
THE REFUGEES IN VOJVODINA: PROSPECTS FOR SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND OTHER ALTERNATIVES

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The break-up of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was accompanied by ethnic conflicts. These conflicts and the ethnic cleansing practices resulted in a massive exodus of refugees from their hearths. According to the 1996 UNHCR census, 646,066 refugees of predominantly Serbian nationality were stationed in the territories of Serbia and Montenegro by that time. An approximate 40 percent of these refugees were accommodated in Vojvodina, most of them in Bačka and in Srem (Tables 1 and 2). My focus in this article will concentrate on the refugees' integration process within Vojvodinian society, its difficulties, and the other options available (e.g. repatriation, emigration to a 'third' country). What will be demonstrated is that the most feasible option, and that favoured by most refugees, seems to be the refugees' integration to Vojvodinian society. Prior to all these, however, a definition of the term 'refugee' ('izbeglica') within the legal contexts of Serbia and Montenegro should be made¹.

Table 1. War-displaced persons, accommodated in the territory of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, according to the 1996 UNHCR census:

Area	Refugees	Percentage	Evicted persons	Percentage	Total	Percentage in total population (%)
Serbia	537,937	95.0	79,791	100	617,728	6.3
Central Serbia	282,022	51.0	48,801	61.2	337,830	5.8
Vojvodina	229,811	40.6	29,908	37.5	259,719	12.9
Kosovo	19,097	3.4	1,082	1.3	20,179	1.0
Montenegro	28,338	5.0	0	0	28,338	4.5
FR Yugoslavia	566,275	100.0	79,791	100.0	646,006	6.2

Source: edited by the Author

¹ It should be borne in mind that much of this article was written prior to the Montenegrin referendum for secession from the Serb-Montenegrin federation (May 2006).

Table 2. Colonists and refugees in Vojvodina (1948-1996)

Area	Colonists (1948)	Total population (1948)	% of colonists in total population (1948)	Total population (1991)	Refugees (1996)	% of refugees in total population (1991)
Bačka	125,684	802,235	15.7	1,032,915	127,214	12.3
N.Bačka	9,032	262,449	3.4	286,354	15,942	5.6
W.Bačka	72,100	200,465	36.0	215,916	33,200	15.4
S.Bačka	44,552	339,321	13.1	530,645	78,072	14.7
Banat	79,465	599,120	13.3	648,611	45,720	7.0
N.Banat	15,818	100,864	15.7	98,830	8,404	8.5
C.Banat	31,126	219,164	14.2	221,353	15,324	6.9
S.Banat	35,251	279,092	11.7	328,428	21,992	6.7
Srem	11,162	224,752	5.0	332,363	84,805	25.5

Source: edited by the Author

DEFINITION OF THE TERM 'REFUGEE' WITHIN THE LEGAL CONTEXTS OF SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO

According to the definition issued by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (1967), a refugee is: a. a person who, under fear of persecution because of his/her race, religion, national affiliation, or political convictions resides outside the state of which he/she is a citizen; b. a person who does not hold citizenship of the state where he/she previously resided and which he/she fled under fear of persecution and cannot or does not want to return to his/her native place of origin².

In the cases of Serbia and Montenegro, however, there was an internal distinction among the refugees. First of all, there were those who were refugees in the international legal sense. These were persons who fled the war-zones of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina after these two states' official recognition by the UN and did not possess any valid legal documents regarding their citizenship³. On the other hand, there were the so-called 'displaced persons', or '*raseljena liča*' according to the Serbian terminology. These were persons who fled to Serbia and Montenegro from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1991, before those two states' official recognition by the international community. These persons held documents that made them eligible for Serbian citizenship (i.e. passports of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) and cannot be regarded as refugees in the international legal sense. According to the 1996 UNHCR data, 29,908 out of the 259,719 refugees stationed in Vojvodina by that time fit into the category of 'displaced persons' (Table 1). In this light, the arrivals from Kosovo, between

² For this definition see UNHCR 1996:113.

