

Event report

“The Western Balkan’s Diversity of Identities: Political Culture, Minorities and Gender”

On 31 May 2018, the CEU Center for European Neighborhood Studies (CENS), Andrásy University (AUB) and the Austrian Cultural Forum Budapest jointly hosted an international conference entitled “The Western Balkan’s Diversity of Identities: Political Culture, Minorities and Gender”.

Christina Griessler (Research Fellow for netPOL at Andrásy University) and **Regina Rusz** (Director of the Austrian Cultural Forum) welcomed the speakers and guests to the joint conference. They stressed that the established cooperation among the institutions has great importance for all three and that it should continue in the future.



Péter Balázs (Director of the CEU Center for European Neighborhood Studies) addressed the significance of political culture, minorities and gender in the context of identity formation and nation-building in the region of former Yugoslavia, politically known today as the Western Balkans. This region returned to the agenda at the EU-Western Balkans summit in

Sofia on 17 May 2018. The Sofia declaration, with which the Western Balkans partners have aligned themselves, looks like a promising document, adding the region’s network routes to the EU connectivity map (e.g. Budapest-Belgrade or Sarajevo-Belgrade railway projects). Professor Balázs also mentioned that the areas such as energy, digital connectivity, security cooperation and counterterrorism deserve special attention and that close cooperation with the Western Balkans in these fields would also be a great achievement for the EU. The next summit meeting will take place in 2020 under the Croatian EU Council Presidency and it remains to be seen how much the Western Balkans can progress over the course of two years.

The first panel on political culture was chaired by **Suzana Jurin** (Professor, University of Rijeka).

The first speaker **Oliver Vujović** (Secretary General, South East Europe Media Organisation, Vienna, Austria) reminded that the very name Western Balkans has a negative connotation and that the region generally has a bad image in Europe and beyond. He focused on the media, saying that it is a reflection of what is happening in the society: journalists' work is difficult and many of them are under constant political threats and pressures. What the region misses is professional reporting and the educational function of media. When talking about the level of political culture, Vujović stressed that the Western Balkans is missing educated politicians and that domestic media is not as strong and influential as it should be. More focus should be put on informing regular citizens on how people live in the neighboring countries. Another part of the problem is that CSOs are not very active in this context nor are as independent as they should be.



Elona Dhembo (Fellow at the Department of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Tirana) spoke about “the new political culture” and “the politics of difference” with relevance to local governments and urban politics. When we talk about political culture, we talk about beliefs, emotions, gender, race and class – all of which are part of the political culture. When outsiders look at the Western Balkans, they observe that the countries are very different and they also shape diverse identities. Albania is one of the most interesting, yet most difficult cases of democratization to look at, also from the perspective of the interplay of political culture and identity. While Albania has not experienced the ethnic frictions and the processes of nation-building as elsewhere in the region, its political activity and democratization processes are often underpinned by domination of authoritarianism. One of the reasons for it can be the communist legacy that is different from socialism of the former Yugoslavia. Political engagement is one form of participatory culture that is crucial in terms of pluralism. One can also see how gender identity and the gender gap interact with political culture and political outcomes in Albania. Her research provides evidence of the gender gap in political engagement of women and men in Albania, ranging from inequalities in figures of participation and representation in formal politics to inherent beliefs that still portray politics as “men’s business”. In Albania, men largely dominate the political arena and essentially set the rules of the political game. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to remain unengaged due to beliefs that they do not have any power

to influence, perceptions of politics as ‘dirty business’, the perceived risk of losing employment upon rotation of political powers, and the challenges of reconciling work/activism with unpaid labor and responsibilities in the family.



