

SUSTAINABLE RETURN TO NENKALAJA/PODKALJAJA

Stories from Prizren 2013



Starting in 2011, Danish Refugee Council Kosovo facilitated the first organized Serbian urban return project 'Sustainable Return to Nenkalaja / Podkaljaja'. The project is co-financed by the British Embassy and the Ministry of Communities and Returns and implemented by the Danish Refugee Council and its partner Sveti Spas.

In collaboration with local partners, municipal authorities and the local community, DRC assisted the return and reintegration of 10 displaced minority families and individuals to the Nenkalaja / Podkaljaja neighbourhood in Prizren. Following the success of this first round of returns, DRC Kosovo is now in the process of rebuilding the homes of another 13 Kosovo Serb families and preparing for their social and economic reintegration into the local community.

Currently nine houses are under construction and work on the tenth is about to start. Seven heads of households returned to Prizren in March 2013 to be present during the construction of their houses.



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As we arrive in Prizren we are greeted by DRC Project Manager Petrit Bllaca and his team. Bathed in June sunshine, the city's cafés and streets in the historic part of town are bustling with locals and visitors alike. From the historic centre of Prizren we start the short walk up the hill to the Nenkalaja/Podkalajaja neighbourhood where DRC is in the process of reconstructing the houses of families displaced after the war in 1999 and again during the riots in 2004.

Following the steep winding lane, the first signs of the destruction caused during the riots come into view. Houses gutted by fire and rubble alongside the trail remain as evidence of the worst outbreak of violence since the war was brought to an end by NATO forces in 1999.



Svetlana Nikolic

Along the way we meet some of the beneficiaries who are on their way to check on the progress of their houses. 'Most of them are elderly, but every morning they walk up the hill to visit the building site, come rain or shine,' Petrit tells us.

We catch up with the oldest member among the 13 Serb families that are waiting to move into their reconstructed houses. Before the war, around 10'000 Serbs lived in Prizren town and around 400 in this area. Now there are barely 300 in the entire municipality.

Svetlana Nikolic leads us to her house. Sitting on a concrete slab in front of her home, she tells us about her daily routine since she arrived here in March together with the other beneficiaries. 'I walk up this hill every day. Once in the morning and then around 7pm we gather by the old stone bridge at the foot of the hill to look at our homes.'

At the age of 70, Svetlana is still in excellent health and the steep climb up the hill does not deter her. 'Until 2004, I never needed any kind of medication. Now I take something for my blood pressure that is all. The only thing that bothers me are my feet. They are old. If I could switch them for some animal's feet, a goat's perhaps, I would be very happy,' she chuckles.

For Svetlana, this is the second time she sees her house being rebuilt. 'In 1999 my family and I fled Prizren after our house was burned to the ground, and in 2003 after my husband's death I returned by myself. My house was reconstructed then, but in 2004 during the riots it was destroyed again.'

Looking past her home into the distance, she recalls the events of the night when she was forced to leave everything behind for the second time. 'I was hiding with other women in my house. People came looking for us, but we were hiding in the basement and they left again. We were afraid, so we picked up whatever was lying around to defend ourselves.' She laughs at the idea now as she picks up a piece of wood and brandishes it in the air. 'Later that night we sneaked out of the house and made our way down the hill. On our way down we met a man who told us to come with him. He was Albanian and he said he would help us. He let us into his house where we stayed the night and in the morning he said he would call the police to pick us up. But the next morning there were over 500 people around, mostly young, so I didn't want to stay. He had a family and it could be risky for him to shelter us. His daughter called a contact to have KFOR pick us up and bring us to the KFOR barracks.'

For one year she lived at the KFOR base with her son and his children. After that they were housed in Brezovica collective centre near Prizren until she returned here in March to wait for the completion of the house.

'I have no worries for myself. If I can stay in my own home even if it was only for one night, I can die happy. I worry only about my son. He has two children and he is unemployed, so he and his family will stay here with me.'



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A few metres away from Svetlana's house, we meet Ljubisa Jevtic who guides us through the rooms in his 2-storey house. He travelled here ahead of his wife who will join him once their home is completed. He is the youngest in the group and concerns about the future seem to occupy him more than some of the other returnees.

'After the house is constructed we are talking about the sustainability of return,' Ljubisa tells us in near perfect English. He taps his fingers against the yet-unfinished wall of what is to become the family's living room. 'We may have this, but we can't eat walls. A few years ago the main concern was security, but now this is not a problem. The problem is how to make a living. I was telling my neighbours that we should organize with the other returnees. They talk about technical details and construction issues but not about the future.'

Ljubisa is well spoken and confident in his demeanor when he presents his views. 'My family was displaced to Mataruška Banja which is 9km from Kraljevo in Serbia. The largest number of people displaced from Prizren was in Kraljevo and the surrounding area. In Kraljevo I was the president of an NGO with 6000 members. We lobbied the Serbian government to provide assistance to IDPs who used to work in state institutions in Kosovo.

That helped a little but I didn't have steady employment, just odd jobs here and there. It was very difficult to provide for my family.'



Ljubisa Jevtic

Upon his request, DRC designed the ground floor of Ljubisa's house to serve as two potential shops.

'I would like to open a business if possible. I have some plans to open a souvenir shop or perhaps sell chillies and other produce. There are many possibilities. Before the war I worked in a factory here as a food and vegetable engineer and later in a wine factory. But my last job was managing the cinema in Prizren. It was not related to my profession at all but things like that are possible here in Kosovo,' he smiles.

