



ETHNICITY, POLITICS, AND EDUCATION IN MACEDONIA

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Abstract:

This article examines the education system of the Republic of Macedonia by focusing on education segregation along ethnic lines between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians who comprise the second largest ethnicity in the country. The article builds upon an existing body of literature on the country as well as a number of reports from international organizations. It utilizes theories on ethnicity and nationalisms, brings forth the historical context of the conflict in the country, identifies how this affected the post-conflict education system and proposes a number of steps that are necessary to desegregate the education system in order to achieve reconciliation and foster integration.

Keywords: education, ethnicity, segregation, Macedonia, peace building, post-conflict

1. Introduction

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (henceforth Macedonia) is a small, ethnically mixed country in the Balkan Peninsula. The main ethnic groups are Macedonians comprising 64.2 percent of the population, Albanians comprising 25.2 percent of population, while Turks, Roma, Serbs and others account for the remaining 10.6 percent (CIA n.d.). Unlike other former Yugoslav republics, Macedonia's independence did not follow the same pattern of war and ethnic conflict. Nevertheless, the ethnic tensions between the country's ethnic Macedonia majority and its Albanian minority had been slowly mounting since the 1980s. These aggravated tensions culminated in 2001 with an armed insurgency by ethnic Albanians. The ensuing conflict was brought into an end through the NATO brokered Ohrid Framework Agreement.

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This paper will deal with the post-Ohrid Agreement education system in Macedonia. The primary question that this paper will aim to answer is; how prevalent is ethnic segregation between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians in Macedonia's education and what are its implications? A secondary question that this paper aims to answer is; what are some complementary, to the government work, steps to address this phenomenon?

The Ohrid Agreement in 2001 helped put an end to the conflict and aimed at improving the rights of the Albanian minority. In terms of language rights, languages spoken by more than 20 percent of the population became co-official in local level. Article 6 of the Agreement stipulates that the government is under the obligation to offer language rights to minorities, if the latter request it. As a result, Macedonian is taught as a secondary language in primary education, to children who follow the education system in either Albanian, Turkish, or Serbian (Myhrvold 2005, p. 17). The drive for decentralization in the agreement gave more authority to municipalities in establishing and running their education systems. In terms of primary and secondary education for the Albanian population, not much changed from the 1991 Constitution. A major change occurred in tertiary level where Albanians were allowed to have their education in their native language. In this paper, I argue that ethnic identities have created a system that is divided along ethno-linguistic lines encouraging the segregation of education systems and the separation of students.

This paper's scope is to explore the education system of Macedonia by looking at the level of ethnic segregation in schooling and its implications thereof. It aims to contribute to an existing body of literature for Macedonia which links to a larger education literature on segregation and the Balkans. The country exhibits similarities to Kosovo, and Bosnia that can be grouped as a *Balkanized* type of education (Kavaja, forthcoming). Torsti (2009) researches the effects of the national segregation in Bosnia while McKinna (2012) focuses on how competing ethnic groups and security issues produce segregating schooling in Kosovo. These cases relate to Macedonia, as they share similarities in terms of multi-ethnic and multi-religious demographics, historical trajectories, and conflict. Macedonia also links to cases such as Cyprus and Israel. In Cyprus ethnicized identities in education are a norm (Zembylas 2010). Whereas in Israel ethnic identity and nationalism promote segregation in schooling (Bekerman 2009). Furthermore, Macedonia reflects a broader global debate on the negative faces of education, with segregation being a component of it, as identified by Bush and Saltarelli (2000), and Davies (2010).

The paper is divided in three sections: The first section deals with education provision and legal framework in Macedonia prior to the conflict. The second section deals with the segregation of the education system after 2001 and analyses how

ethnicity and nationalism, although imagined/mythical concepts (Smith 1991; Anderson 1983; Appiah 2016), link to physical separation, textbooks and curriculum development, and language of instruction. Furthermore, it analyses some of the implications that arise from education segregation. The third section informs on attempts to re-integrate the system. In this section, I propose some steps that the country can take towards desegregation.

1. The Macedonian education system pre-2001

Macedonia, as stated before, is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, country. According to its Constitutionⁱⁱ (Azizi 2011, 2436) the government has the obligation to fulfil the right to education for all and not to discriminate against ethnic identity or gender. Nevertheless, in the 1990s, the Albanian minority was protesting against the discrimination by the Macedonian authorities in the field of education (Berberi 2017, p. 170). On the reasons for the protests was the government decision to designate Macedonian as the official language of the country thus discriminating against the minority languages. In retrospect, this language policy indicates the lack of desire for an inclusive national identity that would have prevented fuelling ethnic nationalism among both Macedonian and Albanians.

