

Building A New University: Translating Western Academic Tradition Into Balkan Culture

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Abstract

The breakup of Yugoslavia during the 1990's was in part caused by long standing ethnic strife in regions of the country. In 1991 Macedonia became one of the several new countries created from the former Yugoslav Republic. The raison d'etre for Macedonia becoming an independent state seems a bit vague. What is clear is that ethnic distrust between the country's ethnic Albanian Muslim minority and the Macedonian Greek Orthodox majority became a focal point.

1.0 Ethnic Considerations

The territory that became the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) has an ethnic composition that is 67% Macedonian; 23% Albanian; 4% Turkish; 2% Roma; 2% Serbian; and 2% Other (CIA World Factbook). The Macedonian segment of the population is Christian Orthodox, and the Macedonian language is the language of the government. The Albanians are Muslim and forcefully retain the use of the Albanian language as a way to perpetuate their identity. Turks and Serbians are other Muslim minority groups.

2.0 Government Structure and Politics

Macedonia is an emerging democratic country. The President who is head of state holds a five-year term and is elected by popular vote. The Prime Minister who is the head of the government, and Cabinet members are elected by Parliament. The legislative branch is a unicameral Parliament with 120 deputies. Eighty Five members of Parliament are elected by popular vote and 35 members are appointed from party lists based on the proportion each party has of the popular vote.

In the early 1990's a practical arrangement was struck for the governance of Macedonia. Since no single party could gain a majority of the seats in Parliament, a coalition government was established and power was shared between the majority Macedonian party and an Albanian party. Albanians ruled the territories most heavily populated by Albanians and Macedonians ruled areas most heavily populated by Macedonians. Cabinet Ministers were elected based on the number of seats held by each party in the ruling coalition. Among the Albanians the largest number favored this arrangement and sought expanded rights for Albanians within this framework. A smaller Albanian faction was not as supportive of this arrangement.

In 1998 an Ultra-Nationalist party gained a plurality in the Macedonian parliament and formed a government with the moderate Albanian party. Prime Minister Ljubco Georgieski appointed an ultra right MP to head the Interior Ministry. The Georgieski government ignored some of the power sharing arrangements of past governments.

Readers with comments or questions are encouraged to contact the authors via email.

Several articulated problems pointed out the inequities in the country. First, the Macedonian constitution specifically limited certain civil rights to the Macedonian majority. Albanians were not allowed to be a "constituent national group." While the Albanian party was part of the ruling coalition, ethnic Albanians were not allowed regional autonomy as were other ethnic groups. The Muslim population felt subtle and at times blatant discrimination. Second, structurally the Minister of the Interior controls the police at the national level and he was accused of using national police to harass political opponents in the countryside particularly in Albanian communities. Third, the language of government is Macedonian. The Albanian minority for the most part do not speak or read Macedonian and they want the Albanian language accepted as a second national language.

While the roots of the 2001 civil war were also part of the historical conflicts between ethnic and religious groups in the Balkans, current events exacerbated the historical friction. Many observers content that political harassment by the national police created a climate of conflict and, thus, lead to the outbreak of civil war. War erupted in the spring of 2001 when the Albanian community asserted their demands for civil rights. The Albanian community at the time was split into two uneven sized groups. The largest group was part of the coalition that was in power and wanted to negotiate with the Macedonian Nationalist party to stop the harassment and gain additional civil rights for Albanians. The second group, lead by the rebel commander Ali Ahmeti, was not as patient as the larger Albanian party and was no longer willing to negotiate with the majority Macedonian Nationalist party.

Macedonia like many of the newly formed countries in the Balkans has ambitions of ultimately becoming part of the European Union (EU). NATO and the EU intervened in the Macedonian conflict and attempted to bring about a negotiated peace. After several months of fighting, an agreement was finally forged in early October 2001 in the resort city of Orhid in southeastern Macedonia. The Treaty of Orhid called for the Macedonian Parliament to revise the constitution giving full civil rights to the Albanian minority. Albanian negotiators had pushed for these changes in the constitution to give their minority group full civil rights including rights to higher education. The EU stipulated approaches to protect minority rights and exercised a strong influence on the Orhid Treaty. The EU also provided funds from their PHARE Program to assist the country in making changes to come into line with EU concepts of civil rights. Since Macedonia had no state-recognized Albanian speaking university, part of this aid has been targeted to institute reforms including higher education. The carrot of possible future membership in the EU and aid assistance in funding current projects influenced internal changes in Macedonia.

3.0 A New University

The reform of higher education in Macedonia included establishing a new university near Tetovo a city of 80,000 people, in the Albanian dominated northwest corner of the country. Funding for the new university came from three sources. The Soros Foundation (Open Society Foundation) provided US\$18 million for construction of campus buildings. United States Agency for International Development provided a US\$10 million endowment to assure lower tuition for students at the university and a US\$2.3 million consulting contract to Indiana University. Finally, the EU's PHARE program provided some personnel and the initial operating budget. The University of South East Europe (SEEU) hurriedly opened in November of 2001.

The Orhid negotiations had taken much longer than expected and the agreement for the new university was one of the last issues settled. The structure and programs of the university were designed overnight by non-academics. In spite of this, the new university's mission is to provide very innovative programs for the Balkan region. University programs were to be delivered in three languages Macedonian, Albanian and English. The concept was to create an international university offering BA degrees in four professional fields: Education, Business, Law, and Communications. Students were to take courses in each of the three languages. SEEU was designed as a private university with an open admissions policy, and it was to serve all ethnic groups.

