

Language, education and conflicts in the Balkans: policies, resolutions, prospects

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Abstract: The issue of the languages and education in the Balkans is heated, despite the fact that in the last twenty years many epochal events have occurred that have radically changed the scenario in each country and in the region. The dissolution of former-Yugoslavia, the agreements of Dayton and Ohrid, the Stability Pact, the process of EU enlargement have had a significant impact on the Balkan populations also from the cultural and educational point of view. The Balkan languages are on one hand reacquiring their dignity, uniqueness and personality, on the other hand they are becoming a way of asserting the identity of an ethnic group over another, in an eternal game of prevaricators and prevaricated that perpetuates a latent tension and endangers stability. The importance of the legislative and constitutional measures that protect minorities, as well as the constant confrontation with the international community – in particular the EU – with its shared values and approaches, ensures that there is no escalation of tensions and conflicts. Nevertheless, the educational system is still the emblem of identity policies based on nationalism. History textbooks are an interesting example. The prospects are related to mutual recognition, overcoming the painful past. This essay explores all these aspects and takes the reader on a analytical journey in this intricate issue, providing a complex view of the situation and of the conflict resolutions strategies, with a vision for the future.

Keywords: Balkan countries, Language, Education, History textbooks.

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The emblematic case of F.Y.R. Macedonia

“Maybe we are different fish, but in this school we swim all together”. This is the motto that can be found in the hall of the only bilingual school in F.Y.R. Macedonia². The school is located in Preljubiste, a rural area in the mountains near Kosovo, and it is entitled to the Nobel prize winner Fridtjof Nansen³. When the school opened in 2008, no Albanian child in the area could speak Macedonian, and no Macedonian child would understand one word of Albanian. Now fifty children belonging to the two ethnic groups can communicate between them. It is a project financed by the Norwegian government within the activities of the *Nansen-Dialogue network* that has risen some critiques but also great appreciation. The school is being visited by representatives of local and international institutions and is taken as an example for new schools to be opened, in particular bilingual secondary schools. Being located on a smuggler’s route, there have been fears that the school might inspire a rearm of nationalist groups, due to the tensions that have followed the teaching of the Macedonian language to the Albanians. Nevertheless, other schools have followed the example: in 2012 ten Macedonian elementary and high schools have joined a project run by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) which aims to unite children of different ethnic backgrounds. The project aims to encourage setting up multiethnic classes by offering financial assistance to renovate school buildings as well as training awareness in teachers, students and parents (Marusic, 2012).

Following the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement - the peace deal signed by the government of the Republic of F.Y.R. Macedonia and ethnic Albanian representatives - the country has implemented a consociational form of democracy, according to theories of Arend Lijphart (1968, 1977): a

² Note on geographical names: in this text the A. uses the name *F.Y.R. Macedonia* for the country, which is the official reference used by the UN and the EU; the A. uses the term Macedonian to define the language spoken in F.Y.R. Macedonia and for the ethnic group and its members, assuming that in this text the reference is always to F.Y.R. Macedonia. As regards other names of places in the Balkan region inhabited by different ethnic communities, the A. uses the reference in one of the local languages at random, without any political connotation.

³ Fridtjof Nansen, Norwegian, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1922. He has inspired the Nansen Dialogue network, which is very active in the Balkans especially in the field of education. See: <http://www.nansen-dialogue.net/ndcscopje/> (Retrieved: July 2013).

form of government involving guaranteed group representation, which is often suggested for managing conflict in deeply divided societies, as it allows all political elites to represent the interests of their own ethnic communities.

According to the Ohrid Agreement, the situation as regards languages in F.Y.R. Macedonia today is as follows. Article 7 of the Agreement says that: (1) the Macedonian language, written using its Cyrillic alphabet, is the official language throughout the Republic of F.Y.R. Macedonia and in the international relations of the Republic of F.Y.R. Macedonia; (2) Any other language spoken by at least 20% of the population is also an official language, written using its alphabet; (3) Any official personal documents of citizens speaking an official language other than Macedonian shall also be issued in that language, in addition to the Macedonian language, in accordance with the law; (4) Any person living in a unit of local self-government in which at least 20% of the population speaks an official language other than Macedonian may use any official language to communicate with the regional office of the central government with responsibility for that municipality; such an office shall reply in that language in addition to Macedonian. Any person may use any official language to communicate with a main office of the central government, which shall reply in that language in addition to Macedonian; (5) In the organs of the Republic of F.Y.R. Macedonia, any official language other than Macedonian may be used in accordance with the law; (6) In the units of local self-government where at least 20% of the population speaks a particular language, that language and its alphabet shall be used as an official language in addition to the Macedonian language and the Cyrillic alphabet.

With respect to languages spoken by less than 20% of the population of a unit of local self-government, the local authorities shall decide on their use in public bodies (Ohrid Framework Agreement, 2001).

The issue of the percentage of the population is very delicate. According to the last census carried out in 2002, in the country the percentage of the two main communities is: Macedonian 64.2% and Albanian 25.2% (CIA World Factbook, 2013).

In the educational system in the Republic of F.Y.R. Macedonia, the Albanian community is guaranteed the opportunity to use the Albanian language. Yet, the situation is still complex.

Boycott! This is how the Macedonian pupils of the first class of primary

school started their school year in all the municipalities with an Albanian majority. It is January 2010, and this is the reaction to the decision of the Ministry of Education of F.Y.R. Macedonia who has decided that the Albanians in the country must start to study the Macedonian language since the beginning of their school career, not only since the fourth year (that is at the age of 11). The Albanian NGOs *Realitëti* (Reality) and *Ilirikum Libertas* (Illyrian freedom) have appealed against the decision of the Ministry, affirming that it was an anti-constitutional decision, against the law. The article 42 of the constitution on education says that ethnic minorities must start learning the Macedonian language in the fourth class. Moreover, according to the amendments made to the constitution after the Ohrid agreement - the peace deal signed by the government of the Republic of F.Y.R. Macedonia and ethnic Albanian representatives in 2001 – if an ethnic group constitutes more than 20% of the population of a given municipality, then the language of that ethnic group will be considered the official language together with the Macedonian language.