Martina Mirković (PhD candidate, Andrásy University) spoke about the commemoration of the massacre of Bleiburg or the Bleiburg tragedy, which took place after the end of World War II in May 1945. At the time, the troops of the fascist Independent State of Croatia retreated to the former Third Reich to surrender to the British Army. However, the British demanded that the Ustasha troops

surrender to the Partisans. During this time, the massacre of Bleiburg occurred, which nowadays is remembered by right-wing groups annually in Bleiburg, Austria. The presentation described the background of the commemoration and its political contestation in Croatia. Nowadays, the event is known for attracting mainly members of Croatian right-wing organizations who remember the deaths of the right-wing Ustasha soldiers killed in May 1945, but exclude other victims who died at the same event. At the gathering, Ustasha emblems, flags and other fascist symbols are displayed publicly, which are officially prohibited in Croatia. The issue of political remembrance and the status of this particular event in the Croatian public memory was analyzed in the presentation. Recently, the event has also received the attention of the Austrian state, due to the fact that illegal organizations are participating and that prohibited fascist symbols are used at the commemorative ceremony.

The second panel, chaired by **Christina Griessler** (Research Fellow for netPOL at Andrásy University) addressed the question of minorities and their impact on identity formation in the Western Balkans.

Antonija Petričušić (Professor, University of Zagreb) argued that the EU accession process has not brought about a positive development in Croatia in relation to minority protection. The EU created a second generation conditionality, which were the prosecution of war crimes, reconciliation and repatriation of refugees. These additional conditions aimed to reestablish trust at the last stage of democratization and to create a more stable political culture in Croatia. However, it created social forces in Croatia, which were undermining certain democratic

developments, especially in relation to minority rights. The dispute about the installation of bilingual signs in 2013 in Vukovar, the city in Eastern Slavonia once occupied by Serbian paramilitary forces, ended in the declaration of the Constitutional Court that the implementation of the minority right should be postponed until the city of Vukovar decides that the conditions are right to implement the law. The adherence of minority protections was moved away from the level of the state to the level of the city. Petričušić makes the argument that this was the first attack on minority protection by social forces who considered the bilingual signs as “undeserved privileges” to the Serb minority in Vukovar. The second attack is the narrative that the special list for candidates for the minority seats are not legitimate and that the representatives of minorities should not be allowed to vote on certain issues, such as the budget and government formation. Consequently, this would mean that the minority deputies should not have the same rights as their colleagues in the parliament. In both cases, the demand for a popular referendum was requested. The first one was rejected by the state. The second one is currently being prepared. The argument, which can be made, is that EU membership does not automatically lead to a stable democracy or guarantees minority rights.

Damjan Zdravev (Programme Officer, Civil Rights Defenders, Belgrade) looked at the normative and practical challenges in advancing ethnic minority rights in Macedonia as a multi-cultural society with fragile and often tensed inter-ethnic relations. Ethnic Macedonians form majority in the country, while the second largest group are Albanians. Both groups have the right to education in their native languages, which is



often a dominant area of contention and the (ab)use of ethno-national sentiments as a tool for political mobilization and legitimization. Albanian is entirely different from Macedonian or other South Slavic languages. The city of Tetovo, for instance, opened the first Albanian speaking university which was not recognized by the state. The 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement, ending the armed conflict between the National Liberation Army and the Macedonian security forces, set the foundation for giving more powers to Albanians when it comes to the language and on the local level. These processes, however, negatively affect the weak social cohesion in the society. Schools are still separated for children of the two ethnic groups, attending classes in separate shifts, being taught by different teachers and following

different curricula. He concluded by outlining that further democratic development of the country is significantly dependent on the advancement of minority rights and the multi ethnic relations. Partially due to these reasons, the country did not have a census since its independence in 1991 and there are no political parties that consist of both Macedonian and Albanian politicians.

