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**Growing Older as a Refugee: A Study of Bosnian Refugees in the UK and their Experiences of the Ageing Process**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores and evaluates the interaction between ageing and forced migration. Using evidence from in-depth interviews with older Bosnian refugees in the UK, coupled with relevant theories, I aim to understand how older people experience the ageing process from the perspective of those forced to leave their country due to conflict. Some of the issues highlighted by the research participants are similar to those faced by labour migrants. However, most are unable to return home and choose to remain in the UK, owing to strong ties to family and the poor socio-economic situation back in Bosnia. Key to their well-being is staying socially active, being surrounded by family and having access to healthcare. The conclusion calls for older refugees to be included in studies of transnationalism, ageing and migration in order to better support policy-makers working with this group.

## **Keywords**

*Ageing, older people, refugees, transnationalism, Bosnians, well-being*

## **Introduction**

Anything can happen. How it can happen for us to have to come from our country to here?... We had to leave everything what we had...just our clothes on, this is what we had. And we had to go.

The above quote is a small extract from one of the six in-depth interviews undertaken for the purpose of this research study. The speaker, an older Bosnian lady in her early 70s, describes how she came to arrive in the UK. Forced to flee conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina (henceforth, BiH) at the age of 49 and seek sanctuary abroad, she still remains in the UK. Today, conflicts around the world continue to uproot tens of thousands of people from their homes and force them to seek safety in northern European countries, often making perilous journeys. There exists a plethora of literature on forced migration, and more interestingly, the literature on ageing and migration has also increased in recent years. More specifically, the ‘ageing and migration nexus’ (Lulle and King 2016a) researches older migrants and how their constructions of ageing and ‘living well’ are shaped in different ‘time-spaces’ (Lulle and King 2016b: 458).

Many scholars have contributed to advancing the work on ageing migrants, arguing for the inclusion of ageing in migration studies ‘as an intrinsic factor of life and livelihoods with far-reaching consequences for well-being’ (Lulle and King 2016a: 3). Gardner’s (2002) detailed ethnography of older Bangladeshis in London is perhaps best known, whilst King et al. (2014) have documented the experiences of older people in Albania who are left behind by their migrating children. In contrast, in another very different line of research, King et al. (2000) have explored international retirement migration – older people who migrate as a lifestyle choice, in search of better climate and leisure activities amongst other things. Studies on labour migration and ageing, however, have broadly been categorised into migrants who stay in the

host country and age in place, those who return to their country of origin after a period of work, and those who undertake a ‘back and forth’ transnational lifestyle (Bolzman et al. 2004). Indeed, ageing migrants are diverse. Lulle and King (2016a) argue that, especially from Eastern Europe, there is a ‘trend’ for older-age migration due to increasing levels of poverty in old age and a lack of pension coverage. Coupled with the increase in migration in old age is an ageing population worldwide. ‘Between 2015 and 2030, the number of people in the world aged 60 years or over is projected to grow by 56 per cent’ (UNDESA 2015). Despite ageing being a biological process, it is also very much socially and culturally constructed (Lulle and King 2016a). Markers of ageing or what it means to be old vary according to different cultures. It can be argued that there is no universal definition of what it means to be ‘old’.

However, from the literature on ageing and migration it appears that the relationship between *forced* migration and ageing has received almost no attention. This paper<sup>1</sup> therefore seeks to address a gap in studies of ageing and migration. There is scarce literature on older refugees and their transition into transnational agents or ‘migrants’ through the ageing process and this paper argues that both trajectories – that of refugee to transnational migrant and from being ‘young’ to being ‘old’ – merit further research and inclusion in studies of migration.

The overarching research question of this paper is to explore and understand *the intersectionality between the process of ageing and the experiences of being a refugee. How does the relationship between the two unfold?* The main objective of this dissertation is to discover how these two processes or ‘entwined becomings’ (Lulle and King 2016a) interact with each other. This will entail a narrowing of the research question to cover three dimensions of ageing and refugee studies: well-being, transnationalism and rights/citizenship. By exploring these dimensions with my research participants, I seek to highlight how older refugees both experience ageing and provide guidance for policy-makers and scholars, thereby promoting research in this area.

My research focuses on Bosnian refugees who arrived in the UK in the early 1990s. I chose this group to reflect my interest in the experiences of ageing from the perspective of those who were ‘forced to leave’ and seek sanctuary abroad (Kelly 2003). Another aim of the paper is to help policy-makers understand that older refugees should not be an overlooked group and my intention is that my findings will help them target this group better. As we will see, that the subject of ageing refugees merits further inclusion in studies of migration because they challenge traditional assumptions of ageing, and subvert the expectation that all refugees lose ties with their country of origin.

My motivation for undertaking research on older migrants stems from a deep interest in supporting the inclusion of older people in humanitarian emergencies around the world. Prior to commencing my Master’s degree, I spent four years working for an international NGO whose target population was the elderly. I also have a strong and personal association with migrants and refugees, as the granddaughter of European migrants myself. My interest in choosing Bosnian refugees as a study group stems primarily from a strong desire to understand the culture and people better, and because my previous studies led me to read literature on the history of the conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a revised version of my MA dissertation in Human Rights, submitted in September 2016, at the University of Sussex, School of Global Studies.

The paper develops as follows. First, there are several background sections – on the BiH background, on methods, and then a review of relevant literature. The core of the paper is made up of three longer sections which address research questions and empirical results. The first of these presents findings from discussions on the subject of rights and citizenship. It seeks to address the question: *What languages and concepts of rights and citizenship are invoked in discussions with ageing refugees?* The next one explores the participants' level of engagement in transnational activities. This raises the question: *Do older refugees engage in transnational activities and how are these shaped through the ageing process?* The final one discusses the subjectivities of well-being in the ageing process. More importantly it seeks to understand the following: *How do personal perceptions of ageing and well-being develop and change when people are forced to leave their own country?* The study concludes by analysing the key findings with a view to placing them in the wider implications of the research. It will also present some ideas for future studies.

