

## PRELIMINARY REPORT

The International Regional Conference **“Inclusion and Integration in Diverse Societies: Strategies and Experiences of Diversity Management in Central and South-Eastern Europe”** was organized by the Institute for Ethnic Studies and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Zagreb office and held at the City Hotel in Ljubljana, Slovenia on Friday and Saturday, 28 and 29 November 2014. The conference was one of important events in the program that celebrates the Ninetieth Anniversary of the Institute for Ethnic Studies in 2015.

All participants and organizers agreed that the conference was a very successful one and expressed their hope that this conference was the first one in a long-term process of discussing strategies and policies of diversity management, integration and inclusion that will be followed by regular annual or biannual conferences. Considering the quality of discussions and the outcomes of our conference, it was suggested that the optimal format of the future conferences might be a combination of the format of focused scholarly conferences discussing specific topics related to (socially relevant) diversities and management thereof, integration and inclusion and the format of brainstorming conferences that will focus on the discussions of broader framework and the elaboration of elements of possible successful strategies of diversity management, integration and inclusion in the region and at all relevant levels (from local and national to the global levels).

What follows, is not an exhaustive conference report (all presentations and discussions were recorded and are available at the IES, although the quality of recording might not always be the best), but rather a brief overview, summary and evaluation that will serve as the basis for the preparation of the presentation of conference outcomes for the traditional regional Conference on National Minorities, organized by the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Zagreb and supported by FES to be held in Brijuni, Croatia in 2015.

The general conclusions of participants are that the conference was timely and necessary, and that the concept paper offered a good basis and framework for the discussions that addressed topics that are relevant for the past, present and future of the countries of the region, the region, Europe, as well as globally. A particular quality of the conference was that it was a multi- and interdisciplinary one and that it managed to address the topics from different perspectives, combining different approaches and disciplines. In this context the diversity of participants – considering their background, different professional and social roles (scholars, politicians, public opinion leaders, civic society activists, practitioners, public servants, etc.) as well as their different theoretical, value and ideological positions – proved to be an important advantage and an approach that shall be followed also in the future conferences. However, such a structure of conference participants requires that special attention is paid to terminological, conceptual and methodological issues, which proved to be an excellent basis for the discussions addressing general topics as well as specific cases. It is important to note that substantive and important differences (conditioned by a specific

situation, social setting and unique conditions, historic, social and economic development, diverse needs and interests, etc.) exist in every environment. Consequently, broad generalizations are hardly possible, although certain similarities and common features might be detected in different and diverse environments. These facts need to be taken into account also in developing, (re)shaping and executing of strategies and policies of diversity management, integration and inclusion at all levels as well as in coordination of those strategies in ways that will provide for their synergies.

Considering the makeup of participants, it was logical that the discussions started with terminological and conceptual questions that stressed the importance of the practice that every term, definition and concept as well as possible theory needs to be presented and described clearly and extensively, taking into account that no language is value and/or ideology neutral. As all social and natural phenomena languages are complex, dynamic constantly evolving/changing processes with their relational (social), spatial (considering the actual geographic space as well as imagined and mythical territories and spaces) and temporal dimensions. Each of dimensions as well as types of change – evolutions and revolutions – in society, space and time condition social processes; often we try to describe social phenomena as situations (static cross-cuts of social relations in time and space) and build our definitions and concepts accordingly, reducing their complexity (that might be extremely difficult to detect and comprehend) and overlooking their dynamic nature. Such simplifications – more precisely simplified explanations of realities – might be important and necessary for our awareness and comprehension of complex social phenomena (as processes) and societies; however, we shall be aware of their reductionist nature. Consequently, terms, definitions, concepts, (theoretical) models and theories should not be confused with the reality. Rather, it should be recognized that they are tools and yardsticks (measures) that we agree upon and can be used to analyze and describe our realities characterized by the existence of multiple and multidimensional diversities.

All terms and concepts are ideological (value conditioned) and could be considered problematic in certain contexts. This is true also for the central terms and concepts discussed at the conference, such as: pluralism/plurality, diversity, interests and needs, interdependence, inclusion – exclusion, equality – inequality, (social) (re)distribution, integration, identity (observed as identity processes), ethnicity, divisions and cleavages (including walls), cohesion and solidarity, justice, democracy, etc. Some concepts – such as e.g., nation-states, nationalism, uniformity (e.g. nationalistic understanding of “national unity”), homogeneity, social engineering (although all social and political actions are in a way attempts of social engineering) and diversity management, etc. – might be considered particularly problematic and ideological, possibly dangerous; however, they exist (occupy certain social space) and are used in the scholarly and public discourse. Consequently, they should not be ignored. Rather, they should be analyzed and deconstructed – in order to detect and present their limitations and bias nature – constantly. For these reasons the

participants agreed that always terms and concepts (particularly the way we understand and use them) should be described and explained, while certain terms, such as diversity, interdependence, inclusion, participation (in all spheres of social life, particularly cultural, economic, social and political life), openness, justice, equality, solidarity, integration, etc. as well as diversity management (regulation and management of diversities) could be promoted as positive values, standards and (long-term) social goals in our societies that should be the basis for common ideologies and integral strategies and policies of diversity management, integration and inclusion at all levels. The discussions at the conference confirmed the suggestions in the concept paper that past and current strategies and policies of inclusion, integration and diversity management (including minority protection and non-discrimination as well as concepts and policies of segregation, assimilation, “melting pot,” guest-workers, multi- and inter-culturalism, voluntary integration, etc.) have been proved inadequate and limited.

In addition to general – more conceptual and theoretical – issues also more specific themes (e.g., democratization and transition(s), post-conflict justice, the role of branches of government, standards of democracy, human and minority rights, protection of minorities, communication – particularly multicultural communication, multi- and interculturalism, the role of local communities and public administration, etc.) and case studies (e.g., Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia – particularly Vojvodina and its South, Croatia, Slovenia, etc.) were discussed. In this context, positive experiences and practices as well as problems and open issues were addressed considering how experiences and findings from certain environments can be useful for other ones. However, it was stressed that positive experiences and practices (including the ones developed within the project “BUILDING THE PEACE REGION ALPS-ADRIA (PRAA) – ENVISIONING THE FUTURE BY DEALING WITH THE PAST: Open and Inclusive Public Discourse within Austria and Slovenia and between the Countries”) are always place and time specific and could not be directly and simply transplanted from one environment to the other.

At the end a special thanks go to those who by organizing the event and taking care of everything (organizational issues, transportation, communication with participants and hotel, etc.) made this International Regional Conference possible and contributed to its success: The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Zagreb agreed to finance the event and we managed to organize an international scholarly conference in a month which in itself is a remarkable result; additionally FES took care of communication with participants and logistical issues regarding travel of participants. You, Ditmar Dirmoser and Ivana Jonjić Paučinac were amazing. Thank you. At the Institute for Ethnic Studies for their contributions to the organization of the conference I need to thank Danijel Grafenauer and Sofija Zver as well as Sonja Novak Lukanovič, director of the IES. Special thanks for her assistance go also to Renata Ribezl.

Mitja Žagar, coordinator of the conference