

The University of Tetova: A Glorious Temple Built on the Nation's Sacrifice for Culture and Justice Acknowledgement

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Abstract

In different historical periods, famous people have sacrificed themselves on behalf of their substantial beliefs in the function of promoting scientific knowledge. Likewise, many of them, with an uncompromising piety have contributed to the establishment of institutions to ensure its advancement. Not long ago, by the end of the 20th century, in a Macedonian town – now North Macedonia, in Tetovo - the first Albanian-language university was founded as a product of citizens' collective willpower for ethnic and cultural identity actualization in the field of education. It is fairly said that its founding history is hurtful and atypical for a higher education institution. Therefore, through this article we will tend to elaborate the specificities of its evolution by describing two development stories based on the collected data using the archival study method. In the first one, we will give light to some of events of essential importance of its establishment, in a time and context of communist regime that led an ethnic groups marginalization politics in a multiethnic society. Our focus will be the police actions by the government of the time in order to brutally crush the pro-University civic movement, which led to murder and imprisoning of Albanian intellectuals, professors and youngsters, but with unsuccessful epilogue. Subsequently, we will present the second story of this major national project: from the moment if its institutional legalization in 2004 to the present. Today, this university represents the nucleus of the Albanian emancipation in RNM, by promoting social, multicultural and especially scientific and academic values. At the end we will emphasize the vision, strengths of this University, such are women empowering, intercultural dialogue and its internationalization.

Keywords: cultural identity, multiethnic society, vision, internationalization

Introduction

Expanding cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity throughout the world, especially after the end of the Second World War, revealed a new basic orientation necessary for normal functioning of civilization (Banks, 1996; 2004). Setting communication barriers between young people (and citizens) of different cultures in Balkan states and beyond, as a strategy to assimilate minorities, has a long institutional history (Murtezani, 2018). The members of these cultures need to have greater self-confidence and simultaneously develop evaluation and understanding of the other cultures (Tiedt & Tiedt, 1990). The instructions for multicultural understanding can assist in raising the academic expectations of the pupils from the minorities and to contribute for decreasing the negative stereotypes. It is assumed that in order for the multicultural programs to be efficient, it is necessary for them to incorporate the social, historic and political contexts (Niето, 1997). In many Balkan countries, and not only, which were under the domination of the communist system, the issue of ethnic diversity has always been neglected. In this paper we will refer to the issue of higher education of the Albanian community in North Macedonia, from a historic perspective, including reflections of recent times. As we will argue below, the education challenges which the Albanian community in North Macedonia faced implicate their collective commitment and sacrifices in order to gain their right to quality university education. The epilogue of their legitimate efforts to preserve the cultural identity was the establishment of the first Albanian University in 1994 by the Albanian people in the Macedonia of that time. Since its commencement, immediately after its establishment, this university has had to face many unusual challenges for a higher education institution.

It is easy for us to describe its development path by a retrospective analysis but the masterminds of this university establishment had faced major difficulties due to the quite unfavorable and life-threatening circumstances, approximately three decades ago.

1. North Macedonia - a country of attractive nature but fragile multiethnic society

Situated on the Balkan Peninsula in Southeast Europe, this small country takes pride of a sublime natural beauty, with rivers and lakes like Ohrid, mountains like Shar and many other. It borders Kosovo to the northwest, Serbia to the northeast, Bulgaria to the east, Greece to the south and Albania to the west.

North Macedonia has a demographic of different ethnic, religious and linguistic affiliations. Regarding the statistical data related to the number of the population, we note that in 2002 ethnic Macedonians are 64% of the population, while 25% were ethnic Albanians, 4% Turks, 3% Roma and smaller percentages of other ethnic groups (Fig. 1.1). The native language of Macedonians is Macedonian while native languages of Albanians, Turks and Roma are the Albanian, Turkish and Roma (Fontana, 2007).

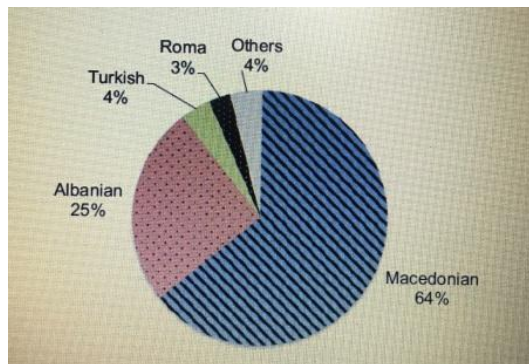


Fig. 1.1 Macedonia's population by ethnic affiliation according to the 2002 census (State Statistical Office, Census of population, households and dwellings 2002. Book X: Total population according to ethnic affiliation, mother tongue and religion (Skopje: State Statistical Office, 2002): 62)

The majority of them, fortunately or unfortunately, belong to two different religious groups. Based on fig. 1.2, in 2002, the majority of the Macedonian population was Christian orthodox and Muslim (mainly Sunnis). After 2002 for many reasons, especially for political, we do not have reliable data on the population of this country.