Due to the ambiguity of terminology, I will use the terms 'refugee' and 'migrant' interchangeably allowing for the fact that research participants came to the UK as refugees but are now classed as migrants. Finally, as this paper will explore the meaning of citizenship, based on the literature, the proposed definition of citizenship is one of '*rights, duties and contributions*'.

### **Background to the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), 1992-1995**

About 25 years have passed since the end of the brutal conflict in BiH. According to Young (2001), around 1.3 million people became displaced internally within the country, 500,000 became refugees, fleeing to neighbouring countries such as Croatia, and approximately 700,000 refugees fled to various countries in Western Europe. In total around 3 million people from the wider Balkan region were uprooted (see, inter alia, Kondylis 2008; O'Balance 1995).

Following the fall of the communist regime in ex-Yugoslavia in 1992, a referendum for independence was organized in BiH, mostly boycotted by the Serbian population (Amnesty International 2009). The majority voted for independence (around 92.7 per cent of those who voted); however tensions ensued post-referendum between the Serbs, Bosnians and Croats. Then, on 5 April 1992, Yugoslav Army forces, with orders from Belgrade, and local Serb troops united and began the siege of Sarajevo only a day before Bosnia was recognised by the European Commission as an independent nation (Remembering Srebrenica 2016): 'Serbs in Bosnia declared an independent Republika Srpska unleashing a campaign of "cleansing" and violence across north-west and eastern Bosnia' (2016: 35).

In 1995 the international community's combined efforts to bring the war to an end resulted in the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in Paris on 14 December 1995 (UN Human Rights Instruments 2011: 6). The Dayton Agreement divides BiH into two republics – the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska (Remembering Srebrenica 2016). Forty-nine per cent of Bosnia Herzegovina is controlled by Republika Srpska and 51 per cent by the Federation. Both are decentralised and hold a central government and a revolving State Presidency (Remembering Srebrenica 2016). Prior to the outbreak of war, Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats had lived side by side peacefully.

As a result of the war, the mortality rate increased and the natural growth rate decreased, 'resulting in a destroyed biological reproduction of the population in BiH' (UN Human Rights Instruments 2011: 5). The 1991 census in Bosnia revealed that people aged 65 years and over represented 6 per cent of the population. According to HelpAge International's Age Watch Report Card on BiH (2016) pension coverage for people over 65 years does not exist. Furthermore there is no national policy on ageing. Age Watch predicts that by 2030, 30.6 per cent of the population will be over 60, and by 2040 this will rise further to 40.5 per cent.

## **Methodology**

My primary research involved conducting face-to-face semi-structured interviews with six older Bosnian refugees living in the UK: three females, one aged 73 and two aged 60, and three males aged 61, 57 and 51. My use of semi-structured interviews allowed for greater flexibility and encouraged fluidity in conversations. One month prior to conducting the interviews was spent researching and contacting various individuals and mosques found on the internet. My desk-based research led me to contact one individual who then signposted me to a community event in London and there I was fortunate to meet and network with potential research participants. At this community event I met a prominent individual within the Bosnian community who helped me to identify a number of participants and he explained to them the purpose and details of my study.

The interviews took place in locations suitable for interviewees such as their homes and in a café in central London over the June-July 2016 period. Three of the participants required the assistance of an interpreter – this person was a key contact in the Bosnian community and kindly offered her services for one day of interviews. All participants had an information sheet and the study explained to them as well as the consent form in English and in Bosnian prior to the interviews. All interviews were recorded on my iPhone and ranged from 30 minutes to 90 minutes in length. Participants appeared very happy to take part in my study and thanked me for taking an interest in their community. I was warmly welcomed into their homes and offered tea and cake. A small gift was given to participants to say 'thank you' for their participation.

## *Ethics*

In order to carry out successful interviews, I explained to participants in English and in Bosnian (through the interpreter where necessary) all about my study, my role and intention with the research findings. I had the advantage of having worked with older people in refugee settings prior to doing this research and therefore I held some experience in communicating with older people. All aspects of confidentiality were respected and carried out in accordance with the University of Sussex's Ethical Review process. I use pseudonyms to protect the identity of all six participants. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees, transcribed and I obtained their consent to use their information in my research. All interview recordings were deleted from my iPhone after the analysis.

### *Limitations*

An obvious limitation is the size of the sample of research participants. Ideally, more people would have been interviewed for this study – however it was not possible given the time constraints and challenges encountered in locating participants. Many older people return to Bosnia during the summer holidays and were therefore unavailable. A further constraint is that this methodology combines one focus group discussion with four individual interviews. Whilst it would have been better to have had only individual interviews, there are some advantages to doing a focus group discussion as well as interviews, namely in the fact that it makes it more interesting and varied and provides a different way of analysing the information. Finally, ideally, the research sample would have included an older person above 80 years old, but I struggled to locate such an individual.

### *Sampling*

Table 1 presents the demographic data of the six research participants. The sample consisted of older men and women from different towns in Bosnia, different religious belief and who used different methods of arrival into the UK in the early 1990s. From the people interviewed, two were a married couple and so this interview naturally took on the form of a joint discussion, together with the translator. Participants were selected randomly through key individuals who knew people within the Bosnian community. The age watershed line was flexibly set at early 50s.

Table 1. The research participants

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age upon migration</b>	<b>Age at present</b>	<b>Years in the UK</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Education</b>
Melisa	Female	49	73	24	Widow	Primary
David	Male	37	61	24	Married	Primary
Ana	Female	36	60	24	Married	N/A
Petar	Male	33	57	24	Married	Primary
Lana	Female	36	60	24	Married	University
Marko	Male	27	51	24	Divorced	Secondary

### **Literature Review**

This research is located within several fields, notably studies of forced migration, ageing and migration, transnationalism, and well-being. A number of debates exist on ageing and migration which have been central to my work and scholars overwhelmingly agree that the experiences and needs of older people are overlooked in research. For example,

If there is a strong argument for factoring age/ageing into the matrix of intersecting variables shaping economically-driven migration processes (along with gender, class, race/ethnicity etc.), we also need to acknowledge other theoretical frames, and build ageing and gender into these too. (Lulle and King 2016a: 34)

Clearly there is a need to factor ageing into theoretical frames of forced migration. Critical to debates on ageing is the assumption that the older generation is in need of care, is dependent and they are ‘poor pensioners’ (King et al. 2014). Scholars also agree that defining ageing and the process of ageing is debatable. The notion of who is older, and at what age, is contingent on factors such as culture, identity, context and geographical location (Lulle and King 2016a). Ageing, therefore, can be seen as a continuous and evolving process of ‘becoming’, rather than as a fixed life-stage (cf. Worth 2009 on ‘youth’). My research aims to explore how older refugees conform to or challenge traditional assumptions of ageing.