In this sense, then, the Macedonians think that in those municipalities the study of the language of the “other” ethnic group should be compulsory. Those NGOs together with the committee of the school “Bashkimi” in Gostivar, have mobilized and have gathered some fourteen thousand signatures of parents, teachers and citizens on a petition that has been sent to the then Minister of Education Nikola Todorov asking him to revoke the decision. Todorov commented that he feared something worse, and that the boycott could not be considered as a mass movement (Macedonian Information Centre, 2010). But the Albanians were ready to defend the boycott even physically, especially in case the teachers were sanctioned for having taken part into the boycott. The Albanian parties took sides and the issue became hot.

This might be judged by some as an extremist attitude by the Albanians, but it must be analyzed and interpreted taking into account the context of tensions that had been worsening for some time. In 2009, the first Macedonian Encyclopedia published by the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts has risen vivid polemics because in it the Albanians are described as mountain peasants who arrived in the country four centuries ago, while the Albanians sustain that they have much more ancient ancestral rights on the Macedonian land (RT News, 2009).

“This encyclopedia is essentially anti-Bulgarian, anti-Albanian and pro-Serbian” said Ljubco Georgievski, the founder and former president of the

VMRO-DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) as well as former Prime Minister, who has provocatively become Bulgarian citizen in 2006 (Focus Information Agency, 2010). Also the new urban plan *Skopje 2014*, which has been proposed by the government of the Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski for the capital, has been heavily criticized. The plan provides that the capital will undergo a radical make-up, with the construction of new buildings in Baroque style to make the town more attractive. An operation that will cost between eighty and hundreds of million Euro, perceived by many as a nationalistic frenzy, because the project does not reflect the multicultural history of the town.

Going back to the question of teaching languages, in February 2010 after many consultations, the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) has intervened because it has been asked to express an opinion. The OSCE has stated that there is a need for an integrated system of education in F.Y.R. Macedonia, affirming that learning Macedonian should be compulsory for the ethnic groups, and that the Macedonians should learn the languages of the minority groups as an optional subject.

The Ministry of Education has replied by saying that the option to learn Albanian for the Macedonians is available, although in only one school in Skopje. Nikola Todorov, who was then Minister of Education and Science, has passed the issue to the Constitutional Court. In July 2010 the Court has accepted the request presented by the Albanian Democratic Youth and other NGOs and has cancelled the decision of the Ministry of Education to introduce the Macedonian Language as compulsory in the first grade of primary school, mentioning also that such decision was in contrast with the law on primary schools of 2008.

The pupils who belong to minority groups have started to study the Macedonian language in fourth grade as it was before. Moreover, emphasizes the Court, the committees for the relations between the communities, have not been created in all the municipalities as the law provides. The fact is that the Albanian children do not study the Macedonian language until they reach the age of 11.

The problem is that education and language are only one aspect, although very relevant, of a wider conflict. The last violent events that testify the ongoing tension between Albanians and Macedonians occurred in March 2013 (NewsOk, 2013): riots broke out in Skopje after police tried to disperse an unruly protest against the appointment of former ethnic

Albanian rebel Talat Xhaferi as F.Y.R. Macedonia's new defense chief (Marusic, 2013).

The paradoxes of mutual non-recognition⁴

The paradoxical aspect of the language issue is that it is diffused all over the Balkans, in a cyclical domino system that sees discriminators become discriminated and vice versa according to the territory in which they live and according to whether their community constitutes the majority or the minority. The Macedonians, accused of discriminating the Albanians in F.Y.R. Macedonia, affirm to be discriminated in their turn in Albania. In 2009, in the middle of the heated discussion on the Macedonian Encyclopedia and other, the website *turkeymacedonia* (wordpress.com) re-published interview carried out in 2001 with Edmond Temelko, president of *Prespa* (the Macedonian Organization in Albania), that accused the Albanian statistics on the Macedonian community in Albania of being inaccurate. According to Temelko, in 2001 the Macedonians in Albania were between 120 thousand and 350 thousand, while the official Albanian statistics stated 5.000. Moreover, he cited the Albanian Constitution according to which the minorities are entitled to 60% of education in their own mother-tongue, denouncing the fact that this right was not granted (TurkeyMacedonia, 2009).

The situation has not changed since, as *turkeymacedonia* affirms, and there have been arrests of activists and Macedonian students. There are accusations also of pressures on the Macedonian population to impose Albanian names to their newborns, limitations of the freedom of the press and other.

Albania is still waiting to be attributed the status of European Union

⁴ The concept of recognition and non-recognition is here intended as in political theories, where it refers to the act of acknowledging or respecting another being, such as when we 'recognise' someone's status, achievements or rights. The recognition between groups has been theorized by Charles Taylor (1994) who argues for the importance of collective rights, and by Axel Honneth in his recent works (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 159; Honneth, 1995) where he takes into consideration the possibility that groups can be the object of recognition, although his general emphasis is on individual rights and recognition. Very interesting are also the writings by Kymlicka (1995) who sustains the fact that groups can be both recognisers and recognisees, defending the thesis of group-differentiated minority rights.

Candidate Country (F.Y.R. Macedonia is already a candidate). In the *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2012-2013*, published in October 2012, it is stated that: “Regarding cultural rights, public education in minority languages is still not available for all minority groups and Albania has not adopted the European Charter for regional and minority languages” (Communication of the Commission, 2012, p. 21).