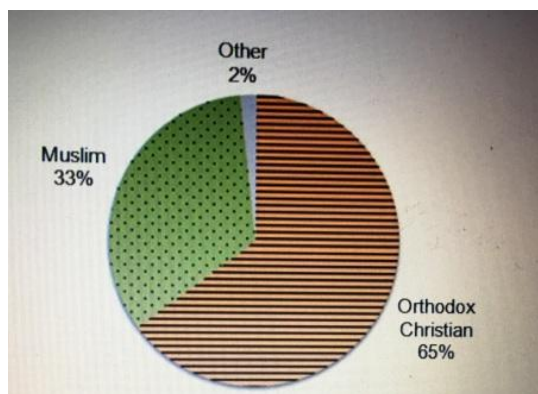


Fig. 1.2 Macedonia's population by religious affiliation according to the 2002 census (ibid., 334)

Historically, the Balkan peoples have been involved in many disputes and even conflicts - wars resulting in grave consequences. They 'coexist in parallel rather than live together' (ICG, p.4). There may have been temporary cohabitation periods but the social and political situation has always been characterized as tense. Most Balkan states have responded by force to diversity and identity-based conflicts in their territory by eliminating, assimilating, suppressing, or subjugating smaller cultural and ethnic communities. In almost all disputes between the peoples of this region, the right to native language use for certain communities (minority) has been and remains one of the most debated issue.

Macedonia was first under Ottoman rule and later within the borders of Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece during the First world war (1913). It was established as a Yugoslav republic for the first time after WWII. Between 1991 and 2001 it was established as an independent country. And last, by the end of 2019, it was renamed to the Republic of North Macedonia.

2. The first Albanian university in North Macedonia founded by the people

The University of Tetova, one of the newest universities in North Macedonia, currently represents a temple of knowledge in which the academic activity includes all three study cycles. This institution stands out every day more with numerous achievements on many academic and scientific fields.

Its establishment saga is characterized by countless challenges, atypical for a higher education institution. From a retrospective standpoint, we will disclose the period of being an illegal institution, more precisely the circumstances that resulted in mass protests. Nevertheless, we will describe all critical events that contributed to the establishment of this institution as well as the social and political turbulences due to the historical hegemonic state practice.

2.1. Circumstances preceding the actualization of the right to an Albanian University

The issue of an Albanian-language university establishment in Macedonia is an embodiment of widespread struggles for inclusion and rights of the Albanian community. A series of political, social and educational circumstances in the past, rather than advancing the Albanian ethnicity position, were even more disadvantageous to their rights to integration and equal education in the society. Albanians were merely denied the right to higher education in their native language, since the end of WWI (even earlier), which made them feel discriminated against and marginalized due to the inability to decide about their fate. In former Yugoslavia, a communist ideology policy of the time offered the minorities the opportunity of primary education in their native language. Just for illustration, in the Republic of Macedonia, by 1952 there were 25.645 students enrolled in Albanian language classrooms and by 1972 that number had increased to 54.801. However, as time passed, the Albanian community remained alienated from the ideologies and narratives that supported the state-building project of Yugoslavia. Worst of all was that, considered a non-Slavic people, Albanians were excluded from the pan-Slav ideal which represented the nucleus of the federal state; their discrimination was never ending.

Many Albanian intellectuals had graduated at the Albanian-language Pristina University but the authorities of Republic of Serbia closed the university in 1990. All these changes made the access of the Albanian community to university education impossible. Unlike the Yugoslav constitution of 1974, the Macedonian legislation did not guarantee university education in Albanian. In an atmosphere of collective

frustration, the idea of establishing an Albanian-language university in Macedonia began emerging spontaneously. What occurred in the decades that followed, namely the Albanian higher education issue, would continuously strain the relations between ethnic Albanians and the independent Macedonian state.

Major issues were articulated in 1980 when the Macedonian elite began implementing the so-called integration education system, while in fact it was solely a perfidious institutional effort to assimilate Albanians. Schools were now functioning that way that in the new curricula the number of Macedonian lessons in Albanian language schools increased, books in Albanian language were rewritten to further emphasize Macedonian identity. The Law set the very high figure (30) as the minimum number of students as a condition to open classrooms in Albanian. Due to this well-planned effort, between 1981 and 1989, the number of Albanian-language high schools was halved (Phillips,2004), while Albanian teachers who refused to work with the new curricula were fired. (Ingrid, 2001). At the time, the tendency of collective sociopolitical exclusion of the Albanian ethnic community was a great concern. For example, in 1990, the state-founding narratives and state-forming policies promoted by the state emphasized state compliance with the ethnic Macedonian nation. These policies fueled ethnic Albanian feelings of collective exclusion and fear of assimilation, which eventually motivated the 2001 uprising.