Jovana Radosavljević (Executive Director, New Social Initiative, North Mitrovica, Kosovo) said that minority rights remain one of the most controversial issues in the Western Balkans. While the countries of the region have managed to create solid legal framework based on the internationally recognized standards, the level of implementation is in its infancy. The lack of implementation derives from a combined lack of political willingness and limited capacities. As a result, minority communities continue to be marginalized and subject to difficult socio and political position. In her presentation, Radosavljević brought recent insights on the state of play of minority rights in Kosovo by focusing particularly on the rights of Kosovo Serbs. The main issue today is the Brussels Agreement in which the locals, both Kosovo Serbs and Kosovo Albanians, had no local ownerships whatsoever. There are approximately 7% of Serbs in Kosovo today and they feel like they are in a limbo, she said. On the level of institutions, both ethnicities should be represented, but on the practical level this is not the case. A political party introduced from Belgrade is the one largely deciding on behalf of the Kosovo Serbs. The implementation of laws is another issue as there are 10 Kosovo Serb MPs in the Parliament, while around 80% of the Kosovo Serbs are financially directly dependent on the Republic of Serbia. There are many reasons why the Kosovo Serbs do not want to integrate in the Kosovo institutions: emotions, grievances and ethnic animosities that are created by politicians on both sides. The bottom line is that small incidents can create violence. Radosavljević concluded by reminding that education is one of the keys, but there is no political desire to even try to bridge this gap.

The third panel on gender was chaired by **Hana Semanić** (Research Fellow, Center for European Neighborhood Studies, Central European University).



The first speaker **Elissa Helms** (Associate Professor, Central European University) in her presentation addressed the issue of gender relations, which always interact with other societal aspects and other roles in society. The gender relations in the Western Balkans can be termed as patriarchic gender regime with a distinct idea on female reproduction.

Furthermore, in the societies in the region older generation has more power over the younger generation and over women, which adds a generational layer to the societal hierarchy. Former Yugoslavia's official policies aimed at changing the traditional role of women in the society and actively engaged in moving from the perceived region's backwardness on the issue to a modern secularized and urbanized society. The general assumption was that with advancing secularization and urbanization the traditional gender roles will disappear. Another issue addressed in the presentation was the participation of women in politics, which is deterred by the notion that politics is a dirty place and women are too sensitive to become politically active, hence only man can really engage in politics. Even during the socialist times women were not really actively involved in politics, because apart from their employment responsibilities, they had to look after the children and care for other members of the family. Women were overburdened with a number of tasks in the family, which kept them from political positions. The gender role of women is constructed as an object, which is seen to require men's protection. Still, what needs to be considered is that gender is a relational system and needs to be analyzed in this context.

The second speaker **Marsela Dauti** (Professor, University of Tirana, Albania) presented a study on women councilors in Albania. The study investigated how women receive positions in local councils and what kind of policies were mainly supported by women in comparison to men. The guiding question of the research was: What difference do women make? Albania is an interesting case, because it moved from a very low percentage of women participating in politics to a rather good percentage. Mainly women with personal relations were recruited into to the council, which raised the question if women then conduct policies for their political mentors – which could be family members - or if they become independently active in implementing policies advancing and supporting women. To analyse the activities regarding political representation, the study looked at the number of draft decisions, topics discussed in

the council, public investments and business cooperation with dealt with women issues such as kindergarden places, education, day care, etc. The independent variable in this study was gender. The outcome of the study was that men are more active in general, but that in relation to gender issues women are more likely to initiate law decisions.

The final speaker of the conference was **Anamaria Batista** (Lecturer, University of Economics and Business, University of Vienna) who linked the issue of nationalism and gender in the Western Balkan region with art projects from artists from the region. Nationalism is considered as a construction by the political elite. Instead of investing energy in social integration,



nationalism as a strategy was applied by the political elites. Already the First Yugoslavia followed that model and tried to unite the regions of the new state by creating Yugoslav people. The aim was to establish a universal culture with the premises of multi-culturalism. The past needs to be understood as the basis of the future and the foundation of reflection of the past. One of the presented art work was a video that showed the transformation of a transgender person from a man to a women, which started in 1989 - the time of the fall of communism in Europe – and which documented how the newly created person started to intonate his voice in a more female way. The video tried to show the overlap of the transition of states and transition of people into something new. This transformation is considered to act as a synonym of Yugoslavia's development. The presentation also introduced work by Selma Selman, a Romani artist from Bosnia and Herzegovina who worked with women from former Yugoslavia who were restricted to certain roles in their life with limited possibility to escape from it. Art can raise awareness by addressing women issues in different ways and by dealing with past experiences of restrictive roles for women in society.