

Conclusions from the Conference in Golubić (near Obrovac), Croatia  
**„Serbo-Croat Relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – History and Perspectives“**  
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Conference „Serbo-Croat Relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – History and Perspectives“ took place from September 18-20 in a village of Golubić, which is located near Obrovac. The conference was organized by the Center for History, Democracy and Reconciliation (CHDR) and sponsored by the Balkan Trust for Democracy, Serb National Council from Croatia, Town of Obrovac, and Dijalog from Zagreb, Croatia. Participants, who included historians, sociologists, and political scientists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, and the United States, worked in two separate groups. One team dealt with past political and cultural Serbo-Croat relations, with emphasis on the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while the other working group focused on the future development of these relations.

This was the first time in the series of meetings that were organized by CHDR that the future of the relations between the Croats and the Serbs and their respective states was included as a separate dimension of discussions, which have until now largely focused on the shared understandings of the history of the people on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. There are several rationales for adding the section on perspectives to these academic dialogues. This is a venue for addressing contemporary problems in the Serbo-Croat relations. It is complementary to the historical discussions since placing it in an academic setting is a step toward avoiding politicization of the issues that concern the adverse situation of the citizens of Croatia and Serbia regardless of their ethnicity. As a wide range of topics is covered, this discussion calls for expertise of scholars from a diverse set of disciplines thus enabling a more comprehensive and multi-faceted analysis. Finally, the results may provide decision-makers in both states, given that political will exists, with insight on how to approach protracted problems in the Serbo-Croat relations from which both states bear costly consequences.

Dr. Ranko Končar, from the University of Novi Sad, reported the most relevant conclusions of the working group „Political and Cultural Ties Between the Croats and the Serbs in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.“ Following the discussion of the more or less recent history of the Serbo-Croat relations, this group agreed that it makes sense and that there is historical justification for the continuation of the study of these relations. However, greater effort should be made to base this research on the maximum level of documentation, or as much as it is permitted by the accessibility of sources. In that spirit, it is important to facilitate exchange of scholars who could spend some time in institutions where they have access to those sources that are not available in their own states but that would contribute to a more balanced research overall. This effort would also encourage greater intellectual collaboration across the two states.

The future research, as well as the re-evaluation of the sources that are used, should use core works from the past research as a baseline, so that the continuity with earlier research is established. Yet, the use of the existing sources should proceed with caution and critically due to the delicate nature of the Serbo-Croat relations and the influence of propaganda on these relations. With that in mind, it is necessary to create space for de-mythologizing or de-mystifying certain prejudices that have been present

both in the study and in the approaches to the study of the Serbo-Croat relations. It is, therefore, of utmost importance to publish and make available critically-grounded documents. One of the conclusions was also that historical research should be approached in a more comprehensive manner while aiming to extend its programmatic orientation beyond political themes to include social, economic, and cultural topics, as well.

In the presentations of this working group, a range of different topics was discussed. Dr. Darko Gavrilović, Director of the CHDR, studied a case of political collaboration between a Serb politician Svetozar Pribičević and a Croat politician Stjepan Radić within the Peasant-Democratic coalition between two parties in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes – the Independent Democratic Party (*Samostalna demokratska stranka*) and the Croatian Peasant Party (*Hrvatska seljačka stranka*). Dr. Gavrilović followed their political activity through the leaders' relations with the government and through participation of the Serbs from Croatia and the Croats in the state institutions. The questions of political regime at the time and its possible change were also considered in this presentation.

Dr. Ranka Gašić, from the Institute of Contemporary History, examined the political goals and orientation of the Serbian Independent Party (*Srpska samostalna stranka*) in relation to the Croatian nation. Dr. Gašić asked whether it was possible to determine if the Serbian Independent Party and the Croatian political nation ever accepted a civic and political idea of the nation as it exists in Western Europe, in which the Serbs would constitute equal citizens of Croatia while maintaining their own ethnic and cultural rights. The Serbian Independent Party had initially accepted the idea of political nation of Croatia with hope that the Serbs would be able to preserve their cultural distinctiveness in this political arrangement. However, after the 1909. events, the Party turned toward protecting itself from political persecution. Dr. Gašić concluded that the two pre-conditions for the collaborative Serbo-Croat political relations – that the Serbs abandon the idea of united ethnic territory and that the Croats resign from the idea of ethnically homogeneous political nation – were not found in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, just as they did not exist at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Dr. Mile Bjelajac, from the Institute of Recent History of Serbia, showed on the research about the military of the former Yugoslavia how stereotypes can cloud our knowledge even of the facts that can be objectively verified in historical documents. In the paper, Dr. Bjelajac uses archival documents showing that military personnel decisions were meant to reflect proportionally the ethnic composition of the country, and therefore, contribute to the greater legitimacy of the military in the eyes of its people. These intentions were often impeded by certain historical or material circumstances, rather than the obdurate will of the state leadership to have only one ethnic group (i.e. Serbian) dominate the common state at the expense of other groups. Dr. Bjelajac argued that this example showed that scholars can prevent politicization of history if they are guided primarily by the existing documents and the objective data when attempting to understand certain historical events and outcomes.

Dr. Vjeran Pavlaković, from the University of Rijeka, studied the Independent Democratic Party (*Samostalna demokratska stranka*) in Croatia from 1936 to 1939. By using the example of this party, which took a different position on the Spanish Civil War than its coalition partner, the Croatian Peasant Party (*Hrvatska seljačka stranka*), Dr.

Pavlaković showed that there existed a non-communist response to fascism in Croatia in the interwar period.