Interestingly, scholars have also emphasised better inclusion of refugees in theories of transnationalism. Today, the blurring of lines between refugees and migrants has become greater and it is possible to talk of refugees engaging in transnational activities (Al-Ali et al. 2001a). These authors challenge the concept of the division between refugees and migrants, or in other words ‘economic migrants vs political refugees’. Clearly not all refugees are transnational but it is important not to ‘bypass’ this important group. Koser (2002), for example, argues that it is important to include refugees in studies of transnationalism because not all go home after the conflict has ended. In fact some remain and produce an enabling environment and the ‘geographical requirements for their transition into transnational communities’ (Koser 2002: 143).

My research therefore speaks to those calls from scholars who urge for a greater integration of ageing and refugees into wider studies of migration and transnationalism. It focuses on refugees who have ‘remained’ in the host country and are undergoing the ageing process. My work aims to highlight the particularities facing this group and the implications of transnational activities. Today it can be argued that there is a wealth of literature which reveals how refugees maintain links with the homeland and subvert the traditional assumption of refugees – namely that they lose all ties with their country and community of origin. It must also be recognised that scholars such as Al-Ali et al. (2001b: 591) argue that forced migration may sometimes lead to ‘forced transnationalism’. Their study of Bosnian and Eritrean refugees in Europe reveals that they belong to communities which are ‘emerging’ in transnationalism terms and that this is a fluid process as opposed to a static state of being. They remind us that refugees are like labour migrants in that they do not fit into a fixed notion of social practice – they are ever evolving.

This piece of research also involves exploring transnational activities. Koser (2002) provides a theoretical framework for understanding where this is located. For example, do older refugees who stay and age in the UK conform to the ‘citizenship model’ (Portes and Rumbaut 1990) such as integration in the host country and transition to an ethnic minority, or do they conform to the ‘post-national model’, deepening links with ‘communities and countries of origin?’ (Smith 1998). My research therefore connects to concepts of citizenship and how these are framed by older refugees. This is important because it is argued that ‘youth’ has a higher value than the ‘aged’ in economic migration terms. As evidenced by Lulle and King (2016a: 42),

Young citizens in national states as well as young, legal migrants, especially those with higher education, are almost unquestionably seen as ‘value’, while in migratory

contexts ageing people are rarely addressed as full citizens with their attendant rights, practices and aspirations

Migration theory is therefore ‘age-blind’ and labour mobility is mostly concentrated on youth (Lulle and King 2016a). Thus, my research is crucial to the debates around ‘valued citizens’ and the negation of older person’s rights, duties and contributions to society.

The notion of well-being (Wright 2012) is used to nuance its relevance and importance for older refugees. Wright’s study of Peruvian women in London revealed that well-being is multiple, functional and subjective. As Lulle and King (2016a) evidence:

The key functional needs are those which are important for the well-being of all working-age migrants: legal papers, language knowledge, stable income, adequate dwelling space, and being able to manage time and money. Among the subjective needs, among the most important are maintaining social roles and learning new ones, building security for the future for oneself and one’s family, resilience, self-esteem and relatedness.

My research seeks to explore how this concept of well-being can be applied to older Bosnian refugees and if there are any new and interesting aspects of well-being that are pertinent to their context, in its particular time and space.

Finally, the concept of ‘entwined becomings’ (Lulle and King 2016a) is used as the main theoretical framework, meaning that ageing, gender and migration must be observed together. For the purpose of my research, I will ask: how do ageing, transnationalism and the refugee experience intertwine? The concept of ‘entwined becomings’ gives us a forward-looking perspective on ageing and migration and the planning for a better future such as income and pension – it symbolises ‘owning’ the future and ‘reclaiming embodied citizenship’ (Lulle and King 2016a). My research is relevant to this theory as it explores two ‘becomings’: that of younger people becoming older, and the transition from a refugee to a transnational community, and how they relate to each other.

If refugee and transnational communities ‘co-exist along a single continuum’ (Koser 2002: 151-152), then my primary data collection will help to understand this relationship better from the perspective of the older generation.

## **Human rights and citizenship**

In this first main section on my findings, I examine the rights and citizenship-related dimensions of nationality, equality, the right to return and language. The questions raised here revolve around the meaning of British citizenship and in what way older refugees exercise their rights and duties and contribute to society. So, how were the concepts of rights and citizenship invoked in discussions with participants?



### *Britishness, belonging and 'valued' citizens*

It was important to ask participants if they felt at home in the UK and where they stood in terms of their subjective position on nationality and identity. Many participants alluded to the fact that they felt happy to call the UK their home. Melisa's response, however, was quite different, which probably reflected the fact that, at 73, she was the oldest of my sample, and hence was already 49 when she came to the UK. When asked if she felt 'British', her reply was: 'I cannot be British because I'm not British'. One respondent talked about how it took her some time to feel at home in the UK, and that in the beginning when she arrived there were many challenges. She said:

I needed two years to be settled but after this I felt my home is here. I didn't like it here at all because when I came here I have my language, I have my country, I don't like another country. Psychologically it was like this but after this, when I crossed this border I feel this is my home – Lana, 60.

For Petar (57) it was clear that the UK was his home. He said: 'I'm twenty-four years, actually been in this place, this room here. I didn't change – when I move inside. This is my home'.

