

The State of Higher Education in Kosovo*

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After the Albanians in Kosovo had faced ten years of segregation under the dictatorship of the Serbian regime of Slobodan Milosevic, which included the expulsion of Kosovo-Albanians from the official university and school system, the changing political conditions following the cease-fire for Kosovo reached in June 1999 has provided - in addition to other important changes in the civil and administrative structure in Kosovo - the chance to create a modern, cross-ethnic school and university-system for this country.

The current situation in (higher) education in Kosovo can not be understood without knowledge of the former educational system in Kosovo and its transition.

Prior to the Serb political domination in Kosovo in 1991, the educational institutions were administered and maintained independently from Serbia within the general system of autonomy, with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture of Kosovo as the highest organ. The educational authorities of Kosovo were fully at liberty to compile and approve the curricula and to control the whole educational system of Kosovo.

At the University of Prishtina - inaugurated 1970 - the subjects were taught in two languages, Albanian and Serbian, which enabled Albanian students to study in their mother tongue what was the proper reason for establishing a university in Kosovo. This system was closely related to the comprehensive regulations regarding minority protection within the Yugoslav constitutional framework of 1974, which guaranteed the Kosovo-Albanians almost national equality among the nations of the former SFRY and included Turkish as the third official language in Kosovo as well.

This educational system was very successful, as at the end of the second world war still 78% of the population were illiterate and there was only a very modest tradition of higher education, while today the percentage of those in Kosovo who are illiterate is apparently not very different from the "average" of the region and the neighbouring countries (Bulgaria 5%, Yugoslavia 7%, FYROM 11%, Albania 28%; currently, however, detailed statistics aren't available for Kosovo). Since the establishment of the University of Prishtina more than 60.000 students had graduated - 38 thousand of them in Albanian language by 1996.

From 1981 to 1990 the number of Albanian students was already reduced for 25%. However, with the abolition of Kosovo's autonomy by the Serbian regime in 1989/90 the effects on the educational system were disastrous.

In 1991 the Serbian political regime annulled the Kosovo legislation on education, science and culture, introduced Serbian laws instead and closed down school buildings of primary and secondary education by force. Around 14.500 primary and 4.000 secondary school teachers and 862 university teachers of Albanian ethnicity were dismissed. The Albanian teaching staff, pupils and students were forced to find shelter in private homes so as to continue teaching. In addition, the lectures, administration and finances of the two academic communities were separated. To the international public this system became known as the "parallel educational system".

The Albanian faculties were, of course, very badly equipped. For example, all literature stayed in the libraries of the faculty buildings used by Serbs, which were closed to Albanians; Albanians had no access to gyms, dormitories, canteens and laboratories etc. Thus, the attention has been focused on lectures and consultations with students. Due to the shortage of means, premises and teaching materials, the application of other more efficient methods (experimental exercises, practice etc.) was limited. On the other hand, efforts have been made to ensure probable and necessary practical and professional work for students. This has been attained in elementary schools, workrooms, agriculture parcels, in nature, ateliers, studios, ordinations, cabinets and in improvised laboratories. The University of Tirana but also some institutions in Turkey have given considerable contributions in this regard since a high number of students of the Faculty of Science and Mathematics and the Medical Faculty have carried out their professional practice there. Due to the difficult educational and social conditions, however, the numbers of Albanian students dropped. Yet, in 1996 there were around 16.000

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students (both full time and part time) studying at the parallel Albanian University of Prishtina and coping with shifts in classrooms and halls. The university teaching personnel was made up of 826 full-time teachers and 200 part time and associate teachers.

On the Serbian side, the number of students was difficult to estimate. However, due to the economic crisis in Serbia, investment was also very rare in "Serb" schools and faculty-buildings and the maintenance of the buildings was very poor. The quality of teaching and research lagged far behind western European standards.

While the normalisation of the situation in education –one of the two main pillars of the peaceful "shadow system" alongside the health system – could only occur with the settlement of the political status of Kosovo, the international community tried to overcome the issue by treating it as purely educational matter and by circumventing or reducing the political implications. Within such a framework, 13 rounds of talks were held under the Geneva Conference with the mediation of Ambassador Geert Ahrens.

But it was only in 1996 - after five years of unsuccessful negotiation - that an agreement for education could be negotiated between Dr. Ibrahim Rugova, the political leader of the Kosovo-Albanians, and the Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic under the mediation of the Vatican based Saint Egidio Community. The agreement entailed the reopening of school and university buildings for Albanians based on a shift system, that means the alternating use of the buildings by Serbs and Albanians over the course of the morning and afternoon. The project was to be implemented in several phases and was planned to be completed by the end of September 1998. The reopening of university-buildings to Albanians was planned as part of the first phase.