Thereafter, the Albanian community considered that its rights as ethnic minority, acquired during the Yugoslav era, had been steadily eroding. Language of instruction was also part of those rights, which in the case of Albanians in tightly linked to ethnicity. Instruction in the mother tongue though a minority right was limited only in the primary and secondary education, being more extensively applied in the first case. As the political class of both Albanians and Macedonians instrumentalized education for its gains the demands became more nationalistic in nature (Myhrvold 2005, p. 24).

One of the issues that exacerbated the relations between the Macedonian majority and Albanian minority was the lack of Albanian language higher education, which was stopped in 1985 (Berberi 2017, p. 170). As a result the quality and numbers of Albanian school teachers lowered as ethnic Albanians students could not follow Skopje's Pedagogical Academy in their native language. According to Myhrvold (2005, p. 26) "*Out of 2500 Albanian teachers in 1991 only 400 had remained by 1994*". Such statistics show that the policy was ill-conceived and had mid and long term repercussions to the Albania community's education. Despite the problems of such policy, the government considered that having higher education in Albanian was unfair to other minorities. After pressures by the Albanian community the Macedonian government tried to

ⁱⁱ See articles 44-48 of Republic of Macedonia Constitution

address this issue by reopening Pedagogical Faculty for Albanian in 1995. Yet, this did not fulfil the demands of having mother tongue higher education also in other professional fields. As a response, the Albanian minority established the University of Tetova offering classes and issuing diplomas in Albanian. The said university, during its first years of operation was not recognized by the Macedonian authorities.

For the Macedonian government, the existence of an Albanian language university was an issue of high controversy as it perceive it to lead to the separation of the country into parallel socio-economic spheres. Student protests by the Albanian minority against the raids and force closure of University of Tetova along with the mediation of the international community would help in the establishment of the first private university in the country, the South Eastern European University (SEEU) (Azizi 2011). SEEU would become the first legally recognized higher education entity which would offer programmes and courses also in Albanian.

The growing discontent in the education system, among the Albanian community can be seen as one of the many issues culminating to the conflict in 2001, as they considered that the Macedonian state was exclusively focused on the rights and identity of the Macedonian majority in terms of provision, language of instruction, and curriculum. The issue of higher education in Albanian was resolved only after the Ohrid agreement, which reified the right of minorities, in the areas where they constitute more than 20 percent of the population to have education in their native language in all levels of education.

2. School segregation between Ethnic Albanians and Macedonians and its implications

The post-Ohrid Macedonian education system is divided into 8 years of primary and 4 years of secondary education, with grades 1-9 being compulsory basic education for all pupils. Higher education, can last from 4 – 6 years depending on the degree. Conceptually, in every society it is the government's responsibility to foster social cohesion among its population. Education is a way in which such cohesion can be achieved through a curriculum that promotes common social values and history, and through a common language (Anger, Rood, and Gestakovska 2010). Although the post-war agreement gave Albanians and other minorities their rights it also exacerbated segregation and separation. According to the government of Macedonia 2012 official statistics, all Macedonian students study in Macedonian language classrooms in primary education, while 97.83 percent of Albanians study in Albanian speaking classrooms (Barbieri, Vrgova, and Bliznakovski 2013). This data demonstrates a prevailing separation between Albanians and Macedonians in schooling, with no

foreseeable change in the near future. Other minorities, such as Roma and Turks face similar issues (US DoS 2016), though these are not covered in this paper.

The prevailing perception is that the current situation is a direct result of the insurgency and the post-conflict security concerns that emerged from having Macedonian and Albanian students in the same classrooms. Evidence suggests that similar policies existed also during the Yugoslav era of “*separate but equal*” education for different ethnic communities (Lyon 2013). Nevertheless, the ensuing conflict played a role in reinforcing that divide with school segregation used as a quick fix policy to be reversed over time (Grozdanovska 2007). As such, it addressed the security concerns of possible intra-classroom conflict between students of both ethnicities due to nationalistic sentiments. Yet, what was aimed as an initial quick fix took roots in the education system making it harder to reverse it back.

The security concerns, although at times overstated, have not been totally unfounded. Some mixed schools have exhibited issues of school inter-ethnic violence, such as small scale fights and brawls between Macedonian and Albanian pupils during class breaks. Small scale violence in previously mixed high schoolsⁱⁱⁱ has been reported in cities such as Skopje, Struga, and Kicevo (Barbieri, Vrgova, and Bliznakovski 2013) where the demographics show a more mixed population. These incidents point to a failure of the education structures to address identity issues in schooling among students. Moreover, classroom separation promotes alienation instead of contact which is the most efficient way towards reducing prejudice between different groups (Allport 1959).