For David (61) and Ana (60) there was a sense of not wanting to forget their Bosnian homeland or identity. They wanted to feel Bosnian whilst at the same time felt a sense of belonging to the UK. 'I feel British when I'm here and I feel British and Bosnian', said David. When asked about his nationality, he replied, 'I'm from Bosnia but I live in Great Britain'.

There was a collective sense of ease amongst participants about feeling British, made stronger by the fact that they were all entitled to British passports. For Petar, it was confirmation of his citizenship. He said, 'Actually I haven't got a problem if I say I'm British. I'm holding a British passport'.

As mentioned earlier, the definition of citizenship used in this study includes the capacity to 'contribute' to society. What was clear from the interviews with participants was that they were collectively contributing to the economy by undertaking non-remunerated work in the form of caring for grandchildren on a daily or weekly basis. Lana (60), for example, said:

6.30am I wake up and get breakfast. Go to the kids' house. Bring kids to school. After the school run I go to do some charity work... And pick up kids at 3.30 and that's it.  
6.20 my husband comes home and brings kids to my daughter's house....

Here we see evidence of 'reproductive labour' – grandparents helping to 'reproduce' the population. Older refugees are thus making a double contribution. Lana, for example, looks after the grandchildren which enables her daughter to go to work and which also helps her save on child-care costs. This double benefit is a considerable contribution to society and thus must be viewed as 'valuable'. Indeed, Lulle and King (2016a) have argued for ageing migrants to be seen as 'valued' in migration studies and for them to be recognised as 'full citizens'.

### *Respect for human rights*

Research participants were asked what they liked most about living in the UK and the collective agreement was that the respect for human rights was one of the things they appreciated most. The majority of participants talked overwhelmingly about the important and valuable role that human rights play in UK society. They mentioned the values of ‘respect’ and ‘equality’ present in the UK, that were absent back in Bosnia. Melisa, the oldest participant, mentioned that ‘no one is bothering me. I feel I have freedom to walk in the town’. When asked what he liked most about the UK, Petar responded by saying:

First of all honestly, I like human rights. It’s for everyone the same.... human rights are stronger here than anywhere else in the world.

The same opinion was echoed by Lana who talked about ‘equality’ as an important element of what she enjoyed most about the UK. She said, ‘I love it in this country where everybody is equal. When I came here, nobody asked me, who are you? What is your religion?’

One participant described how this respect for rights contrasted greatly with the human rights situation in Bosnia. All participants during their interviews mentioned the high levels of economic and social poverty present in Bosnia and how this also contributed to a lack of social protection policies, in particular for older people. One participant mentioned the ongoing tensions between the different ethnicities still prevalent and fuelled by the ongoing negative political discourse.

Interestingly, Marko’s response to the question of what participants did not like about the UK alluded to a different view of social security. According to Marko, 51, the British ‘system’ (alluding to social security) was somehow inadequate and those who abused it were in the wrong. He said ‘I don’t like injustice, don’t like abuse of the system’.

### *The right to remain in the UK*

In order to understand better the ageing experience of older refugees, it was important to ask why participants had decided in later life to remain in the UK. What were the ‘pull’ factors? The responses were overwhelmingly a mixture of a profound desire to stay close to family and because future life prospects were much better in the UK than in Bosnia.

Family ties and looking after grandchildren were very important for wanting to stay in the UK. According to Petar, he said: ‘Probably my children will stay here forever and my grandchildren. They’ll never go back’. Lana was also very vocal about staying close to her children. She said:

.... the kids make your life...I can’t leave my kids here and be back in the Bosnia. Probably I will be happier there... most of friends are there, but I like to be with my kids and grandchildren.

Whilst being close to family was an important aspect of wanting to remain, so too was the issue of lack of opportunities and the minimal social security back in Bosnia. David and Ana described how difficult it was to survive back in Bosnia. ‘We don’t have means of supporting

ourselves there. We don't have money to live on there. There is no pension. We don't have anything'.

For Petar, there were also economic and social reasons keeping him in the UK. He alluded to the fact that the human rights record in his area of Bosnia was poor and that he would not feel 'safe' going back. Also, there are no employment opportunities for him and he said he would suffer at the hands of discrimination and the ongoing ethnic tensions prevalent in the country. He said: 'When the President uses a bad word for you, how you can trust that government? I'm not feeling the safety. I think that's that right word'. One of the questions that Koser (2002) uses as part of an analytical framework to chart refugee communities' transitions into transnational communities is their decision not to return and the security of their status in the host country. We can evidence here that these two questions are important reasons why Petar and others chose to remain in the UK. It can be argued here that the dimensions of rights and transnationalism intertwine. The right to remain in the UK (and to not return) is coupled with the transnational activity of awareness of the security (social and physical) situation back in Bosnia.

### *Right of return and nostalgia*

As well as understanding the 'pull' factors for remaining in the UK, we must also examine if there are any factors that might 'push' participants into returning to Bosnia permanently in the future. Participants were asked if they had any plans to return permanently to Bosnia, either for retirement or another reason, and if they felt nostalgic at all about Bosnia or about the prospect of returning there. The majority of participants did not want to return to Bosnia. Some saw it as something that they ideally wished for, but which was not viable due to financial insecurity.

There was some desire and interest to return, mainly expressed by the couple Ana and David. For example, David said, 'I'm dreaming all the time about that and I'm imagining myself being there, walking there'. However despite this, both David and Ana are aware of the fact that return is not a viable option. Ana said, 'We are limited with what we can do because we do not have money to do it'. For Ana, it was about 'wishing' to be there. She also said, 'I wish that, you know, somehow that I could be there and that grandchildren would sometimes visit'. It was clear that both Ana and David felt 'nostalgic' about Bosnia with David admitting that the 'pull (to Bosnia) was much stronger' in older age.

For Melisa, there was a sense of wanting to 'plan' to go back but this was only an illusion. She said, 'I plan but maybe it's more like a dream. I plan but I don't have anything to return with'. Deep down, Melisa knew it was out of her reach: 'I don't feel it's happening'. For Lana, Petar and Marko, return to Bosnia was not something they wished for but spending more time there on holiday was. For Lana, the decision not to return was due to having her children and grandchildren in England. As she described: 'If the kids don't need me I would like to spend like 3-4 months there in the spring and summer, but I will never live there. Not an option'. On the subject of nostalgia, she alluded to having occasionally felt this way, 'sometimes...sometimes. I'm missing and feel nostalgic but not most of time'.

