

The opinions, recommendations, and conclusions of the grantee are his own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IREX or the US Department of State.

Andrei Simic
Professor
University of Southern California
STG 2005-2006
Serbia and Montenegro and Croatia

A Field Study of Serbian Refugees from Croatia and Bosnia: Implications for Domestic and Foreign Relations Policy

Topic of Research and Countries Visited

The STG grant was used to carry out research in Serbia and Montenegro and Croatia. This work was carried out under the auspices of Matica Iseljenika Srbije (Center of Emigrants of Serbia) and Etnoloski Institut Srpske Akademije Nauka I Umetnosti (The Ethnographic Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts). This represents the continuation of related research in Arizona and California (1999-present) and field work sponsored by IREX in Serbia during the summer of 2002.

Relevance and Contribution to Field

The presence of hundreds of thousands of refugees and other displaced persons in an economically depressed and politically volatile country evokes a number of issues related to the internal stability of Serbia and the ramifications for Western and American foreign policy toward Serbia and the Balkans in general. Some of the general questions explored during the grant include:

- To what degree do Serbian refugees and displaced persons exhibit strong nationalistic and /or chauvinistic tendencies?
- What are refugees attitudes regarding possible return to their former homes?
- Which political elements do refugees support in Serbia?
- What are refugee attitudes regarding American and Western foreign policy vis-à-vis the Balkans and former Yugoslavia?
- How do refugees perceive the concepts of “democracy” and “free markets”?
- How similar are the attitudes of refugees to those of the Serbian public in general?
- How do refugees view other ethnic groups in former Yugoslavia and their host population in Serbia proper?

Approach and Research Methodology

Interviews were conducted with 46 refugees and displaced persons: 6 from Bosnia, 35 from Krajina, 3 from Kosovo, and two from Sandzak. The interviews were open-ended and informal in character. Most were carried out in the context of family groups and often included inquisitive neighbors. As has always been my experience in Serbia, my interactions with interviewees was regarded primarily as a social situation, one involving generous hospitality in spite of the poverty of many of those interviewed. In addition to the interviews, I conferred with numerous colleagues, journalists, writers, government official and others regarding a range of topics related to my research.

The sample was not a random one, but rather interviews were located through colleagues, friends, relatives, and a number of fortuitous encounters. However, the reliability of the results is enhanced by the fact that there was a very high degree of unanimity in interview responses.

The venues of research were in Belgrade and in its environs, Nis in Serbia proper, Indjija, and Kikinda in Vojvodina. Also, two families of returnees were interviewed in the village of Kolaric in the Croatian region of Kordun.

Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

Informed opinion seems to indicate that the Serbian public is sharply divided between those favorably oriented toward the West and the United States and those often labeled as “traditionalists: who are profoundly nationalistic and anti-Western. There are some indications that the latter group is gaining ground in the political arena. For instance, on June 25, 2005, in a TCV poll in Belgrade, 63% of callers expressed opposition to Serbian President Tadic’s implicit recognition of Serbian guilt in the alleged Srebrenica genocide by his planned visit to Bosnia to attend the commemoration of the purported massacre scheduled for July 11, 2005.

People whom I interviewed had generally negative attitudes about returning to their original homes in either Croatia or in the Muslim-Croat dominated part of Bosnia. They cited numerous reports in the press regarding discrimination against Serbs in these areas in respect to the return of property, jobs and social benefits. Moreover, in regard to Republika Srpska, they expressed fears (based largely on press reports) that it was the intention of the High Representative of the “occupying powers” to systematically dismantle Republika Srpska. In their eyes, it would be very difficult to live in a “Muslim dominated” Bosnia. It should also be noted that, fearing Muslim oppression and possible violence, some Serbs are now leaving Sandzak.

There is a very high level of anger regarding the Hague War Crimes Tribunal and the demand by the US and other Western powers that General Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic be delivered to the Hague. The linking of economic aid to the delivery of alleged war criminals to the Tribunal is regarded as “blackmail.” Views were expressed that the Hague Tribunal is regarded as a fraud since no Americans or NATO citizens will “ever be held accountable for their war crimes.”

The American and EU presence in the Balkans was interpreted in a number of negative ways. For instance, the following were common responses: “The Balkans have become a colony of the West”; “All the West wants from us is cheap labor and raw materials” and “We are victims of American imperialism.”

In contrast to negative stereotyping of US foreign policy, interviewees retained a positive view of life in America and of individual Americans. Paradoxically, many voice alarm at the proliferation of elements of American popular culture in the Balkans.

The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, which is perceived as largely an American enterprise, was cited repeatedly as evidence of America’s unprincipled behavior toward the Serbs. This was in turn linked to the ongoing crises in Kosovo. There is dismay that the United States and the West have been unable to protect the Kosovo Serbs and their national treasures – monasteries, churches, etc. (According to a 2003 memorandum of the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, an incomplete survey lists 110 Orthodox churches destroyed and/or vandalized in Kosovo). It is regarded as criminally hypocritical that the West and the US are attempting to force the creation of a unitary multiethnic state in Bosnia-Herzegovina while they have acquiesced to the ethnic cleansing of Serbs from Croatia and Kosovo.

Attitudes toward other ethnic groups in former Yugoslavia were essentially the same as those which I had observed during my field work in Serbia three years ago. The greatest

possibility of reconciliation was perceived in respect to the Croats. The Bosnian Serbs in particular expressed considerable hostility toward the Muslims and expressed no desire to ever live with them in a single state.

Suggestions for Future Research Agendas

I am planning to write an academic paper describing in greater detail my finding and conclusions from this research. I also plan to continue my field work among Serbian refugees in California and Arizona, focusing on both political attitudes vis-à-vis the topics described in this report and their accommodation to American life.

Recommendations for the US Policy Community

The political significance of the refugee population is considerable. Serbia has received more refugees than any other part of the former Yugoslavia. Various estimates indicate that there are 500,000 to 800,000 refugees in Serbia, of whom approximately 80% are Serbs. The influence of so many displaced persons in an economically depressed and demoralized society with a legacy of political instability should not be discounted. This is especially significant since their views tend to be ultra-nationalist and profoundly anti-Western and anti-American. Moreover, the sentiments expressed in interviews also appear to be broadly shared outside the refugee communities. This was confirmed by accounts in the press, by opinions of academics, journalists, writers, and formal and informal polls I conducted.

Unfortunately anti-American and anti-Western sentiments have been continually strengthened by the policies and behavior of the Western powers and the United States vis-à-vis the Serbs. If the goal of US foreign policy is to create a pro-Western, stable, democratic state in Serbia, a far more conciliatory, even-handed policy is called for, one which does not demand, either implicitly or explicitly, that the entire Serbian population assume collective guilt for crimes which are perceived by the Serbs to be either invented by the West or to have been perpetrated equally by all sides in the recent civil wars in former Yugoslavia. At the moment, even many Serbs who are Western-oriented perceive the US as blatantly favoring the Kosovo Albanians and the Bosnian Muslims.

One significant symbolic step to mend this impression would be to cease the continuing vilification of the Serbs in the American media. Equally important, as mentioned above, aid to Serbia should not be dependent upon the surrender of alleged war criminals to the Hague Tribunal. In this respect, it is possible that the surrender of Mladic and Karadzic might well have a politically destabilizing effect in Serbia, and this surely would be the case in Republika Srpska.