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Living Ethnicity in Exile: Identity Processes in Refugees from the Former Yugoslavia

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Introduction

This paper addresses the issues of gender, ethnicity, identity, and exile caused by conflict constructed as ethnic strife. The discussion reflects upon some aspects and findings of my empirical research among refugees from former Yugoslavia who were in exile in Serbia, Italy and the Netherlands.[1] The examination of the situation of refugees, who were of different ethnic backgrounds,[2] in these three different settlement contexts examines the processes of (re)shaping ethnic identity in exile and - against this background - deals with questions concerning conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction in the country of origin which is also influenced by the experiences and identity processes of returnees. The paper specifically focuses on different state interventions in the three settlement contexts and their role in (re)shaping ethnic boundaries among the refugees from former Yugoslavia. It proposes that settlement policies and practices play an important role in boundary formation and (re)creation of inter-ethnic ties in exile. These processes, in turn, affect prospects of conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction in the country of origin.

The importance of examining the process of boundary formation in places of exile and its link to post-conflict reconstruction in the places of origin is embedded in the acknowledgement that the primary targets of the very logic and political economy of 'new wars' (Kaldor, 1999) are social networks, social systems and the social fabric of life in community. Orchestrated insecurity and violence deployed by warring parties in this type of conflict, are aimed at destroying the very relations that form the foundations of conventional society (Duffied, 1997). Duffied points out that destruction in this type of conflict does not only have a physical and material

dimension, but also social, civil and political one. Consequently, the questions of reconciliation and post-conflict reconstruction are critically and centrally linked to issues of rebuilding communities and social networks destroyed by war.[3]

The identity processes shaped by different contexts of settlement are central to addressing the social and political consequences of mass displacement of people fleeing conflict constructed as ethnic strife. The processes of (re)shaping ethnic boundaries facilitate refugee settlement and influence the prospects of post-conflict reconstruction in the places of origin, because rebuilding of war-torn societies is also influenced by the experiences and identity processes of returnees. In this paper I will analyse and discuss the problems of people fleeing conflict constructed as ethnic strife and emphasise the importance of processes of boundary formation. A number of analyses have focussed on the construction of ethnic boundaries among refugee populations fleeing former Yugoslavia and in doing so have discussed the pre-conflict socio-economic and cultural conditions as well as the consequences of violent conflict. However, too little attention has been paid to the flexibility of ethnic boundaries among the peoples from former Yugoslavia and the contextual shifts in the line between 'us' and 'them' that take place in exile. I argue in this paper that state interventions, such as policies targeting refugee populations fleeing conflicts that are constructed as ethnic, play an important role in (re)shaping ethnic boundaries. This argument is based on the recognition that ethnic boundaries are

> not fixed or primordial and more importantly, that it is not always the most appropriate principle around which social activity or identity may be organised. In some situations it has so little relevance that participants may simply set it aside, acting without reference to their 'ethnic' affiliations (Wallman 1979.: x)

On this basis I will explore shifts in the construction of ethnic boundaries among refugees of variety of ethnic backgrounds from former Yugoslavia in different countries of exile. I will examine the structural factors that influence and organise their experience and shape ethnic identity and I will demonstrate that some policies and practices are creating conditions in which ethnic boundaries have little meaning in the social activities and identity formation of refugees from the post Yugoslav states. Thus, certain circumstances of exile may enhance the creation of inter-ethnic social networks as a means of bettering the process of their settlement and integration.

Many studies have emphasised the value of social networks for the integration of refugees in receiving societies (I discussed this elsewhere, too, Korac, 2003). It is also important to emphasise the value of these networks in post-conflict reconstruction efforts in the regions affected by 'new wars'. In an earlier study I showed that the development of wide social networks, both within and outside the ethnic group, is central to how refugees assess their situation and integration in the places they settled (Korac, 2003). Social interaction within, across and outside their ethnic group, as I pointed out, contributes to their subjective well-being by making them feel part of the social fabric in the new environment (Korac, 2003). Furthermore I will argue here that social interaction across ethnic boundaries in exile is also important for the process of conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction in sending areas as it affects refugee attitudes towards cross-ethnic coexistence and hence towards return.