But in the region there are other similar cases. An interesting example is the Preshevo Valley - the area located in Southern Serbia, composed by the municipalities of Preševo, Medvegja e Bujanovac, which is the center of the Albanian community in Serbia with Albanians comprising 54.6% in Bujanovac, and 89% in Preševo, and 26% in Medveđa. The number of inhabitants is disputed, and the 2011 Serbian census was mostly boycotted. Nevertheless the estimation says that the area is inhabited by some 50 thousand Albanians (*Balkan Insight*, 2013). In those municipalities where the Albanian community is very numerous, already in 2001 the local citizens together with the *Albanian American Civil League* which created an *Albanian Platform for the Resolution of the Conflict* in the area, explicitly asked that the right to use the Albanian language also in education be granted. In 2013, the Parliament of Kosovo has passed a resolution that seeks to protect the rights of ethnic Albanians living in Preshevo Valley, equating their status with that of the Serb population in Northern Kosovo (the area of Mitrovica) especially after the agreement that was signed between Serbia and Kosovo in April 2013 (Karadaku, 2013). The resolution has come as Belgrade is preparing to meet with the Albanians from the Preševo Valley to discuss their participation in State-owned institutions, economic recovery in the municipalities, official use of the Albanian language as well as education and health issues.

Another example is related to the Slavic toponyms in Albania. The idea came from the former (until July 2012) President of the Republic Bamir Topi, and was strongly supported by former Prime Minister Sali Berisha who proposed the constitution of a commission to change all the names of Slavic origin in Albania with names with solid Albanian roots, preceding the Slavic dominations (Rukay, 2009). The “Albanization” should have also concerned all the private enterprises in the country, which should obligatorily adopt Albanian names. The question, Rukay affirms, is linked to the thesis at the basis of the concept of Albanian nation, that is the “indigenous” character of the Albanian population. But, as in all the

Balkans, the country presents a great variety of names of Slavic, Greek, Italian, Turkish origin, and the operation aimed at “albanizing” them all would be very complex. On the web, a very significant source for the analysis of the participation of the wider public to these issues, there are interesting reactions. For instance, “The Baron” (a nickname) lists on the blog *topix.com* a vast number of Albanian toponyms of Serbian origin, with an historical explanation, that sees already in the IX century a large diffusion of Slavic toponyms in the country⁵. If the toponyms are as many as “The Baron” and many others say, the “albanization” becomes a problem. Nevertheless, the Albanians can always recur to texts such as “*L’enigme*” by Robert d’Angely (1990) published in 1990 in Corsica, which was one of the few books to be found in bookshops in Tirana in 1991 during the very difficult period that followed the fall of regime – of which who writes owns a rare copy: in the book d’Angely affirms that the Thracian-Illyrian language – the origin of the Albanian language – was the most diffused language in the ancient world, more than the Greek.

The process of Albanization has stopped, and in April 2013 the Macedonians in Albania had the opportunity to applaud the decision by Tirana to reverse a 1973 order by which several Macedonian municipalities had their names changed into Albanian names, following a decision taken by the local authorities in Pustec (located at the border with F.Y.R. Macedonia), who voted to replace the names of the following municipalities into their pre-1973 Macedonian names (MINA, 2013).

Meanwhile, in F.Y.R. Macedonia a new albanization has started, this time

⁵ “The Baron”, in: <http://www.topix.com/forum/world/serbia/TA4Q4UHAMJQVURLFN> (Retrieved: July 2013) This is an example of the list of toponyms: Baba Babin Babinja Babja Balaban Banja Bastare Bastrice Bezani + Belgrad Belice Belje Belove Belovode Berzeste Bistic Biserka Bistrica Bistrice Blace Bobostice Bodin Bodriste Bordani Borici Borje Borova + Borovjani Bradosnica Bratomira Breska Bresnik Brezdan Brostani Budisa Bukmira Buzgara Valjana Valjusa Varvara Veles Veljean Gora Vernica + Vila Vodica Vojnika Vrakule Vranista Vranista Vrepska Vulcani Gabrica Gajtani Glava Gline Golem Golemi + Golik Goloberdo Goljovisti Gorica Goroselj Gostiviste + Grabom Grabova Grabove Grabovice Grabovo + Gradac Gradec Gradiste Gradiskije Grazdani Grazenik Graliste Gracen Gracani Grace Grozdani Gruda Darda Debrova Desmira Dobra Dobric Dobruna + Dragan Dragavoja Draginje Dragobija Dragostun Dragove Dragus Draci Dracove (...) Trasani Trebinje Treske Tresova Trosan Tuceni Ulova Uljmiste Ustinje Cerkovica Cernjeva Catiste Cesme Coban + Siroka Sistevac Skola Stit Sticeni Sumica (the symbol + near the names of places indicates that the same name appears more than once on the map for different places).

in Kichevo municipality, a few days after the new mayor took office in March 2013. Fatmir Dehari is the first Albanian mayor of Kichevo in 70 years, and belongs to the ethnic *Albanian Democratic Union for Integration*. His election has raised protests because the Macedonians fear that the area will lose its ethnic Macedonian identity (Marusic, 2013b). For the first time the Albanian flag has been seen flying on the municipal building.

The issue of the Albanization is strongly felt. It started in 2011, when the Ministry for Kosovo-Metohija announced that he would have informed EULEX (EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo) about cases of Albanization and assimilation of Serbs, demanding that the practice be put to a stop immediately: He told about increasingly frequent cases of alteration of data in the personal documents of Serbs that took out Kosovo ID cards mainly for the purpose of exercising the right to a pension (Ramidorovic and Cerovina, 2011).

Also the Greeks lament to be discriminated in Albania, because in their opinion Greek is the second language in the country, being spoken by the Greek minority that lives mostly in Çamëria, the region in the south of the country, and it is used in the Greek schools in the area. A contested census carried out in Albania in October 2011, showed that there are about 24.361 Greeks in the country that is 0.87% of the residents. Nevertheless the figures are rejected by the Greek minority that affirms that the calculation was flawed (Greek Reporter, 2012)⁶. An endless story, because also the Macedonians think that theirs is the second language spoken in Albania, not to mention the *Vlach* language spoken by the Roma, which would be spoken by some fifty thousand people. Unfortunately the available statistics are rarely homogeneous as regards languages, because as we have seen, the issue becomes the basis for ideological and political interpretations. Many statistics change according to the country of origin of the minorities (Greece for the Greeks in Albania, for instance) because the number changes the level of impact and the opportunity to advance requests and claim rights. Given that the ethnic groups in the Balkans are often scattered in different countries, the group *Ethnologue* (2013) analyzes the language statistics related to Albanian starting by saying that there are some seven

⁶ A contested census carried out in Albania in October, 2011 showed there are about 24.361 Greeks in the country that is 0.87% of the residents. Nevertheless the figures are rejected by the Greek minority that affirms that the calculation was flawed.

and an half million Albanians in total living in different countries in the world.