However, the implementation was obstructed by the Serbs. The Serbian academic community did not keep to the implementation time-table and aimed at the full separation of the Albanian and Serbian university buildings. It was only in autumn 1998 that the Albanians got a few buildings (a complex accommodating the technical faculties and the building of the Albanological Institute) which were vandalised before being returned and which were not used by Serbs from that time on. All other buildings remained closed to the Albanians (inclusive student dormitories, canteens), only one canteen was returned in spring 1999 when the building of the Faculty of Economics and Law was also handed over to the Albanians.

In the course of this unsuccessful reintegration-project, Albanian students and professors became partly radicalised, which again led to the agreement on higher education, achieved in 1996, being officially revoked by the Albanian side in 1998. Only the politically moderate rectorate kept to the implementation plan and continued to insist on the reopening of all university buildings for Albanians.

The situation got worse when atrocities against Albanians started in spring 1998 and the UCK became the dominant political force in Kosovo. The extremist part of the Albanian academic community demanded the forceful occupation of university buildings to solve the education problems.

Under such political conditions, even international development measures which were mainly aimed at physical and technical reconstruction of the educational infrastructure could not be implemented. Projects which were aimed at vital academic reconstruction - e.g. the denationalisation of textbooks, academic exchange programs, the provision of computer-, language- and creative classes, the creation of networks between education institutions in Kosovo and other infrastructure programs aimed at bridging the ethnic gap between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, were rare. At university level, WUS Austria has operated a program of assistance to both communities since autumn 1998 which was similar to the KEEP project-line of SOROS. In both programs, the Albanian side has been the more active partner.

However, these projects came too late, as the conflict escalated into open war. At the start of the NATO bombardment on 24 March 1999 school and university classes and any international development measures in education had to be completely suspended. The overwhelming majority of pupils, students, teachers staff of the Albanian academic community fled to neighbouring countries or in the forests where they searched for shelter.

After the end of NATO bombardment, the retreat of the Yugoslav army, Yugoslav police forces and paramilitary units and the entry of KFOR into Kosovo at the beginning of June, approximately 800,000 ethnic Albanian refugees - among them the majority of school pupils, school and university teaching staff (altogether about 1,100) and more than half of the Albanian university students - returned home. However, their position is critical, as they have to cope with very difficult living conditions.

Parallel to the return of the Albanian Kosovars, about 180,000 Serbs (90% of all Serbs outside Prishtina, 95% of all Serbs living in Prishtina) – among them the great majority of Serbian pupils, students, teachers and

university staff - left Kosovo due to the hostile and hazardous environment and the fear of acts of revenge. Generally speaking, the interethnic situation is very tense, especially in the north of Kosovo (e.g. in the divided city Mitrovica) and violent incidents are daily occurrences. In general, the freedom of movement of all minorities (including Roma) is very limited.

The lack of the rule of law and the breakdown of administrative and civil structures in Kosovo can hardly be compensated for by UNMIK (United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo), which is currently the only official civil authority in Kosovo. In addition to the task of providing security for all the inhabitants of Kosovo, the "umbrella" UNMIK – consisting of UNMIK itself, UNHCR, OSCE, and EU – co-ordinates basic supplies for returning refugees and internally displaced persons, mine-clearance, winter quarters (about 25% of the building structure is uninhabitable, meaning about 500,000 Kosovars are in need) and the reconstruction of the basic infrastructure (energy, water, transport, communication etc.).

As a counselling and consultation instrument for UNMIK, the Kosovo Transitional Council - in which all ethnic groups in Kosovo are integrated – represents the preliminary stage for a parliament to be elected. Moreover, UNMIK established for each sector a civil-administration body called "Joint Civilian Council" (JCC), which is – if possible – multiethnically filled with local experts and representatives but chaired by a senior UNMIK official. In addition, UNMIK has been setting up sectoral "Directorates" – co-chaired by a local and an international expert, - which represent the executive supplement to the rather consultative JCC.

As regards this socio-political development, on June 30 the former Serbian rector of the University of Prishtina symbolically handed over the keys of the university to UNMIK and asked for the university buildings to be protected from being taken over by Albanians. However, after the voluntary "hand-over" of the keys to UNMIK, Albanian professors and other university staff entered the buildings on their own initiative and are presently in control of most of the buildings. From the viewpoint of the Albanian side, an adequate number of rooms have been reserved for Serbian teachers.

From July, the Albanian university board has cleaned up the war-affected buildings with great determination and prepared for provisional teaching which was started on August 2 1999 so as to catch up the last semester.

Similar to the high commitment of other staff members towards their university - although salaries are lacking -, the manager of the Students Center has taken all necessary measures to adapt the buildings so that from the beginning of September 2700 Albanian students have been able to stay in them after nine years of exclusion . However, due to the general state of the buildings, the water and electricity supply is problematic. The canteens could not be opened due to the lack of food. This is a serious problem, because the food sold in local shops is too expensive for students to afford.