The discussion in this paper is based upon my research carried over the past ten years in which I examined different stages of the migration cycle of forcibly displaced people from the region of the post Yugoslav states. One of the aims of this empirical research was to explore the issues of settlement of refugees in receiving societies, both in or close to zones of conflict as well as in the developed world, specifically the EU. In the three contexts of exile I discuss in this paper, one within the region of former Yugoslavia (Serbia), and the two further away, in Europe (Italy and the Netherlands). As mentioned above, one of the central issues has been boundary formation. The boundary process, as Wallman (1979) explains, is happening:

> in response to several different kinds of variable, and on a number of different levels. The factors affecting it may be macro and micro, a function of structure or perception, of changes in history or of situation" (1979: 5).

Wallman further suggests that a social boundary is embedded in both the 'organisation of society' and the 'organisation of experience' thus "neither element has more or less reality than the other. Both the difference and the *sense* of difference count" (Wallman, 1979: 7). One of the important macro factors affecting the process of boundary formation relates to the organisation of society including state policies and interventions regulating the social 'system'. Depending on the specific historic,

social and political context, these interventions may aim to construct boundaries of difference, as was the case in Serbia at the time of my research, in 1994, 1995, 1996 and 1997.[4] Further, they may intend to reshape them in order to facilitate a more inclusionary society, as was the case in the Netherlands at the time of my fieldwork in 2000 and 2001. Alternatively, there may be the absence of any articulated policies specifically concerned with refugee community development, and more generally of policies aiming at social inclusion and integration, as was the case in Italy at the time of my research in 1999 and 2000.[5] In the three contexts, micro factors, that is the *perception* of difference among refugees from former Yugoslavia, are important elements affecting the process of boundary formation in each of these settlement contexts.   As will be shown, the intersection of macro and micro factors characterising different settlement contexts shapes the process of boundary formation in the specific places of exile.

Refugees in Serbia, state interventions and boundary formation

My examination of gender aspects of forced migration of refugees in the Balkans demonstrates the centrality of gender in the formation of new ethnicised states. Statistical data show that over 70 per cent of refugees in some regions were women and children (USCR, 1993). I propose that this massive gendered population transfer has operated as a critical symbolic and practical element in reshaping boundaries between ethnic collectives (Korac, 1999). Uprooted women, I suggest, became symbolically and strategically important in the destruction of opposed ethnic collectives. The role women play in this process is centrally related to their role in the ideological and biological reproduction of their collectives. As several studies have pointed out (Yuval-Davis and Anthias,1989; Walby, 1992; Brah, 1993; Yuval-Davis, 1993), women are conceived as cultural embodiments of collectives and their boundaries, as well as participants in ethnic-national struggles. Therefore, I argue, that a forced migration of women in wars constructed as ethnic is both practically and symbolically the most effective way of (re)shaping the boundaries of an ethnic collective. Forcing women to flee their homes is, however, just one of the critical elements in this process. The process of (re)shaping boundaries, as my research documents, continues in the place of women's exile and, I argue, is central to further

consolidating nationalistic projects of ethnic division and consequently, to the formation of new states based upon essentialist notions of belonging.

My research on the situation of refugee women of variety of ethnic backgrounds who fled to Serbia from Croatia and Bosnia documented that various state interventions were crucial for furthering divisions among exiled women along and within ethnic lines. Through various policies, the public media, and education, these state imposed divisions become a powerful tool of controlling refugee women in order to prevent the formation of alliances among women of different ethnic backgrounds. These alliances, I proposed, were based upon the realisation of exiled women that refugees of other ethnic backgrounds were also victimised. The alliances were also based on their shared experience of difficulties in exile, regardless of their ethnicity (Korac, 1998). As a refugee woman of Serbian ethnic background from Bosnia explained:

> There are refugees [in collective accommodation] from various regions. There are Serb, Croat and Muslim women. We're linked by a common fate. I share a much better understanding with Croat and Muslim refugees than with the people here [in Serbia]. I live here, if this can be called a life. They [the local population] don't understand me, I don't understand them. There are frequent disputes and I think that I prefer to talk to refugees of any nationality, that we understand each other better.

This and other testimonies of refugee women in my research document how ethnicity is not always relevant to social relationships in which people of different culture interact. These testimonies support Wallman's argument that when ethnicity is used "in a context for which any of the participants deems it inappropriate, it becomes *for them* a crippling liability" (1979: x). This is not to argue that all refugees I interviewed have articulated their experience of exile and belonging in the same way. Rather, their accounts show that notions of belonging cannot be fitted into a single mould, because "identity is constructed across difference (Hall, 1987: 44).

