

## REMEMBERED BUT NOT FORGOTTEN: The Erased of Slovenia

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Irfan Beširević was 'erased' in 1992 and lived in for 11 years with no official identity in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

34 at the time, had lived his whole life in Slovenia, his parents having moved from Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1958 when he was one year old.

At the time, the former Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was made up of seven people's republics. Citizens of various republics had the right to live and work in any of the other republics under Yugoslav federal law. When Slovenia declared its independence, nationally issued Yugoslav identity papers ceased to be valid and bureaucrats within the new Slovenian government began a systematic removal of any and all records of Slovenian residents originating from the other Yugoslavian republics. Beširević, who had only known life in Slovenia, was without warning or notification removed from the system. His identity was literally erased.

Upon reporting for his initial status hearing, Beširević was told that he had missed a special six month window established for former Yugoslav citizens to sort out their immigration status. Later, at a second hearing, Beširević discovered that the first clerk had lied to him and he had not, in fact, missed the window at the time of the first meeting. Beširević suspects that he was lied to because his name is Bosnian in origin, not Slovenian, a common story among many of the 'Erased.'

At the second meeting, Beširević was told that this time he actually had missed the window and he was now officially an illegal alien.

Beširević recalls, "I presented my identity card and the clerk immediately punched two holes in it." Beširević said, "I was told to get my original birth records from Bosnia, so I went to the Bosnian Embassy in Ljubljana. They told me I had to go to Bosnia myself to sort out the problem."

In March 1992 Bosnia and Herzegovina was plunged into a bloody and brutal civil war. News reports coming from Beširević's 'home' country told chilling stories of the mass killing of civilians, killings based only on ethnicity. Beširević choose not to return to Bosnia. "I decided not to go back," Beširević says, "I was afraid that I would be killed."

When Slovenia proclaimed its independence from Yugoslavia, there were approximately 200,000 non-Slovenians living in the newly independent country, including many citizens from other former Yugoslav republics. While these new 'foreigners,' the majority from other surrounding European countries, were able to immediately rectify their immigration status, an estimated 25,000 were cast into a bureaucratic black hole, leaving them with no identities, unable to leave and unable to access state services.

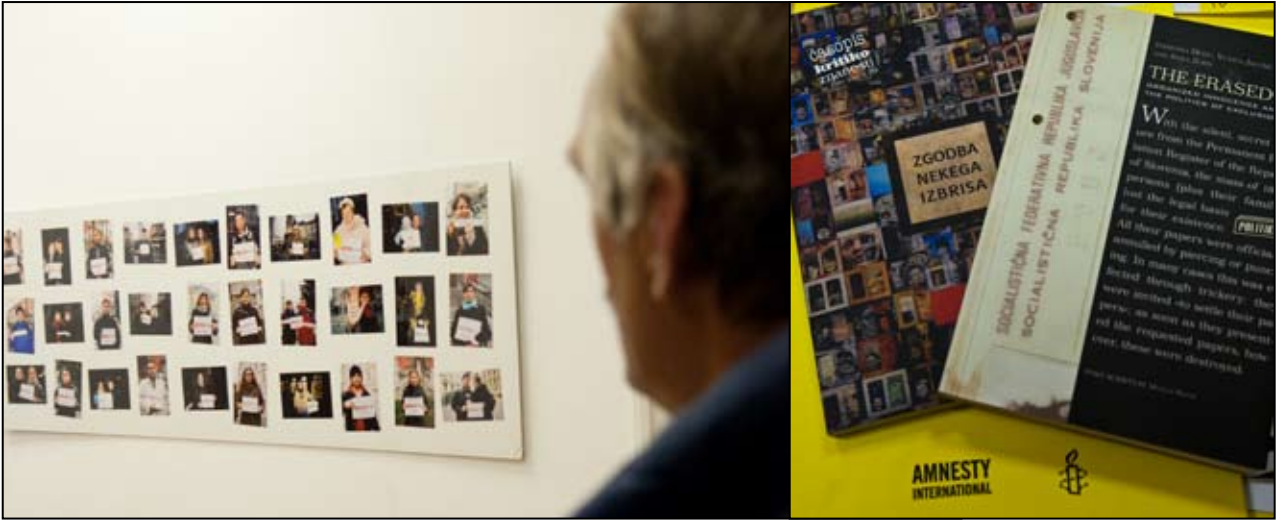
For these people, known as 'The Erased,' the long nightmare of their non-existence is finally coming to an end. In the past few years, the Slovenian Constitutional Court has made several key rulings and Slovenian politicians are finally putting the finishing touches on a law which will be submitted in an upcoming parliamentary session that would resolve a number of remaining issues, such as lost retirement benefits and access to health care. But the effects of 17 long years of erasure are not easily resolved.