Marko's approach to return was very straightforward. 'It's just not going to happen. I can't see anything there that will give me the quality of life that I need. Even the bare minimum, I can't have it there'. However, there was a sense of a plan to return, but not to Bosnia. 'My

home will probably be in a village in the West Balkans (other than Bosnia) because that's what I'm aiming to do for my retirement'.

Similarly, Petar was confident that he would not go back to Bosnia permanently, but instead he envisaged spending more holiday time there in the future. This was because his grandchildren were settled in the UK and he did not want to be far away from them. He was also feeling 'a little bit' nostalgic.

Maybe when I'm retired I will spend more time there, but forever in Bosnia I not plan forever. Maybe I spend a lot of time there than now but I want to be staying with my children and my grandchildren. I'm not planning to go back in the Bosnia forever – Petar, 57.

In her study of returned Bosnian refugees from Sweden, Porobić (2017) discovered that the desire for return also included a sense of 'nostalgia'. Her findings revealed that participants held a 'double life' – their dual citizenship allowed them to move back and forth when they wanted. It allowed them to navigate the poor socio-political context in BiH, keeping the option to re-emigrate open as they had access to better educational and public services in Sweden. In other words, they experienced what Porobić calls 'enabling citizenship' – making use of Sweden's residence rights to allow them to engage in transnational activities. In this study we also see the same 'enabling citizenship' being used by the research participants.

#### *Access to services and language*

To further comprehend what it was like for participants to exercise elements of citizenship such as the right to healthcare, it was deemed crucial to ask if language was a barrier or not to accessing services. Half of all research participants interviewed did not speak English and the other half had a very good level of English. For the former group, the language barrier had a considerable impact on their day-to-day lives, and meant that they were not able to be fully independent. They relied on family and friends to help them pay bills and understand their finances and other matters.<sup>2</sup> For participants who had a good level of English, taking care of personal matters was done alone and with little support from family members. It was clear that those participants who had good levels of English led more active and independent lives.

For Melisa, her lack of English meant that she was unable to communicate with non-Bosnian people her age and this could possibly account for an underlying feeling of isolation. 'I don't know how to talk to other elderly people and in Bosnia I can talk to everyone', she said.

Not being able to speak English was clearly a barrier for David and Ana. Due to health reasons, they had been unable to pick up the language when they first arrived in the early 1990s. Support with financial matters and with attending appointments, in particular the GP, was given by family members. David said: 'We have daughter-in-law and two sons and so between them they try to help and interpret'. The things they needed help with the most were 'translating, reading the post or if we have to write a letter or something like that'. Interestingly, Ana later

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<sup>2</sup> See also the full-page article in *The Guardian*, 16 November 2016, which reports on the role of the language barrier in preventing refugees from Ethiopia, Iraq and Somalia from integrating in various towns in England (Summers 2016).

in the interview talked about how growing older made her feel ‘more dependent’ on her family. ‘Every year it’s harder. The older you get, you become more dependent, the older you get, you feel like you are burdening your children’.

Both Lana and Petar spoke English to a high level but described how they struggled at the beginning of their English language journey. Petar talked about how poor health had affected his ability to learn. ‘.... First year I didn’t went for the college because I couldn’t. Three years I think I wasn’t able to go’. Petar went on to complete college and learn English, and today he has a full-time job.

When Lana was asked about how she deals with financial matters she replied, ‘We do all the bills ourselves, no problem’. Of her struggle to learn English she said, ‘I think two years it was really hard to speak. I didn’t speak properly at all but I can communicate, but for two years it was really hard’. Today Lana is retired but was in employment until last year.

### *Summary*

Summing-up this first set of interview findings, it can be concluded that a lack of English can be a potential barrier to independent living and possibly increase the feeling of isolation or loneliness. Thus, there is some dependency on family and community for assistance with administrative matters but this does not necessarily result in greater vulnerability of the individual. What was evidenced instead was that the participants’ basic needs were secure and their rights respected. The ‘pull’ to remain in the UK was strong, and due to factors such as family ties and a better standard of living. Participants did their own analysis and internal thinking about what the future might look like for them if they returned to Bosnia and overwhelmingly agreed that it would be bleak and less ‘secure’ than the UK. One major ‘pull’ factor for participants was the ‘enabling citizenship’ that they can enjoy in the UK – one that allows them to move back and forth and navigate the poor socio-political context in Bosnia (Porobić 2017). Participants also challenged the narrative that the ‘valuable migrants’ are young and highly educated by demonstrating their contributions to the economy and society in the form of care-giver.

### **Transnational activities**

In this section, I examine the different transnational activities that older Bosnian refugees carry out, allowing them to keep in touch with the homeland and strengthen their ties to family and friends living there. First, the participants discussed how they spent their holidays in Bosnia and the ways in which they communicated with relatives.

#### *Holidays*

Spending time in Bosnia on holiday is an important example of a transnational activity that participants are engaged with. The majority of research participants chose to spend their holiday time in their town of origin in Bosnia. Holidays are taken at least once a year, usually during the summer holidays so that children and grandchildren can come along. Petar travelled to Bosnia twice a year and saved up all of his annual leave to take this time off:

Actually my annual leave I spending in the Bosnia. Usually in March, two weeks. In July and August, three weeks. Yes I have a brother there.... He looking after my place there.

All participants talked with great enthusiasm about how much they enjoyed going back to Bosnia for holidays and that this was seen as a very important time to spend with family and friends. For most it was also a time to meet up with friends who were also returning from other countries around the world. For some it meant spending time with brothers and sisters. For Melisa, going back was crucial so that she could spend time with her identical twin sister. For David and Ana, travelling to Bosnia was seen as part of a 'normal' routine and that, once there, it was as if they had never left. For example,

We go to visit our family. There is something you know, like a wedding or something so you know things that would normally happen in Bosnia that we would be invited to. Normal things.

