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Cres Summer School on Transitional Justice and the Politics of Memory

Over the past summer, I was selected by the EU Center of California to attend the Cres Summer School on Transitional Justice and the Politics of Memory in Croatia. Cres, a very small island right off of the coast of Croatia, was a beautiful, Balkan location bustling with cultural, historical, social, and political intersections that reflect the brevity and complexity of the former Yugoslavia's history. The summer school itself, hosted on Cres, did a fantastic job bringing a diverse group of both scholars and lecturers from all factions of life: from variances of academic and professional backgrounds, age, vocational goals, and cultural upbringings. Everyone at the Cres summer school had a unifying interest in concepts ranging from international relations, human rights, accurately utilizing historical narratives, and ways in which societies transition from a state of political, economic, or social displacement towards a more democratic structure of stability.

Nevertheless, regardless of the variety of backgrounds, interests, or intentions of the students and lecturers at the summer school, all of those attending the program left the beautiful island with an altered perception of transitional justice and its importance in giving a voice to those who have been historically and systematically silenced – from the former Yugoslavian region to Indonesia to the recent Arab Spring-affected countries like Bahrain. I especially left Cres with an altered perception of my own interests, switching from a Politics major to an International Relations major in order to curate my path of studies in a way that will allow me to

develop my understandings of the world, travel via foreign service work, and catalyze more bureaucratic amendment that ensures the narratives often left untold throughout history are given the platform to heal and grow in the right direction.

Transitional justice is best defined by guest lecturer of the program, Meireke Weirda. Meireke described transitional justice as a home-grown and internal process from within a society that seeks accountability, democratization, inclusivity within a society, and reconciliation for the victims of a specific event – whether it'd be a war, revolution, or genocide. The politics of memory was discussed through a multitude of frameworks and angles, but I best understand it as a historical and academic taboo in which people choose to memorialize or commemorate the victims and/or the victors in a way that may erase specific narratives or devalue the pedagogy of a history with *many* sides. I would absolutely recommend this program to anyone interested in any of the aforementioned vocational and academic intentions and schools of thought – whether you may want to work for the International Criminal Court, the United Nations, go into academia, or simply learn more about transitional justice and the politics of memory in the beautiful Balkans area, this program will alter your perception on history, society, and the way conglomerates of people work and think – from the people who commit the crime, to the victims, to the judicial structures that determine how to move forward.

This program exposes those fortunate enough to experience it to concepts like transitional justice and memory politics, both extremely relevant and still socially potent in Croatia, and it does so in a way that brings these concepts to life to show their implications in *practice* rather than just in theory. Being face to face with some of humanity's darkest concepts such as war, genocide, and crimes against humanity was an experience that has helped me to

mature and grow into a more empathetic and conscious student aware of the nuances of the politics of memory and the ways in which symbols of commemoration affect their respective communities. These concepts were brought to life by visiting northern Croatian cities such as Vukovar and Osijek, both still very destroyed and visually representative of the damage from the 1990s Yugoslav wars. I was removed from my comfort zone with visiting war-torn cities still rebuilding and healing; however, I was also simultaneously able to develop and establish beautiful, life-lasting relationships with new friends from Italy, Brazil, South Africa, and all over cities in the U.S. I was able to swim through beautiful sea caves off the coast of Croatia, a sight more beautiful than any number of poetic descriptors could justify, and I was also able to converse with some of the most respected scholars, foreign service officers, lawyers, and activists of the world over lunch or an espresso.

To say the least, this program was quite the multi-faceted experience complete with intellectually stimulating conversations and conscious-building visits to war-torn Croatian cities; nevertheless, this program also exposed me to amazing like-minded friends, the beautiful Adriatic coast, and the culturally diverse history and social atmosphere of the Balkan island, Cres. Without a doubt, this program, made possible by the EU Center of Scripps, was definitely an unforgettable and life-shaping experience.

SUMMER SCHOOL ON TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY IN CRES, CROATIA

My first introduction to the concept of transitional justice was in the classroom. In my first year, I took a class on “Violence, Media and Transitional Justice”, taught by a media and communication studies scholar. It was a challenging and fulfilling class, as we attempted to work through the complexities of defining “transitional justice” and balancing the trade-offs between different priorities and mechanisms. This summer school program thus enabled me to sink my teeth further into these ideas, and more importantly, helped me to examine some of the assumptions and biases I held. As an intrinsically interdisciplinary field, I realized that ideas of transitional justice can look very different depending on which perch we are on; the good thing about the summer school is that it exposes us to many scholars and fields at one go, and allows us to rapidly develop a road map of the entire field and the main debates within it. In particular, I gained a deeper knowledge of the legal origins of the field, and thought more deeply about the relationship between transitional justice and human rights. Is transitional justice about upholding human rights in the context of transition and scale, or is human rights a subset of transitional justice, and should serve the purpose of reconciliation and moving forward?

A big sub-field of transitional justice is about dealing and remembering the past, and there are few better places in the world to learn about memory politics than in the Balkans. Our lectures came to life in a short day trip to the nearby city of Rijeka and a 3-day field trip to Osijek and Vukovar. The former city is a historically and culturally rich city, carrying the legacy of the Habsburg, Ottomans, Romans, Italians and socialist Yugoslavia, while the latter were the sites of some of the most intense fighting during the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s. Memory politics was all around us. The battle for the narrative extended into street names, choice of language script, to the museums, sites of remembrances, the classroom, the newspapers and even to cemeteries. I was also fortunate to spend the following 2 weeks after the program travelling through Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia – I met amazing and friendly locals in all of these places, but they also told me significantly different accounts of the 1990s conflict, and impressed upon me the intractability of the conflict and its legacies on contemporary politics.

While the program had its grounding in the Balkan region, it also had breadth, and brought in various comparative and international perspectives. Some of the highlights include an overview lecture by Marieke Wierda, a lawyer and scholar who worked for a decade with the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ); a conversation with Joshua Oppenheimer, director of the acclaimed films, *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* which spotlight the culture of impunity following the 1965 mass killings in Indonesia; and a lecture by Mohamed Arafat on the intersections between Islamic law and transitional justice.

In sum, I thoroughly enjoyed the program, and would recommend it to anyone with an interest in the themes of transitional justice, human rights, international criminal law, and memory politics. The unique set-up of the program: a small, highly international classroom located on an island in the Mediterranean Sea, with ample opportunities built into the schedule for off-the-grid conversations with both lecturers and classmates, also helped shaped this into a fun and rewarding program.