

**Comparative Analysis of the Adaptation and Integration Processes
among Kurdish and Yugoslav Immigrants in Alberta**

Final Research Report

Submitted by

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To

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***Comparative Analysis of the Adaptation and Integration Processes
among Kurdish and Yugoslav Immigrants in Alberta***

Executive summary

Subject: Analysis of the adaptation and integration process of the two recent immigrant groups in Alberta (Canada) – Kurdish and Yugoslav.

Objectives:

- ◆ To compare the two groups: Kurdish and Yugoslav immigrants, find similarities and differences in terms of their integration patterns.
- ◆ To identify key social integration determinants and explain the social context that makes them relevant for each group.
- ◆ Document immigrants self-assessment in terms of their own perception about the overall successful or unsuccessful integration into Canadian society.
- ◆ To identify key policy relevant issues and make recommendations of the areas that need change.

Methodology:

- ◆ Qualitative research methodology included interviews, secondary data analysis, focus groups
- ◆ Grounded theory approach – development of the conceptual framework from available data.
- ◆ Conducted were 25 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Kurdish immigrants in Calgary and 45 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Yugoslav immigrants (Calgary).
- ◆ Deployed were judgement and snow-ball sampling technique
- ◆ Two focus group meetings were held in order to identify key dimensions of the research as well as to develop key research questions.

Findings, conclusions:

- ◆ Several key relevant domains were selected for analysis based on information gathered through interviews, they are as follows: political discourse, ethnic and national identity, nationalism, attitude towards the homeland, citizenship and civic participation, community.
- ◆ Based on our comparative analysis of the two immigrant groups identified were several key points of difference as well as similarities.
- ◆ Similarities: more or less simultaneous period of immigration ; shared push/pull factors related to political and economic crisis in their countries of origin ; exposure to oppressive political regimes and warfare, traumatic refugee experiences ; potential for internal division within both groups (political and ethnic differences) ; both groups formed so called fragile communities subject to numerous potential cracks along the political, ethnic, religious and other lines. In both

groups modal individuals are identified who could be placed into two opposing poles – on one side are educated, English proficient individuals with previous immigrant experiences and skills, while at the other pole are those who are low educated, have no English knowledge and have few or none of the so called immigrant skills.

- ◆ Differences: while among the Kurdish group there is a strong sense of ‘community’, which is defined as those of Kurdish nationality coming from predominantly Iraqi Kurdistan, there is a weak sense of ‘community’ among the former Yugoslav immigrants. Internal divisions in their homeland were reflected in somewhat segregational social patterns in Canada. This fact did not help create a number sub-communities of ex-Yugoslavs, but rather weakened the need to create or belong to a national, or ethno-regional community of the former compatriots ; different attitude towards the homeland (while among the Kurds it is the notion of Kurdistan and the idea guided by the liberal nationalism that all Kurds should one day live in one land, among the Yugoslav the notion of homeland was dissolving as the years went by, and out of formerly one state several political units were formed) ; while liberal nationalism is seen as a positive political concept among the Kurds which allows them to organize and believe in their future joint homeland for all Kurds, among the Yugoslavs nationalism is seen as a negative concept blamed for recent inter-ethnic conflicts)

Policy recommendations

- ◆ Policy recommendations: more flexibility is needed in designing and implementing (delivering) immigrant programs to better suite needs of individual groups. For example more diversified ESL programs, or longer ESL programs (currently it is one year on a government sponsored ESL program which is not enough time for those who have low literacy levels and no knowledge of English at the starts).
- ◆ More standardized, unified accreditation procedures in different professions and trades. Immigrants often have little if any information about the way they can achieve accreditation for their foreign diplomas and training. Those information are scattered and too general.
- ◆ For large families employment of one or two family members can hardly fulfil existential needs, therefore social welfare trap appears an important issue in Kurdish group. One policy recommendation would be to look at the possible ways to enable productive family members to find employment, while *at the same time* financially assisting to meet the minimum economic need of such a family.