'I have a broad view on all this. I don't only see the walls here. I am talking about the return and my vision for Kosovo. Many Serbs are still afraid to travel in Kosovo, but I am not afraid. In this multi-ethnic area we can all live together. Prizren has always been known for this and that's why this is possible here in Prizren.'



Ljubisa's house with ground floor shopfront.



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Olga looking out over Prizren from her balcony.



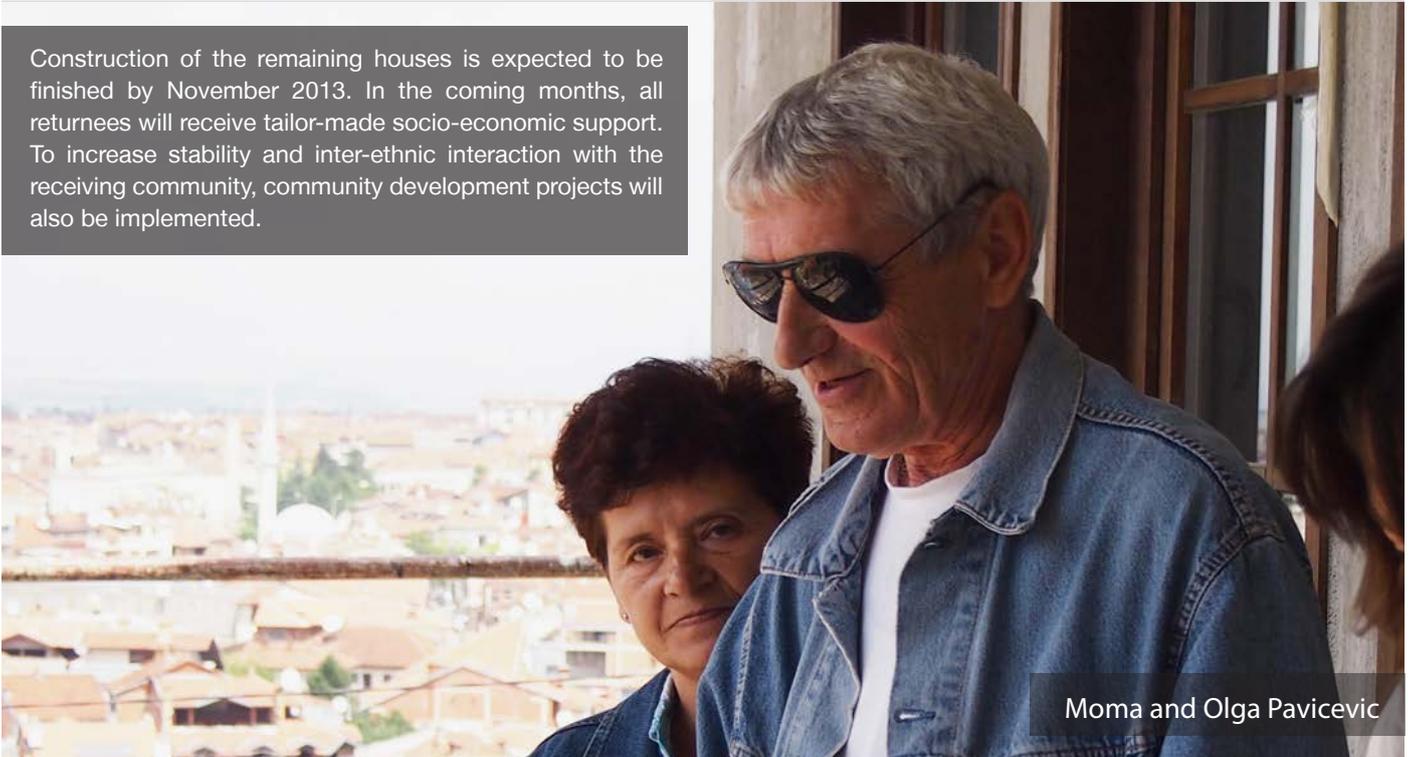
As we make our way a little further up the hill, we are met by Moma and Olga Pavicevic. Standing on the balcony of their house overlooking the historic centre of Prizren we see what Ljubisa was talking about. The mosques, orthodox and catholic churches stand as a testament to a vibrant melting pot of cultures. To this day Prizren has three official languages: Albanian, Serbian and Turkish.

'Moma speaks Albanian, Turkish and Serbian of course. Before the war, we had a great life here. We went all around the town visiting friends. Nobody in Prizren closed their doors to us,' Olga tells us. 'We wanted to return because we can't live without Prizren,' adds Moma.

After the war the couple and their two daughters fled to Nis in Serbia where they had some distant relations and were able to rent a flat. While in displacement, both daughters got married in Nis. 'Our daughters have built a life for themselves in Nis, but for us things are different. We lived in Prizren for 50 years. It would take another 50 years in Nis to build the kind of friendships we had back here,' says Moma. Olga agrees: 'Life is much better for us here. We lost everything, but things, furniture and other material things can be replaced. Friendships cannot. We don't have any special needs. What is most important to us it to be back in our home.'

Some mornings Moma and Olga have breakfast here on the balcony and enjoy the view. 'Once the house is finished you must come back here and we will have coffee, juice and a glass of Rakia,' says Moma. This is an invitation we do not want to miss.

Construction of the remaining houses is expected to be finished by November 2013. In the coming months, all returnees will receive tailor-made socio-economic support. To increase stability and inter-ethnic interaction with the receiving community, community development projects will also be implemented.



Moma and Olga Pavicevic



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