Major changes in the structure of the university representatives and staff members of the Albanian university community - in comparison to the members of the Council of the University and the staff before the NATO bombardment - have not occurred. Nearly all of the former deans of the 21 faculties (i.e. 14 faculties, 7 higher schools or colleges) have returned by now.

Still, the rectorate of the University of Prishtina and his university board, which can be called moderate in comparison to the general atmosphere in Kosovo, are under severe pressure from Albanian professors and students who want an independent Kosovo and who articulate their displeasure at any moderate response of the university representatives as regards negotiations with Serbian representatives. This can be partly understood by analysing the structure and perspectives of the Serbian university representatives:

On the Serbian side a new rector, Mr. Jagos Zelenovic, was appointed from Belgrade. Mr. Zelenovic was formerly the Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Economics and was a federal minister for science in the government of Milosevic. He is one of the people who has been mainly responsible for the development of segregation in higher education in Kosovo in the last few years. In this tradition, he and his colleagues look upon the Albanian university - disregarding the changed political framework - as a private university and still claim to be the only official university in Prishtina.

Like the Albanian university board, the Serbian university board has plans to hold catch up classes and examinations, too. However, as many students of the Serbian university came from regions outside Kosovo (2/3 - 3/4), it is not very likely that they are going to return to take up their studies. On the other hand, the fact that Serbian students from Prishtina are not accepted by other universities in Serbia and Montenegro may make them more willing to return to Kosovo to continue their studies. For the time being, the Serbian "branch" of the University of Prishtina reorganized itself – now as a Serbian shadow university with faculties which are

distributed to several villages in the northern part of Kosovo or beyond the border in Serbia proper. At the moment, the rectorate is located in Krusevac.

Besides its other obligations UNMIK as the official authority acts as the key-player in the reconstruction and development of higher education. UNMIK established the Joint Civil Commission for Education (JCCE), which includes members of both sides of the Kosovo academic community as well as a UNESCO/UNICEF representative as chairman. As far as the university level is concerned, this JCCE is still a "virtual" one as no common meeting has been organized yet; all efforts have been confined to bilateral talks between UNMIK and the respective language stream. In addition to UNMIK and JCCE, there are several other non-governmental, government and international organizations engaged in the (re-)construction of (higher) education in Kosovo. International "key-players" involved in the reconstruction of (higher) education are the Council of Europe, OSCE, EU-TAFOK, CRE-Task-Force, WUS, SOROS and others.

In respect of the situation in education as outlined above, there are three areas of reconstruction: physical reconstruction (new equipping of schools and the university), legal reconstruction (creation of new, normative basis for school and university structures) and finally academic reconstruction (curricula-development, school and university management, transfer of know-how etc.). The UNMIK education section is currently engaged in establishing a sort of consortium for the reconstruction of (higher) education to define the division of work between the different international players in educational reconstruction. Generally speaking, one can see a gap between the claim of UNMIK to be the only legitimate official authority on the one hand and the lack of manpower and organizational structures for the implementation of steps necessary to move and transform the system on the other. While the officials of the UNMIK education section are attempting to bridge this gap, the original problem remains; - namely in the mistaken strategic decision of the UNMIK leaders not to prioritise education. This approach is far more dangerous than it seems since investment in education and human resources development represents the only way for prosperity in a Kosovo lacking natural resources .

At this stage the solution of political/legal questions is the priority issue of UNMIK. Here, two basic principles are guiding the work: the basic right to education for all people living in Kosovo and a non-discriminatory approach.

While the Serbian side - ignoring the new political conditions - wants to see the agreement on higher education between Rugova and Milosevic from 1996, which was never fully implemented, as the basis for the future development and thinks that only one official University in Prishtina (namely a Serbian one) can exist, the Albanian university board stresses its desire for an open, democratic, non-discriminatory university (that means no division of the university). However, concrete proposals for the teaching language, integration of Serbian professors in the university structure etc. have yet to follow the general proposal.

In the bilateral negotiations between UNMIK and the Albanian/Serbian academic communities - direct contact between the Albanian and Serbian academic representatives have not been able to be established up to now - the question of space (buildings, rooms) at the university and the schools is of utmost importance. Facing such a situation, UNMIK tried to bring about a provisional solution concerning the room question by creating provisional parallel structures to enable both sides to catch up on last semester. Facilitating the trouble-free holding of catch-up classes and examinations for Serbian and Albanian students was seen as a first step for further talks and concessions. Unfortunately, the planned remedial classes and examinations for the Serbian students were not held as planned.

For the future, however, the restructuring of the university should be completed in accordance with the factual numbers of students (Serbian and Albanian and also students from other minorities). Therefore, the main discussion point is the question of how many students of the "Serbian" university will return. For a transitional periode, the whole reorganization of the university structures of Kosovo should be done with the support of an international administrator who will work together with the Albanian and Serbian academic communities and the international keyplayers.

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