

Conclusions from the Conference in Sremska Kamenica, Serbia

“The Faith of Refugees and Emigrants from the Territory of Former Yugoslavia”

November 27 - 28, 2008

Historians, jurists, political scientists, and sociologists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, and the United States gathered on November 27th and 28th at the Faculty of European Legal and Political Studies (FEPPS) in Sremska Kamenica, Serbia, to debate the issues under the theme “Refugees and Emigrants from the Former Yugoslavia.” The conference was sponsored by the Provincial Secretariat for Science and Technological Development of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. It was organized by the Center for History, Democracy and Reconciliation (CHDR), Novi Sad, Serbia, and the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR), Salzburg, Austria.

The conference was opened by the President of the host institution, FEPPS, Prof. Ilija Babić, Ph.D. who welcomed the scholars and the guests, and the Ambassador Hans Ola Urstad, the Head of Mission to Serbia of Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Prof. Darko Gavrilović, Ph.D., from FEPPS, and Prof. Elazar Barkan, Ph.D., from Columbia University (New York, United States).

On that occasion, Prof. Gavrilović, mentioned that a well-known Italian writer Italo Calvino said that in order to understand what sea is, we need to immerse ourselves in it, and in order to understand what desert is, we need to take sand into our own hands. Prof. Gavrilović drew an analogy to this statement by saying that the scholars from the CHDR and the IHJR also need to immerse themselves into the shared past and to take into their own hands the documents that serve as its evidence, impartially and without prejudice. Only then, Prof. Gavrilović emphasized, it would be possible to understand the past and to carry its lessons into the future. Finally, Prof. Gavrilović noted that those lessons are not only to be directed toward the academic community, but also toward the political actors and the people.

Ambassador Hans Ola Urstad spoke about the importance of the collaboration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other organizations that have good will to work on the resolution of the refugee-related problems. The international community, as the Ambassador underlined, tries to help in resolving the outstanding issues with respect to refugees. As a result, certain achievements have already been made. However, the Ambassador also expressed his dissatisfaction with the intensity with which these issues are addressed and suggested that everyone should take part in this protracted and arduous process.

The opening remarks were followed by a lecture of Prof. Barkan, who reviewed the historical and global phenomenon of mass migrations. Prof. Barkan mentioned that there were over 200 million refugees across the world, and that the largest number of refugees occurred following the WWII. From the first cases of refugees in the 20th century until today, several conventions were passed, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 and the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees from 1951, among others. Prof. Barkan also reminded us about the more recent refugee waves in the past several years from Iraq, Georgia, and Kenya. Unfortunately, according to the existing statistics, the failure of minority refugees to return to their original territories is evident. All refugees have a right to return. The lack of return of minorities is more than obvious, as only the elderly are returning. Prof. Barkan posited that if the refugee crisis resulted from the conflict with political causes, then the change of politics could help in resolving the refugee issue. However, if the source of the conflict is the question of identities, whether ethnic, national, or religious identities, then the return to the previous state is unlikely. Prof. Barkan emphasized that he was not making a philosophical or legal argument, but simply presenting an empirical description – while the minorities should return, they do not return. It is, thus,

necessary to recognize this limitation. The focus of the international community, should be to help the refugees by promising them a right to home, as refugees suffer more than others in these crises. Finally, Prof. Barkan concluded that rather than protracting this crisis, it is necessary to insist on the resettlement, the reconstruction, and the resolution of the conflict.

During the two days of the conference, the participants worked in two thematic groups. The first working group addressed the issues related to refugees, both in the most recent period of the refugee crisis following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, as well as the solutions to refugee problems from the more distant past, while the second group examined the emigration from the former Yugoslavia, with emphasis on the 20th century emigration.