Indiana University's Center for International Education Development Assistance (CIEDA) won a contract to assist in creating and developing the new university. Since computer skills were thought to be essential to careers in the 21st century, the contract called for IU to install a complete computer system on the SEEU campus, and computer skills courses became a required part of the curriculum in each of the academic areas. IU also provided academic advisors for three of the academic programs (Education, Business, and Law). The French government

provided an advisor for the Communications program. The advisors assisted in the design of the courses and curriculum, provided administrative advice, and taught beginning courses. The new institution was charged with seeking international accreditation as soon as practical. International recognition of the institution and its programs would in part obviate the problem caused by not having Macedonian accreditation.

Each academic advisor was expected to spend at least two months on the campus during the first half of 2002. Students were mostly Albanians from the local area. Only a small minority of the student body spoke Macedonian or English. In keeping with the mission of the university numerous sections of language (Macedonian and English) and computer skills courses were offered in the first year class schedule. Each academic program also had first year courses.

Traditionally, higher education in the Balkans has been oriented towards the liberal arts and sciences with emphasis on the theoretical issues of the various disciplines. Lectures by senior professors and practice sessions in which theoretical problems are "solved" provide the principal teaching methods. Little effort was devoted to student involvement or to practical problems and case studies. Professors "wrote" the book for a course by publishing their lectures and would "read" their "book" to students. Students were expected to take thorough notes, study them, and parrot the material back to the professor on exams. Modern teaching methods are, of course, quite different. Ethnic Albanians comprised 80% of the faculty and staff of SEEU. Most of the faculty had only undergraduate or masters degrees earned from Macedonian institutions or from Ethnic Albanians comprised 80% of the faculty and staff of SEEU. Most of the faculty had only undergraduate or masters degrees earned from Macedonian institutions or from institutions in Kosovo.

The lead author served as Business curriculum advisor at the new university during May and June of 2002 and taught freshman Introduction to Business (IB) in English to 180 students. Since Balkan academic tradition focused on reading lecture notes to students, the first IB class featuring Power Point slides and interactive student involvement caused a large amount of discussion on campus. Each student was given handouts made from the slides and was encouraged to ask questions in class and interact with their fellow students. Assignments involved written papers based on Internet research on various business topics. Students were very enthusiastic about both the delivery of the course and the content. Grades were based on six written assignments handed in over the seven weeks of the class. Part of the rationale for the program advisors being on campus for two months was to teach the teachers modern pedagogical methods. Albanian faculty were appalled at such a departure from traditional teaching methods and attended only the first class.

The campus atmosphere was open and friendly. While the vast majority of the students were Muslim, they were not radical Muslims as pictured by the press in other Muslim countries. Students at SEEU looked, acted, dressed and talked just like students on any university campus in the U.S. Only two or three female students wore scarves and long, dark coats suggesting Muslim dress. The remainder wore clothing similar to that worn by male and female students on any American campus. There was some tension between the few Macedonian students and the Albanian faculty and students. The tension was mostly beneath the surface and unrecognizable to outsiders. Uneasiness mostly took the form of student complaints of not being able to understand lectures. Friction was also apparent between older traditionally minded Albanian faculty and younger Albanian students who wanted to learn English.

4.0 SEEU – Looking Forward to Year #2

Since the original academic program of SEEU was developed overnight, it was obvious that the program would need to be revised before the beginning of the second year. Most of the faculty are ethnic Albanian and wanted the revision to eliminate both English and Macedonian language teaching. They argued that too much emphasis was placed on English and Macedonian courses. They felt that Albanian children who did not have exposure to English and Macedonian languages "in the villages" were at a disadvantage in doing university work in these languages. The academic advisors argued that without second language skills graduates of SEEU would be poorly equipped to work with or for international employers. Most students want the language skills. The Albanian faculty argued that the solution was not to teach these languages and or courses in these languages. The Albanian faculty prevailed and the curriculum revisions significantly scaled back language instruction in English and

Macedonian. The Administration allowed the faculty to change from a tri-lingual university to a single language program. Clearly the mission of creating a tri-lingual international university was thwarted by Balkan reticence.

5.0 Conclusions

The IB course was cited as evidence that teaching in English will not work because the instructor did not give an exam, and he required students to do research on the internet and write reports in English. Yet, frequent e-mails from students ask the instructor to return and teach another course in English. Failure rates for the Introduction to Accounting and Introduction to Economics were 50% in the spring semester. Their academic tradition that seems impervious to change is but the tip of an iceberg that reveals, a much more deep seated resistance to adopt new teaching methods and ideas.

In another disquieting arena on September 15, 2002, Macedonia held a national election. The ruling Nationalist party was defeated easily by a 10 party coalition led by the Social Democrats. The moderate Albanian party was also defeated by a radical Albanian party headed by Ali Ahmeti. The Social Democrat coalition holds 60 seats (out of 120) in the new parliament and will have to form a broader coalition with one of the Albanian parties..

On October 31, 2002 Parliament elected Branko Crvenkovski, the leader of the Social Democrat coalition, Prime Minister. The radical Albanian party's Vice President, Musa Xhaferi, was elected Vice Premier. The Albanian party was also given Cabinet positions as heads of the Ministries of Justice, Health, Education, transport, and Communications. Since the Albanian party now controls the Education Ministry, it seems unlikely that the planned change in SBEU's mission to become an Albanian language university will be reversed. ☞

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