Experiences of exile expose the hollowness of essentialist beliefs in the 'common destiny' of ethnic collectives and related narratives. These experiences were crucial in creating counter-narratives of women's belonging. Although these counter-narratives of belonging and related alliances were not widespread at the time of my

research, I argue that they represent a potential for the (re)creation of multi-ethnic social networks in communities destroyed by war.

These emerging inter-ethnic alliances and trans-group coalitions were not entirely spontaneous either. Rather, they emerged primarily among exiled women who were involved in multi-ethnic self-help groups initiated and facilitated by some women's groups in Serbia (Korac, 1998). This kind of practice and 'identity work' of women's groups existed in all the post-Yugoslav states and was part of the emerging resistance of some women to nationalism and war. An activist of the *Women in Black*, Belgrade, explained some aspects of their work with refugee women:

> They [refugee women] have every right to their bitterness towards people from other ethnic origin, and we [women activists and workshop facilitators] let them say things. However, in some of our workshops, I would talk about my friends who were of other ethnic origin, we'd [women activists] read a letter from Sarajevo which we got from a Muslim woman. In time, they got used to being able to talk about neighbours and friends of other ethnicity. Because they came here thinking they could never talk about them, that they have to say that they [neighbours/friends of different ethnicity] are all 'genocidal', that they should all be killed, in order to make some friends here. Then, in time [during workshop discussions], out of the blue friends emerged [in there stories and memories], daughters in law, neighbours of various ethnic backgrounds, they all emerged [in their stories and memories] out of the blue [during workshop discussions], who didn't exist [in their stories, thoughts and memories] up to then.

This and other forms of cross-ethnic identity work and assistance helped refugee women not only to regain their self-respect and to re-establish their lives gradually, but it also became an avenue to rebuilding a sense of mutual trust and consequently, the social fabric of life destroyed by war. This form of activism also became a two-way learning process between refugees and activists. The following account of an activist of *Women in Black* details the character of this learning process:

> The most important value of our work during these wars [the work of Women in Black and some other women's groups] has been the work with women who developed some kind of new autonomy and agency, and I refer here to women refugees in particular. They overcame the role of a victim. They developed this new sense of autonomy and agency through the process of confrontation with pain. It sounds paradoxical, but their struggle to protect their experiences of pain and suffering from manipulation and misuse [by local nationalists], led to empowerment, to agency…I call it a positive approach to crisis. We've [women refugees and activists] learned to take a crisis as a challenge, and not as a catastrophe. We've learned to take control over our traumatic experiences by thinking positively.

This process of learning also created a situation in which the individual resistance of women to manipulation by nationalists and their ideologies created a potential of becoming more politically articulated and powerful. It opened a new space for understanding differences among women and peoples in the war-torn region. As this mutual process of learning through cross ethnic communication was based on the principles of 'rooting and shifting'. Yuval-Davis (1997: 130) explains this type of communication as the one that does not involve self-decentering or losing one's own set of values, nor homogenization of the 'other'. As such, the communication based on principles of rooting and shifting they established with refugee women from variety of ethnic backgrounds could have played an important role in the process of peaceful conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. The activist of *Women in Black* explains how this potential has been created:

> The experience of work with women refugees has helped me when I was for the first time [after the break of the war] in Bosnia, in 1995. It helped me to perceive the differences among women through a new lense. The experience of work with women refugees has helped me to perceive calmly and tolerantly our differences and to understand how these differentiated positionings of women provoke different kinds of vulnerability. The reactions of women in Bosnia might've been different from mine, but my experience has helped me to perceive our differences in a new way. That doesn't mean that I think that there aren't differences that would be hard to overcome, but there are those which we definitively can surmount.

However, in a political context where essentialist notions of ethnic identification are informing the nation and are central to the claim for power, any form of trans-group coalition is seen as a challenge to the power structure. Therefore, the state-imposed ethnic division among exiled women became strategically important in Serbia. In conjunction with women's own diverse experience of war and victimisation, this state-imposed ethnic division tends to reduce all other but ethnic differences among exiled women, such as age, class or urban/rural divide. It also overshadows similarities of their experiences in exile, the ones that are not necessarily linked to their ethnicity. Therefore, the organisation of the receiving society facilitated by divisive state interventions was to some extent congruent with the organisation of experience of ethnic boundaries created by war and victimisation. The former tended to strengthen the subjective sense of difference among refugee women. The level of

compatibility between the two factors affecting boundary formation played an important role in undermining the reconciliatory potential of the 'identity work' initiated by some women's groups.

