

# The Politics of History Education in the Balkans: The Young Generation as Transmitter of Reconciliation

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**B**alkan, *a: Of or pertaining to the peninsula bounded by the Adriatic, Aegean, and Black Seas, or to the countries or peoples of this region; spec. with allusion to the relations (often characterized by threatened hostilities) of the Balkan states to each other or to the rest of Europe; so in the derivatives, Balkanic (blkænk), Balkanoid adjs., Balkanism. Hence Balkanize v., to divide (a region) into a number of smaller and often mutually hostile units, as was done in the Balkan Peninsula in the late 19th and early 20th centuries* (Oxford English Dictionary)

I was not sure of how concise my definition of the terms "Balkans" would be, so I resorted to the Oxford dictionary for a more accurate result. Even for somebody unfamiliar with contemporary world politics, Balkans is synonymous with ethnic antagonism, political and military upheaval. Political scientists and policy makers, in terms of promoting a new image for the region, initiated the use of the term "Southeastern Europe" to describe the same geographical area. The name change, though, cannot delete historical memory. Narratives of numerous wars, relocation of borders, exchanges of territory and people, and inter-ethnic conflicts are prevalent within every ethnic group in the region.

Are we citizens of the countries of the Balkans to consider ourselves as a unique case, as ill-fated peoples who should be pitied because they are destined never to see the light of day? The post-1990 era has provided no sustainable solution for the region. Devastated economies, dysfunctional political systems and ethnic tensions comprise the image of the contemporary Balkans. The recent shift of interest of the international community to other parts of the world left most of the Balkan disputes unresolved. With the European Union

membership being a far dream for most of the region's countries, Balkan people see their lives doomed in this everlasting narrative of warfare. Indicative of this situation is that immigration to Western Europe is the aspiration of the majority of the population.

My belief is that we should abolish any metaphysical determinism that the Balkans have been historically a venue of warfare and will remain so in the future. Young people, constituting the most dynamic group in the society, can bring the desired change. My aspiration is that young Balkans will maturely manage their historical heritage and get actively involved in forging modern Balkan states.

***Throughout history, the Balkans have been a crossroad, a zone of endless military, cultural, and economic mixing and clashing between Europe and Asia, Christianity and Islam, Catholicism and Orthodoxy. (Mark Mazower)***

The history of the Balkans is depicted in the narratives of its people: personal stories of individuals who confront the issues of ethnic identity and historical heritage in their everyday lives. My life scenario constitutes a

microcosm of the complexity of Macedonia, a sub-region of the Balkans with a rich multiethnic heritage of more than 3,000 years. The geographer H. R. Wilkinson, in his book on the area, comments on the complexity of the region, contending that the term Macedonia "defies a definition." The post-1990 nationalist era, in the wider region, revived the questions regarding Macedonian history and identity which were set aside for many decades. My personal situation illustrates the quest of every Macedonian for ethnic and cultural self-determination in this new age.

I was born in Thessaloniki, the capital of historic Macedonia and birthplace of Alexander the Great. Thessaloniki has been, for the last century, part of the republic of Greece, with a population of whom 95 percent identify as Greek-Macedonians. The Macedonian atmosphere is prevalent all over the place: ancient temples, statues, venues of Ancient Macedonia remind everybody of a glorious Macedonian cultural heritage. Consequently, it is inevitable that this population feels detached from its history and is confronted with an international environment that denies its right for self-determination as Macedonians.

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Slavic Macedonians comprise the majority in the neighboring state, the Former Yugoslav Republic Of Macedonia (FYROM), established in 1991. This group has different cultural characteristics from other ethnic groups in the region. They proclaim their distinct ethnic origin, declaring that they are the only ethnic Macedonian group, something that is heavily disputed by Greeks and Bulgarians.