As the system does not inspire interaction between children of different ethnicities there are a growing number of mono-ethnic schools in the country. Thus, Macedonian students attend classes in Macedonian, usually in different school premises from their Albanian co-peers. Likewise, Albanian pupils follow education with their co-peers in Albanian classes, usually not sharing the same facilities with Macedonians. These parallel education communities than do not cross the boundary lines set by their ethnicity have become a norm in primary education as almost all schools target either Macedonian or Albanian children (Myhrvold 2005).

In terms of schooling segregation structure Myhrvold (2005, p. 19) notes that in the Macedonian secondary system it can be divided into three main approaches:

1. Ethnic Albanians study in ethnic Macedonian schools: In this case, it depends on the number of minority students whether classes will be offered in their own language.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mixed schooling does not equate mixed classrooms in Macedonia

2. Two schools under one roof: This approach highly resembles similar approaches in ethnically mixed communities in Kosovo and Bosnia. Albanian and Macedonian students share the same facilities, but their classes are divided according to ethnic lines. The students in such cases tend to form in-groups and socialize with peers of their ethnic background, avoiding interaction with students from different backgrounds. OSCE (2010a) noted that maximally 26 percent of kids in primary education ...and 37percent in secondary education have an actual chance to interact in the school environment.
3. Students follow classes in independent premises: The third approach is the most separating one, as students will follow classes in different school premises. Thus, a primary or secondary school will be completely Albanian and another one completely Macedonian.

In cases where one group, usually the Albanian, is considerably smaller than the majority in the area, usually Macedonians, then the integration in schooling is easier. Whereas in the other cases in-group salience serves as a barrier to contact and integration. Anger, Rood, and Gestakovska (2010, p. 15) note that *"where there is a small Albanian population the Macedonian students have more frequent contact compared with communities where the population is more equally mixed."* For example, in the communities of Gostivar, Tetovo, and Kicevo where population is more mixed it is harder to integrate students. Their assertions corroborate and match Myhrvold's (2005) findings, by showing that actual contact in schools settings has continued to decrease. As it seems, only under the first category has been possible to establish interaction.

Language is an important issue that has not been addressed sufficiently in existing literature. Macedonia, a language of the Slavic family, is the main language for the country's majority. Whereas, the Albanian minority speak Albanian as their mother tongue. Unlike Bosnia, where all three spoken languages (Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian) are mutually intelligible, the Macedonian and Albanian languages do not share any common roots. Therefore, it becomes the education system's duty to promote communication between different ethnicities through language. Starting from grade 1 Macedonian is taught to Albanians for some hours per weeks. Whereas, Albanian is withheld and only offered to Macedonian and other minorities as an optional secondary language. As a result, Albanians do not learn Macedonian in a proficient level and Macedonians almost never opt to learn Albanian (Anger, Rood, and Gestakovska 2010).

Extracurricular and out of school activities are also separated along ethnic homogeneous lines. Language of instruction is the common denominator, even in mixed schools, of how these activities are held (Unicef 2009). Teachers concur to these claims as the only area where mixed teams have been formed is usually in team sports (*ibid*). In practice, this deprives students of the chance to communicate, exchange

knowledge, and cooperate on joint ventures and projects. In some schools, this segregation of activities had been taking place from Yugoslav times, whereas in others it is a more recent phenomenon stemming from security concerns and mistrust.

2.1 Implications

Schooling infrastructure in Macedonia has proven so contentious that there have been cases where Macedonians have protested the opening of classes in Albanian in the same schools where classes are held in Macedonia. Such cases include the protests occurred in the city of Bitola, where Albanian language classes were supposed to open at the same school with Macedonian ones. This mobilized the school faculty, parents, and pupils who protested both attempts in 2000 and 2003 respectively (Lyon 2013). Similar protests against having mixed classes or sharing education facilities took place also by Albanians during 2003 in cities like Tetovo and Kumanovo where they form a majority ([Grozdanovska, 2007](#)). Even the naming, or renaming of schools has become a contentious issues in the education system. With the decentralization of the system, the ministry of education has established a legal procedure through which schools can change their official name. But, as sometimes tensions and animosities run high, there have been instances where Macedonians fled a school in Jegunovce when it was renamed after an Albanian teacher or when schools are named after individuals from the Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA) or security forces of the 2003 conflict (Lyon 2013). This indicates that ethnic segregation is affected and affects parental choice leading to conflict prone situations since Albanians are perceived as threat and *vice versa*.