The working group, "Refugees and Displaced Persons on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia," which was coordinated by the three members of the steering committee of the CHDR, Prof. Ana Trbović, Ph.D., from the Faculty for Economy, Finance and Administration (Belgrade, Serbia), Vesna Ivanović, Ph.D., from the Ministry for Regional Development and Tourism (Zagreb, Croatia), and Ranka Gašić, Ph.D., from the Institute for Contemporary History (Belgrade, Serbia), categorized their discussion into three main themes – historical perspectives, contemporary issues, and the media portrayal of refugees. Papers by Prof. Adnan Jahić, Ph.D., from the Philosophy Faculty (Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina), Prof. Željko Bartulović, Ph.D., from the Law Faculty (Rijeka, Croatia), and Nebojša Petrović, M.A., from the Student Center of the University of Novi Sad (Novi Sad, Serbia), dealt with historical perspectives of the refugee and immigrant issues. These papers stressed the role of the state in generating and resolving the refugee or migrant issues, with a conclusion that the examples of the state responses were more of political nature than of purely humanitarian nature. One of the lessons that may be taken from these historical examples is that there is a necessity to encourage the state policy that is more equitable and impartial when addressing the displacement issues of the members of particular regions, nations, or ethnicities. The papers also showed that the refugee problem is present in the region of former Yugoslavia throughout the 20th century. Hence, the public should be made more aware of the refugee problems, which in turn, need to be addressed without preconceptions and bias. Finally, the state of historiography on the issue of refugees is generally poor, although several existing studies may serve as a useful starting point for future projects.

Within the working group "Refugees and Displaced Persons on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia, Vesna Ivanović, Ph.D., Prof. Janko Veselinović, Ph.D., from Alfa University (Novi Sad, Serbia), Prof. Ljubica Đorđević, Ph.D., from FEPPS (Sremska Kamenica, Serbia), Mila Dragojević, M.A., from Brown University (Providence, United States), Prof. Ljubiša Despotović, Ph.D., from the Faculty for Culture and Media (Belgrade, Serbia), and Prof. Srđan Šljukić, Ph.D. from the Philosophy Faculty (Novi Sad, Serbia) spoke about the contemporary issues related to refugees, such as their return and perspectives for their integration. In this context, a study that was conducted by the United Nations (UN) in Croatia concluded that if the current situation continues, the returnees will likely be increasingly isolated. Also, the demographic picture and the general social situation of the returnees are problematic. It remains questionable whether the states and the communities that were affected by the refugee problems are able to resolve these problems effectively. One of the factors that may be necessary for the successful resolution of the outstanding issues is the collaboration of the institutions throughout the region of the former Yugoslavia that is affected by the plight of refugees, whether it is a region of origin or a region of the destination of the refugee flows. For example, in Croatia, there are cases when the legal system was sometimes misused at lower levels, where ethnic-based discrimination that discouraged the return of refugees resulted. Among the several concrete suggestions for future projects is the book project, which would address the contemporary problems related to the refugee crisis in the former Yugoslavia. Also,

given the accessibility to government materials, the data collected by the offices that managed individual refugee cases would be an excellent source of valuable research material for future projects. Scholars from the region of the former Yugoslavia should collaborate with the existing network of scholars in other parts of Europe, who are working on similar issues. Finally, this group suggested to create an atlas, in which the refugee flows throughout the entire region would be mapped.

The media and the state response to the refugee issues was the third theme within the working group “Refugees and Displaced Persons on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia.” Paper by Prof. Zoran Jevtović, Ph.D., Faculty for Culture and Media (Belgrade, Serbia) analyzed the content of the Serbian media throughout the 1990s. The article concluded that refugees had a passive role in texts and were often placed in the background of conflicts, serving as an additional justification for the continuation of wars. The refugee-related issues were generally absent from the media, and the texts that were found tended to present the state as their caregiver. However, when we analyze the role of the state in meeting the needs of the refugees at the time, it becomes evident that this image is far from reality. In short, the refugee crisis was misused in the media for political purposes to meet the needs and interests of particular political actors. Finally, the image of refugees that the media created gave an appearance of their successful integration, which is also not supported by data regarding the actual conditions under which refugees continue to live in Serbia.