1999 and 2000, can also be classified as 'internally displaced persons', since they already possess Serbian citizenship. In this text, both terms will be used alternately.

THE SOCIAL INTEGRATION PROCESS

The migration of the displaced Bosnian and Croatian Serbs to Vojvodina fits into the category of forced migration⁴. Forced migrations cause a variety of psychological traumas to the migrants. Therefore, there exist psychological factors that hinder the refugees' adaptation to the new environment. Most important, the evicted feel that the spatial-temporal relation with their land base has been violently disrupted. So, the reconstruction of a new identity within a new environment is a painful procedure, especially when the new environment differs morphologically, culturally, as well as socio-economically from the old one. In Vojvodina, this is the case with the older refugees from the mountainous parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Croatian Krajina. The non-regulated refugee status, for over 9 or 10 years, of many refugees is a factor that aggravates their psychological tension. This issue will be dealt with, in greater depth, later on.

As a result of their psychological tension, the majority of the Serbian refugees in Vojvodina feel a more powerful attachment to the Republic of Serbia than to Vojvodina as a specific region⁵. This is understandable, bearing in mind that most of the refugees who were evicted from Bosnia-Herzegovina and, particularly, Croatia saw and still see the Serbian republic as a shelter from persecution. On certain occasions, the frustration involved in the loss of the homeland had an additional repercussion on some of the refugees. Namely, it encouraged their adoption of nationalist political options. For instance, the refugee community in Srem has often rallied behind the banner of the Serbian Radical Party⁶. Moreover, a notable participation of young refugees in local groupings with a militant nationalist orientation (e.g. 'Obraz') has been witnessed. Nevertheless, it is not an easy task to diagnose the political trends among the refugee population in Vojvodina, since many refugees are yet not entitled to vote. Apart from political options, psychological frustration has had its impact on other group aspects of the refugees. For example, surveys carried out in Srem

³ The Republic of Croatia was recognized by the UN on January 15th, 1992. As for Bosnia-Herzegovina, it was internationally recognized on April 6th, 1992.

⁴ For more on this issue see Nikolić 1994: 192.

⁵ Lazar and Marinković 2001:185-86.

⁶ On this issue see 'Predsednički Izbori 2002' at: <http://www.cesid.org>.

demonstrated that the low birthrate of the refugee population in this region has been conditional upon psychological factors as well. Indeed, between 1992 and 1996, a mere percentage of 7 to 8 percent out of the total 10,600 newly born in Srem came from a refugee background⁷.

The second major obstacle is of a legal and political nature and has particularly affected those refugees who came from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in the mid-’90s. The official norm for the solution of the refugee issue, adopted by the Serbian government back then, became the repatriation of the refugees to their native places of origin. As far as those refugees originating from *Republika Srpska* (Bosnia-Herzegovina) are concerned, their recognised citizenship by the Serbian authorities became that which they were granted by the Bosnian Serb authorities. This policy, though, had a variety of legal consequences on the refugees who arrived from Croatia and did not possess any valid documents with regard to their citizenship. The most notable of these consequences was a prolonged lack of citizenship, which corresponded to a restriction, even deprivation of basic civil rights (e.g. the right to vote and the right to social security). Consequently, many Croatian Serb refugees in Vojvodina have remained stateless for a long period of time⁸.

The social integration of refugees has also been hampered by economic obstacles. The most crucial of these has been the high unemployment rate among them. The unemployment crisis has obstructed the utilization of a well-qualified labour potential among the refugee community. These are usually refugees originating from the economically developed regions of Baranja and Slavonia, which have a greater experience of market economy.⁹ An additional percentage of refugees survive through the ‘grey economy’¹⁰.