***...a Macedonian salad, in the end, is just a mixed salad. A salad with a diversity of similar ingredients—fruits, veggies, warring ethnicities, whatever.***

Whenever I identify myself as an ethnic Macedonian, an international would assume that I am of Slavic origin and not Greek. I would definitely not consider this an insult, since every civilization has its cultural heritage that one is proud of. I feel, though, deprived of a vital part of my national identity. My situation exemplifies the complexity that arises from the content of the rule of self-determination, the situation where the rights of two different ethnic groups conflict. There are no legal procedures by which one can protect his right to a national identity. All international charters denote the supremacy of the right of self-determination, assuming this is the main principle, which will regulate the relations between neighboring states.

Besides its political aspects, this situation brings many practical problems to everyday issues. An ethnic Macedonian may be a citizen of FYROM, but the airport of Macedonia and the University of Macedonia are located in Thessaloniki, Greece. Macedonian is the

language spoken in South Bulgaria. I think that it may make some sense to a foreigner now why we refer to the situation as a Macedonian salad.

The history of the Balkans was more than a plain historical inquiry for me, as I was raised in a period of ethnic tension that emerged after the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Questions that dealt with contemporary regional politics and history were considered taboo, even in an academic environment. After ten years of high school and college education in history as well as personal readings, I was convinced that I had a solid background in Balkan history and was open-minded enough to discuss these topics; my summer internship at the Kokkalis Foundation was a unique chance for me to be “exposed” to an environment of people with the same interests and concerns as me.

I thought myself as extremely privileged that I could form my own inquiry in respect to the Ethics Center Student Fellowship. I chose to work for the Olympia 2006 Balkan Seminars organized by the Kokkalis foundation in Greece. The central mission of the Kokkalis Foundation is the promotion of a peaceful, democratic and prosperous Southeastern Europe through the development of public, cultural and scientific life in the region. Through its various initiatives, it seeks to leverage the region’s human capital and cultural heritage in order to develop a democratic polity, a new economy and a civic society that provide opportunities to all nations. The Foundation sponsors numerous initiatives relative to the region, including the organization of public fora, international conferences,

the development of human networks for the promotion of inter-ethnic understanding and the advancement of knowledge with an emphasis on public policy. It

is widely regarded today as the most prominent institute in terms of research on Balkan politics and economics. The Balkans Studies Seminars constitute a unique (for the region) educational initiative of high quality, organized in collaboration with Yale and Duke Universities. The main thematic unit of the 2006 seminars was entitled “War, Conflict and Identity.” A number of acknowledged academics and researchers

addressed the above theme with respect to the current developments in Southeastern Europe.

### **My return to the Balkans**

I spent the first part of the internship in the headquarters of the Kokkalis foundation in Athens, welcomed by my supervisor and the rest of the academic staff. Although my assignment there entailed a series of administrative issues, I was able to get

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valuable feedback on the formulation of my proposal. The staff of the institute was comprised of experts on issues of public policy and politics of the Balkan region. They expressed their interest in my project and provided their insight in terms of the issues that were expressed in my proposal. Their practical experience and perennial engagement with the Balkans was an invaluable source for me. Although frustrated by the administrative workload at the beginning, I felt privileged to interact with these individuals. They were highly qualified scholars, who returned to the region and devoted their careers to the prospect of a better future for the Balkans. Even tasks that might originally seem trivial and of no particular interest for my research helped me conceptualize the real socio-political situation of the contemporary Balkans. For example, I spent a considerable amount of time every day helping out participants with the visa documentation and the procedures at the Greek embassies in Southeastern Europe. Having myself a passport of the Republic of Greece and the European Union, I have traveled extensively in the region without the burden of issuing a visa. This was not the case, though, with the citizens of the other Balkan states who wanted to travel to Greece; they cannot travel freely around and their visa authorization procedures can take many months. There were cases of students who were awarded fellowships to attend the seminars and were not granted visas in time to come to Greece. It seems that in the Balkans of 2006, we are not as close as the travel signs indicate. There are still barriers that keep us apart from reconciliation.

