

Call for Papers

International Conference

From Exile to Diaspora: Southeast European Intellectuals and Political Activists Abroad

9–10 September 2026, University of Fribourg (Switzerland)

Migrations from Southeast to Western Europe have profoundly shaped societies in both regions during the second half of the twentieth century. Labor migration within the framework of bilateral recruitment agreements, political exile under authoritarian rule and during the Cold War, and forced displacement caused by the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s have resulted in large numbers of people of Southeast European origin living in Western Europe—populations that would later be described, both analytically and emically, in the vocabulary of “diaspora.” These developments are situated within a longer history: from imperial rule on the Balkan Peninsula through the rise of nationalism and state formation into the recent past, the migration history of Southeast Europe has consistently challenged sharp classifications and clear-cut conceptual distinctions. Populations, identities, and borders in the region have long been marked by high degrees of mobility, patterns that persisted in distinct forms throughout the post-war period. Since the mid-2010s, Southeast Europe has once again become the site of a major humanitarian tragedy along the so-called Balkan route, shaped by renewed forms of displacement and exile. At the same time, mobility within Europe has taken on new directions in the context of continued intra-European labor migration. As in earlier periods, the boundaries between different forms of cross-border movement remain blurred, making today’s transnational communities fluid and historically contingent objects of study.

Amid the growing recognition—and the simultaneous political contestation—of the idea that many Western European societies can be understood as post-migrant, scholarly interest in migration and in the role of cross-border actors and communities within these societies has intensified. However, with notable exceptions, scholarship on Southeast European migration and its afterlives in Western Europe remains empirically organized along national or binational frames, even when transnational concepts are adopted. In particular, the historical study of Southeast European transnational intellectuals and political activists would benefit from cross-area and comparative approaches. By tracing Southeast European intellectuals and political activists as mediators, organizers, and knowledge producers, the conference explores how “diaspora” is actively made through transnational practices and how political authority and claims of representation are shaped and contested through associations, networks, and media. It also highlights the often underestimated place of transnational Southeast European intellectuals and political activists in global political and intellectual history, focusing on cross-border circulations of knowledge, ideas, and practices within exile and diaspora formations. Against this background, the conference aims to strengthen systematic exchange and cooperation across Europe by developing a more differentiated historical understanding of Southeast European actors and communities shaped by exile, displacement, and migration, thereby contributing to broader transnational research on diaspora formations.

Used to capture forms of transnational connectivity, cross-border practices, and hybrid subjectivities beyond the nation-state, the concept of diaspora has become a central yet contested analytical category in the humanities and social sciences. Today, the term has acquired new meanings that differ from earlier conceptualizations, increasingly serving as a form of self-identification among people of Southeast European origin in the post-migrant societies of Western Europe. The conference title thus operates on two levels. First, it points to the evolving character of transnational communities, including their composition, practices, and relationships to host societies and societies of origin. Second, it highlights that the very terms used to describe these formations, both as analytical categories in scholarship and as modes of self-identification, are themselves subject to semantic change. Constellations of flight or forced displacement, initially experienced and framed as political exile, have sometimes come to be organized and described as “diaspora.” The aim of the conference is therefore to historicize “exile” and “diaspora” both as empirical objects of study and as descriptive categories, situating them within the broader context of Southeast European migration. Taking the post-war developments as a point of departure, the conference revisits the history of Southeast European communities in Western Europe and, rather than assuming the existence of a diaspora, asks how, when, and under what conditions diasporic formations emerged from experiences of exile, displacement, or migration.

To explore and discuss these questions, we have divided the event into five panels:

Panel 1 addresses conceptual issues surrounding the terms “exile” and “diaspora.” Panel 2 examines politically diverse forms of exile and emigration, focusing on how competing ideological projects and claims to representation took shape within diaspora communities and across borders. Panel 3 focuses on people who were active in exile and for the diaspora as part of an intellectual elite. Panel 4 considers how and where exile was possible within Southeast Europe, often as a stopover on the way to Western Europe. Panel 5 turns to Southeast European exile and diaspora in Switzerland, a topic that remains highly under-researched within the Swiss academic landscape.

1. **Conceptualizing “Exile” and “Diaspora”:** Southeast European exile/diaspora in global perspective and within exile/diaspora research
2. **Political Exile and Diaspora:** From Southeast Europe to Western Europe
3. **Intellectual Exile and Diaspora:** From Southeast Europe to Western Europe
4. **Heading West:** Exile (as a stopover) *within* Southeast Europe
5. **Exile and Diaspora in Switzerland**

We invite historians as well as scholars from adjacent fields to submit proposals. Please indicate in your abstract which panel you would prefer to join.

The abstract (max. 3,000 characters) and a short CV (max. 1 page) must be submitted by email to konstantinos.tsakmaklis@unifr.ch by **15 March 2026**. The conference language will be English. Travel and accommodation costs will be covered as far as possible.

This conference is organized by the [Department of Contemporary History](#), University of Fribourg. Conference organizers: Dr. Franziska Zaugg, Dr. Karlo Ruzicic-Kessler, and Dino Tsakmaklis