FINAL REPORT

PCERII FUNDED RESEARCH PROJECT-

Comparative analysis of the adaptation and integration processes among Kurdish and Yugoslav immigrants in Alberta

1. Statement of the problem

This research was a second part of a larger project that looked at the integration among the immigrant groups in Alberta. The main goal was to conduct research that would enable comparison between the two groups of immigrants in focus – Kurdish and Yugoslav immigrants in Alberta. We wanted to define key variables and dimensions of the integration by looking at group characteristics and migration patterns (in particular identifying key push/pull factors). Since this was a grounded theory approach, key research areas emerged in the process of research, in particular after two focus group meetings and identification of the key areas to explore further. Through our research we identified key *emic* social integration determinants and described the social context which makes them relevant. We also traced down informant self-assessment or ethno-explication: personal evaluation of one's own immigrant situation in order to understand the proper context and meaning of words such as: integration, isolation, internal group divisions, political orientation, being an outsider / insider etc. Some of the relevant rhetorical questions at this level were: Why am I here, what do I want to achieve, how am I going to achieve it, how do I measure compared to other immigrants in Canada, what is the measure of success / failure in Canada? Finally, based on collected data analysis we wanted to make relevant policy recommendation firmly grounded in insider's perceptions.

2. Methodology

Qualitative, ethnographic research methodology was deployed to collect data: participant observation, in-depth interviewing, but also organizing and facilitating focus groups, performing secondary data analysis (integration of available statistical data), and literature reviewing. Informants were selected by deploying snow-ball and judgement sampling techniques. In analyzing data, a grounded theory approach was deployed, which meant that the key research questions and conceptual framework was built from the data through the research process, as opposed to the more standard theoretical framework which is established prior to the research. This technique helped avoiding falling into pre-established theoretical models when it comes to researching immigration. For example, rather than working with the commonly accepted definitions and criteria of integration into Canadian society, by deploying grounded theory approach, we were able to construct a model from informant ethno-explication of the meaning of integration. We were also able to measure formal, official criteria for defining successful integration of immigrants in comparison with the ones stated by immigrants themselves.

Interviews were tape recorded or detailed notes were taken during the interview. Later, data were transcribed and organized for analysis as separate enumerated interviews (I 1 to 25). During the research, we worked with one co-researcher who was taking notes

and sometimes co-interviewing. Approximately 1/3 of the interviews were conducted with the help of a Kurdish interpreter. The small team was working throughout the months of July to November in gathering data through interviews.

3. *Data analysis*

Twenty five in depth interviews with Kurdish immigrants from Calgary were analyzed in this part of the research. In the first phase, forty five in-depth interviews with Yugoslav immigrants were analyzed, as well as data obtained through 120 questionnaires administered by mail. Since only Kurdish research has been funded by the PCERII grant, I will present here data analysis of the Kurdish group, with some comparative conclusions and findings relevant for both groups also listed at the end of this report.

Several dimensions are relevant for analysis of immigrants' interpretations of their 'lived experiences' (Goffman). They form the two opposing poles between so called *Kurdish* and *Canadian* discourses and *emic*, or insider versus *ethic* or outsider perspective. I will first analyze data relevant for the Kurdish discourse, and then introduce Canadian context and analyze data about the immigrant relationship to Canadian society.

It has been clear from the literature review and focus group meeting that there are several different groups of Kurdish people who immigrated to Calgary in the core years 1990 to 1995. Majority of the Kurdish immigrants were Sunni Muslims originating from Iraqi Kurdistan, but there were also other religions present in smaller numbers. Some Kurdish immigrant arrived from Turkey, and there was also a group of Kurdish immigrants who originated from Iran. In terms of the Iraqi Kurds, majority was of Badhanini (Badhini) background (approximately 80%) with the rest of Sorani background. The categorization refers to dialectical and regional group division which also has some social components. Overwhelming majority of Kurdish immigrants entered Canada as refugees. Majority of the Kurdish immigrants lived elsewhere as refugees prior to arriving to Canada, mostly living in Turkey, but also Pakistan, Greece, Iran..

