



Mirjana Maleska

Project of hope

The Macedonian university of Tetovo co-educates Macedonian and Albanian students. Mirjana Maleska reports how language differences can be resolved in such an environment and asks how useful these co-educative policies really are: After Macedonia pulled back from the brink of a civil war in 2001, are the students ready to overcome the recent past?

Last semester I taught Politics to a smaller group of students of Albanian ethnic origin at the Southeastern University in Tetovo. The group was very dear to me: it was disciplined, interested, and the language barrier was not a serious problem. What is more, I was very proud of those students who could easily talk and write Macedonian which I felt was my own doing in a way. These are "our children", I used to say. But then came the period of writing seminar papers that included bigger essays on politics, and some of them were not able to achieve the necessary level. Because of this, I let them write in Albanian and asked some assistants to translate for me. In the meantime I started learning Albanian, without any hope that I would learn this difficult language in such a short time. However, to their joy I managed to learn some greetings like: "*Miremengjesi*", "*Si jeni*", and they would answer me "*Mire*". They were pleased with the fact that I was trying to communicate in their language and the class started in a pleasant atmosphere of mutual confidence.

Later I met a group of students, of Albanian and Turkish origin to whom Macedonian language presented a big problem in the course of their studies. They were not able to read the extended literature in Macedonian, nor write any essays. Some of them couldn't write an exam answer in Macedonian, and they were studying public administration, which in the future might take them to a post in the public administration and/or the government. One intelligent girl who didn't pass the exam, said to me: You know, I have always studied Turkish at school, lived in a Turkish neighbourhood, my friends are Turks and I am watching Turkish TV through satellite. I let them answer in their mother tongue, but that created additional problems since I needed a translation and additionally, the choice of selected literature had to be altered. Incidentally speaking, I noticed that some of them were taking the lessons from Politics in Macedonian, just because they heard that the professor was *nice*. I heard them saying to me so many times: Honestly professor you're so nice. I tried to explain to them what being *nice* actually meant, both as a person and a teacher but some of them thought that I would tolerate their lack of knowledge, just because they told me that they didn't know Macedonian very well. Compliments were not pleasant any more.

An unpleasant episode occurred during the academic year: Two students demanded in a written exam for the equal opportunity of answering in their

mother tongue, and, as Macedonian students, even refusing to participate in the exam if there was not a granted permission to do so. Although this was an optional subject I granted their request, allowing them to choose between Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish and English, which is the official language at this university. As it transpired later, the main reason for these protests lay in their poor preparation for the exam and not in their knowledge of Macedonian. The two students passed the next examination period, but I felt relieved in a way because it came to my knowledge that the university decided to divide the groups to those who would follow the lectures in Macedonian (Macedonians, Albanians, Turks and Gypsies), and those who would follow the lessons in Albanian. This was not my intention when I came to give lectures at this university, since I was giving lectures to mixed structures of students from different nationalities. However, as the number of Macedonian students rose, this was the most rational solution.

Thus, I continued my lectures to Macedonian– speaking students separately from the students belonging to different ethnic groups (Muslims, Turks, Gypsies etc.). The latter ones, before coming to my classes, had to learn Albanian, so sometimes I would ask them whether they had any difficulties in learning the language. Their response was negative.

It was really nice to hear that because, until very recently, learning the language of the *other* was unthinkable. A few years ago, when I wanted to take elementary courses in Albanian, there was just one course offered and even that stopped a while later due to lack of interest. Today, every language school in Skopje has an Albanian language programme. However, I was quite surprised by the fact that a lot of my Macedonian students were not really keen on learning Albanian, particularly because by learning it they might alleviate the communication with Albanians, both professionally and in everyday life. And now I am really happy to say that being rational has prevailed. The more rational we are, the better for us, because, as I am teaching my students: If we are rational, if we select the problems which we can "trade", then we are ready to find solutions for them in advance. In post–conflict societies there are some questions that have to be avoided, since they are not in anybody's favour, such as *national* questions (stately and territorial questions), *priority* questions (who was first and who became the *impostor*), as well as questions about which nation is a constitutional one. Precisely these type of questions led us right to the conflict.