Another task that I was assigned, while in Athens, was to assist the Committee in the evaluation of the applicants. University students and recent graduates from different backgrounds comprised a group of highly motivated young people, bringing in different experiences from academia, government and civil service. Their application form asked for their personal views in terms of the current

political status in Southeastern Europe. I was very interested to read pieces that comment on Balkan politics in a very moderate manner; many of the applicants included their personal experience in terms of the recent events in the region, such as cases where their families were dislocated because of warfare. I felt like an “outsider”; I belonged to the “privileged side” of the Balkans, since my generation in Greece did not experience any warfare. The Balkan controversy was an academic issue for me, whereas for others was an everyday reality.

Besides the administrative aspect of my duties, I was able to devote some personal time to my research project. It set the question of whether the contemporary young generation (the age group of 15 to 30 years old) has the potential of transition or such a goal would be unrealistic for the near future. The proposed research project examined the attitude of a group of young Balkans (these are participants of the seminars, who identified themselves as coming from countries of the Balkan region) towards the issues of reconciliation within the framework of the already existing nation-states in the area. During this internship, I would have the chance to interact with a solid group of young individuals from the Balkans and get concurrently academic training on issues of Balkan history. The researchers of the foundation assisted in formulating my research inquiry; they proposed a less structured model of research, since the body of participants was not a representative sample of contemporary Balkan youth (they were “community leaders,” having already demonstrated commitment to the reconciliation process). They expressed their concerns over the structure of the survey (I was in favor of a quantitative written survey, whereas they proposed an open discussion in a form of workshop); they helped me address my topics in a politically correct manner, in order to comply with a respectful attitude towards every participant’s view. It is challenging to address individuals who have

different opinions on the topics, as a result of personal experience and national sentiment.

Then came June 30th; my last day at the office filled me with anxiety for what was going to follow. It was time for the seminar to start, to put into action all the theoretical preparation of the previous period.

### **Moments from the seminar**

July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006. We were on the bus from Athens International Airport heading to Olympia. I felt like a tourist guide, and crowd control was certainly not my forte. Thirty-five students from ten different countries were selected from a pool of more than 120. I had worked towards their selection process for the past three weeks and read extensively about their backgrounds. I talked with some of them on the phone, helping them with their travel arrangements. Although we had done extensive research on their backgrounds, I felt that there was a lot more to know about them. All of them were leaders in their communities and had demonstrated extensive interest in the field of political activism. I anticipated our first meeting with great anxiety, since I didn’t know what to expect.

Our responsibilities would primarily demand from our side (the host organization) a politically correct approach to a number of issues; history is still in the making in the Balkans and many of the participants are personally involved in the events that were going to be discussed. We needed to make them feel comfortable, in order to establish a truly multi-cultural environment in which students would be able to express their views freely. (This is the main reason why the seminars are conducted in a hotel detached from an urban area: to decrease the impact of the local community, Greece, on the work done at the seminar.) I got advice to be prepared even for a possible tension between students. Having all this feedback, I expected a rather challenging two weeks ahead.

One main goal of the first days was to achieve the cohesion of the group. The ice-breaking practice I got in the States was definitely useful; but would this work with a group of people from Eastern Europe? (I have to admit that I did not think highly of those techniques when I first came to the U.S.) My original plan was to assign seats for the four-hour bus trip and rooming assignments at the hotel, "forcing" participants to socialize with people of different nationalities. I was really surprised to see that little effort was required in this field. Without even following a procedure of introducing everybody publicly before getting on the bus, students themselves took the initiative of introducing themselves to the rest of the group. They dashed to the back of the bus, making jokes with each other; the bus ride resembled a high school field trip rather than a politics seminar. The stamina of participants was something that really surprised me. Although our meeting point was the airport, most of the participants had arrived in Athens by train or bus, after very long journeys. It was definitely a smooth beginning for the group.

As though at a class reunion, some of the students asked for music during the bus ride; besides being a bit skeptical at the beginning, I went forward with it. Listening to them singing all together, I could not imagine all these "tension scenarios" that we were prepared for. The power of rock music certainly had a bigger impact than I could have imagined. You could hear "heated" arguments – not about politics but about bands and concerts.