In December 2007 Vasil Bollano, the mayor of Himara, a small town on the southern Albanian coast, ordered the removal of all the road signs because they were not bilingual, that is that they were not also in Greek, given that the area is inhabited mostly by the Greek minority (Topix, 2008). The town and the region to which it gives its name is now defined as bilingual.

What is interesting, though, is that this kind of protest, that had at that time an impact on the tourist in the area more than on the decision makers – is quite diffused: also the Slovenians, EU citizens, who are a minority in Carinthia - a region of Austria, which is an EU member – are engaged in a similar battle for bilingualism which is exemplified by road signs (Slovenska Tiskovna Agencija, 2009). Much must still be done in the country, although the Austrian Constitution says that Slovenes in Carinthia have the right to have their own organizations, press and public meetings in Slovene, the right to receive primary level education in Slovene and a modicum of secondary level education in that language as well as their own Inspectorate of Education. In a study carried out by the European Commission the situation is summarized as follows: “There is an increasing tendency towards language group exogamy and the need to produce rather than reproduce the language. Despite the high degree of legitimation it is not transferred into institutionalization. Neither does it operate in such a way that production is guaranteed. As a consequence the group is in a delicate position, having a fairly strong support structure related to a reproduction context, but facing a rapid restructuring context deriving from the negative identity which is quickly reversed, and being unable to generate the support structures necessary to ensure an effective production process.” (European Commission, 2013).

The reciprocity and mutual non-recognition cycle continues. Greece has in its turn been condemned in 2005 by the European Court of Human Rights for having violated the European Convention on Human Rights as regards the Macedonian minority. The Greek government was condemned to pay 35.000 Euro as a compensation to the *European Free Alliance-Rainbow*, a Macedonian organization, given that the court issued a verdict that said that the organization had been persecuted in Greece. The organization has used part of the money to publish a book bearing a title that mixed Greek and Macedonian together: “*Bukvar anagnostiko*” (“Unknown Primer”,

Thessaloniki 2006) which included the copy of the Manual of Macedonian language *Abecedar* published in 1925 (Vecer daily newspaper, 2006).

In Turkey in September 2010 Erdoğan rejected the idea that Turkish children could learn the Kurdish language in schools and affirmed that education in Turkey could only be in Turkish. The main pro-Kurdish party *Peace and Democracy Party* (BDP) stimulated its supporters to organize a one-week boycott of the academic year as part of a campaign to introduce the education in Kurdish in the country (SETimes, 2010). In 2013 the Kurds are still fighting for the right to educate their children in Kurdish. Under Erdoğan, Turkey has eased restrictions on the use of the language, allowing defendants to use it in court cases, politicians to use it during campaigns, and prisoners to use it in jails. The government has launched a Kurdish-language TV station, as well as elective courses in Kurdish in universities and schools. But the Kurds aim at public schooling and find “elective courses” insufficient, because without schooling in Kurdish, the Kurds in Turkey face the threat of complete assimilation. Kurds politicians say that already about 50% of Turkish Kurds, particularly the children of migrants from southeast, don’t speak any Kurdish (Zalewski, 2013).

Chinese boxes

The question of the languages in the Balkans does not end with the fight to affirm or impose a language over another, or in the dynamics of coexistence. The issue of the name of F.Y.R. Macedonia is probably the most known and studied of all (ESI, 2010): Greece opposes the use of the name “F.Y.R. Macedonia” by the Republic of F.Y.R. Macedonia without a geographical qualifier, supporting a compound name such as “Northern Macedonia” for use by all and *erga omnes*. The opposition of Greece is blocking F.Y.R. Macedonia’s European Union and NATO ambitions. The countries of the world are taking sides. Many recognize the name Macedonia *tout court*, others use the formula Former Yugoslav Republic of F.Y.R. Macedonia (F.Y.R.O.M.) others, including Italy, have not taken a clear position and in official documents use both.

The Macedonian language has been re-integrated by the United Nations in the identity card of F.Y.R. Macedonia only in 2010. In the language section, in fact, it had always been inserted adding in brackets the formula “of the *former Yugoslav Republic of F.Y.R. Macedonia*” (MicNews, 2013).

An endless fight.

People's daily life in the Balkans is pervaded by language issues, because they are all connected fundamentally to a readjustment of the identities in the region. A process that is still ongoing, difficult, in some cases very painful, because languages are the instrument to (re)interpret and (re)write the past, to define the present, to lay the ground for the future of the populations.

The famous specialist of Slavic languages and literatures Victor A. Friedman examines in depth the vocals and the dental, labial, guttural, velar sounds of each Balkan term to define its origin and belonging. He tells us whether Macedonian is a Bulgarian dialect or not, whether that toponym has Slavic or Thracian-Illyrian roots, whether a specific sound is the result of a combination of sounds. As regards language and ethnicity in the Balkan policies, he affirms that the Balkans have always been characterized by a diffused multilingualism. What is ironical is the fact that while the term *Balkanization* has become a synonym of *fragmentation*, the term *Balkanism* in reality refers to shared grammatical and lexical aspects, which have derived from intense multicultural contacts and exchanges in the region, that would have been possible only in case of a prevalently pacific coexistence (Friedman, 2000).

According to this analysis, religion, and not the language, has been the strong element of identity, above all during the Ottoman Empire, when religion constituted much more than the language a fundamental element of the *millet* (nationality) of an individual.