Irfan Beširević, 51, waiter and activist, first learned of his erasure when, in 1992 while convalescing in hospital from serious injuries sustained in a car accident, he was called to report for an administrative hearing to determine his status. Beširević, who was



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After Beširević was 'erased,' he was not allowed to legally work or own property and, in 1993, his wife divorced him and he lost custody of his children.



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With help from Amnesty International, the Peace Institute and other activists in Slovenia, the 'Erased' formed their own organizations to lobby for changes and to carry out public awareness campaigns.

Left: Beširević looks at photos from a public awareness campaign in which Slovenians were photographed on the street holding the names of the 'Erased.' Right: Several books have been published documenting the plight of the 'Erased,' and numerous reports have submitted to the UN and other international human rights agencies. A selection of these can be found at the end of the document.

From that moment onward, Beširević began living in a twilight world in which he had no rights and no status. Barred from the possibility of legal work, Beširević could not afford to purchase the flat he and his family had been living in. After the independence, the Slovenian government instituted a special program for tenants to purchase their formerly government-assigned housing for relatively low cost. But, Beširević was not allowed to own property.

Beširević recalls, "after we were told that I could not buy our flat, my Slovenian wife divorced me and I had to move out." As a result, he lost custody of his two children in 1993. Oddly enough, the civil bureau responsible for marriage had no problem in processing his divorce.

For the next ten years Beširević did what he could to survive on a day-to-day basis. After a few years, another 'Erased' contact was able to find housing for Beširević in trade for Beširević's labor; in effect Beširević became a modern day indentured servant for other Slovenians who were prospering under the uncertain but lucrative economic opportunities gained with the independence. At times Beširević worked as a waiter, a baby sitter, a gardener or manual laborer.

Slowly, very slowly, the issue of the 'Erased' started to become known to other civil society organizations and human rights activists. Some of the 'Erased' were so afraid and ashamed to speak out that they did not even know their friends or acquaintances were also erased. Beširević recalls the story of his friend who, for 11 years, didn't know that seven others whom the friend was close with also belonged to the 'Erased.'

Gradually, the 'Erased' began to organize themselves and, with the help of Amnesty International and other activists, were able to form their own group to lobby for changes in the law and to raise the issue in view of the general public. In 2002 they formed the Association of the Erased Residents of Slovenia (DIPS); later, in 2005, a second organization was formed, the Civil Initiative of Erased Activists (CIIA).



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Beširević spends his time shuffling between offices, working to solve both his own issues and those other 'Erased.'

In 1999 and again in 2003, the Constitutional Court of Slovenia ruled that the act of erasure was unconstitutional. In both cases, however, the government and parliament were slow to respond or to take meaningful action to comply with the court's rulings. The 2003 ruling also ordered the government to develop procedures to retroactively apply correction to administrative records for the missing years of those who had been erased.

In that same year, 11 years after his erasure, Beširević was granted his Slovenian citizenship. But his fight is not over yet. Without medical treatment, Beširević's medical condition worsened over the years and he is now unable to hold a regular job.



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A group of activists have established the 'ROG Social Center' at the formerly state run ROG bicycle factory, which collapsed in 1991 and has sat abandoned since. ROG users work on a variety of critical social issues, including the plight of the 'Erased.'