Consequently, for women refugees of non-Serbian ethnic backgrounds, the place of exile carried the characteristics of a war zone, as they found themselves in the environment where they represented a demonised ethnic group. As a consequence, many of them tried to resettle in a third country in search of safety and "a minimal condition for some kind of democracy of selves" (Cockburn, 1997). Therefore, the state policies were in effect furthering ethnic cleansing and had far reaching consequences for peaceful conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction.

For women refugees of Serbian ethnic background, the place of exile also carried threats to their rights and safety. They were often forced to 'return', that is to forcibly move to the territories controlled by Serbian forces in Bosnia or Croatia in the name of 'national security'. The following words of a Serbian woman, a refugee from Bosnia, demonstrate a kind of problems these women faced:

> They called me; it was April 19, 1994, to report to the Red Cross. I got there; one young person and an old woman were there. 'Where are your papers, your refugee I.D. 'Where do you come from?', she asks. I said Sarajevo. 'Would you live in Srbinje?'[6] I didn't need to hear any more. I said: Where's that? 'Formerly Foca', she said. And then she went on to tell me what state that's in, that it's the Bosnian Serb Republic. Where's that, I asked, in Africa? And on whose blood-covered doorstep were you thinking of settling me? 'Well, the mujahedin killed the Serbs', she says. Wait a minute, I said, you can't talk to me like that. How dare you, a clerk, settle me in a state I don't belong to. Then I went mad and quarrelled with her. And they took away my refugee ID.

Forced return of women to these territories (even if they were not at home there) was important both strategically and symbolically. It was not only that refugee women were to repopulate the deserted territories heavily affected by war. They were also considered as 'naturally' suited to rebuilding ethnic communities. As Peterson and Runyan (1993) argue, women are considered as "life givers" and thus are "expected to restore 'life' after a death-dealing war is over[...] Thus, after the devastation they must 'pick up the pieces' and create the conditions for repopulating society" (1993: 82). Women are also perceived as pillars of society, as they are traditionally seen as

caretakers and guardians of their children, men and homes. They represent these roles even more starkly in time of war and consequently, are the best 'weapon' in the struggle for a 'sacred national cause' of ethnically cleansed and expanded territories.

Refugee women who were resourceful enough to fight for their rights, as well as those in ethnically mixed marriages whose alliances with their ethnic collective were regarded problematic, were labelled as 'traitors' to their nation. The following account of a refugee woman from Bosnia, who is of Serbian ethnic background and married to a Muslim from Bosnia, reveals difficulties these women faced:

> Some neighbours and friends here in Serbia blame me, they say 'go to Alija' [Izetbegovic, the then president of Bosnia-Herzegovina] 'take your Muslim children away,' 'You should all be slaughtered, killed' and more. It even went so far that my parents said 'let your husband die,' or 'we wish him dead.' That hurt me a lot.

At the moment when political power in Serbia radically shifted along unified ethnic lines, this state-imposed 'othering' of refugee women rapidly became part of the social and cultural fabric of life resulting in their stigmatisation. The stigmatisation of refugee women who were in ethnically mixed marriages often resulted in their attempts to resettle to a third country. These processes strengthened the ethnic homogeneity of the newly created nation states in the region, which had far-reaching consequences for conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction.

Mixed marriages were at the core of a rich unified culture of the region before the conflict (Kaldor 1999:34), and were not only a strong sign of peaceful multi-ethnic co-existence but also of community cohesion. Mixed marriages were one of the most significant demographic and cultural characteristics of Yugoslav society. Although ethnically mixed marriages were more typically found in urban areas, they were also common in rural areas. Approximately two million people in the region were either spouses or children of ethnically mixed marriages (Petrovic 1985). At the time of the 1981 census,[7] people of ethnically mixed background outnumbered Albanians, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Muslims, and Slovenes, and were themselves outnumbered only by Croats and Serbs (Petrovic 1985). Mixed marriages were a prerequisite for multi-ethnic co-existance and tolerance in the region. For this reason, people who have been married inter-ethnically have been under attack by militant

nationalists for whom these marriages were a major obstacle to their fundamentalist goals. Furthermore, those in ethnically mixed marriages can play invaluable role in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction, as they have a genuine interest in rebuilding inter-ethnic ties in their places of origin. Their declining presence has reduced the prospects of reconstructing these post-conflict societies into communities of ethnic tolerance.

