereditary property of *Semberci*... When there are elections, people start saying how there are no *izbjeglice* on any positions where some major things are to be decided,” Nikola (36) said, repeating a sentiment I heard from many other IDPs during fieldwork.

These tensions were deeply shaped by a perceived cultural gap between the two groups. Many IDPs came from urban centres like Tuzla, Sarajevo, or Zenica, and viewed locals of Semberija – mostly rural and agricultural – as backward and uncultured (Pupovac 2020). At the same time, they knew they were seen as

different by their dialect, manners, and lifestyle. Mutual perceptions hardened the sense of being outsiders, even decades after displacement. In this context, *izbjeglice* began to draw strength from their perceived difference from the local population, but also from perceived similarities within their own group: a shared experience of loss, survival, and rebuilding, and values of *snalažljivost* (resourcefulness), *spodobnost* (capability), and *solidarnost* (solidarity). These qualities, forged in adversity, became central to how they saw themselves. As Darko (33) noted, “There are many *izbjeglice* who have done well for themselves... and now live better than most of the locals do.” Such reflections did not erase exclusion, but they began to counter it – not through appeals for recognition, but through a quiet redefinition of what it meant to be *izbjeglica*.

Remaining *Izbjeglica*: From Survival to Belonging

By the late 2000s, most displaced Serbs in Bijeljina had moved beyond the hardest years of exile, having secured housing, steadier incomes, and places for their children in schools and workplaces. What had once been sheer survival gradually opened into the possibility of ordinary life. For many, this stability came not only through years of labour and saving but also by selling or renting properties in the FBiH. Though these transactions rarely compensated for what was lost, they provided resources for rebuilding in Semberija and confirmed that return was not their path forward. With housing and livelihoods in place, families could now invest in businesses, consolidate social standing, and establish associations of displaced persons. In this new context, the label *izbjeglica* for many no longer described who they were or how they lived. It felt outdated, even offensive – a remnant of poverty and marginalisation they had worked hard to leave behind. Stevan (63) spoke with clear frustration, questioning how he could still be seen as displaced after building a house, owning land, and having an apartment in Bijeljina: “I don’t want to accept that I am an *izbjeglica*, and that’s the end of the story.” This rejection reflected a broader shift in self-understanding: from displaced and dependent to settled and contributing, unwilling to be reduced to memories of poverty rather than recognised for the lives they had rebuilt.

Communal organising in the 2010s followed a similar pattern, as associations formed in the 2010s rarely gathered under the name of refugees or displaced persons. Instead, they presented themselves as “citizens,” “friends,” or “people” of a particular *zavičaj* or *rodni kraj* (homeland) – Ilijaš, Tuzla, Bosanska Krajina.⁵ Alongside practical concerns – assisting members still struggling with

⁵ These are, namely, the Citizens’ Association “*The Friends of Ilijaš*” (*Udruženje građana “Prijatelji Ilijaša”*), the Tuzla Citizens’ Homeland Association (*Zavičajno udruženje Tuzlaka*), and the Association of Krajina’s Citizens (*Udruženje Krajišnika*).

housing or advocating for unresolved rights – they invested energy in building community through religious gatherings, cultural events, sports and art competitions. At the same time, commemorative visits and memorial activities kept the memory of displacement alive and gave it renewed public meaning. As I was told during one such gathering, the point was not only to celebrate traditions, but to spend time “with our own people” (*među svojim svijetom*), to reconnect with friends and relatives scattered across the country and abroad, and to reaffirm belonging rooted in shared heritage. In these contexts, *zavičaj* emerged as a central theme: remembered nostalgically and often in embellished ways, it carried traces of loss but not a desire to return. “*In my rodni kraj, we had rivers, valleys, rustling leaves, clean air, and freshness everywhere. It’s simply more beautiful than here,*” Miloš (58) told me, contrasting an idealised homeland with what he saw as the monotony of Semberija. Such memories were less a longing for return than a form of cultural capital – a marker of solidarity among the displaced and, at times, of superiority in relation to locals.

From these everyday invocations of *zavičaj*, more formalised commemorative practices emerged, particularly among associations representing displaced Serbs from Sarajevo and Tuzla. For both groups, the *egzodus* (exodus) – their wartime or post-war departure – became the central narrative around which collective memory was constructed. Unlike many displaced communities elsewhere, where a “myth of return” – even when unrealistic – sustained identification through imagined homecoming (Loizos 1981; Zetter 1999), my interlocutors in Bijeljina did not dream of going back. As Al-Rasheed (1994) shows for Iraqi refugees in London, the persistence or abandonment of the return myth is not universal but shaped by a variety of social and political factors; for some it is maintained as narrative, for others transformed or replaced by alternative forms of belonging. In Bijeljina, too, rather than nurturing an imagined homecoming, collective memory centred on the ordeal of expulsion and the endurance of rebuilding, which gave exile meaning long after the event.