Doing 'normal' things whilst back in Bosnia can be attributed to a strong desire to be back and feel like nothing much has changed. Their strong feelings for nostalgia and return become apparent when they talked about how they felt when they had to return to the UK. They said 'we not really happy when we come back, we are sad, we are a bit sad. We get used to here [Bosnia] and then have to go back'.

For Lana and for Petar, going back to Bosnia for holidays was a time of constant socialising and activities. This was seen as a good thing and it appeared that their schedule was faster-paced than the other participants. When asked about her time in Bosnia during the holiday, Lana replied,

Tiring! We going out all the time, having a party every night. Meeting people for the lunch for the breakfast because we like to spend most of time with the friends. So tiring!

Huttunen argues that 'moving from one country to another does not mean the disappearance of significant social relations with the country of origin' (2010: 43). It is clear from the responses here that participants continue to have very strong ties with Bosnia. For Marko, spending time in Bosnia is also a busy time: 'So many meetings! Meeting people and socialising with friends. People I care about and they care about me'. However his time in Bosnia is somewhat speedier, opting to say for a maximum of a few days only.

### *Communication*

Another way in which older migrants are transnational is through maintaining more virtual contact with loved ones back home. The majority of participants talked about keeping in regular contact with friends and family in Bosnia. Various methods of keeping in touch were mentioned, such as Facebook, Viber and Skype. A couple of participants were active internet users, yet the majority had mobile phones and kept in touch regularly through phone calls.

Half of all participants mentioned having Bosnian TV channels which they watched now and again. David, for example, learned about the result of the recent EU referendum in

the UK through watching Bosnian news on television. Therefore the media, such as TV, also plays a role in providing a better understanding in the mother tongue of events going on around the world. For Lana and Petar, they mentioned that they had ‘very little’ time for watching Bosnian TV as their active lifestyles did not allow them sufficient time and they were engaged in other activities. Lana, in particular, mentioned that she did not like watching Bosnian news.

### *Charitable work*

Another type of transnational activity mentioned by a research participant was that of charity work. Al-Ali et al. (2001b: 581) argue that, in order to be able to engage in transnational activities, migrants need to identify with the ‘social, economic or political processes’ in their country of origin first. Lana does exactly that. She spends some of her time during the day working for a UK-registered charity that supports disadvantaged children in Bosnia. Her time at the organisation was normally spent in between doing the school run (dropping off the grandchildren) and some shopping in late afternoon. Her work with the charity continues when she is on holiday in Bosnia, further expanding her links and relationships with individuals in the country.

### *Summary*

It is evident that the research participants were highly engaged in transnational activities. As mentioned earlier, migrants who are forced to leave their country are similar to labour migrants in that they do maintain links with their country of origin, dispelling any myths that they cut off all ties. It can be argued that, for my participants, engaging in transnational activities promotes a greater sense of ‘well-being’. Some participants felt happiest when they were on holiday in Bosnia, whilst for Lana, her charitable work allows her to keep abreast of the socio-economic situation in the country and also contribute to a sense of satisfaction and well-being. We can also observe that social media was a popular form of keeping in touch with family and friends back home, and it can be argued that technologies such as Skype and Viber have made the task of communication a lot simpler for the older generation. The findings from this section show that having a ‘home’ in Bosnia and sharing a culture and history with children and grandchildren are important for older refugees’ process of transnational migration.

## **Well-being**

In this final section, we examine perceptions of well-being and ageing together. Participants were asked to describe how they dealt with isolation and loneliness, what was important for their ‘well-being’, and if they perceived any differences between life as an older person in the UK and Bosnia.

### *Social well-being: combating isolation*

One dimension of the component of well-being is that of reducing isolation through possession of multiple social ties. Maintaining relationships with friends and family and being socially active within the community all figured as important aspects of combating isolation. Being

surrounded by friends and family was crucial to a good sense of well-being. For the majority of participants, seeing friends happens less frequently than spending time with family and grandchildren. Most family members worked during the day and so this prevented participants seeing them more frequently. It was observed that those participants whose level of English was good were more likely to be active socially and therefore less likely to feel lonely. In addition, some participants in their 50s and 60s combated isolation by doing sports as social activities, providing their health was good.

For Ana, having a visitor come by the house everyday made her feel surrounded by friends and family. Her free time is mostly spent in the home and with the grandchildren. Often on walks, she and her husband will bump into friends. However, they do not engage in more 'active' activities as such due to health issues. Socialising also takes place once a week at a local school as many grandparents bring along their grandchildren and socialise there. For Melisa, her mood is a factor when deciding whether to go out or not. She feels that when her spirit is good then she can accomplish many things. Sometimes, 'there is a will to go out and be sociable and then other times there is a need to be still and quiet', she said.

Melisa's need for quietness contrasts with that of other participants. Most notably, Petar, described in great detail how he must keep busy. 'I can't just sitting nothing to do. If nothing on telly I must find to do something. I just can't stay without anything'. For Petar, being active and being engaged in his job were important factors in combating isolation and post-war trauma. It was his life-line. In this regard we observe socialising and being active as a way to improve one's mental health. Lana, like Petar, is active and rarely spends time alone. She enjoys the company of friends with whom she goes to the theatre, and she spends time with her grandchildren on a daily basis. 'I'm never alone. I have kids or friends. I don't like to be alone', she said. Indeed, a full and active social calendar is again observed here as a pleasure and requirement for well-being in older age. This finding resonates with the argument by scholars such as King et al. (2014) who suggest that older people are in fact active and express agency in their migration and through giving care and support to their grandchildren. It also underpins the reasons why some scholars have called for the more explicit inclusion of older people in migration research (Lulle and King 2016a).