Quality of schooling for minorities is also affected by the segregation of the system (Nijboer 2011, Lyon 2013). In primary level, education in minority languages is usually of lower quality than that Macedonian language education. This suggests that the resources devoted to minority students and institutions are lower. Decentralization plays also a part here since richer regions can ensure better financing. Consequently, Albanian students have lower achievements than the majority Macedonians which undermines their opportunities. Such vicious circle will inevitably allow for mounting societal pressures and dissatisfaction with the existing system and order. The opportunities and the future socio economic status of children is also affected by the aforementioned language policies, as Albanians who are not fluent in Macedonian will face difficulties competing in the Macedonian labour market. Therefore, children will have less opportunities, and mobility, being confined in the territories inhabited by their co-ethnics, hindering efforts for a true multi-ethnic state (Reka 2008). The lack of opportunities is not confined to the Albanian minority, but also to other minorities like the Roma (Jandrijeska Jovanova, and Zevik 2009).

Textbooks, as a result of ethnic based politics, tend to focus on ethnic identities more than civic identities. Therefore, most textbooks focus on the Macedonian national identity although they do not have any overt discriminatory references towards other ethnic groups or cultures (Achkovska-Leshkovska and Davchev 2013). This promotion of an ethnicized notion of who is a true Macedonian has implications for students coming from other ethnic groups. Minority students who do not identify as Macedonians feel as having their identity or history excluded from the mainstream narratives. Such approach deviates from what should be the goal of education in a country, which is multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural. Education should promote inter-ethnic and intercultural understanding, and social cohesion. Textbooks can be instrumental in achieving that by reflecting such topics that promote the understanding of the country's diverse cultures and a common history instead of in-group and out-group narratives.

Teachers can also influence education segregation. According to an OSCE (2010b) report they are one of the factors for developing interethnic relationships among students. Thus, when teachers bring in the classroom their personal prejudices this affect students perceptions and relations. The same report showed that nearly half of the students identified their teachers as making insulting remarks against other ethnic groups (OSCE 2010b, p. 9). Some of the most common remarks happen between Macedonian teachers against Albanians and by Albanian teachers against Macedonians (OSCE 2010b). By reflecting their own negative feelings for other ethnic groups to their students they contribute to the worsening of relations between the different ethnicities. Their agency, which in Macedonia is tied to their ethnic affiliation, results in regressing interethnic relations and promoting unofficial, not state sectioned 'hate narratives'.

School teachers, in addition to using discriminatory remarks based on their own prejudice, also teach subjects according to their ethnic groups' narrative. These teaching professionals usually come from the same ethnic group as the students. Their ethnicity, coupled with system segregation has an implication on the teaching sensitive subjects such as history, civics, geography, language and social science. The aforementioned subjects are taught through ethno-nationalistic lenses. According to former Education and Sciences Minister Aziz Polozani *"Instructors often focus on teaching subjects related to their own ethnic or political history. Most of the teachers believe that they must fight for the ideals of their nationality"* (as quoted in [Grozdanovska](#) 2007, para 26). This approach to teaching by the pedagogic staff establishes a *de facto* segregation of learning.

Last, school boards could potentially play an important role as their composition is usually mixed in schooling environments where both Macedonians and Albanians attend. Yet, these boards have avoided dealing with issues of ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations, even if they have the capacities to do so. Representatives of school boards

claimed the issue of their inactivity in this domain is a result of lack of requests from students to hold joint activities (Unicef 2009). Thus, the segregation of the system, and the entrenched ethnic identities do not allow school boards to operate according to their mandate. The supposed lack of request is not an excuse for their inactivity as these structures ought to take initiatives that promote cross-ethnic cooperation and work in the benefits of an inclusive education system.

3. Desegregating Macedonia's education system

Since 2009 the Ministry of Education, with the assistance of OSCE has established a strategy for Integrated Education aiming to bring closer the different communities. This strategy has five main themes;

1. integration through joint curricular and extracurricular activities;
2. integration by increasing the mutual knowledge of each other's languages among students and adults;
3. adjustments in the curricula and existing textbooks with particular emphasis on history, geography and language teaching;
4. building teachers' qualifications related to competence of facilitating integration in education; and
5. school management in the context of decentralization, and de-politicization of the education system. (Bakiu, Dimitrova, and Brava 2016).