The seminar hall was located opposite from our hotel. A picturesque school building, used as the local high school during the school year, had been lavishly refurbished by the local council in order to host the seminar. The freshly painted walls and the brand new projector contrasted with the casual spirit of the participants, who reluctantly woke up at 7 a.m. to attend the first day of the seminar. The orientation of the seminar was towards contemporary problems of the region and less on the historical

side of it. Being occupied with a number of administrative issues, I was not able to attend the full session during the first day. At dinner, I got positive reactions about the quality of the course from the students.

Seeing the group around the dinner table, I was reminded of the Balkan villages of the Ottoman Empire. A Balkan community isolated from the outside world had existed for more than five hundred years during the previous millennium. The people of the region were not separated into Albanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Romanians or Yugoslavs. In Olympia, the participants were free of skepticism and resistance caused by their national environment. They had the chance to redefine themselves in terms of a collective Balkan identity. For them, in comparison to their ancestors, the bonding factors might not be the Balkan folklore music or past historic experience. A new Balkan identity can arise from the new Balkan cinema, contemporary literature and music of the region. All we need is to bring young people together and let them interact without a hitch. Give them voice, give them ownership of their future and the process for reconciliation might be simpler than we think it is.

It was a great privilege for us to have world-class faculty from U.S. universities coming to Greece, providing their insight on the politics of the Balkan region. The sessions were organized in a discussion mode, as the participants had already had some exposure to the topics addressed. The second part of the seminar was bringing in the most provocative issue of the seminar, the workshop on the "Macedonian" issue. The subject, which is of prime concern for most countries in the region, constitutes not only a historic inquiry, but brings up many controversies on the current status quo of the Balkan region. The conference program included a series of lectures, which were to be followed by a discussion by the participants.

The lectures were really very interesting. The lecturers were highly knowledgeable and captured the attention of the audience.

Their politically correct approach was really remarkable (sometimes humor is the best way to address "sensitive" issues in politics). The comparative analysis of the problems of the Balkans with the ones in other countries in the world was something really innovative. (I

think that it was the first time that most participants saw the Balkan conflict expressed by a mathematical-statistic equation.) For me, though, what was going to be more interesting was the discussion that followed.

(At this point I should note that the participants of the congress were selected in terms of their academic background and personal involvement in Balkan politics from among a big pool of applicants. They were expected to have an active role in the discussions, which were led by the academic experts.)

At the same time, I was involved in organizing my workshops; from the first moment I would have to deal with my dual role. My supervisor had advised me to "keep some distance" from the group; the fact that I was at the same age as most of the participants would potentially hinder me from exercising control over the flow of the conversation. I would have to behave as a student, integrating into the group, and, at the same time, acting as an administrator of the workshop.

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My overall impression from the discussions was below my expectations. I definitely did not witness a true political debate; I thought of most participants as part of their national delegations, rolling out their pre-rehearsed speeches. There was no real exchange of articulate argument between young people, who supposedly would bring innovative ideas on the current issues. This is certainly a paradox for people who have committed their lives to studying political science and are engaged in public service for their local communities. It was depressing to see that the future leaders of the Balkans were not much different from the ones who had brought so many calamities to our region. It was my sense that the participants had no real interest in politics and had already adopted a bureaucratic approach, with no real interest in the essence of political activism. My above argument is not against the specific group of students, but reflects the general standing of my generation towards political issues.

It is almost 1 a.m. after a very tiring day working the seminar. Wandering around the hotel, I stop by the computer room. I see Dusan, a senior politics student from Belgrade, Serbia, still working. Waving his hand, he asks me to come to see his PC. Noticing that he is browsing the pages of UK universities, I ask him if he is interested in continuing his studies there. "Masters in Politics in London?" I ask.

"No, my friend, politics is interesting, but business is where all the money is" he replies. "Come with me to do business in the Balkans."

Doing some thinking that night, I acknowledged that my initial impression of the group might have been an easy generalization. Maybe they were materializing their reconciliation with a more practical mindset, avoiding a pretentious political approach. Since all traditional political norms have failed in the Balkans, we might need to experiment. As my friend from Belgrade illustrated, inter-Balkan business might bring us closer than peace initiatives.