Finally, the successful integration of refugees into the regional environment may be obstructed by cultural factors. The friction between refugees and locals over scarce job opportunities has often fuelled prejudices and stereotypes (e.g. these associated with the social implications of the mountain/plain dichotomy) concerning a group other than one’s own. In quite a few surveys, a remarkable percentage of refugees

⁷ About this data Madžić, Petaković, Malobabić and Solarević 1997: 201-03.

⁸ For example, it is estimated that by the first half of 1995, there were 200,000 ethnic Serb refugees with a non-regulated refugee status stationed in Serbia and Montenegro. For this data see Đurdev 1997: 307.

⁹ As a matter of fact, 142 out of 300 refugees originating mainly from Slavonia and Baranja (in other words, 48.1 percent) in 1991 were previously employed as executives of various kinds in Croatia. On this issue see Nikolić 1994: 193.

¹⁰ Bubalo 1994: 22-23.

stationed in Vojvodina have complained about instances of discrimination against them¹¹. The drive towards ethnocentrism has also taken its toll upon the refugees' integration into the new environment. For a start, this drive has resulted in the popular identification of the western Serbo-Croat variant spoken by many newcomers (i.e. *ijekavica* also their more frequent use of the Latin alphabet) with Croatia and the Croats. Therefore, a social pressure has been exerted on many refugees from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina to switch to the eastern variant (*ekavica*) that is predominantly spoken in Vojvodina.

The long-term integration of the refugees into Vojvodinian society can be pursued along two paths. The first is to render refugees economically independent individuals. What could happen, at this given moment, is the improvement of the local infrastructure in those municipalities where a considerable percentage of refugees are accommodated. This would assist the utilization of the labour potential among the refugees, especially in Vojvodinian municipalities that demonstrate symptoms of demographic and economic stagnation. This is the case with some depopulated villages along the Croatian border in Srem¹². The implementation of positive discrimination policies for refugees at the employment sector would be another step towards their social integration. A complementary option is the cultural integration (not assimilation) of the refugees to the new environment. The emphasis on Vojvodina's cultural plurality may encourage the acceptance of the refugees into the regional society and, vice versa, the refugees' acceptance of the new environment with all their distinctive characteristics.

What might be further required is the adoption of a more 'inclusive' variant of Serbian national identity by Serbian society. This can be achieved through the recognition of certain catalysts (e.g. most commonly, a different collective historical experience—also multicultural cohabitation) that have resulted in the formation of 'sub-identities' within the Serbian nation. At this point, it would be useful to recall Miroslav Krleža's address to the Croatian Communist Party committee in 1957 (in an attempt to illustrate the 'hybrid character' of the Serbian and Croatian nations to his fellow cadres) that 'the differences between Herzegovinian Croats and Croats from Zagorje are more pronounced than those between Croats and Serbs in Herzegovina'.

Another interesting incidence is the fact that, at this given moment, the refugees form a distinct segment within Vojvodinian society. This brings them quite close to

¹¹ On this issue see Lazar and Marinković 2001: 179; Nikolić 1994: 202-03.

¹² For more information about this issue see Đurđev 1997, pp 315-17.

the case of national minorities. As a matter of fact, many refugees already belonged to minorities in their former places of residence. This means that they have already experienced multicultural cohabitation (Table 4). Therefore it might well be argued that, despite some occasional cases of inter-group friction between refugees and certain national minorities (e.g. Hungarians and Croats), the abovementioned factor may facilitate the establishment of better intercultural understanding between refugees and Vojvodina's national minorities. This prospect, however, is always conditional upon the political, socio-economic, and cultural integration of the refugees to the new environment.

Table 3. Number of refugees in municipalities with a dense or a majority Hungarian and other ethnic minority population

Ada	438 out of 21,506 residents
Bačka Topola	3,816 out of 40,473 residents
Bečej	3,541 out of 42,685 residents
Kanjiza	905 out of 30,668 residents
Mali Idoš	194 out of 14,394 residents
Senta	620 out of 28,779 residents
Subotica	4,091 out of 150,534 residents
Temerin	1,732 out of 24,939 residents
Čoka	493 out of 15,271 residents

Source: <http://www.cesid.org>

Table 4. Did you have Croatian friends, neighbours, colleagues, or relatives prior to the breakout of the war?