The Balkan region has undergone waves of *slavonization*, *croatization*, *italianization* and now probably also *albanization*. This is well known to the Julian-Dalmatian and Istrian Italians, whose surnames have been *slavonized* between 1860 and World War I, often adding the suffix *ich*, that ends with an *h* - instead of the Slavic *ć* - as a sign of distinction of their Italian origin. This has also been experiences by the Croats and the Slovenians whose surnames after 1922 have been Italianized (Banovac, 2000).

No population has been immune to such processes in the Balkans, and history tries now to recall the sounds of the past, to find the Venetian-Italian character of that fine intellectual whose name is now Croatian, or the Croatian origins of that hero whose name is now Italian. The issue is still very sensitive.

The most significant example of the language issue in the Balkans is the

dissolution - for some – or transformation – for others – of the Serbo-Croat language. It is the object of accurate studies, also because it has not simply required the printing of new individual dictionaries of Serb, Croat and Bosnian, but is also one of the expressions of the readjustment of the identities in the region.

Some fear the number of translations that might be needed in case all the countries of the region became members of the EU. For the moment the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the Hague has found a solution by using the acronym BCS (Bosnian-Serbian-Croatian) in order to be able to show equal respect for all the three new languages whichever prevails in a specific case.

Single, triple, quadruple

It is not easy, as the BBC journalist Mark Lowen tells, and for many others, to understand the subtle nuance in the pronunciation of the letter “S” that should stress the difference between the Serbian and the Montenegrin languages, when exploring the newborn idiom in the Balkans (Lowen, 2010).

Crnogorski has become the official language of Montenegro since the small country separated from Serbia in 2007. It is still evolving, although the first faculty of Montenegrin language was established in 2010 in the University of Niksic, just in front of the faculty of Serbian Language and Literature, and the Council for General Education has adopted the first *Montenegrin Grammar* in June 2010.

The process has not been easy. In 2004, the government of Montenegro changed the school curricula so that the name of the mandatory classes teaching the language was changed from “Serbian language” to “Mother tongue (Serbian, Montenegrin, Croatian, Bosnian)”. This change was made, according to the government, in order to better reflect the diversity of languages spoken among citizens in the republic and to protect human rights of non-Serb citizens in Montenegro who declare themselves as speakers of other languages. This decision resulted in a number of teachers declaring a strike and parents refusing to send their children to schools.

The Serbian influence has always been very strong in Montenegro. The opposition party *Nova Srpska Demokratija* (New Serb Democracy) was the third party with a 9,2% in 2009 elections. As regards the language, it

sustained that creating a new idiom would have been the same as erecting a wall between the communities in the country. The issue is still heated today. According to the official statistics of the country that carried out a census in 2011, the most numerous communities in the country are: Montenegrin 45%, Serbs 28,7%, Albanians 4,9% (Monstat, 2011). Although the census is always a political issue in countries where there are significant minorities, reading the figures it appears that a linguistic separatism would be a problem for the country.

The differences between the four new languages do not seem to be very relevant at a superficial look. What follows is a comparative table of two common words.

Table 1. Comparative table of common words

English	Bosnian	Croat	Serbian	Montenegrin
Teacher	učitelj	Učitelj	učitelj	učitelj
Milk	mlijeko	Mljeko	mleko	mlijeko

Those differences that seem little at a superficial look, are in fact very significant in terms of identity and policies.

Greenberg wonders about the effects of the dissolution of the languages in former-Yugoslavia on the twenty million people who used to speak one single language (Greenberg, 2004). He sustains that Serbo-Croat had a strong *external* identity but did not have a strong *internal* identity. This is why at the fall of the Yugoslavian shared identity the natural consequence was that the languages claimed their own specificity, even inventing one, if needed. They started to emphasize all the differences, even the minimal ones, although the standardization of each new language might still be undefined, disputed and discussed. Nevertheless, it must be said that the unifying strength of the Serbo-Croat language is still there, because the ethnic borders defined by the dialects do not coincide with the State borders, and therefore an individual in a Balkan State could speak a language that is closer to that of another State. The identity issue is still complex and so will be in the future.

Meanwhile, there are new positive aspects of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, because from its ashes new languages have come to life. Bosnia's residents disagree on whether they speak one language or three: they discuss around the use of "Bosnian" for one ethnic group or for all, and whether in the former sense it should be replaced by the ethno-specific "Bosniak" – and

all the wider political subtexts implied by these usages (Boračić and Kamber, 2011).

But this changes have important effects: the fact that today it is possible to refer to the Bosnian language instead of the old Serbo-Croat, has made it possible for the Albanian children of Kosovo to learn a Slavic language. While Serbo-Croat was forbidden for ideological and political reasons, they can now learn Bosnian, that is also important because it is related to the Muslim traditions of Kosovo, that are more and more consolidating in the population.

Serbia is facing the issue of minority languages also because it is now a EU candidate which means that it has to meet many accession criteria according to the EU conditionality. Serbia has regulated the rights of minorities in line with European standards - the right to use their language, alphabet, access to education and media content in their mother tongue, the protection of cultural identity, and active participation in political life at the state, at provincial and local levels. In fact this year in Serbia the schools have begun education in Bosnian (Jovanovic, 2013) a recognition of the language that is seen as an important milestone for the Bosnians in Serbia, considering the heavy burden of the past. Bosnians are Serbia's fourth largest ethnic group - 2.02% according to the 2011 census – and the last to start exercising its language rights, as eleven other languages are recognized in Serbia's schools.