### *Concerns and fears*

If we are to examine how participants keep themselves active and free from isolation, then we must also examine if and how they express feelings of isolation and fear as they go through the ageing process. This more negative dimension of well-being allows us to understand the 'down' side of ageing in the UK. One participant talked about the challenges in maintaining friendships, which is common in today's modern, busy and fast-paced life. Marko said: 'today everybody got a full-time job and preoccupied with everything. Well I can definitely say for myself that I'm trying to stay in touch. I've still got willingness to have a coffee and to keep in touch but it's really hard'. Melisa, however, felt quite indifferent about how she felt life was like in the UK, 'everything is just fine but you are not very engaged in anything either'. She did, however, express worry about her situation in the UK pointing to the fact she sometimes felt insecure. 'They may come tomorrow and say that I have to go from here. Someone can say just go back to your country', she said. This sense of feeling 'temporary' and that



everything could suddenly change was somewhat mirrored by another participant, Lana. She talked about her dislike for people questioning her status in the UK. She was unhappy when people asked her if she was a ‘foreigner’.

### *Family and grandchildren*

But what I want to say, I love my children but grandchildren are something special. This is really special. I can’t explain – Petar, 57.

Another dimension of well-being is the relationship with children and grandchildren. Participants described how spending time with and looking after grandchildren was an important factor in supporting their well-being. Extended family members such as aunts, uncles and cousins were also important people to spend time with. Participants gave a strong sense of a Bosnian family ‘unit’ in the UK – one that is close and which helps each other out.

The majority of participants spent a great deal of time looking after their grandchildren and helping with tasks such as picking them up from school, cooking meals and generally caring for them whilst parents were at work. It was evident that this role brought about the strongest feelings of happiness and well-being. Ana said, ‘I’m the happiest when they (friends) come and when my children come’. Petar described how being with his grandchildren made him feel better: ‘we (my wife and I) forget everything. We feel much better. It’s the best medication – grandchildren’. Lana said that she spends every day with her grandchildren and described how, for some of her British colleagues, this was seen as unusual. She said ‘my colleagues think I am mad doing things with the kids, but I want to do this, that is my opinion. My mother-in-law did it for me too’.

Here we observe a particular social norm: older people enjoying the role of care-giver. Interestingly, in the Bosnian tradition, it is common for children to support their elderly parents financially in later life (Huttunen 2010). In addition, in some cases, state welfare agencies would refer older people to their children in order that they fulfil their responsibility. This was widely accepted.

### *Physical well-being: healthcare*

One of the most important dimensions of well-being amongst older people in general is healthcare. Healthcare and personal health were considered extremely important for all research participants. Overall, participants were very happy with the level of healthcare they received in the UK and felt that they were treated fairly and equally by medical professionals. Some participants expressed a few issues, such as the difficulty in getting an appointment and frustrations with certain GPs whom they felt were not as good as others, but overall there was a great sense of satisfaction with the level of service provided in the UK. There was no mention of discrimination or unfair treatment towards them. All participants mentioned at least one health condition that they were suffering from. This ranged from mental health issues to rheumatoid arthritis. One of the most common and important themes that emerged from all the interviews and questions around healthcare was that it was free and available to all. This was something that was greatly appreciated and does not exist back in Bosnia. Huttunen’s (2010) research on an elderly Bosnian couple who became refugees in Finland found that they also

appreciated greatly the welfare system and healthcare service offered in the host country. Here are two typical quotes from my own research:

Definitely for older people it's here much secure and much better because if you know the situation in Bosnia you must pay for all medication, you have to pay for everything, but elderly people here when retired, has got really secure, has got medicine, glasses, the free [bus] pass and everything. That is what's great – Lana, 60.

We feel safe. We have support and we have free healthcare and there is nothing else to wish for – David, 61, and Ana, 60.

As the above quotes demonstrate, the fact that healthcare is free in the UK gives participants a greater sense of 'security' and is also a contributing factor in their decision to remain in the UK. However Handlos et al.'s (2015) study on 10 elderly chronically ill Bosnian refugees in Denmark argues that social well-being (being with children and grandchildren) is prioritised over healthcare. One respondent in their study said: 'I love Denmark because of my son' (2015: 12653). This provided them with a sense of purpose and a sense of 'belonging'. It is also echoed by the research participants of my study, who felt a sense of belonging to the UK precisely because their children and grandchildren are there.

For participants who are unable to speak much English, accessing the GP is done through a family member and so therefore there is quite a bit of dependence in terms of support and translation. Half of the research participants were able to access the GP alone, without any support or translation.

#### *Mental well-being: happiness and aspirations*

Participants were asked what makes them happy, what they enjoy doing and what would make their lives happier. Overall, the majority of participants described that they were happy with their lives and would not change anything nor aspire to improve it. David and Ana, however, did mention that returning to Bosnia to live permanently would make them feel happier; however they were both very conscious of the improbability of this ever occurring. As David said: 'I'm physically present here but my thoughts are there'. This demonstrates a feeling of aspiring to be in Bosnia, yet given the country's poor socio-economic situation, they understood how difficult it would be for them to achieve this.

Petar mentioned how very happy he was with his life and his job and that he gained immense satisfaction from this. He said that he 'wouldn't change anything' or need anything to make his life happier. There was a sense from him of wanting to 'give back' to society. For example, 'my life was dependent on somebody else and now I can help someone else, I'm enjoying that'. He also added, 'I'm happy [with] what I have'.

For Lana, her response involved only good health. 'Just health would improve my life, nothing else. I'm happy'. It was also noted that taking exercise and being active contributed to happiness for a couple of research participants. They challenge traditional stereotypes of older people 'slowing down' when they approach the pensionable age. Marko kept active quite often and his outlook on life was positive. 'I try to enjoy life at every opportunity', he said.

### *Comparison of ageing in the UK with Bosnia*

All research participants agreed that the situation for older people in Bosnia was precarious. They described how older people in Bosnia were 'not secure' compared to older people in the UK. As they stated, this was due to the country's lack of a systematic social security policy meaning that the elderly have to pay for everything and therefore healthcare comes at a cost. Participants mentioned more than once that there is no state support or pension for older people above 60 years old living in Bosnia. The poor socio-economic situation facing Bosnia was very much an issue that participants felt some sadness about. According to David, some families remain close and support each other, however there is also poverty and neglect towards some older people. This is not widespread but does exist. He said: 'There are a lot of people who won't, you know, go to visit their old mother, they won't send her money, they won't help their own mother'. Interestingly, David also mentioned that he would feel 'ungrateful' if he was not happy with his life in the UK. We can observe here that a comparison is being made, and that David feels decidedly 'better off' than older people back in Bosnia. Wright (2012) also argues the case that migrants can reconstruct negative feelings into positive ones by comparing them with those in the country of origin, and thereby contribute to the feeling of 'living well'.