Is life in Tetovo different now from before the conflict in 2001? How do Macedonians feel, who presents the minority in Tetovo? The answer from the two quiet and hard–working girls, students from Tetovo, was: Before the conflict they would ask what time is it – in Macedonian, and now they do it in Albanian.

The right of the minority to speak its mother tongue restores and fortifies its sense of dignity. Not even the sentiments of the minority were taken seriously by the majority. All these factors make for a possible cause of conflict. There is more to democracy than the ruling of the majority, and it needs to respect and recognize differences, whether on national or on a local level.

The episode with the students from Tetovo reminds me of the text that contained a comparative analysis of the conflict in Northern Ireland and in Macedonia. Because the number of the victims was lesser and a greater extent of integrity in society exists, Macedonia has bigger chances for inter–ethnic reconciliation than Northern Ireland. Issues connected to the stimulation of an

equal representation of the minorities in the public administration are essential but these have to be connected to the mutual acceptance of language and culture of the other. The concept of *equality* has to prevail over the conflicting policy of the *Zero sum game* (I will get but you will lose.) For a complete reconciliation, all ethnicities (Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, Roma, Serbian, Vlachs and others) have to be proud of their own culture, as well as to develop a sense of respect for the culture of others. We know for a fact that people who have preserved their own dignity know how to defend the dignity of others.

My first experience as a professor at the Stul University in Tetovo tells me that Mr Page was right in comparing the experiences in Ireland and Macedonia, and stating that an integrative education, although ideal, is not the universal palliative solution. It is not a panacea for all inter-ethnic tensions. Particularly now, when we went too far in the separation process, with our prejudices and the mutual intolerance after the conflict in 2001. Now, everybody has their own schools, theatres and other cultural institutions. At the moment one cannot insist upon greater integration. Various researches show us that children, in the process of socialization, acquire their primary attitudes from their parents, who in turn have profound prejudices, as early as in their third, fourth or fifth year. As I noticed from my own practical experience, regardless of my personal enthusiasm and aim for an integrative education, the differences between Macedonian and Albanian are so big that this has cooled off my enthusiasm. Some of the experiences in Northern Ireland as the "twinning of schools", where students and teachers are mixed only in certain classes has been used at the Stul University. This means that Macedonians, Albanians, Turks and the students belonging to other ethnic groups in Macedonia are together in cafés, sports activities, cultural events, and in English classes. They are separated in the classes of other subjects that are held in Macedonian and Albanian respectively. Macedonian students learn Albanian and Albanian students learn Macedonian, and they all learn English together. This method was used before in my secondary school time.

We need to know what we want to achieve as a society— integration or disintegration. If it is integration we want, it is very important to finish with interethnic competition in its early phase, where these kinds of creative projects will undoubtedly be of great assistance. If the hostilities go too far, then it has to be done quietly and carefully. Otherwise, the perspectives for peace and reconciliation will be ruined with every new act of violence.

In Macedonia, the belief that the conflict from 2001 was "imported" is largely spread amongst the majority of Macedonians, as well as the concept that armed Albanians have somehow extorted the Ohrid framework agreement, thus helping in forming the international community. Deviations for bigger rights of the minorities made ethnic Macedonians extremely unhappy with the solutions of the Ohrid Agreement. However, this is changing in favour of a better understanding and acceptance, and it is also time for us to get over the prejudice of a double victim. We need to look into the mutual responsibility for the situation we all found ourselves in 2001, instead victimising ourselves. In that case, the majority that holds the instruments of power bears greater responsibility.

The open question about the future status of Kosovo and its consequences on Macedonia, as well as personal security, are very important political and psychological factors that make for the stability of this country. If people feel insecure they will always be somewhat reserved about the attempt to build confidence with other ethnic communities. Thus, the Albanians, who run the

local government in some municipalities, have a great responsibility for the everyday security and safety of the citizens. The most important matter now is to avoid violence. Mixing of Macedonians, Albanians, Turks and other existing ethnic groups in Macedonia will alleviate the reconciliation process, and projects such as the Stul University or the "twinning of schools", will show their meaning and values in due time.

Published 2004-01-27
Original in Macedonian
Translation by Kristina Krkachoska
Contribution by Roots
© Roots
© Eurozine