Some of the problems with Kurdish immigrants were identified in 1996 pilot study done by the Mennonite center. Our research confirms some of those problems and identifies the new ones. Among the Kurdish immigrants there are significant levels of illiteracy (according to emic self-assessment half of the total number of Kurds in Calgary), and accordingly, low levels of English proficiency. The fact that significant number of Kurds are illiterate makes a profound impact on their ability to acquire English proficiency within the period of one year, which is the period of government English language learning sponsorship. Most informants felt that they needed more time in school. Lack of English proficiency and lack of professional skills, as well as low education also influenced the fact that there are significantly high levels of unemployment in this group, and high levels of those relying on social assistance. Other issues identified by the 1996 pilot study were female isolation and health issues. We determined, after interviewing both men and women of Kurdish background, that women in general do not feel isolated. They might project an image of isolation to the outsiders who deploy their own standards or measures of social engagement and involvement. When we asked women if they felt isolated the general attitude was that there was plenty to do taking care of often large

family, there was a lot of socializing but as a family not - females exclusively. If they feel lonesome Kurdish women telephone each other rather than to arrange to meet separately,. Health concerns were raised as an issue in the pilot, in particular in dealing with the post-war trauma and experiences in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1988-91. There was a campaign of bombing of Northern Iraq which is predominantly Kurdish. People experienced prolonged oppression, some were tortured in prisons. All those experiences account for diverse levels of psychological problems, one most prominent being depression, passivity, lack of initiative. Kurdish people have their own explanation about it: *when you came out of such hardship you just want to live.*

There is a significant level of residential dispersion in Kurdish group, when compared to some other immigrant groups that tend to form patterns of residence which enables members of group to remain in close geographical contact. One area of Northeast Calgary is an exception and hosts a significant number of Kurdish families who bought houses there. Kurdish immigrants are group oriented: they often refer to themselves in plural (we, Kurds do this or that, strive to achieve this or that), in their own words, group ties are strong and important. There were families who moved to Calgary for other places precisely because they felt isolated and without contacts with other Kurds. For those who arrived to Calgary from other places, channels for establishing contact with the Kurdish groups are diverse. Even visit to our University of Calgary public lecture on Kurdish immigrants served one family of Kurds from Turkey as a chance to connect with their own people. Later they were introduced to the Kurdish community.

Kurdish immigrants in Calgary want to create and maintain a unified community. However, there are potential problems and issues that can affect the maintenance of the fragile community. Political opinions served in the past, as well as today, as potential conflict trigger, therefore informants were of the opinion that it is safer not to discuss politics with your own people because you cannot afford to lose them over political disputes. The main catalyst of Kurdish strong sense of a community is Kurdish self-proclaimed *liberal nationalism* which served to unite them in their homeland against the oppressive regimes of the countries where they lived. The main universal goal is the creation of Kurdistan, a political dream of some twenty four million Kurds. Therefore they have a very special relationship with their homeland. They remain connected, if they can, they travel back and forth, but for most men it is dangerous to return of the fear of imprisonment. Nevertheless contacts are retained and flourishing, at each given point in time Kurds are well informed about the ongoing social and political issues in Kurdistan.

How do Kurds in Calgary define their identity? There were numerous statements that when analyzed, point at some very unique building blocks of Kurdish ethnic identity: *When I look at the mountains, like Rockies, I feel so powerful, so Kurdish ; I am Kurdish, it's not even the blood that makes me Kurdish ; it's the way we are brought up, all the past suffering that makes me Kurdish.* Such historic ethnic identities are explained in the literature as those arising from past suffering and hardship and strong bond that emerges out of such connections between people making them feel responsible to stay stronger, to be loyal to their common goals.

I will continue with a brief look at the Canadian context. Most Kurdish informants felt that coming to Canada was as being given a second chance to re-establish one's own life. There were diverse expectations of life in Canada, but for most of them expectations were a luxury - simply being able to move to another country and start living 'a normal life' again as refugees was seen as enough. Accordingly, most do not have huge ambitions about the achievements they want to make over the period of time in Canada.