Among Serbs from Sarajevo, the post-war displacement of 1996 was framed not only as a traumatic exit but as a collective sacrifice for the greater good of national unity and the consolidation of RS. In public commemorations and political memory, their departure was cast as a deliberate act through which one generation gave up its homes so that future generations could live securely in a majority-Serb territory (Žila 2023). At the twentieth-anniversary ceremony in Bijeljina I attended, speakers stressed that the point was not to mourn what had been lost, but to affirm with pride they had endured and rebuilt. Serbs from Tuzla, by contrast, recalled displacement through the May 1992 event known as *Tuzlanska kolona*, when an agreed withdrawal of Yugoslav forces turned violent, resulting in the deaths of dozens of Serb and Yugoslav soldiers. For many of my interlocutors from Tuzla, this was remembered not as sacrifice but as betrayal

– by authorities, leaders, and neighbours they had once trusted.⁶ Their commemorations aimed to document this betrayal and assert the moral legitimacy of flight. In both cases, commemoration turned exile into a narrative of meaning: for Sarajevo, sacrifice; for Tuzla, vindication. Together, these practices offered a counter-memory to dominant discourses of passivity or irrelevance, recasting *izbjeglice* as a group with history, agency, and moral standing.

The commemorative narratives, while rooted in shared displacement, ultimately reinforced regional rather than collective refugee identifications, and many began to define themselves in terms of their places of origin. These identifications were lived in everyday interactions and often determined whom people turned to for support or socialising. Milenko (48) said he was glad his daughter married someone from his own Ozren region, saying that with such people there is an ease and familiarity, unlike with *Semberci* (from Semberija), *Sarajlije* (from Sarajevo), or *Krajišnici* (from Bosanska Krajina), with whom he had the impression they “wouldn’t understand each other.” Shared dialects, customs, and wartime trajectories gave a sense of comfort and recognition that transcended the *izbjeglica* category and grounded people in more culturally intimate forms of belonging. While these distinctions were often subtle and fluid, they carried weight in everyday life and, through the associations’ activities, became more publicly visible. Though representatives often claimed these associations were not meant to divide or exclude, regional lines did produce separate social worlds within Bijeljina’s displaced population – parallel networks of influence, mutual aid, and memory-making.

These regional distinctions also mapped onto new hierarchies of power and influence, both among IDPs themselves and in relation to the local population. Unlike in the 1990s, when many displaced persons worked for locals as day labourers, by the 2010s the situation had reversed: locals sought employment in companies and institutions managed by IDPs, particularly those run by Serbs from Sarajevo, who were perceived as better organised, economically stronger, and more cohesive than other groups (Maksimović 2019; Pupovac 2020). Their association was the most established and active, and many *Sarajlije* were known for their success in business, administration, or professional services. This cohesion, while admired by some, also fostered suspicion and resentment. Displaced

⁶ During an agreed peaceful withdrawal of Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA) troops from Tuzla in May 1992, Bosniak and Croat forces attacked a convoy composed predominantly of Serb and Yugoslav soldiers, resulting in the deaths of around sixty people and more than forty wounded. The circumstances and casualties of the event are interpreted differently by the former warring parties, and the episode continues to be commemorated in sharply contrasting ways: in Tuzla it marks City Liberation Day, while for many Serb IDPs it stands as a symbol of betrayal – particularly painful given the city’s wartime reputation for moderation and coexistence (see Armakolas 2011; 2016).

persons from other regions and many locals believed that *Sarajlije* “stick together,” keep resources within their networks, and project cultural superiority. “They have that attitude like there is nobody as good as them... Their whole appearance, their accent when they speak, it reveals their superior attitude,” explained Marko (34), a local man from Bijeljina. For some *Sarajlije*, this sense of superiority was not only perceived but openly embraced, reshaping the *izbjeglica* label into a claim to cultural refinement, urbanity, and accomplishment. Hence the confidence and clarity in Marina’s words at the beginning of this article: “We are proud to be *izbjeglice*.”

For some, this redefinition of *izbjeglica* into a badge of urbanity, cohesion, and achievement marked the culmination of a long transformation. For others, particularly younger generations, the label carried far less meaning. In everyday life it remained present but unstable: invoked selectively, sometimes ironically, sometimes with nostalgia or pride, and often simply left aside. Among the young, especially those born in Bijeljina or who arrived as children, the term surfaced more often in jokes about dialects and habits than as a serious marker of belonging. Many now described themselves simply as *Semberci*, reflecting the place they grew up in and came to call home. As Olga (49) recounted, even after taking her daughters to visit the family’s *hometown*, they found it lovely but insisted that “nothing compares to Semberija.” “Our children... they’ve grown up here, they love it here, that’s just the fact.” Intermarriages, friendships, and business ties further blurred the lines between locals and newcomers, softening once rigid boundaries and unsettling inherited categories.