This brief overview of my research about women refugees in Serbia intended to point to the intersection of gender and nationalism leading to the processes of 'othering' of exiled women. The state imposed ethnic divisions, I propose, represented a conscious effort to reduce any possibility of recreating inter-ethnic ties destroyed by war. The state interventions aimed at shaping boundary formation among exiled women were in effect furthering the logic of war. In other words, they can be regarded as 'peaceful' instruments of war that has uprooted every fourth or fifth citizen of the region. By August 1995, four to five million people have become internally displaced persons or refugees either within the post-Yugoslav states or in Europe, North America and Australia.[8] This brings me to a brief overview of some aspects and findings of my research about refugee from former Yugoslavia settled in Italy and the Netherlands.

Refugees from former Yugoslavia in Italy and the Netherlands: integration policies and boundary formation

My examination of refugees from former Yugoslavia in Italy and the Netherlands focused on their strategies for integration under specific policy contexts. In examining the experiences of refugees in exile, I explored, among other issues, the character of their social networks and the role these networks play in the process of settlement and/or return.

Studies on diaspora communities demonstrate that although they may assist and support their members (Hugo, 1981; Massey et al. 1987; Cases, 1987), they may also be characterised by division, exploitation, and in some cases political violence (Van Hear, 1998). My research among refugees in Rome and Amsterdam indicates

that policies of receiving societies in specific circumstances play a role in transplanting ethnic tension among refugees fleeing 'new wars' or in alleviating them.

In the Italian context, where refugees are particularly disadvantaged because of the lack of social security systems, assistance provided by migrant networks literally means *survival*. However, in Italy and in Rome specifically, networks of 'old' immigrants from former Yugoslavia were underdeveloped, because Italy has not been an attractive destination for earlier voluntary migrants (i.e. 'guest workers') from former Yugoslavia. Hence, social networks that were almost exclusively *refugee networks* assisted those who fled the war-torn region and came to Rome. These refugee networks served as an *alternative* 'self-reception' system for disseminating information, resolving housing problems, and finding work.[9] Only in exceptional cases, were some of the refugees I interviewed helped through contacts with old migrant networks in Rome. A man of ethnically mixed background from Bosnia explains why this was the case:

> Our *comunità* is small [of refugees from variety of ethnic backgrounds and parts of former Yugoslavia], most got here in 91-92 and 93, at the beginning of the war. Those that were here before [old immigrants] just couldn't fit in with those who came during this war. Their attitude [of old immigrants] towards Italy was different as well as the attitude towards the people who were fleeing the war [in former Yugoslavia]. We weren't people looking for jobs and a better life. The situations we were faced with here were extreme - no regular papers in the beginning, no job, war in our country - so those strong ties were made among those who fled the war [irrespective of their ethnicity].

Almost all of the interviewees were also sceptical about these old migrant networks and community organisations because their activities were perceived as *political*, in a sense that they were preoccupied with the developments of war and nationalistic agendas of the new states that emerged in the region of former Yugoslavia. Thus, most of the refugees in my research described the presence and visibility of these old migrant networks in Italy and Rome as primarily linked to their campaigns for winning the 'hearts and minds' of the Italian public for 'their cause'. Consequently, the activism of old migrant networks was perceived as politically motivated, rather than emerging from their *humanitarian* concerns about the situation of refugees in Italy.

My research among refugees in Rome reveals that the refugee networks were composed of people of all ethnic origins and from different parts of former Yugoslavia and that the vast majority of refugees had contacts across ethnic boundaries. This is not to argue though that these refugee communities were free from ethnic tensions resulting from the conflict in the region. Rather, it is to indicate that the policy context of the receiving country influenced how refugees coped with and organised their experience of ethnic persecution caused by the conflict they fled. A woman of ethnically mixed background from Bosnia said about the character of these tensions:

> Each of us had our own opinions about politics. We'd have disputes over that, but despite the political discussions, we'd help each other whenever we could, regardless of where we were from and what our political views were.

The intensive contacts across ethnic boundaries revealed in this research resulted from the specific circumstances in which they took place. They happened primarily because of the *absence* of an organised reception and assistance system. Consequently, for many of the refugees, contacts across ethnic boundaries were literally a matter of physical survival during their first years in Rome. A Muslim man from Bosnia explains how and why these contacts and networks developed:

> During the first years [in Rome] the refugees from ex-Yugoslavia [from variety of ethnic backgrounds] were the circle I used to socialise with. We were pretty united in these years, we stuck together, those who would and could help each other.