In evaluating their immigrant experiences in Canada, it is important to note that immigrants often work within the parameters given by the institutional framework of Canadian government. For example: the programs that Canadian government set into place to help immigrants, how were Kurds benefiting or not benefiting from them, what are the expectations from them and what are their own views about how well they are doing in Canada. Kurdish immigrants discuss the notion of Canadian citizenship as a 'gift' and some claim that Canadians are unappreciative of that they have in terms of social and political stability in the country. Having a 'normal life' is often perceived as a luxury.

What are some of the stated, official goals about immigrant integration? We looked at some of the policy definitions and policy analysis. Those official views are diverse but they can be summarized as the idea that integration (which can be further divided into functional and structural) is a key factor in (civic) nation building (Hiller). In other words, the more immigrants integrate into Canadian society, the stronger will Canadian nation become. Immigrants have the *right* to integrate, but they are also under the *obligation* to integrate as far as official Canadian discourse is concerned. Integration as a desired goal and achieved state is seen as beneficial for both, receiving society and immigrant group in question. (Royal Commission of Biculturalism and Bilingualism). Different immigrant serving agencies in Calgary also have their own working definitions of integration: by establishing diverse support programs such as ESL program, employment finding programs, they want to help immigrants achieve functional integration into Canadian society. Functional in this case means self-sustainable and not falling into social assistance programs.

Through analysis of those official definitions of integration it appears meaningful to divide our discussion into the social integration (social ties and networks, friends, neighbors relations, peer groups) and functional or structural integration (inclusion and active participation in all aspect of Canadian life most important being work).

Kurdish immigrants are aware of such briefly presented discourses. In discussing their own situation they often debate about the available immigrant programs and external expectations. For example, they say: *they tell us Kurds are on social assistance, should work harder to find employment and be self-relying but they do not understand our situation. Majority of people coming from villages with no or little formal education, having large families with often more than ten, fifteen family members, it is hard for us to find employment that would provide enough money to feed the family. Many are staying on social assistance because it is the only solution.* Such statements reveal what has been

called the welfare trap. In this regard several recommendations for policy makers are delineated future in the text.

Social ties with the host society in Calgary are limited, and most of the social interaction occurs on the group level. Our informants were trying to explain to us such autarchic group outlook: *we are misunderstood - other people do not understand us, our situation. Our inner voice is very low. Can't reach out. We cannot explain our suffering ; Canadian do not want to listen to our hardships, when someone is in trouble people turn their heads, with us it is the opposite when someone is in trouble we all gather and help ; we depend on each other, we do not need to go to members of other cultures.* It is apparent that some social and cultural differences between immigrant and host society affect establishment of close ties or social ingration. Not sharing hardships, having a luxury of living 'normal lives', represent one key point of difference that our informants emphasized when copmparing Kurdish immigrants to receiving Calgarian society.

4. Research Findings: theoretical framework and comparisons between the Kurdish and Yugoslav immigrants in Calgary

From our data analysis it is meaningful to differentiate between Integration as a *process*, desired, or *stated goal* and *assessed status*. All three should be looked at the level of a *given immigrant group, host soociety* and *institutional frametwork* as it pertains to immigrants. Several relevant external and internal factors appear important when we talk about Kurdish integration. Those variables emerged throughout our grounded theory approach as immigrants were describing aspects relevant for their 'lived experiences' in Canada. Those factors are as follows:

1. Situation and characteristics of social and political system in country of origin - Kurdistan / former Yugoslavia (oppressive politcal regimes, global uncertainty, lack of the belief in official governmental institutions)
2. The situation and attitude of the host society in this case Calgary (somewhat receptive but unable to understand past hardship of immigrants / refugges and therefore lacking the ability to connect with them)
3. Time of immigration also makes an impact on the process of integration (most immigrants of both groups live in Calgary from five and more years, the period of time spent in the country makes a profound impact on immigrant's perceptions and stages of adaptation and integration)
4. Previous migrant experiences / status (most of them being refugees in other countries prior to coming go Canada, such experience provide them with immigrant skills necessary when arriving into a new country)
5. Individual / groups characteristics serve either as internal/external barriers to integration (for example illiteracy, no English knowledge, but also closeness of the

host society or enhancements (formal education, profession, English proficiency, also opens of the host society).