***The right question is not "Is it true?" but "what is it intended to do?"***  
**(S.H.Hooke)**

From an academic standpoint, the focus of my inquiry was the developments that followed the disintegration of the Republic of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. This was a period of gross human rights violations in the area, with the first priority of the international community to be the cessation of violence. The long-term planning for a sustainable Balkan community should not have been, though, limited to a ceasefire, but should have implemented a radical social reconstruction. The question of how to deal with the legacy of past wars is acute; the past in the Balkans entails traumatic experience for all communities, since a high percentage of the current population has had personal involvement in such events.

Reconciliation is a concept used by politicians and political scientists to describe the progress towards peaceful and democratic societies. But what is reconciliation all about? Most interpretations include the themes of international justice, apology of politicians, forgiveness, individual healing, commemoration of grievances, reform of history education. Many historians argue that history education cannot be disarmed; history classes are experienced as training for citizens, in order to effectively argue in favor of the nation's interest. The various initiatives around the world are attempting to set up new standards and principles in history teaching. They have examined a vast range of violence, from the protracted cases in Northern Ireland and South Africa to civil war in Guatemala and Somalia. All these attempts can be helpful in establishing a framework for the case of the Balkans. The ultimate goal is to transform history education from a cause of conflict to a means of mutual understanding. It is certainly challenging to confront a reality different from the national historiography and the family narratives, facing a very different perception of the same historic events. This transformation, though, is an essential precondition for the establishment of sustainable democratic societies.

***Trade is incompatible with War.***  
**(Immanuel Kant)**

As in most cases in world politics, businessmen are ahead of politicians in attempts of rapprochement between conflicting nations. The post-communist economic opportunities attracted a large number of businessmen to engage in inter-Balkan trade. In spite of the big business opportunities, companies had to face a hostile environment, stemming from inadequate and irrational historical arguments from the local communities. This environment has obstructed their economic activities and growth potential; they realized that a normalized present for the Balkans presupposed the arrangement of the past. Using their pressure towards local governments, they succeeded in putting the issue of reforming history education on public agendas. Local governments, in cooperation with the international community, started a series of initiatives towards history education.

***The Balkans produce more history than they can consume.***  
**(Winston Churchill)**

Among the various initiatives regarding the politics of history education in the Balkans, I focused on the very systematic work done by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeastern Europe, in Thessaloniki, Greece. This project was a result of capital and personal involvement invested by Kostas Karras, a Greek ship owner and an Oxford history graduate who made the change in the approach to history his mission, acting within the Center initiatives. The CDRSEE three-year project on the politics of history education in the Balkans produced interesting findings. The comparative analysis of national educational systems revealed that, regardless of the education and democratization standards of each community, history education had some common problems in the region. First of all, they indicated that there was no will towards knowing anything about each other. History books, focusing on the broader European perspective, were geared towards the history of Western European

nations, omitting any developments in the neighboring countries; they were depicted with “dim colors on the maps,” giving the impression of an area that does not need to be studied. Furthermore, these books transmitted to the student bodies the sense of victimization, through simplified and biased presentations of military events. The project identified a common pattern according to which “we have never done anything to harm our neighbors and have never waged wars to conquer.” Textbooks create the notion that we have always been winners and our neighbors losers, or that we are the eternal victims, providing an “excellent psychological background for generation of conflicts of varying intensity” (Elizabeth Cole).

The experts in the field agree on some common recommendations in terms of reforms in the area of history education, applicable in the case of the Balkans. First of all, we should denote the primary role of school as an agent of social transmission. Especially in cases of fragmented societies, where ethnic division, mistrust and propaganda are prevalent, the school can be a place of responsible and democratic education. It should be an agent of positive values, promoting critical thinking towards politics.