The refugees from former Yugoslavia found themselves in the context in which ethnic boundaries had little relevance for their situation in exile and were not the most appropriate principle around which to organise their activities and lives. It can be argued, therefore, that the characteristics of the policy context concerning refugees in Italy have created a situation in which people fleeing the deeply divided and war-torn region had to *recreate* links and coexistence destroyed by war. These cross-ethnic links helped them to confront poverty, disempowerment and marginalisation they experienced during their first years in Rome.

This cross-ethnic networking was facilitated by three contributing factors. First, social ties within ethnic communities of nationals from the post Yugoslav states in Rome can be characterised as weak, because they are not based on family or

kinship relationships. The absence of family and kinship ties among the studied population is primarily the result of the policy context that did not allow family reunification and was generally unfavourable to people fleeing with families. The former was due to the humanitarian/temporary status of the majority of refugees from former Yugoslavia in Italy and Rome which does not permit refugees to bring in their families. The latter was the consequence of the lack of any kind of support and services for refugees in general and for those with children in particular. Without provision of housing and eligibility for social benefits it is profoundly difficult to survive, particularly for those with families. Second, the lack of established community organisations supported by the Italian authorities or by the governments of the post-Yugoslav states created a need for *spontaneous self-organising* by the newly arrived refugees. These networks enabled them to cope better with their day-to-day problems in fulfilling their immediate needs, which proved to be common to all regardless of their ethnic background. This spontaneity largely freed this population from political disputes about the conflict, the causes of their flight, and other highly politically charged issues. These circumstances meant that, to paraphrase Wallman (1979), the identity politics of war could have not been transplanted into the new context by boxing them into their respective ethnic groups. Rather, they had to reach outside their ethnic groups and form cross-ethnic networks in order to confront marginalization and discrimination in Italy. Third, the characteristics of the refugee population from former Yugoslavia in Rome have also contributed to the establishment of cross-ethnic networking. These cross-ethnic networks were successful because most of the refugees were young, educated and came from multiethnic urban areas, and often they were themselves of ethnically mixed backgrounds. They themselves had no other experience but that of peaceful multiethnic coexistence and friendships before the conflict. Even those who themselves experienced victimisation and in some cases severe ill-treatment because of their ethnicity, such as those who were imprisoned in some of the concentration camps in Bosnia, were part of these networks. In some cases, for example, they shared accommodation and made close friendships with people of different ethnic backgrounds and from different parts of former Yugoslavia.

My research indicates that a similar pattern of spontaneous and cross-ethnic networking emerged among refugees from former Yugoslavia who arrived in

Amsterdam before legal and other procedures for their protection and reception were set for them. A Muslim woman from Bosnia talks about her experience:

> Those who came here by early 1993 were helping each other. There was nothing here [no organised assistance to those feeling former Yugoslavia] so we were exchanging any bit of information we had, we helped each other with finding shelter for the newly arrived. I had a couple from Croatia, for example, for almost five months, although I'd never seen them before. It was a very tense period in terms of politics and war, and I remember arguments and tensions between some of the people I used to socialise with. But we were all in the same boat then [refugees from variety of ethnic backgrounds and from different parts of former Yugoslavia], and I can't recall any serious problems or people who wouldn't help each other.

Although, unlike in Italy, networks of old immigrants from the region existed in the city, not many of those who arrived early had any closer contacts with them. They all felt that most of these people came to the Netherlands for different reasons and under different circumstances, that is, as 'guest-workers', rather than as people forced to move because of war. Additionally, most of the refugees pointed to the difference in educational background between those that arrived in the late 60s and themselves which, they felt, created problems in communication and mutual understanding.

As the war intensified and with it the number of people seeking asylum in the Netherlands increased, the Dutch government introduced legal and other measures to assist these refugees and to meet their needs. These state interventions, as my research reveals, have shaped inter-ethnic relations among the populations fleeing former Yugoslavia in many unintended ways, one being the maintenance of tension and furthering of social distance between different ethnic groups in exile. My research documents that after the initial spontaneous cross-ethnic networking experienced by those who arrived in Amsterdam in the early years of war, social networks among refugees were soon reshaped. They became primarily family and kinship based networks or established along ethnic lines. The family and kinship networks were due to their legal status, which allowed family reunification, as well as to socio-economic conditions in the country that were favourable to people fleeing with their families.