After delineating the framework for our research here are some of the key findings.

- ◆ Kurdish immigrants in Calgary represent a numerically smaller but highly specific group. What make them specific are circumstances surrounding their refugee experiences, hardships and search for the 'safe haven' in Canada. Their demographic portrait indicates that some social variables may be held accountable for their allegedly slower integration into Canadian society: lower levels of literacy, lower educational levels and lack of English proficiency, large families and inability to provide for them, inability to find employment.
- ◆ Kurdish immigrants have a strong sense of community and they want to preserve it from dissolving along political and other social cracks. There is a feeling that members of their own group provide them with comfort and security.
- ◆ Their attitude towards integration into Canadian society is complex. They are aware of the general expectation from the side of formal institutions that take care of immigrants. They feel that to some extent as a group they are not functionally integrating as it is expected from them. Their own idea of integration is complex too: while some recognize that in order to get functionally integrated they need to go to school, fight illiteracy and acquire English proficiency, others have a more passive attitude about the host society and feel that they have their own well integrated community which provides them with support and help and do not need to reach out and get involved in other aspects of Canadian life.
- ◆ Kurdish liberal nationalism and attitude towards homeland - Kurdsitan is a powerful organizational principle, which helps create and maintain group cohesion and solidarity in Canada. On the other hand their close connection with the old homeland hinders to some degree their involvement and integration into Canadian society

Several key relevant domains were selected for analysis based on information gathered through interviews, they are as follows: political discourse, ethnic and national identity, nationalism, attitude towards the homeland, citizenship and civic participation, community.

Based on our comparative analysis of the two immigrant groups identified were several key points of difference as well as similarities.

Similarities: more or less the same period of immigration ; push/pull factors related to political and economic crisis in their countries of origin ; exposure to oppressive political regimes and warfare, traumatic refugee experiences ; potential for internal division within both groups (political and ethnic differences) ; both groups formed so called fragile communities subject to numerous potential cracks along the political, ethnic, religious and other lines. In both groups modal individuals are identified who

could be placed into two opposing poles – on one side are educated, English proficient individuals with previous immigrant experiences and skills, while at the other pole are those who are low educated, have no English knowledge and have few or none of the so called immigrant skills.

Differences: while among the Kurdish group there is a strong sense of ‘community’, which is defined as those of Kurdish nationality coming from predominantly Iraqi Kurdistan, there is a weak sense of ‘community’ among the former Yugoslav immigrants (internal divisions in their homeland were reflected in somewhat segregational social patterns in Canada) ; different attitude towards the homeland (while among the Kurds it is the notion of Kurdistan and the idea guided by the liberal nationalism that all Kurds should one day live in one land, among the Yugoslav the notion of homeland was dissolving as the years went by, and out of formerly one state several political units were formed) ; while liberal nationalism is seen as a positive political concept among the Kurds which allows them to organize and believe in their future joint homeland for all Kurds, among the Yugoslavs nationalism is seen as a negative concept blamed for recent inter-ethnic conflicts)

5. Policy implications

- ◆ Policy recommendations: more flexibility is needed in designing and implementing (delivering) immigrant programs to better suite needs of individual groups. For example more diversified ESL programs, or longer ESL programs (currently it is one year on a government sponsored ESL program which is not enough time for those who have low literacy levels and no knowledge of English at the starts).
- ◆ More standardized, unified accreditation procedures in different professions and trades. Immigrants often have little if any information about the way they can achieve accreditation for their foreign diplomas and training. Those information are scattered and too general.