Another aspect of reconciliation, which is related to my personal inquiry, is the issue of time; sociologists argue that the idea that hatred fades as time passes by is not necessarily true (see Elizabeth Cole, “History Education and Sociopolitical Reconciliation after Mass Crimes”). Time does not heal all wounds; communities tend to return to past events to address their current and future political standing. Consequently, this would be a problem, not only for my generation but for all the forthcoming ones. We need to approach with maturity the origins of the conflict, since historical disputes will be a source of instability for the future of the Balkans. It takes a number of years from the time that a change is initiated until it reaches the classroom (this is the time needed for the consensus of academic historians to make its way into history textbooks), constituting schools as long-

term agents in the process of reconciliation. As stated by Elizabeth Cole (world expert in the politics of history education), “five or ten years can make a difference.” My generation has had direct experience from the warfare; the next one will have vague memories of it and might consider it irrelevant to its political standing. The situation in the Balkans is even more complex, as ethnic tension still prevails in certain regions, undermining any systematic attempt for a regional reform in history education.

Furthermore, it would be beneficial to connect the regional and domestic conflicts with examples of fragmented societies and reconciliation processes around the globe. The legitimacy of international organizations and the credibility of academics from the West can be helpful in overcoming the local political disputes of who will be in charge of the reform, bringing all groups to work together. “Outsiders” can bring their wisdom from similar cases abroad, add professionalism to the projects and attract funding from foreign governments. We should not, though, overlook the local teaching methodology and knowledge; in many instances, foreign aid failed to adapt to the regional circumstances, producing overall very poor results.

In terms of the actual history curriculum and its revision, one should note that this is primarily a political issue. In most of the Balkan counties, the revision of history books is a highly formalized procedure that is administered by government officials. The extent of the revision is often a debate between political parties. As a result, debatable narratives that deal with highly sensitive national issues are usually absent from history books. The major problem of a reform would be to reach an agreement on historical narratives; ethnic groups have interests in retaining narratives that glorify their past and promote current national cohesion. They denote sharp divergences between themselves and the other ethnic groups, with no interest to present the

conflicting narratives. Additionally, we should acknowledge that historical research does not always result in objective findings, but is strongly related to the viewpoint of the historian and his audience.

The controversies over the events during the Yugoslav wars make consensus a very difficult task.

Special attention should be given not only to the content but to the methodological approach as well. Teachers should promote critical thinking, which will motivate students to seek the truth between the various narratives. Teachers of history in post-conflict areas are more than instructors. They need to become mediators between the political reality and objective history. We should help teachers to gain the necessary skills that will enable them to handle a comparative approach to history. Whereas official history reforms require years to pass, teachers can promptly embrace change in their teaching methods. As past experience indicates, though, it is extremely difficult for them to cope with this task; it is irrational to ask high school teachers to become leading figures in the struggle for social change.

It is generally acknowledged that history education is undervalued as a means of providing transitional justice and reconciliation. Current administrations in the region have set history education as a decreasing priority in their agenda, because of its long-term character and its costly implementation. The education is geared towards practical skills that will enable students compete in the marketplace, implying that less practical initiatives like reforming history education are a luxury for

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the Balkans. This approach is very similar to what I perceived as the aspiration of many Balkan youths that I encountered during the seminars. They anticipate that their education will be oriented towards the economic development of the region. The whole debate in respect to the curriculum of history is of less importance to them. Their “ostensible indifference” to their historical heritage should not be misinterpreted; the younger generation has adopted a much more realistic approach in terms of political activism. Through their stance, they expressed the view that the economic development and social reconstruction of their local communities is a prerequisite for any attempt for reconciliation.

*And yet, if the Balkans were no more than horror, why is it, when we leave and make for this part of the world, why is it we feel a kind of fall – an admirable one, it is true – into the abyss? (Emil Cioran)*

In order for Balkans to escape the tyranny of the past, our role is to restore hope to younger generations, who are morally and spiritually enervated. My overall experience from the fellowship gave me reason to hope for a better future. It is high time we spoke openly about all painful subjects, setting aside our nationalist sentiments. Instead we should try to revive the spirit of the traditional “Balkan village” of the Ottoman Empire; a community of peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding of all ethnic and religious groups. And maybe the future generations will find a different definition for the term Balkans in their dictionary.

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