In its turn, Serbia is fighting to see its rights recognized in the new EU member Croatia. Serbia expects Croatia to enact a language law adopted by the Croatian parliament, which allows Serbs to use two languages in spite of the uproar that this caused in Vukovar. According to official data, over a third of Vukovar's population are Serbs, which obliges the state to allow the use of Serbian language and alphabet in official contexts. Croatian right-wing organizations protested last weekend against this normative, calling for a decade-long moratorium on the law. (Tanjug, 2013). There was also an escalation of violence, with the son of an Orthodox priest beaten up in the Croatian village of Borovo after a protest against the use of Cyrillic alphabet in February (BETA, 2013b). The fight for the alphabet is extremely sensitive because the wounds of the past Serbo-Croatian conflict have not been healed completely.

In her acute analysis, Asya Pereltsvaig (2013) examines all the different aspects of the languages in the Balkans, focusing on Croatia, affirming that although the country is now a member of the European Union, its own

language issue is not solved. These prescriptive efforts purposefully result in reduced mutual intelligibility in the former “Serbo-Croatian area”. She quotes Greenberg, who wonders: “as for the future, it remains to be seen whether after the next generation of Croats, Bosniacs, Serbs, and Montenegrins assume positions of power, they truly will not be able to understand one another any longer” (Greenberg, 2000, p. 167), or, Pereltsvaig concludes, it remains to be seen “if the integration of Croatia - and possibly of other former Yugoslavian countries - into the European Union will reverse this process”.

Compromises

F.Y.R. Macedonia and Montenegro have recognized Kosovo in July 2009. Bosnia and Herzegovina’ position is still suspended because the Serb members of the Presidency refuse to recognize the country. In 2009 Serbia reacted by expelling the Ambassadors of F.Y.R. Macedonia and Montenegro affirming that the attitude towards Kosovo of their countries had endangered the stability of the region. In a different perspective, this demonstrated that Belgrade often acts to keep positions that guarantee that the government maintains its electorate, which, nevertheless, keeps the country distant from what is really happening in Kosovo.

Between 1990 and 1999, Serbia has destroyed about 175 libraries and 1.665.496 volumes and documents in Kosovo. Today the situation has radically changed and the National and University Library of Kosovo in Prishtina works perfectly (Bashota and Kokollari, 2011). This is part of the wider framework of the development of Kosovo under the point of view of education and of the redefinition of the cultural identity, that is here intended in its meaning as a coherent whole subject to a number of cultural identifiers, in Benhabib’s perspective that sees cultures as continually creating, re-creating, and renegotiating the imagined boundaries between “us” and “them” (Benhabib, 2002; Hall and Du Gay, 1996; Tan, 2006).

In Kosovo the language issues are many. The Albanian language itself is a complex issue in Kosovo because in the standardization that was carried out in 1972 many things were imposed to the language that did not mirror (and do not mirror today) the language used by the local population in daily conversations.

In Kosovo schools children learn Albanian, Turkish and Bosnian. Serb is taught through a parallel system managed by the Serbian Ministry of Education. It is true that the teaching of the Bosnian language has been established because of the pressures of the OSCE and that the language is learnt mostly by the 6 thousand Bosnian children and a few Gorani in the country. However, a system is developing by which teachers from Bosnia and Serbia move to Kosovo, or Kosovian students learn the language through distance-learning techniques. Although there are logistic difficulties, scarce preparation of the teachers to face such situations, and other, it seems that the operation is working (Sopa, Salihu and Gaon, 2009). There is also a problem related to the Kosovo-Bosnian community, because this non-Albanian community – the second biggest - has enjoyed only negligible external support in the area of education. The situation is now changing because there is an OSCE-supported effort to expand the basis of qualified university lecturers in Bosnian language and help preserve Bosnian language education and culture in Kosovo (OSCE, 2012).

There are many initiatives for the Serb minority. For instance, in April 2010 the Serb Television Channel PULS (partner of TV Mreža) was inaugurated. It constitutes a unique instrument to keep in contact for the Serb communities in Kosovo who are geographically scattered on the territory of the country: the four broadcasting TV stations (TV Puls, RTV Mir, TV Herc, TV Most) are able to reach 80 % of the Serb population in Kosovo. The project is supported by UNDP (UNDP, 2013). The interesting aspect is that Television PULS quotes also statements by members of Kosovo's Institutions, which is very important because in general there is no contact between Serbs and the self-determined independent Kosovo.

Another example of respect for minorities is the review entitled *Alem* published in Prishtina since 1991 as a manifesto of the autochthony of the Bosnians in the country, which always pays attention to the policies of Serbia, and discusses issues related to Bosnia-Herzegovina as the motherland.

And yet, the process is still developing, because there are many examples of the divisions between the communities, as some affirm (KIM Info Service, 2006). *Politika Daily* (2006) for instance, has stresses that the campaign for tourism of Kosovo in its site www.visitkosova.org uses the Albanian toponym Kosova instead of the Serbian Kosovo and does not mention the Serbs who live in what they call “the province”.

In the report on Kosovo by the *Minority Rights Group 2011* (MRG)

(Minority Rights Group, 2011; Stevens, 2009) it emerges that the situation is still complex and that discrimination and exclusion are still very significant in Kosovo, inspiring extremist positions and violent reactions, especially in areas such as northern Kosovo/southern Serbia. As regards education and other areas, the government and the UN found it difficult to elaborate long-term policies because of the disputed status of the country. There is a lack of access for the minorities to information and education in their own language which makes members of the minorities leave the country: this is an alarming signal for the local communities and the international community. The OSCE itself has affirmed in a report that the students who belong to minority groups have less opportunities to maintain, develop and promote the knowledge of their culture and identity (OSCE, 2009). It has started a campaign diffusing a flyer in the country with the slogan "*Stand up for your language rights*" asking the reader: "Your rights have been violated?" and suggesting to denounce abuses. This is all related also to the consequences of historical events, but winners and losers see things differently.

The mysteries of the past: history textbooks and heroes

School textbooks and teaching materials are central to the construction of national identity. They can be a unifying as much as a dividing factor. Textbooks can also contribute to preventing or resolving conflict, as underlined in UNESCO's 2011 Global Monitoring Report.