6. Dissemination activities

- ◆ Three presentations of the research findings:
 1. October 1999 Methropolis Calgary Node Mini Conference (presentation title *Preliminary analysis of the integration and adaptation process among Kurdish and Yugoslav immigrants in Calgary*)
 2. March 2000 Methropolis National conference in Toronto (presentation title *Kurdish and Yugoslav Immigrants in Calgary" towards integration models*)
 3. March 2000 University of Calgary special lecture given with the title: *Kurdish Immigrants in Calgary: pathways to integration*

7. *List of students*

There were no students involved with the project. I had a co-researcher Sandi Sommers from Columbia University helping me with the research. Interpreter was Jamal Suleman.

UPDATED ABSTRACT

The subject of this research was analysis of the adaptation and integration process of the two recent immigrant groups in Alberta (Canada) – Kurdish and Yugoslav. Objectives were to compare the two groups, find similarities and differences in terms of their integration patterns ; identify key social integration determinants and explain the social context that makes them relevant for each group ; document immigrants self-assessment in terms of their own perception about the overall successful or unsuccessful integration into Canadian society ; and to identify key policy relevant issues and make recommendations of the areas that need change. Qualitative research methodology included interviews, secondary data analysis, focus groups. Grounded theory approach was deployed which meant development of the conceptual framework from available data. Conducted were 25 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Kurdish immigrants in Calgary and 45 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Yugoslav immigrants (Calgary). Deployed were judgement and snow-ball sampling technique. Two focus group were held in order to identify key dimensions of the research as well as to develop key research questions. Several key relevant domains were selected for analysis based on information gathered through interviews, they are as follows: political discourse, ethnic and national identity, nationalism, attitude towards the homeland, citizenship and civic participation, community. Based on our comparative analysis of the two immigrant groups identified were several key points of difference as well as similarities. Similarities: more or less simultaneous period of immigration ; shared push/pull factors related to political and economic crisis in their countries of origin ; exposure to oppressive political regimes and warfare, traumatic refugee experiences ; potential for internal division within both groups (political and ethnic differences) ; both groups formed so called fragile communities subject to numerous potential cracks along the political, ethnic, religious and other lines. In both groups modal individuals are identified who could be placed into two opposing poles – on one side are educated, English proficient individuals with previous immigrant experiences and skills, while at the other pole are those who are low educated, have no English knowledge and have few or none of the so called immigrant skills. Differences: while among the Kurdish group there is a strong sense of ‘community’, which is defined as those of Kurdish nationality coming from predominantly Iraqi Kurdistan, there is a weak sense of ‘community’ among the former Yugoslav immigrants. Internal divisions in their homeland were reflected in somewhat segregational social patterns in Canada. Instead of a number sub-communities of ex-Yugoslavs, weakened ethnic and national ties undermined the need of group belonging all together among members of this group ; there is different attitude towards the homeland (while among the Kurds it is the notion of Kurdistan and the idea guided by the liberal nationalism that all Kurds should one day live in one land, among the Yugoslav the notion of homeland was dissolving as the years went by, and out of formerly one state several political units were formed) ; while liberal nationalism is seen as a positive political concept among the Kurds which allows them to organize and believe in their future joint homeland for all Kurds, among the Yugoslavs nationalism is

seen as a negative concept blamed for recent inter-ethnic conflicts). In terms of policy recommendations more flexibility is needed in designing and implementing (delivering) immigrant programs to better suite needs of individual groups. For example more diversified ESL programs, or longer ESL programs (currently it is one year on a government sponsored ESL program which is not enough time for those who have low literacy levels and no knowledge of English. More standardized, unified accreditation procedures in different professions and trades is needed. Immigrants often have little if any information about the way they can achieve accreditation for their foreign diplomas and training. Those information are scattered and too general. For large families employment of one or two family members can hardly fulfil existential needs, therefore social welfare trap appears an important issue in Kurdish group. One policy recommendation would be to look at the possible ways to enable productive family members to find employment, while *at the same time* financialy assisting to meet the minimum economic need of such a family.

PUBLICATIONS

Will follow in hard copy.