The establishment of social contacts along ethnic lines was the result of three interrelated factors. First, many of the interviewed came from parts of Bosnia heavily affected by war and were themselves subjected to victimisation because of their ethnic

origin. Thus, the organisation of their experience of war and sense of difference made them reluctant to (re)establishing ties and relationships of trust across ethnic boundaries. Second, the Dutch policy system involved a well-organised system of provisions, leaving no need for intense networking among refugees and their search for alternative routs into the society. Moreover, some aspects of this policy system, such as prolonged periods of stay in accommodation centres for asylum seekers, as my research indicates, tend to intensify the importance of ethnic boundaries. A man from Bosnia emphasises this kind of problem:

> The situation at the centre [the accommodation centre] was difficult because we didn't have any information about how long the procedure was going to last. We had nothing to do, we just sat there and waited, and we became paranoid about what we could say to people and who we could trust. There were people from all nationalities [of former Yugoslavia] there and tensions were inevitable because we just sat and talked about what had happened back home and why we had to leave. After a while, there was nothing left to talk about, only were left tension and hatred.

Third, they found refuge in a country with a relatively large and well-established immigrant population from former Yugoslavia, which had already been bitterly divided along ethnic lines. The Netherlands, as some other European countries, had a considerable number of immigrants from former Yugoslavia who came as so-called 'guest workers' in the 1960s and 1970s. Before the war broke-out in the country, the majority of them formed communities of compatriots linked to the then Yugoslav embassies and consular offices in the places of their settlement. For the most part, these communities perceived themselves as Yugoslavs. With the increase of the political tensions in former Yugoslavia, the violent conflict and the consequent rupture of the federal state along ethnic lines, the majority of these immigrants aligned themselves with the new states that emerged during the war, with their institutions and their politics. Consequently, in the Netherlands, as in some other European countries, the networks of old migrants from the former Yugoslavia were deeply involved in and affected by the identity politics of war. Moreover, links with immigrant/ethnic associations are encouraged in Dutch multi-cultural society, as is the case in many other European countries. Through a variety of grants the Dutch government financially supports a range of programmes initiated by different groups of newcomers/immigrants, such as mother-tongue courses for children; cultural events and so forth. These circumstances have become a fruitful ground for maintaining or

even deepening divisions and tensions caused by the conflict. A woman of Serbian ethnic background from Bosnia relates her experience:

> I am very disappointed because our people [from former Yugoslavia] are more divided here than they are back home where they fought war. I went to all three associations [Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian] and I feel like a stranger there. These people care more about their ethnic background than anything else.

As Eastmond points out (1998: 178-179), ethnic tension and divisions among refugees tend to intensify when policies of receiving societies "concerned with the consequences of people 'uprooted' from their native cultures are reflecting essentialised notions of identity and culture." She goes on to explain that although immigrant/refugee community organisations usually fulfil the function of orientating newcomers, they also are an important link to the institutions of the home country. As such, Eastmond concludes (1998: 164), they "constitute the major arena for the articulation and affirmation of a national identity". For populations fleeing 'new wars', however, the issues concerning national identity are centrally related to the identity politics of war (Korac, 1999). Consequently, those associated with community groups were usually divided along ethnic lines. I propose, therefore, that ethnic tensions tend to carry on or even intensify in specific circumstances of exile, especially when some policies of receiving societies are reflecting essentialised notion of identity.

The question remains for further research in what ways and to what extent such policies and contexts of exile may affect the prospects for post-conflict reconstruction and (re)building communities and societies of ethnic tolerance in the places of origin. This question has both conceptual and practical importance, as most of the refugees from the post-Yugoslav states were granted temporary protection, initially at least, and have been expected to return once the armed conflict was over. Even in countries such as the Netherlands, where a significant number of these refugees have eventually been granted permanent permission to stay, the state authorities as well as the public hope for their return. This is expressed in various state-sponsored initiatives and programmes aiming at their return as well as in attitudes of many Dutch people. A Bosnian man explains some of these attitudes:

> I was very upset after the Dayton Peace Agreement [in 1995], because the Dutch were very euphoric at the time; they expected all Bosnians to go back immediately. They couldn't understand that war destroyed not only houses, but

also relationships and ties among people. Many Dutch, even now, ask us [Bosnians] when are we going to go back.

My research indicates that the absence of social contacts and ethnic ties across ethnic boundaries in exile reinforces the feeling of irreversibly destroyed inter-ethnic links and coexistence in the places of origin. It also suggests that such experiences of living ethnicity in exile shape, to some extent, attitudes of refugees towards return. This attitude, as my research implies, is only partially grounded in their assessment of the political and economic situation in their countries of origin and/or their 'integration success' in the new society. There is indication in my research that the attitude towards return is linked to some extent to their experience of ethnic tension and division in the place of exile.