The working group “Emigrants on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia” was coordinated by Igor Graovac, Ph.D., from the Croatian Institute for History (Zagreb, Croatia). In this group, there were five reports. Prof. Vjekoslav Perica, Ph.D., from the Philosophy Faculty (Rijeka, Croatia) examined theoretical and conceptual issues related to diaspora and emigration. Examples of stories of refugees who were transformed into emigrants throughout the 20th century on the territories of former Yugoslavia were presented in the paper by Prof. Boris Kršev, Ph.D., from FEPPS. Three phases of the emigration of cultural workers from this region were illustrated in the paper of Prof. Zoran Đerić, Ph.D., from the Academy of Theater and Fine Arts (Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina). Prof. Edin Radušić, Ph.D., from the Philosophy Faculty (Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina) wrote about individual examples of emigrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Prof. Darko Gavrilović, Ph.D., from FEPPS illustrated the experience of Svetozar Pribičević as an emigrant who changed his political orientation entirely with respect to the political regime in Yugoslavia. For the purpose of further study of emigration on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, we point to some open questions and problems that may be resolved in future conferences and workshops.

First, emigrants are a special category that is sometimes too strictly and other times insufficiently conceptually separated from the concepts of refugees and displaced persons. Second, when studying emigration, it is not sufficient to focus solely on political migration, as the most interesting form of migration, but we should also examine economic and ethnic types of migration. It should be emphasized that when speaking about the larger portion of the 20th century, in the case of political emigration, especially in the context of the Yugoslav state, the greatest number of emigrants had anti-Yugoslav orientation. The only exception is the Informbiro emigration that had Yugoslav orientation, but in the form of pro-Soviet Yugoslavia. Third, when speaking about the socialist states, including the former Yugoslavia, it is important to examine the concept and the actual internal emigration. In the recent period of the 1990s, we could ask whether the Yugoslav emigration to the West even existed at the time of the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Fourth, in the same period, there is a new type of political emigration – regional political emigration, which was found across the entire region of the former Yugoslavia. This emigration does not leave the region, but settles in their respective ethno-national states. Fifth, it is evident that the new forms of emigration, which took place on the territory of former Yugoslavia,

particularly those from the latter part of the 20th century, do not resemble the earlier forms of migration. The new diaspora, or the so-called “invisible” diaspora, which is not officially recorded, is emerging, while the classical concept of diaspora is gradually lost. The invisible diaspora belongs to a new type of the nationalist myths. The new national states have a motivation to hide the actual levels of emigration, as it would be difficult to reconcile a mass emigration with the realization of the national dream for their respective citizens. One point of disagreement in this group is whether a longer residence outside one’s country should be considered as emigration. In sum, there is a need for a more accurate conceptualization of the phenomenon of emigration and diaspora, which should be discussed in future meetings.

There are several possible directions for the future research on refugees and emigrants on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. First, one question should be whether there are any similarities between the treatment of refugees in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia. For instance, Prof. Barkan brought attention to a possible dissonance between a national claim to present the state as a national caregiver and a national policy to resolving the refugee crisis, which was not satisfactory. Thus, the comparative regional study of the tension between the national rhetoric and the national policy could be another possible topic of research.

The conference concluded with the book release of the edited volume that contained the papers presented at the last conference, “Serbo-Croat Relations in the 20th Century – History and Perspectives,” which took place in Golubić (near Obrovac) on September 18-20, 2008. Elazar Barkan, Ph.D., Darko Gavrilović, Ph.D., Igor Graovac, Ph.D., Janko Veselinović, Ph.D., and Vjekoslav Perica, Ph.D. spoke at the book release that was held in the Youth Theater, Novi Sad, Serbia. Among other issues, the speakers talked about the significance of the word reconciliation, not as a process of harmonization of opinions, but a process of the dialogue between the sides that do not necessarily share the same opinions but are able to understand and empathize with one another. Only through such continued dialogues can the relations between the sides that were once in conflict normalize, not to the point that these sides always agree, but to the point that any potential armed conflicts between them become entirely unfeasible.