As previously mentioned, in traditional Bosnian culture the youngest son of the family looks after the ageing parents. However, participants agreed that this was changing now, especially since the war. For example, Petar said: 'That was the culture, probably the culture but now in newest time in Bosnia as well it's losing this system. Everybody going to separated'.

For Lana, however, she observed differently and said that English families are not as close as Bosnians. According to her, the bond between Bosnian grandparents and children is still very tight.

### *Summary*

From the evidence above we can conclude that the main priorities for the well-being of participants were healthcare and being with family and grandchildren. These priorities supported a greater sense of well-being and brought much happiness to participants. Wright argues that the literature on international migration has tended to focus on 'material deficits or structural inequalities which typify the situation of migrants' (2012: 31). In this study we see that much of the discussion focused around what participants valued and appreciated most in life as opposed to what they did not have. Lulle and King demonstrate how their research participants 'resist the image of 'poor pensioner' (2016b: 458). The participants in this study reveal that they are active in their old age and independent. However, King et al. (2014) argue that older people, as well as being independent, can also come to depend on their families for things like financing, social life and housing. This is also evident here from those participants lacking in English, who tended to be more dependent on family for help with accessing the GP. However, it must be asserted that well-being is both 'functional and subjective' (Wright 2012), and that 'feeling safe' and having good healthcare as well as being close to family and friends allowed participants to 'live well', at least in their own eyes. Thus, I would argue that the 'subjective' needs came across as more dominant than the 'functional' needs in my study.

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to understand the dynamic between being a refugee and the ageing process. The findings from the interviews with older Bosnian refugees in the UK reveal that the ‘forced migration and ageing interaction’ exists and to a certain extent does conform to some of the debates already consistent with migration studies. For example, the participants demonstrated that they challenge traditional assumptions of ageing and do not conform to the stereotype of ‘poor pensioner’ (Lulle and King 2016b). Participants showed clear signs of independence and being active. Social activities and relationships with family and grandchildren were strong and healthcare was a priority need. Indeed, good healthcare, good health and being with family promoted the greatest feelings of ‘well-being’ amongst participants. In addition, the findings reveal that refugees do maintain links with the homeland, as argued by Al Ali et al. (2016a). Participants evidenced ‘enabling citizenship’ (Porobić 2017) which allowed them to move back and forth between the UK and Bosnia. Indeed, the participants were highly ‘transnational’ and engaged in certain socio-economic processes taking place in Bosnia.

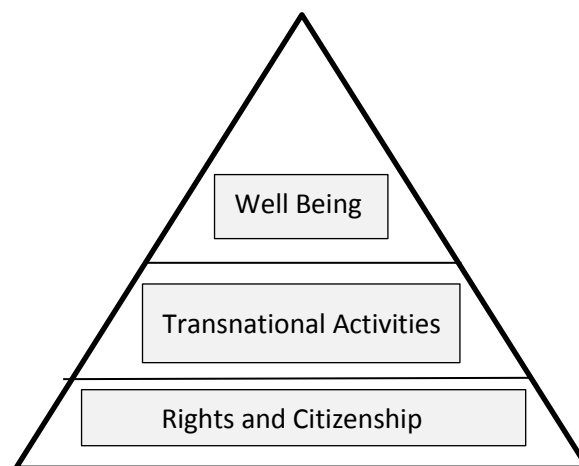
Participants felt overall very happy with their lives in the UK. The majority felt better off in the UK than in Bosnia, yet some felt a strong sense of ‘nostalgia’ and desire to be back in the country of origin. All participants spent some time in Bosnia each year visiting friends and family and this desire to keep ‘one foot in the country’ was very important, especially as it enabled them to immerse their children and grandchildren in their ‘culture’.

Whilst some of the findings might resonate with existing literature on studies of ageing and migration, it must be argued that some findings strengthen this paper’s call for further research. For example, older refugees demonstrated that they were engaged in non-remunerated work such as caring for grandchildren on a daily basis. This paper argues that older people must be viewed as ‘valued citizens’ given that they contribute to the economy. Also, participants alluded to the challenges of having poor English language skills as well as mental health issues. Increased awareness for policy-makers in ageing and refugee fora is needed to address these issues and support older people better.

Implicit in studies of ageing migrants is the notion that ‘well-being’ is both ‘subjective’ and ‘functional’ (Wright 2012). However, Wright pays insufficient attention to transnationalism as an important element of well-being. Indeed, the participants valued their connection to home so much that it gave them an enormous sense of happiness. One way to describe the participant’s interaction between the dimensions of well-being, transnationalism and rights/citizenship is in Figure 1.

In this pyramid diagram, we see how rights and citizenship form the foundation of the participants’ happiness. Having access to ‘enabling citizenship’, safety and security, a British passport and human rights such as equality and respect allows participants to engage in transnational activities with Bosnia. This in turn provides a great sense of well-being because it enables them to enjoy time with family and friends in their country of origin. Ultimately, both transnational activities and rights/citizenship contribute to an overarching sense of ‘living well’.

Figure 1 The pyramid of well-being for older refugees



Therefore, this working paper calls for the inclusion of transnationalism in studies of ‘well-being’, ageing and migration. In addition, further research could be undertaken with other refugee groups such as those from Somalia, Afghanistan or Kosovo. The subject of ageing refugees is not only limited to the UK. In many refugee hosting countries around the world, older people are not an insignificant number. A new avenue of research may include exploring the subject of mental health in ageing refugee populations. This issue is overlooked in ageing and migration studies and would provide for a very rich analysis and help support older refugees even more in their quest to ‘live well’.

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