Branislav Radeljic (Associate Professor of International Politics at the University of East London) gave the first Noontime Scholars Lecture of the summer on June 16. Entitled “European Community – Yugoslav Relations: Documents that Mattered (1980-1992),” his lecture explored the complicated interactions between the European Community (a precursor to the European Union) and the former Yugoslavia as reflected in the archives. Official relations between Yugoslavia and the European Community were established in 1978, making Yugoslavia the first Eastern European country to have an ambassador to the European Community. While Yugoslavia primarily viewed a relationship with the European Community in economic terms (as a key source of financial aid during difficult economic times), the European Community approached its relationship with Yugoslavia in political terms.

The focus of Prof. Radeljic’s lecture was on the content available in the European Union archive in Brussels, Belgium, which traced the relationship between the European Community and Yugoslavia during the two decades before the 1992-1995 war that resulted in the breakup of Yugoslavia. In the 1980s, especially after the death of Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito in 1980, discourse about the links between the European Community and Yugoslavia became more explicit. Political cooperation was necessary for a stable economic relationship. However, the European Community’s perception of Yugoslavia was confusing as it knew very little about the country. It increasingly viewed its relationship with Yugoslavia with skepticism. Yugoslavia’s serious troubles in the 1980s led some members of the European Parliament (the legislative assembly of the European Community) to claim that Yugoslavia was an “artificial” entity that would fail. Though the country kept requesting aid, it never managed to reform. As indicated in the archive documents in Brussels, Yugoslav official visits (and the documents describing those visits) became longer in an effort to convince European Community authorities to support Yugoslavia. When Yugoslavia sought additional economic aid, the European Community kept Yugoslavia as a partner mostly as a way to preserve the Yugoslav state. Even as a partner, Yugoslavia was in a weaker status, demonstrated by the high presence of guest workers in Western Europe and the difficulties for Yugoslavia and its successor states (such as Serbia) to export products to the European Union.

Politically, the European Community was unable to form a solution to the Yugoslav crisis. Although European Community officials acknowledged the problem of the 1981 Kosovo conflict (Kosovo’s first declaration of independence, in which the Yugoslav army quelled riots and demonstrations in the country’s poorest region), they did not pay enough attention to the conflict and only exacerbated their own communication problems. Aside from the debate whether the Kosovo Serbs or the Kosovo Albanians were the real victims of the conflict, the problem of Kosovo was largely ignored. Additionally, the European Community tried to ensure that if any Yugoslav republics declared independence, they would not seek territorial claims toward their neighbors (specifically, those neighbors that were part of the European Community). In response, Slovenia (an
economically well-performing republic that did not like sending money to the central Yugoslav government to distribute to poorer republics) argued that it “deserved” to be recognized as an independent state or else a conflict would occur along the Community’s borders. Croatia, another well-performing republic, also argued that it “deserved” to be independent and belong to Europe.

Prof. Radeljic’s lecture importantly used archival records to examine the relationship between the European Community and Yugoslavia prior to the crisis and subsequent war that tore the country apart. Very few scholars have studied that relationship before the war, despite Yugoslavia’s significant amount of contact with and reception of aid from the West during the 1970s and 1980s. Those two decades were also when Yugoslavia experienced political and economic crises that would eventually result in its dissolution. Prof. Radeljic’s research effectively fills a hole in the existing scholarship about the former Yugoslavia and brings up issues that would be beneficial in analyses of current European Union policies toward Eastern Europe.

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