**WHEN INDEPENDENCE BRINGS DEPENDENCE AND HELPLESSNESS**

My internship at the Peace Institute in Ljubljana has definitely been characterized with both beneficial, encouraging and engaging experiences which have unequivocally fostered my improvement as a researcher as well as with supplemental, substantial and equally significant exposure to various topics, including the topic of erasure, the human rights weight which Slovenia has been carrying on its shoulders since its independence.

After the momentous moment of independence, Slovenia employed regulations for the acquisition of citizenship in the new state, one of them being an application which had to be submitted within several months of independence. In addition, the government/administrative bodies of the Republic of Slovenia drastically affected the lives of those who didn’t manage to submit their applications including those who applied but were rejected Slovenian citizenship, by removing them from the Slovenian registry of permanent residents. The erasure predominantly affected persons from other former Yugoslav republics which triggered the loss of job (opportunities), salaries, pensions, health insurance, child allowances etc. The fact that the Erased were mainly ex – Yugoslavs and that there were only a few of other ‘’foreigners’’ who were erased could serve as a vital indicator that persons from ex – Yugoslav countries were discriminated against as well as perceived as some kind of potential traitors and enemies for Slovenian independence.

It is evident that Slovenian independence benefited some, while in the case of others, independence is associated with the loss of a legal resident status and acquisition of a new foreign and illegal status. Furthermore, even though many of the Erased ended up retaining the citizenship of the republic of their origin after the act of erasure, some of the Erased also lost their citizenship status which resulted in the acquisition of another stateless–person status. In some instances, independence also meant a sudden wave of forcible removal orders for the Erased. Ultimately, the ‘’melting pot’’ of arguments is ‘’boiling’’ and encircling around the declaration of independence and erasure. It is filled with various perspectives on what in fact triggered and caused the act of erasure. On one hand, the government as well as some Slovenian citizens argue that the Erased were informed about the change in their citizen status and they didn’t react to the ‘’citizenship application call’’. The Erased, on the other hand, claim that they never received information from the government about the measure and consequences of such a sudden and an arbitrary act of erasure.

I first encountered the topic of erasure in 2017, when I was discussing human rights matters with the Peace Institute staff who, knowing that I am a human rights student, directed my attention to the stain in the Slovenian human rights records. It was a rather striking moment when I was introduced to the story about the struggles and aggravating experiences of the Erased. Our discussion was followed by a sudden rush of guilt and discomfiture which was caused by my lack of knowledge about the Erased and erasure in general. Moreover, coming from Bosnia and Herzegovina, I only knew that there are a lot of persons from former Yugoslavia who were living in Slovenia and I also knew a few persons from my town who were living in Slovenia as well and none of them has ever talked about the issue of erasure. I can’t say if they genuinely didn’t know about the erasure or they simply weren’t aware that erasure was happening. Similarly, after I learned about erasure, I decided to contact a few of my friends and acquaintances from BiH and inquire whether they knew about the Erased in Slovenia. Only one of them confirmed that she knew about the situation in which ‘’some persons’’ were living in Slovenia with no status and with no rights for years.

Now that I familiarized myself with the topic of erasure, I am genuinely interested if the aim of Slovenia was to hide and somehow place the topic of erasure on a different list, which is not a human rights list or the topic simply wasn’t covered (enough) by BiH TV and print media and news providers. Therefore, I decided to examine what and if the media has published anything in the last few years about the erasure or the Erased persons. In addition, having explored the websites of a few major and most watched/most read media in BiH such as Al Jazeera Balkans, BHRT, Dnevni Avaz and Klix.ba, it is evident that the topic of erasure was covered, but not significantly. In the last few years, a few articles were published, some of the them being quite scarce, which described the situation of the Erased in Slovenia.

Initially, in 2016, BHRT published a short article about the European court rejecting the appeal of the Erased in Slovenia who demanded compensation for each month of their illegal, foreign and stateless stay. BHRT also offered a brief overview of what happened and who was affected by the act of erasure. Similarly, in 2013, Klix.ba published an article about Bosnian-Herzegovinian architects who are designing a monument for the Erased in Slovenia. In their article, Klix.ba also briefly highlighted the exact story of what happened to the Erased, saying that the act of erasure was an arbitrary and unlawful act of the former authorities in Slovenia.