Left: At night, grounds of the ROG bicycle factory. Right: Activists meet regularly at the 'ROG Social Center' to plan events and activities.

After his car accident, a metal plate was inserted into his pelvis; however, it turns out that Beširević is allergic to the metal that was put into his body. The physicians can't remove the plate because the original operation placed the plate too close to a major nerve. Removing it now would risk forever crippling Beširević.

Compounding his problems, Beširević lost his place to live and now has to squat illegally in an abandoned building. "I have my citizenship now, but I still do not have the right to have a home. I can't afford to pay for my own place because I can't work and the government is slow to provide me with housing," he laments.

According to the 2003 court rulings, the government must account for Beširević's time while he had no records, but frequent trips to the state pension fund and housing offices to sort out the issues produce only slow results as the bureaucracy continues to grind through the intricacies of non-existence. Non-existence, it seems, has a kind of persistence.

These days, Beširević spends his time shuffling between government offices and working as an activist on behalf of other 'Erased.'



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At the former state-owned ROG bicycle factory, which collapsed in 1991, a collective of activists and other organizations established The ROG Social Center in the abandoned factory premises. Participants of the ROG Social Center work collectively on a wide range of pressing social issues in Slovenia and the Balkans region. With help from the ROG, Beširević and other 'Erased' activists meet regularly to plan events and activities to maintain pressure on the government to follow through on the mandates from the courts.

When reflecting on his experience, Beširević displays a mixture of resignation and profound unbending determination. He knows that what happened to him was a result of specific, high-level political decisions made by those in power during Slovenia's early days of independence. "I want them to know they are responsible," he says, "they took 11 years of my life away from me." He also knows that little or nothing can be done to those who were in control during at the time.

But he is also determined. Determined not only to gain access to health care and housing, but also to continue to stand up for the rights of the 'Erased' and others living in precarious and marginal situations. For Beširević, it is important that no one else suffers a similar fate, be it in Slovenia or elsewhere. Beširević's sensibilities even stretch across the Atlantic to civil rights issues in the United States, a land founded on the idea of freedom and the twin premises of liberty and equality. But, as Beširević knows, if you are not recognized you cannot be free. "Every day I wake up and think, what can I do to help others who are worse off than myself?"

Undaunted, Beširević, continues to work in the hopes that no one else will ever suffer a similar fate.

## Selected Resources & Further Reading

### Web Sites

- Association of the Erased Residents of Slovenia  
<http://www.izbrisan17let.si>  
[In English and Slovenian]
- Human Rights Press Point  
<http://www.humanrightspoint.si/node/9>  
[In English]
- ROG Users Collective  
<http://www.tovarna.org/>  
[In Slovenian]

### Books and Reports

- Dedić, Jasminka and Vlasta Jalušič and Jelka Zorn. *THE ERASED: Organized Innocence and the Politics of Exclusion*, Peace institute, Ljubljana, 2003.  
The full publication is available in PDF format from this link  
[http://www.humanrightspoint.si/files/att/Erased\\_book%20MI.pdf](http://www.humanrightspoint.si/files/att/Erased_book%20MI.pdf)  
[In English]
- Zorn, Jelka and Uršula Lipovec Čebren, Editors. *Once Upon an Erasure: From Citizens to Illegal Residents in the Republic of Slovenia*, Študentska založba, Ljubljana, 2008  
The full publication is available in PDF format from this link  
[http://www.izbrisan17let.si/pdf/once\\_upon\\_an\\_erasure\\_combine.pdf](http://www.izbrisan17let.si/pdf/once_upon_an_erasure_combine.pdf)
- Amnesty International  
2005 Report by AI to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on the issue of the Erased  
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR68/004/2005/en>  
[In English]
- Amnesty International  
Amnesty International's Briefing to the United Nations Human Rights Council 9th Session  
September 2008  
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR68/001/2008/en>  
[In English]