Friends	YES- 264 cases or 89.5 percent	NO-36 cases or 9.5 percent
Neighbours	YES- 253 cases or 85.8 percent	NO-47 cases or 14.2 percent
Relatives	YES- 185 cases or 62.7 percent	NO-115 cases or 37.3 percent
Colleagues	YES- 248 cases or 84.1 percent	NO- 52 cases or 15.9 percent

Total sample: 300 Croatian Serb refugees (mainly from Eastern Slavonia).

Source: Nikolić 1994: 192.

THE MEDIUM OF REPATRIATION

The option of the refugees' repatriation to their native places of origin remains to date the preferred medium of the Serbian government with regard to the solution of the refugee question. This option, however, has not been particularly popular with the majority of refugees. Return to the native places of origin is discouraged

by two factors: One of them is the fact that the former houses and other property of many refugees have either been occupied or destroyed. The other is the reluctance by refugees to live under state authorities regarded as hostile. The incentives for return are equally restrained by the new political and legal circumstances in the refugees' native places of origin. In Croatia, the acquisition of Croatian passports by Croatian Serb refugees has proven a long and painful legal procedure.

Most importantly, the Croatian law on citizenship is based on a double-standard approach. On the one hand, those ethnic Croats who owned property in the territory of the Croatian republic but resided in another republic of the former Yugoslavia (or even abroad- e.g. Canada, Australia) until October 8th, 1991 (i.e. the date of declaration of Croatian independence) were entitled to Croatian citizenship. On the contrary, the civic status of persons who owned property in Croatia, by that date, but at the same time had a 'special relationship' with some other former republic of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (e.g. the case of the Croatian Serbs in relation to Serbia) was to be 'regulated'. In the case of many Croatian Serbs, currently accommodated in Vojvodina, the situation becomes even more complicated since they have abandoned their homes and cannot prove that they actually owned them¹³. Any agreements reached between Croatia and Serbia (e.g. the Agreement for the Normalization of Relations between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Croatia signed on August 23rd, 1996) have not produced any fruitful results with regard to this issue.

On the other hand, quite a few of the formerly Serb-owned properties in Croatia have been occupied by Croatian refugees or other Croatian citizens. Some of these houses have even been rented to tourists over the summer¹⁴. Lack of Croatian citizenship makes it increasingly difficult for many refugees to start a legal procedure over their properties in a Croatian court of justice. An additional discouraging factor has been the arrests of some Serb returnees, by the Croatian authorities, and their indictments with charges, often unsubstantiated, of war crimes¹⁵. The ethnification of the Croatian educational system also serves as a factor that discourages the younger generation of refugees from returning to Croatia.

The recent developments, with regard to the repatriation option, have been more positive in the case of Bosnian Serb refugees. In this case, the positive developments

¹³ For more information over this issue see Bubalo 2001: 21-33; Helsinski Odbor za Ljudska Prava u Srbiji 1997: 71-76.

¹⁴ Interview with the manager of Novi Sad based refugee NGO (March 12th, 2001).

¹⁵ On this issue see Bubalo 2001b: 3.

have resulted from the more active involvement of the international factor, as dictated by the Dayton Agreement. Indeed, Section VII of the Agreement has enabled quite a few Bosnian Serb refugees to obtain citizenship of Bosnia-Herzegovina and regain their homes and other abandoned property¹⁶. According to the Belgrade daily *Danas*, approximately 114,000 refugees of Serbian nationality had returned to Bosnia-Herzegovina, from Serbia and elsewhere, by late autumn 1999¹⁷.