No doubts that the inequality in education makes the members of a community feel uncomfortable because of their inferior position in society, especially when we talk about a society that proclaims cultural pluralism. Maslow's theory (1956), teaches us how important for an individual and a community is to fulfill the self-actualization motive. The mental and social well-being of members of a society can only be assured if they manage to integrate into society as equal citizens. They can only this way actualize their identity - which was not the case with Albanians, well-known for their loyalty around the world! For years their frustration grew due to the lack of willingness of the communist authorities to hear their complaints, respectively, to discuss about their national and cultural needs and concerns. The collective sense of being second-class citizens, accumulated over the decades, towards the end of the 20th century, overcame the state of chronic collective stagnation by manifesting into massive disobedience towards the hegemonic state policy of that time. Another circumstance that influenced political and social events was, undoubtedly, the ethnic conflict in Macedonia that lasted for about seven months (February-August 2001), between the National Liberation Army and state security forces. The conflict led to 150-200 casualties and 650 injuries, and about 7% of Macedonia's population was displaced during this period(Ripiloski, 2011).This conflict, directly or indirectly, furthered social segregation, and increased cultural polarization in society.

2.2. Why and to whom the ethnic Albanian university was an obstacle?!

Being aware of the way the Albanian-language University in Pristina had evolved into a nest of nationalist uprising, the Macedonian authorities were determined to prevent

the establishment of an Albanian-language university. Therefore, successive governments encouraged Skopje's St. Cyril and Methodius University to set enrollment quotas for members of ethnolinguistic communities, which increased the Albanian student percentage (Karakajkov). In 1997, despite the open and violent opposition from Macedonian professors and students, the government established an Albanian-language institute within the Faculty of Pedagogy of the University of Skopje.

However, these concessions were not sufficient so by the mid-1990s, the Assembly of Albanian Intellectuals in Macedonia called for the establishment of an independent Albanian-language university. The establishment of the University of Tetova faced with considerable resistance. To counter this initiative, Macedonian authorities argued that the University of Tetova was illegal because it was private and teaching was only in Albanian (Duncant, 1995). Furthermore, the government never accepted a proposal for its establishment and most of the academic staff did not fulfill the legal criteria required for university professors (Risteska, 2011). The fact that most of the staff members were University of Pristina graduates additionally strengthened the ethnic Macedonians suspicion that the University of Tetova was the cornerstone of an Albanian parallel education system promoting nationalism and secession (Koppa, 2001).

These were, in fact, only quasi-arguments. In reality, this major national project presupposed inclusive higher education, and most of the professors had appropriate (legitimate) degrees from the University of Pristina (in Kosovo) and other Universities of Yugoslavia and European countries. The situation in Macedonia was different from that of Kosovo: Albanian political parties demanded constitutional changes and insisted on the establishment of an Albanian-language university, but they had also participated in government coalitions since 1992. When tensions between the ethnic Macedonian and Albanian communities escalated in the late 1990s, ethnic Albanian parties began to complain that the distribution of ministerial positions did not reflect the demographic and political significance of their community (Ripiloski, 2011). A chronology of events clearly shows the political and social turbulence that emerged as a result of the Albanian intellectuals' organization to reject the status of ethnic marginalization. At the beginning of 1995, leaders of all Albanian parties gathered for the opening ceremony, but the next day police stopped the lectures and arrested the rector and several professors, imprisoning them on charges of enticement (Vetterlein, 2006).

Most Albanian parties temporarily boycotted the parliament in protest; they argued that beyond the socio-economic inequality of ethnic Albanians, the denial of the right to university education in their native language "reinforced the perception of state's ethnic Macedonian superiority" (Ripiloski,...) Tetova continued its activities unrecognized by the government and by 1999 had enrolled over 4.500 students (Koppa, 2001).

Another crucial circumstance that pressured the government of North Macedonia to correct its attitude towards the unrecognized University was the Albanian uprising during the 2001 conflict in Macedonia when, among other things, NLA required the expansion of native language education and state funding for the University of Tetovo.³³ In essence, this requirement proves that language remains the most politically emphasized sign of ethnic identity in Macedonia. Finally, the dialogue between the confronted parties followed while USA and EU were assisting in mediating and drafting the Ohrid Framework Agreement which was the result of this dialogue. The Ohrid Agreement reaffirmed the rights to primary and secondary education and provided state funding to universities where teaching was conducted in the language spoken by at least 20% of the population (313). Since 2004, two states have been conducting academic activities in Albanian: South East European (Trilingual University) and the now-legal University of Tetovo. Besides OFA prediction regarding positive discrimination at university enrollment, (314), higher education in native language facilitated ethnic Albanians' access to university. Ragaru (2008) concludes that between 2001 and 2004 the percentage of Albanian students enrolled at university increased from 4.9 to 14.9% .