Concluding remarks

This overview of some aspects of my research intended to point to problems involved in addressing the consequences of mass displacement of people fleeing conflict constructed as ethnic strife. In the three contexts of exile, I discussed here, the one within the region of former Yugoslavia, and the two further away, in Europe, one of the central issues has been the boundary formation and the role of inter-ethnic ties.

One of the important macro factors affecting the process of boundary formation, as I argued in this paper, relates to state policies and interventions shaping the legal and social situation of refugees in exile. Depending on the specific historic, social and political context, these interventions may aim to construct boundaries of difference. As shown in this paper, this was the case in Serbia. There, the state imposed 'othering' of refugee women was facilitated by divisive state interventions and was to some extent congruent with the organisation of their experience of ethnic boundaries created by war and victimisation. These experiences tended to strengthen the subjective sense of difference among refugee women. As a consequence, many attempted to resettle to a third country. Therefore, the state policies were in effect furthering ethnic cleansing and led to a strengthening of ethnic homogeneity in the newly created nation states. These processes had far-reaching consequences for conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction, as the territories of former

Yugoslavia became even more ethnically 'pure' and also 'cleansed' from a majority of those of ethnically mixed backgrounds. If the latter category had been protected in their places of origin or indeed in the post Yugoslav states where many of them initially fled, they could have played a crucial role in the process of (re)building social ties and networks destroyed by conflict and the divisive identity politics of war.

The findings of my research in Italy and the Netherlands show that refugee policies can have unintended consequences in the receiving societies. In the Italian case, where refugees were particularly disadvantaged because of the lack of social security systems, refugee networks served as an alternative 'self-reception' or self-help system for disseminating information, resolving housing problems, and finding work. There were intensive contacts across ethnic boundaries that resulted from the specific circumstances in which the refugees lived. Contacts developed primarily because of the absence of an organised reception and assistance system. These circumstances have created a situation in which people fleeing the deeply divided and war-torn region had to *recreate* links and coexistence destroyed by war. They had to reach outside their ethnic groups and form cross-ethnic networks in order to confront the marginalization and discrimination they were experiencing in Italy. In the Netherlands, as the discussion in this paper indicated, the state interventions developed to assist refugees have contributed in a way to upholding ethnic tension and to furthering social distance between different ethnic groups in exile. As I proposed, ethnic tension among the peoples fleeing 'new wars' tends to continue or even intensify in specific circumstances of exile, especially when the policies of the receiving societies are reflecting essentialised notions of identity.

The question to what extent the problems of living ethnicity in different contexts of exile may affect the prospects for post-conflict reconstruction and (re)building communities and societies of ethnic tolerance in the places of origin is a question that requires further research and policy considerations. This question is important, as most of the refugees from the post-Yugoslav states were granted temporary protection, initially at least, and have been expected to return once the armed conflict was over. **Indeed, this is a very interesting question - would it be possible to elaborate a bit more on it?**

[2] Refugees involved in my research were Croats, Muslims and Serbs, as well as those of a variety of ethnically mixed backgrounds, who fled armed conflicts and tensions in Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia. The term Muslim is used here in reference to nationality of the refugees in this research, because constitutionally Muslims in former Yugoslavia were regarded as nationality and not as a religious group or affiliation.

[3] Duffield (1997) and Kaldor (1999), among others, discuss in detail the characteristics of 'new wars'.

[6] A town in Eastern Bosnia, formerly Foca, with a majority Bosnian Muslim population before the war. At the time of my research, it was a Serb held town, called Srbinje. All Bosnian Muslims in Foca were 'cleansed'.

[7] The 1981 census is the last reliable census for the whole region. The 1991 census was conducted just before the outbreak of war, and the data collected were never processed through the Federal Bureau of Statistics. Instead, each republic, after gaining sovereignty, had published partial data.

[8] The data refer to UNHCR report, July 1995, as well as the instances of 'ethnic cleansing' in Srebrenica and Zepa (Bosnia) and in the region of Krajina (Croatia). *Nasa Borba* (August 10, 1995:5).

[9] For more information on the cross-ethnic character of these networks see my article "Cross-Ethnic Networks, Self-Reception System, and Functional Integration of Refugees from former Yugoslavia in Rome", *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, Winter 2001, 2(1): 1:27.

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