The Integrated Education strategy has not been fully implemented by the government with weaknesses pointing to the political climate in national and local level that withhold the implementation of education policies (Bakiu, Dimitrova, and Brava 2016). For example the Albanian political elite blocked the initiative for introducing Macedonian language from grade 1st in Albanian schools. Similarly, school boards usually elect parents that have a political affiliation and are not neutral. In terms of textbook, there was no involvement of the academic community for consultation. All that has been achieved so far in terms of the Integrated Education strategy has been on a project level with the support of donors and international agencies like USAID (Bakiu, Dimitrova, and Brava 2016).

A number of international organizations, like UNICEF and the European Commission have paid attention to education segregation in Macedonia. The European Commission 2014 Enlargement report for Macedonia noted that there is a need for more political support and additional funding in order to implement the Strategy on Integrated Education. In a decentralized education system, higher budgets are needed to achieve equity in education, especially in the case where ethnicity results in the

physical division of education. This will assist in easing existing grievances relating to education quality and equity.

Macedonia can also promote a tangible de-segregation of education by following a combination of different approaches that I will delineate below. First, school mixing should include Albanian and Macedonian children, being taught in the same classes, not just the same schools. Textbooks and curricula need to be revised to appeal and encompass the realities of Macedonians, Albanians, and all the other minorities. History and culture should not simply focus on either the Macedonian or Albanian one, but should be more integrative with students being taught about the history, culture, and language of the "Other". This "Other", identified in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) creates a binary relationship of positive and negative characteristics with the "Self". The Self/Other theory is applicable in Macedonia where ethnicity plays an important role in identity formation and schooling socialization.

Teacher training is also a factor in achieving intercultural education, as teachers ought receive training and be able to follow best practices on methods that allow for the development of intercultural awareness. Teachers should be able to recognize and introduce themes in classroom that go beyond the label of ethnicity by promoting civic identities and understanding of the different cultures, religions and traditions of all ethnic groups. Also, in schools where parents have reported issues with teaching, better classroom observing mechanisms should be developed by relevant authorities (Pantic, Closs, and Ivocevic 2011).

Integration within the schooling system should not start and end with students joining the same classrooms. It should follow up with extra-curricular activities which have mixed members from each group. According to UNICEF's (2009) study mentioned in this paper Albanian and Macedonian children do not engage with one another in extra-curricular activities. In order to boost this engagement schools and non-governmental organizations should take the initiative to implement joint activities for students. This will reduce the distance created by ethnicity and will cement genuine contact resulting in the formation of cross-ethnic friendships.

4. Conclusion

The Ohrid Agreement was an international brokered policy by NATO that managed to end the insurgency in 2001. In the field of education, it offered Albanians the rights that they were seeking as a national minority, as it allowed them to establish their own schools and provide education in their own language in all levels. Especially in higher education, Albanians were for the first time, legally allowed to establish and attend universities in their native language. In hindsight, a number of issues that are evident

today continue to pose a challenge to Macedonia's education. First and foremost, schooling is divided along ethnic lines. Even, in "mixed" schools students either do not share the same classrooms, are divided in shifts, or do not share the premises at all. Second, the education segregation is visible in many aspects of education system such as language of instruction where Macedonian students do not learn Albanian, textbooks that focus on ethnic narratives, teaching pedagogies that bring their own prejudice in classroom, lack of mixed extra-curricular activities, and a complete opposition by parents of having their children study side by side. This makes it an imminent need for curricula and textbooks to be more inclusive and reflect the culture and history of all people living in Macedonia.

Segregation of education in multi-ethnic countries is part of a global debate, especially in post-conflict countries like Macedonia. This type of segregation does not promote contact and the creation of positive identities which can tackle discrimination and prejudice thus leading to reconciliation. Ethnicized divisions create parallel societies within a country, which mistrust one another. International organizations have made efforts to tackle segregation though much remains to be done. Smaller minorities like the Roma, which were not in the focus on this paper, also face their own segregation (Arraiza 2014) which is part of a larger European wide phenomenon (European Commission 2011). To combat this, Macedonia needs to enact policies that will foster multi-ethnic classrooms with Albanians, Macedonians, and other minorities. Textbooks and curricula need to be inclusive and respectful to the language, history, religion, culture and all the other aspects that form the identity of ethnic group. Since school is a medium of identity formation, the Macedonian education system needs to have as its goal the promotion civic identities instead of ethnic exclusive ones. Better teacher training is also another factor that can help in desegregating education, as teacher agency is important in classrooms. Extracurricular activities and initiatives should have also a multi-ethnic character as schooling does not start and end in classroom. The engagement of other actors such as NGOs, cultural, and religious organizations can help in bringing these children together. Otherwise, the segregation of the education system could transpire in their everyday lives, as it has happened in recent years.

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