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STUDENT CONFERENCE: “9TH ANNUAL STUDENTS’ CONFERENCE ON SECURITY ISSUES”

Jakub Rafay*

On 21 April, the 9th Annual Students’ Conference on Security Issues was held at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Masaryk University in Brno. Jointly organised by the faculty’s Department of Security and Strategic Studies and by the Center for Security Studies of Metropolitan University Prague, the conference was open to students of all levels of studies. As in the previous years, the conference sought to encourage scientific research on recent issues, share students’ findings and promote cooperation among young researchers in the field of security studies.

The conference kicked off with opening speeches by **prof. JUDr. PhDr. Miroslav Mareš, Ph.D.** of Masaryk University and **doc. Mgr. Oldřich Bureš, M.A., Ph.D.** of Center for Security Studies. They were followed by the first panel of presentations, titled *Armed Conflicts*; as the title suggests, this panel’s contributions dealt with issues surrounding conflicts both past and present. First presentation by **Alexandra Šmídová** from Masaryk University touched upon the subject of privatisation of security in Ukraine. Her work analysed various groups on both sides involved in the current conflict, as well as the emergent pattern of their ties – covert or overt – to private sponsors and companies. Next was **Barbora Valíková** with a contribution about reintegration of child soldiers after the end of the conflict in Sierra Leone; according to Ms **Valíková’s** research, what proved immensely successful in the post-conflictual society re-building efforts was the frequent use of small, clan-based reintegration rituals – however, these had to be accompanied by usual, multilaterally-based conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. Following her was **Michal Kouřil** of Metropolitan University Prague with his field research in South-Eastern Asia. His presentation, *Process of Democratisation and its Influence on Armed Conflicts in Burma*, was based on his personal experience in the area where he had the

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opportunity to conduct interviews with members of warring factions, as well as government forces and compare their perspectives on the conflict dynamics in context of country's democratisation. Wrapping up the panel was **Michael Myklín** with his presentation about environmental factors underlying the ongoing Syrian conflict. As Mr **Myklín** suggested in his speech, series of droughts preceding the conflict, as well as regional competition for water sources gave the conflict a new dimension, possibly hastening its outbreak and influencing its course. After all submissions were given, a short Q&A session took place, giving conference participant the opportunity to ask panellists questions about their findings.

The conference continued after a short refreshment break with its second panel, chaired by Mgr. et Mgr. **Petra Vejvodová**, Ph.D. Titled *Terrorism and Radicalism*, its speakers presented their research findings on one of the most medialised security issues today. Although the media are dominated by jihadism-related violence, the panel gave ample space for other ideological strains of political violence as well. First speaker, **Marek Dolejší** from Masaryk University, presented conclusions of his research on the Balkan factor of contemporary jihadi movement; while the phenomenon is underpromoted in Europe, Mr **Dolejší** paints a grimmer picture. His presentation has highlighted strong focus of the so-called Islamic State on the region, resulting in a growth of radical preachers and subsequent radicalisation and notable immigration of local, previously moderate Muslims to the Levantine battlefields. Connecting to the topic of jihadism, a presentation by **Patricie Sušovská** (stemming from her bachelor thesis), also from Masaryk University, dealt with the presence of child soldiers in propaganda outputs of the so-called Islamic State. Having watched and analysed numerous propaganda videos published by the terrorist group, Ms **Sušovská** noted variations in topics presented therein and a shift in the message about child soldiers these videos are intended to get across, all the while maintaining the showcasing of their importance to the group as the next generation of jihad. Contribution on racism as an ever-present problem by **Zuzana Buroňová** of Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University in Prague marked shift from both Masaryk University and jihadism-related topics. Her presentation was centred on the U.S.-based extremism in the past few years and scrutinised the growth of hate rhetoric on social networks. Last research on terrorism and radicalism was presented by **Jan Smetana** of Center for Security Studies. In his speech, Mr **Smetana** focused of the growth of extremist tendencies in Ukraine, notably on the authorities' latent support or at

least tolerance of extreme anti-Russian sentiments, exploring the under-researched dimension of the conflict.

Final panel took place after a lunch break. Moderated by **Dagmar Rychnovská** of Metropolitan University Prague, the panel was called *Security Policies* and it was opened by **Silvie Janičatová** and her analysis of the effects Brexit will have on British defence policy; although acknowledging the inevitable implications of the move and necessary adjustments needed, Ms **Janičatová** is generally sceptical about any far-reaching consequences or reconceptualisations of the UK's defence. Following her was **Priya Vijaykumar Poojary** of Metropolitan University Prague and Manipal University India. Her commentary titled *Towards a Non-Nuclear Regime: European Union's Indian Dilemma* dealt with the system-level efforts in disarmament area and the inapplicability of the European approach when dealing with the Indian case, as well as the inefficiencies of the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. **Soňa Rusnáková** of Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences of Comenius University in Bratislava then gave her presentation, *Information as a Weapon of Mass Confusion – Information War in the Context of Slovak Republic*, dealing with the use of social networks and “alternative sources” – often of foreign provenience – in spreading of disinformation and alternative narratives in the Slovak Republic. As her commentary made clear, extremist groups and paramilitary organisation in Slovakia make good use of these outlets, spreading information that often undermines democratic foundations of the society, as well as its strategic partnerships, notably with NATO. Next speaker, **Tomáš Maďar** of Masaryk University contributed to the panel discussion with his analysis of cyberattack attributing – giving an overview of cybersecurity theory and following up by describing various methodological approaches and challenges facing states when tackling this extremely rapidly developing security challenge, Mr **Maďar** demonstrated complexities behind the issue – seldom it is as simple as pinpointing one definite culprit. Wrapping up the panel and conference was **Michael Bárta**, from Masaryk University as well, with his presentation about predictive methods and their usefulness in security studies. His contribution raised two important points – frequent use of this approach in many branches of security studies, notably their professional application and the low appreciation for the discipline in university courses. Especially the latter point was later scrutinised by attendants (professors and lecturers including) during the Q&A session, pondering possible practical exercises or workshops aimed at improving students' abilities in this regard.

As in previous panels, the last one was also followed by the opportunity to further enquire the panellists about their contributions, prompting a live debate. The conference closing speech was given by its opening speakers, professor **Mareš** and doc. **Bureš**, thanking speakers for their presentations and foreshadowing the next year's anniversary 10th conference, which is to be organised on the premises of Metropolitan University Prague.

In conclusion, the event was successful in fulfilling its goals, namely sharing students' research findings and demonstrating that meaningful research on security issues can be done also on lower level of studies. Equally important is that the event provided the students with an opportunity to establish contacts with their counterparts in other departments and universities, facilitating exchange of knowledge and allowing broader development of security studies in Czech Republic across different cities.