2.3. The establishment of the first Albanian-language University: the transformation pathway from illegal to legal state institution.

As mentioned above, the general sociopolitical situation in Macedonia did not reflect hope for higher education of the Albanian community supported by the state. The late 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century sensitized the struggle for human rights and the rule of law in societies of globalization era. At this time, as expected, the idea of enjoying basic human rights - one of them being higher education in mother tongue - was articulated in the collective consciousness of Albanians.

The well-known rule: right people, right actions at the right time made many progressive forces of the Albanian community in Macedonia on December 17, 1994 to proclaim the establishment of the people's University of Tetovo which was, unfortunately, considered illegal by the government until January 2004 when it was legalized as a state university.

The first lectures reflected the national euphoria and were therefore held with great devotion, although in non-typical teaching spaces for higher education and low didactic infrastructure. The lectures began in February 1995 in the suburbs of the city of Tetovo, mostly in private houses, while the first students were very enthusiastic to study (fig.2).



Fig. 2. The first students with their indexes

Many community members, eager to serve the ethnic cause, in addition to the material support of the university establishment, opened the doors of their homes to facilitate the first lectures. Albanians have been deprived of their right to higher education for decades, therefore the moment of the university establishment announcement was so significant to them that, despite threats from the Macedonian army and police at the time, they did not withdraw from making their longstanding dream reality. This whole movement was in essence very genuine and with a human mission. We find evidence of this in the appeals of its head, Prof. dr. Fadil Sulejmani (fig. 3), engraved in the collective consciousness of the Macedonian Albanians of that time: “We don’t want violence but pencils and notebooks”.

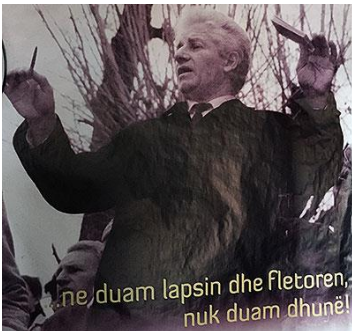


Fig. 2. Founder of the University of Tetovo: Prof. dr. Fadil Sulejmani

Ironically, his now historic appeal was interpreted as something which endangers the state, for which he was arrested and sentenced to 30 months in prison. Many other intellectuals and citizens were also arrested and threatened by state authorities.

Despite the substantiated claims of the originators of this movement, the Albanian ethnic community will face major obstacles in further developments. In remembrance of the police repression against innocent people, the Museum of Tetovo University was established, representing a link between its past and its future.

3. The actual situation: the vision toward globalization

The University of Tetovo saga is a presentation of the ethnic Albanians’ struggle for a university where they would be taught in their own language and provide cultural

survival. It happened that a group of devoted self-sacrificing students, supported by professors, intellectuals and their entire community, proved the value of obtaining the right to quality education.

Nowadays, this institution can be justly attributed the title multicultural, with around 15 thousand students, mostly Albanian and with a considerable number (10%) of Macedonian and other ethnicities. With a total of 15 faculties, teaching is conducted in all three study cycles. Priority is given to building links with many universities and institutions in the country, Europe and the USA, it is important to mention the Memorandum of Understanding with the University of Northern Illinois (USA).

Teaching curricula are constantly subject to the evaluation process always being in line with market demands. The academic staff and students are regularly active participants in many conferences and exchange programs such as Erasmus Plus networks, Ceepus, Mevlana, etc. A great importance is given to the continuous stimulation professors and students mobility, so that they can benefit from global development trends and then contribute to their home country. These events and many other achievements continue to verify the academic and social mission of this temple of knowledge.

Conclusion

The university has come a long way in a short period of time. Established on December 17, 1994 as the first higher education institution in Albanian language, it was unfortunately considered an illegal university by the government until January 2004.

The University of Tetova has a very impressive establishment history that makes people fascinated by the strong will of the community to guarantee educational equality.

On the day of the public announcement of the lecture commencement, the police tried to force students and professors to withdraw, but to no avail: members of the Albanian community, committed to the cause, formed a human blockade to defend their University.

Their resistance was epic regarding the fact that they were opposing about 300 police officers who tried to prevent the start of academic work. Moreover, defending the national ideals for education, a young man was shot and lost his life at his best age. It is more than accurate when it is said that blood is shed for this university.

This movement, led by professors and students, may perhaps convey a message about how young people are that vital force that is progressively changing the world.

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