Mr. Davor Pauković, from the Political Science Research Centre, presented the results of the discourse analysis of the texts about the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*) in the Belgrade daily *Politika* during 1989./90. in the section „Reflections and Reactions.“ In his article, Mr. Pauković aimed to isolate key elements of the structure of discourse and uncover possible strategies and goals behind the arguments that were published. This analysis revealed the *Politika* authors' views of the Croatian Democratic Union's role in Croatia, in Yugoslavia and for the Serbs in Croatia.

Mr. Filip Škiljan, from the Museum in Jasenovac, covered the medieval cultural history in his article about the cultural monuments that were built in the middle ages but were taken over by the Orthodox population that migrated to these areas of Croatia in later periods. Mr. Škiljan argued it is uncertain who built some churches and when they were built in certain regions of Croatia, especially in the region of northern Dalmatia. The author also noted that this information cannot be determined with certainty without the appropriate historical documents and analyses that are based on archeological excavations.

In future meetings, it was proposed by the group that dealt with the past Serbo-Croat relations to include evaluation of the research conducted outside of this project, as well. Finally, the group concluded that means for the continuation of the dialogues that would contribute to more comprehensive approaches to the study of the past Serbo-Croat relations should be secured.

Dr. Igor Graovac, from the Croatian Institute of History, introduced the working group „Perspectives of the Development of Croatia and Serbia in the Future.“ This was a smaller group and the first attempt within this project to tackle the future of the Serbo-Croat relations. This group did not consist solely of historians, but it also included other social scientists. Among other points of discussion, the group asked whether it was possible to talk about the future of these relations without a constant need to change the current understanding of the past, or how to avoid that historical interpretations limit the future development of the Serbo-Croat relations. Even though the group talked about several topics only, such as return of refugees, protection of minorities, regional development and social exclusion, it is necessary to extend these discussions to other possible themes in order to improve the neighborly relations between these two states within the European context.

Dr. Graovac summarized conclusions of this group: „For the first time within this research project, a working group also considered possibilities concerning the future development of the relations between the Croats and the Serbs, as well as between their respective states. We used examples from the past and the present that contribute to the more comprehensive preparation for the future of our relations. Among the issues that we discussed within the context of the strengthening of the civil society on both sides of these dialogues were the return of refugees, the status of minorities, regional development, and social exclusion. Future discussions should be framed by similar research guidelines. Their success greatly depends on the accessibility of sources, the ability to exchange research findings, and meetings of scholars. It is critical to coordinate the usage of key concepts, research methods and methodology, as well as the

interpretation of the past that negatively affects the future relations between the Croats and the Serbs.“

The presentations were opened by Dr. Graovac, who warned about the tendency on both sides to politicize certain historical facts, such as the issue of defining and counting victims of wars and the use of certain terminology. Dr. Graovac urged scholars to coordinate their methodologies in order to present comparable and realistic data, as well as to agree on common terminology and concepts that would be neutral, or free of political connotations.

Dr. Vesna Ivanović, from the Government of Croatia, compared regional development inequality in Croatia and Serbia. Dr. Ivanović concluded that similar problems exist, as both states have regions that are under-developed and under-populated compared to other regions. Hence, a politics of development should be similar in both states. The aim should be to achieve economic cohesion and to reduce the level of overall social exclusion of some regions.

Dr. Janko Veselinović, President of the Fund for the Assistance of Refugees and Expellees and Assistant of the Provincial Secretary for Science of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina of the Republic of Serbia, presented the problems that still exist in the return of refugees to Croatia as one of the pre-conditions for the normalization of relations between the Serbs and Croats, as well as between their respective states. Dr. Veselinović mentioned that from over 400,000 refugees that left Croatia in the period 1991-1995, only around 60,000 have returned. During the same period, a portion of ethnic Croats also had to leave the Serbian Province of Vojvodina. Dr. Veselinović mentioned the consequences that this migration had on the state that accepted the refugees, as well as on the state that they left under pressure. One of the concrete problems that was presented was the delayed return of property to the ethnic Serbs who left Croatia.

Mr. Mila Dragojević, from Brown University, talked about the rights of the Serb minority in Croatia as one of the pre-conditions for successful consolidation of the democratic regime in Croatia. The paper presented the issue of minority rights in a post-conflict context in general, while emphasizing the more challenging aspects of this situation. Dragojević made a distinction between the legal or constitutional changes in securing the rights of minorities from the societal changes, which are slower and more difficult to take place.

In sum, the researchers from this group, who are currently working on different individual projects, showed that there is a need to talk about the conditions of people, both Croats and Serbs, whether they are refugees, minorities, socially excluded, and to coordinate the usage of concepts in the research that is conducted on both sides. The group proposed to continue its activity in the future meetings. Rather than to influence the future of the relations between the Croats and the Serbs directly, the aim is that the results of this research contribute to the resolution of the concrete problems that are common to both Croats and Serbs in both countries.

At the end of the conference, Dr. Darko Gavrilović, Director of the CHDR, directed the messages of these two groups to the government representatives from Croatia and Serbia who were present, as well as to other organizations that are interested in this research, as these topics are not specific to this region. For example, the themes that are included within the Salzburg Seminar include Jewish-Palestinian relations, Chinese-

Japanese relations, German-Polish relations, Polish-Jewish relations, and German-Jewish relations. The next meeting that will be organized by the CHDR at the end of November of 2008 will deal with refugees in Croatia and Serbia. Dr. Veselinović, said that it is critical to have greater presence of the media in the future meetings in order to make their results and conclusions more accessible and more useful.