The issue of textbooks in the Balkans is very relevant. Each country has elaborated strategies to overcome the problem of the different interpretation of past historical events, as well as the concept of heroes and heroism, and patriots and patriotism. The problem lies often in the fact that historical figures can be considered heroes and patriots on one side of the border, and war criminals on the other. In less extreme cases, the origin of a population represents the right to the land, and when history books establish the ancestral rights of a population to a land, on one side it is interpreted as a legitimate recognition, on the other as radicalism or propaganda.

The Ministry of Education and Science of F.Y.R. Macedonia has created a mixed expert groups for the approximation of views on historical events and historical figures. Textbooks cover the post-independence period very superficially, primarily because Macedonians and Albanians interpret the

2001 conflict that took place in the country differently. In August 2012, the European Association of History Educators urged history education reform in F.Y.R. Macedonia, also because there is a certain degree of awareness that a segregated education system in which history is studied according to opposing views is not inclusive, and allows a latent potential for conflict in the future. The question is even more complex. In 2010 F.Y.R. Macedonia's Education Ministry ordered an urgent review of school textbooks amid widespread criticism of their quality - just a week before the start of the new academic year. The books were full of mistakes regarding historical dates, figures, geographical names and other (Marusic, 2010).

It must be taken into consideration that during the communist regime period in former-Yugoslavia as well as in Albania, history books and statistics were the most efficient tools for propaganda, and therefore the most censored and modified by the nomenklatura according to political and ideological needs. This has deeply influenced the mentality of the populations, and its long-term effects emerge also today, although the fact that the issue is debated is a healthy sign even when the discussion is heated. Unfortunately the discussion is not always a process of introspection, it is often about the interpretation of history by the "counterpart".

For instance there is a movement of thought in Serbia against the fact that high school fourth graders in Albania are being taught that several territories in the Balkans have been "unjustly given" to neighboring countries. The BETA Agency denounces that the geography school book, on page 13, blames the Berlin Congress of 1878 for "making decisions at the expense of the Albanian people" by "unjustly giving Serbia the eastern part of Kosovo with Vranje (Vranje), and Bar, Podgorica and Gusinje to Montenegro." (Beta News, 2013a).

Even the Ottoman period is a source of polemic. Turkey is particularly keen on history issues. In 2010 the Turkish Minister of Education Hüseyin Çelik asked Kosovo to change the terminology used in history books because they offered a negative portrayal of the Ottomans as ferocious invaders (Hamidi, 2010). Examples of the changes proposed by Turkey are the following: replace "violence" and "killing" with "conquering" and "imprisonment"; delete the sentence: "Ottomans killed many Albanians"; replacing "Ruthless Ottoman rule" with the more neutral sounding "Ottoman conquest". In 2011 a five-member Commission on the Revision

of the Presentation of Ottoman and Turkish History, Geography and Culture, was set up by the Kosovo's Ministry of Education. The Report of the Commission, issued in 2012, suggested to avoid saying that the Ottomans used violence against, or killed, Albanians.

The history of the Balkans can also be viewed from the Greek perspective. In 2007 the Greek Ministry of Education was forced to withdraw a sixth grade history textbook, because of public reactions, which were caused by the way it presented some events, including the fact that the writers of the textbook used the phrase "Greeks gathered at the port of Smyrna" to describe the burning down of the city in 1922. The book was withdrawn after continuous media hysteria for weeks, with news and television discussions, which were turned into reality shows, and even protests organized by patriotic organizations. Balezdrova (2012) quotes a Greek teacher who affirms that the withdrawal of textbooks based on political and ideological positions is not new in the country: history textbooks in Greece have been changed many times in different periods.

The linguistic league

The unique relationship that unites the Balkan languages, can be identified in the fact that they constitute what Nikolai S. Trubetzkoy defined in 1923 as a "linguistic league" (quoted in Friedman 2008), in an historical period in which in the Balkans there was a wide process of readjustment, between independences proclaimed, threats from Europe, and discussions on how to define the identity (Muslim Albanians, for instance, were discussing whether to impose the veil to their women or not ...). Later, in 1997, Maria Todorova, in her "Imagining the Balkans" (Todorova ,1997) said that the concept of *Balkanism* was substituting the concept of *Orientalism* in western imaginary, becoming a synonym of "Other" with a connotation of "exotic", "problematic". But *Balkanism*, as we said with Friedman, is a unifying term at linguistic level, not a dividing one. Is this the umpteenth Balkan paradox?

The changes occurred in the last few years in the Balkans have allowed new intense multilateral contacts (Albania for instance has opened its borders after decades of complete isolation): a situation that is similar to that of the Ottoman Empire in which the free movement favored an intense cultural exchange within its borders. Occurrences and recurrences of

history, it is right to expect new constructive changes in the future.

Adela Peeva (2003) toured the Balkans in 2003 making people from the different countries of the region listen to the same song from the Ottoman period, knowing that the melody was a common heritage although each ethnic group had added its own lyrics in its own language to it. As she shows in her documentary, in some cases she was chased and even risked to be beaten up when she said to the Albanians or to the Serbs that the song that they considered as an emblem of their own culture was in fact considered as such also by the other group in the region. What would happen to Adela today?

In the region today people know English better than the language spoken in the neighboring country, and are not aware of the similarities between the regional languages because they are studied in isolation and the fact that there are many convergences with the bordering languages, also those present in the same country, is not known.

Every standard language is a political creation, even if the degree of influence of the State on the process varies. The policy of the European Union on the languages of the minorities strongly encourages the preservation of diversity in all domains. Nevertheless, in contrast with this, there is a strong demand driven by bureaucratic needs to merge the languages as much as possible.

The protection of minorities is a pragmatic change that sees the standard languages less as elements of identity and more as a means of communication. In the case of the languages derived from the dissolution of former-Yugoslavia, the attitude seems to have changed, and from the instigation to ideological and symbolic issues, what prevails is a pragmatic vision to infuse hope: there are explicit divergences and implicit hidden divergences, but in general the four languages find a common platform when they engage in communicating on practical issues or on the basic linguistic structure.