Yet even as the label lost everyday relevance, it continued to circulate in public life. Politicians invoked *izbjeglice* in electoral rhetoric, often presenting their presence as proof of unity while tacitly acknowledging division. Local media, meanwhile, shifted focus from hardship to reporting on commemorations and cultural events, portraying *izbjeglice* not as a burden but as keepers of memory and tradition. Although this was a more positive image, it nevertheless reinforced their visibility as a separate group, keeping the label alive in the public sphere long after many had rejected it in their private lives. The label *izbjeglica*, then, endures less as a stable category than as a shifting reference to a particular history and trajectory – interpreted differently across generations, situations, and social contexts. What it means today, and whether it still matters, depends not on fixed definition but on how people choose to use it, reinterpret it, or let it fade.

Conclusion

This study has shown that to understand what it means to be an *izbjeglica* in post-war Bijeljina is to approach identification as a process – fluid, relational, and continually negotiated. The label was never only a bureaucratic designation,

but something lived through displacement itself: the loss of homes and communities, the improvisations of survival, and the slow building of new lives. Its meanings emerged in the interplay of similarity and difference, as people drew boundaries against “locals” and were, in turn, similarly bounded by them, while reinforcing bonds within their own networks. Shared symbols of solidarity, endurance, and sacrifice gave substance to groupness from within, while contrasts of everyday practices, cultural traditions or regional origin reinforced difference. In this sense, the *izbjeglica* category was imposed from outside but also continually reworked from within, circulating not as a fixed identity but as an everyday condition remembered, joked about, resisted, or redefined.

Three periods make these shifts visible. In the first, from wartime flight to the DPA, displacement was experienced as suspension: people fled with little but the expectation that return would soon be possible, carrying the label lightly if at all. In the second, from the mid-1990s to late 2000s, *izbjeglica* became most intensely inhabited and contested as a social position and moral category. Public discourse marked IDPs as burdens or profiteers, and locals often treated them as culturally inferior and economically dependent. Yet from within, belonging was rebuilt through house-building, mutual aid, and the values of *snalažljivost* (resourcefulness), *sposobnost* (capability), and *solidarnost* (solidarity). By the late 2000s, as families secured homes and stability, many rejected the label as outdated or humiliating. Still, it persisted in politics, commemorations, and regional associations, sometimes redefined as sacrifice or urban cultural distinction, sometimes invoked ironically by the young who increasingly called themselves simply *Semberci* – a regional term referring to people from Bijeljina and the surrounding Semberija region.

These evolving identifications unfolded within a Bosnian policy framework shaped by international involvement in return and reintegration policies, which privileged “domicile” and “minority” return while overlooking co-ethnic resettlers. Assumed to have integrated smoothly, they were in fact negotiating new cleavages, unmet demands, and competing interests with both locals and political elites. Their relationship with ethnonational elites, who oversaw and politically endorsed their relocation, was marked by a gap between promises of protection and the practical delivery of housing, property, and representation. Meanwhile, everyday life was negotiated in local settings, where established hierarchies, local dominance, and restricted access to resources and networks continued to shape their position. This experience shows that integration cannot be reduced to shared language or religion, but unfolds as a long and uneven process marked by boundaries, hierarchies, and the ongoing negotiation of acceptance and exclusion. In this sense, the *izbjeglica* label outlived its legal status and took on a symbolic life of its own. Without a “myth of return”, belonging was built instead through endurance, resourcefulness, solidarity, and, at times,

difference from locals. The *egzodus* narrative, not homecoming, became the foundation of memory and self-understanding, shaping what it means, even today, to be *izbjeglica*.

Author's Statement

I confirm that the submitted article is the result of the author's original and independent academic work, based on my own intellectual effort, analysis, and interpretation.

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used the AI tool ChatGPT to assist with editing in order to improve grammar and readability.

The author has reviewed and revised all outputs generated by this tool and assumes full responsibility for the final content of the work.

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Postati i ostati izbeglica: Identifikacije izbeglica i promenljivo samorazumevanje u Bosni i Hercegovini

Ovaj članak ispituje kako su se raseljeni Srbi u Bijeljini, Bosna i Hercegovina, označavali kategorijom izbeglica (izbeglica) u decenijama nakon rata 1992–1995. Oslanjajući se na etnografski terenski rad, ukazano je kako se identifikacije sa ovom oznakom menjaju tokom vremena – u trenutku naseljavanja osporavanja i redefinisavanja – kako se raseljavanje kretalo od privremene suspenzije do dugoročnog naseljavanja. Smeštajući ovu dinamiku u bosanski posleratni kontekst, gde je međunarodna politika favorizovala „manjinski povratak“, dok su koetnički doseljenici uglavnom bili zanemareni, članak pokazuje kako oznake izbeglica opstaju i nakon pravnog statusa, dobijajući nova značenja u svakodnevnom životu. Ističe kako je, u odsustvu „mita o povratku“, pripadnost obnovljena kroz izdržljivost, snalažljivost, solidarnost i razliku, oblikujući šta znači biti i ostati izbeglica.

Ključne reči: izbeglice, oznaka izbeglice, identifikacija, interno raseljavanje, interno raseljena lica, Bosna i Hercegovina

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