Nevertheless, the Bosnian Serb refugees who have so far chosen the option of repatriation are essentially those who own property or have family and friends in the territory of Republika Srpska. The case of the Bosnian Serb refugees who originate from the Croat-Muslim federation is rather different. These refugees' incentives for return are blocked by a feeling of insecurity. Indeed, some Bosnian Serb refugees went back to the Croat-Muslim federation only to return to Vojvodina a few months later. Finally, as far as the 'internally displaced persons' from Kosovo are concerned, the current prospects and their intention to return are virtually non-existent.

Table 5. Internally displaced persons from Kosovo in Vojvodinian municipalities (as in October 1999)

Zapadnobački okrug (Sombor)	1,139
Južnobanatski okrug (Pančevo)	3,050
Južnobatski okrug (Novi Sad)	1,500
Severnobanatski okrug (Kikinda)	580
Severnobački okrug (Subotica)	2,500
Sremski okrug (Sremska Mitrovica)	550
TOTAL	12,590

Source: Statistical data offered courtesy of the 'Humanitarian Centre for Integration and Tolerance', Novi Sad.

EMIGRATION TO A 'THIRD' COUNTRY

Apart from repatriation, an alternative option to social integration is emigration to a 'third' (mainly Western) country. At this point, it might be interesting to mention some empirical evidence with regard to the social adaptation of Serbian refugees in the United Kingdom. The information presented below is taken from a survey carried out by the sociologist Gordana Vuksanović in the greater Oxford area, between late

¹⁶ For some detailed information over the repatriation of Serbian refugees to Bosnia-Herzegovina see Bubalo 2001c: 1-29.

¹⁷ On this issue see *Danas*, November 24th, 1999, at: <http://www.danas.co.yu>.

1996 and early 1997. The findings of the survey paint a negative picture, with regard to the refugees' prospects of adaptation to the new environment.

First of all, there have been certain cultural barriers. The most notable of them is the problem of cultural differences with the domestic population, which has hindered the establishment of successful communication between refugees and locals. Even the local British Serbs were regarded as rather 'Anglicized'. On the other hand, many refugees did not demonstrate any effort to learn English because they regarded their stay in the United Kingdom as temporary. With a poor knowledge of the English language and equally poor prospects for return to the old territory, many adult refugees in the greater Oxford area and elsewhere in Britain remained unemployed. Most refugees in the survey expressed a wish to return to the former Yugoslavia. Fearing to return to their native places of origin, though, they often expressed their intention to settle in Vojvodina, a place where many of them had relatives and friends.¹⁸ Indeed, the medium of emigration to a 'third' country has not been particularly popular among Vojvodina's refugee population¹⁹. The refugees are discouraged by the prospects of moving to a geographically remote as well as culturally different environment.

CONCLUSION

The majority of Serb refugees in Vojvodina seem to opt for their integration into Vojvodinian society. According to the present circumstances, this appears to be the most feasible option. Judging from the current circumstances, the most effective way to integrate (not assimilate) the refugees into Vojvodinian society might be through a fruitful combination of economic assistance and cultural tolerance. However, it should be borne in mind that the refugees constantly oscillate among the following options: a. social integration; b. repatriation to their native places of origin (most commonly these refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina); and c. emigration to a 'third' country. Indeed, according to the 2002 UNHCR census, there were 160,806 fewer refugees stationed in the territories of Serbia and Montenegro than according to the 1996 registration. It is exactly this mobility of the refugees that makes them a very 'dynamic' group and no precise data about them can be available.

¹⁸ See the findings of this survey in Vuksanović 1997: 225, 227-78.

¹⁹ For example, less than 3 percent of the refugees stationed in Bačka Palanka expressed the desire to emigrate to the West. For this figure see Čolović 1997: 59. Also, a mere 7.62 percent of the refugee population expressed the same desire in Novi Kneževac (Northern Banat) as well. For this figure see Bugarski 1997: 208.

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