The multinational Mozilla has recently started to offer a version of its browser Firefox in Macedonian and Slovenian and in the BSC languages, but not yet in Montenegrin. The commercial websites use English – and Russian, German and other – and there seems to be no convenience in creating a browser in Montenegrin. But also the political value of the small country will increase as it is happening with the other countries in the region, especially if the countries of South Eastern Europe will understand the enormous opportunity that derives from the fact that they can propose

themselves as a “gate” towards the former Soviet Republics and the Middle East, just as Turkey is already doing (Walker, 2008).

Today there are also Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian Wikipedias. Although a Bosnian, Serb or Croat can read any of those languages, there is a great competition between the projects, and no Croatian/Serbian wiki-article can enter the Serbian/Croatian Wikipedia without previous adaptation. The same as regards movie subtitles: a Serbian person will first look for a Serbian subtitle, but if none exist, they will search for a Croatian or Bosnian. (Maksimovic, 2013).

This complex picture emphasized that the road for complete harmony and serene mutual recognition in the Balkans is still long and winding, and not exempt from momentary discouragement and melancholy. The roots of this strongly emotional dimension of the language and education issue, are exemplified by this episode: recently, a Croatian friend of who writes at a party with people from the whole Balkans between 30 and 40 years of age, was dancing lively Yugoslav pop and rock music from the 1970s. All of a sudden, she stopped and said sighing: “Well...you know...when I hear this old music, I really feel Yugoslavian!”.

Conclusions

In her precious book *Education and Conflict*, Lynn Davies (2004) explains that her aim is to demonstrate the “crucial contemporary importance of an analysis of the relationship between education and conflict” (Davies, 2004, p. 7). She uses complexity theory to explore the relationships between education and conflict and to promote her argument for ‘complex-adaptive schools’, in which conflict should be used positively to engage students in the creation of peaceful communities. Another interesting book is Gallagher’s *Education in divided societies* (2004), in which the author examines the way education systems have been structured to respond to and operate in divided societies, concluding that it is crucial to focus on classroom agency and flexibility. The issue of conflict and divided societies is not only pertinent to the Balkans but also to other areas, because the issue is broad. In a study by Dwyer (2005) on Chinese language policy and language use in Inner Asia, as well as on the relation of language policy to the politics of Uyghur Identity, it emerges that language is central to ethnic

identity, and official language policies are often overlooked as critical factors in conflict over ethnic nationalism. Dwyer also suggest that languages should be used as historical sources, not culture, because a number of fundamental information about the identity of a population are sculpted in languages. Language narratives can explain historical patterns. All these theories can contribute to the resolution of the equation language and conflict through education, that is the aim of this essay: reconstruct the close link between education and conflict, passing through the analysis of identity to understand and comment language politics.

In Western Balkans language and politics are intertwined, and have undergone a constant attempt to readjustment especially since 1999, after the Kosovo war and have been redefined after the events in F.Y.R. Macedonia in 2001.

Despite the strong convergences between the languages of the region due to intense interaction in the past – always keeping in mind that not all share the same linguistic roots – the populations of the region strongly express today the need to keep and speak a language that they feel their own, that is the emblem of their identity. The felt need for the standardization of the language is an opportunity to politicize language, interfering in the education policies even when changes proposed by the majority or the minority could promote more integration and peace-building strategies.

As it has been explained in this essay, the delicate balance between the respect of minority rights, the need to mutual understanding and interaction, overcoming conflicts still perceived and perpetuated in the ideological interpretation of history, based more on an emotional need of redefinition of identity's symbols and values than of objectivity, is always at risk. Yet, the Balkan States are now democratic, although democracy and multilingualism cannot always coexist peacefully, even when there are coherent Constitutions and political strategies aimed at protecting coexistence.

One opportunity could be offered by one element that is shared at regional level, that creates interests that are mutually recognized by all the populations of the Balkans: the EU membership.

As Victor Friedman explained in a conference⁷ (2007) as an example of this, it was only with the EU accession that Greece published a Pomak textbook– a Slavic Muslim community some 35 thousand members of which live in Greece - that was a clear reversal of a long history of cultural rigid policy of assimilation of minorities.

The EU language policies “aim to protect linguistic diversity and promote knowledge of languages – for reasons of cultural identity and social integration, but also because multilingual citizens are better placed to take advantage of the educational, professional and economic opportunities created by an integrated Europe” (EU Language Policy, 2013). This approach can be opportunely exploited by the Balkan countries as a term of reference in the management of linguistic pluralism and plurality of interpretations of history, especially through educational programs. The problem persists that if on one hand it is possible to act and intervene, as we have seen that many groups do, as regards the constitutional and legal frameworks laid down to manage the issue of language, identity and education to avoid conflict, on the other hand, the framework in which these issues are raised is not as structured as it seems, because it is influenced by a considerable number of variables – wide range of emotional interpretations and reactions, lack of trust, ineradicable beliefs and traditions, unnegotiable values and views and other.

The only key to solve the problem would be to start from a mutual recognition that would re-establish the mutual recognition dignity of all the populations in the Balkans, whether minorities or majorities. This can only be achieved through a shared long term educational program for all, which must start from the identification of a common interest and aim for all: bring up serene future generations with multiple identities. While who writes is convinced that great part of the civil society in the Balkans is ready to implement this approach, many are still the obstacles at political level in the region. This essay can be concluded with an axiom then: the EU must invest much more in cohesion strategies, especially in candidate and

⁷ Language Politics and Language Policies in the Contemporary Western Balkans: infinitives, Turkism and EUrolinguistics, Discussion with Victor Friedman and Andrew Mellon, Wilson Center, Washington, 18th April 2007, at: <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/language-politics-and-language-policies-the-contemporary-western-balkans-infinitives-turkisms> (Retrieved: July 2013).

potential candidate Balkan countries, because cohesion is the true key to solve the equation language-conflict-education, and cannot be underestimated.

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