On the other hand, in 2015, Dnevni avaz reported on the Amnesty International’s statement, highlighting the fact that discrimination against Roma and attitude towards the Erased and non–Slovenian persons are the main problems in the field of human rights violations that Slovenia is facing. Dnevni avaz proceeded further, noting that Amnesty states that Slovenia has offered some indemnity from the compensations given to them by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. Furthermore, in the article, Dnevni avaz also offered information about the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) which issued an unanimous decision, declaring that Slovenia must pay EUR 240,000 for pecuniary damage caused by the removal from the list of permanent residents as well as to systematically solve this unsolved problem which has been around for years. Ultimately, Dnevni avaz also reported on the fact that compensations which have been allocated to the erased by European Court of Human Rights are significantly higher than those compensations that are stipulated by Slovenian law.

Subsequently, in 2014, Al Jazeera Balkans also reported on the process of compensation allocation by the ECHR, offering additional information on the statements and opinion of Slovenian minister Gregor Virant to both compensations allocated by ECHR as well as compensations stipulated by Slovenian law. Additionally, in 2012, Al Jazeera Balkans also published an article with the headline which says that Slovenia has no money for the erased in which the lack of funds for Slovenian own vital needs is also addressed. Similarly, in 2012, Al Jazeera Balkans published an article about the erasure, addressing it as a stain in the history of Slovenia. The article features the story of Aleksandar Mlač who is telling a story about Irfan Beširević, president of the Civil Initiative of Erased Persons, and his struggles caused by erasure. Moreover, the article also contains information on the book written by Goran Vojnović, ‘’Čefurji, raus’’, highlighting that this book depicts the life of erased persons the best and that Slovene press has given the erasure its real name, ethnic cleansing and social genocide.

On the other side of the erasure spectrum there are international organizations and other bodies which have also reported on the topic of erasure in the last few years. Namely, in 2014, European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) produced a report on Slovenia in which it addressed the state and levels of racism and intolerance towards various groups, including the Erased. In the report, ECRI urges Slovenian authorities to restore the rights of the Erased and to also place public debate on the situation of the Erased in the realm of human rights and to refrain from generalizations and misinterpretations concerning these persons which foster racism and xenophobia. Similarly, a few weeks ago, Human Rights Commissioner of the Council of Europe published a country visit report with the concluding marks that Slovenia should pursue its efforts to protect vulnerable people. In the article, Nils Muižnieks, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, declares that the erasure was a violation of human rights that caused deep suffering for thousands of people and that the Slovenian authorities should provide a way to regularize the status of the remaining Erased people who wish to reintegrate into Slovenian society, in particular the small number still living in Slovenia. The Commissioner also offers a very constructive and important recommendation that information and analysis about the Erased and erasure should be part of school curricula which would facilitate awareness-raising about this issue. Furthermore, in the article published a few months ago, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights argues that upholding human rights should be a guiding principle in policy making because human rights provide an essential safety net for people, and are necessary to ensure that no one is left behind.

The history of Slovenia, specifically from the Slovenian independence onwards, evidently has its dark side, defiled by the act of erasure, which continues to represent one of the crucial points in the Slovenian human rights records. Having their roots in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the rights surrounding the issue of erasure indicate that the removal of individuals from the registry of citizens has undoubtedly affected various rights such as the right to work, social security, health (insurance), education etc., all of which are enshrined in the above – mentioned treaty. On the other hand, the lack of sufficient compensation, rehabilitation and reparation as well as the still – contested recognition of the Erased in particular parts of Slovenian society is still fragmented, therefore, continuously influencing mental and physical health of those affected by the erasure. Besides the often – limited recognition and protection in existing law and policies, the Erased continue to experience difficult situations in the society and everyday life. Subsequently, human rights represent an essential component of people’s existence and they are also crucial factors in the history of a country’s minority/vulnerable groups treatment. Thus, the final staircase which await to be climbed by both, Slovenian authorities and society as well as the rest of the world, represent the steps which would lead to the promotion of a positive image of the Erased, recognition of their violated rights and ultimately assurance that the need for compensation is understood and respected.

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