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The South East European University in Macedonia

An International Effort to Promote the Solution of Problems in the Field of Higher Education in Macedonia

While the war was raging in Yugoslavia, relatively little attention was given to the Republic of Macedonia, which succeeded in 1991 in leaving the Yugoslav Federation and becoming fully independent without a shot ever being fired. For a long time the view prevailed that, in contrast to Kosovo or Bosnia, no major inter-ethnic tensions would develop in this country, which according to the census of 1994 had a population consisting of Macedonians (67 per cent), Albanians (23 per cent) and a number of smaller ethnic minorities, the Turks, the Vlachs, the Serbs and the Roma. It seemed to be a guarantee for the stability of the country that the Albanian minority had been represented in every cabinet that was formed since independence and that Albanians were well represented in Parliament.

In reality, however, there were far more inter-ethnic tensions in the country than was often assumed. There was alarmingly little contact between Macedonians and Albanians. Having different cultures and different religions, they each lived in their own world. Among Macedonians there were constant fears that the Albanians living in Macedonia were sympathetic to the idea of creating a pan-Albanian state consisting of present-day Albania, Kosovo and those areas of Macedonia where Albanians constitute a majority. Albanians, for their part, often felt that they were treated as second-rate citizens, because, notwithstanding the clause in the Constitution regarding equal rights of all citizens regardless of their ethnicity, they were heavily under-represented in the civil service and in leading positions in society. The degree of Albanian discontent became even more visible when groups of Albanians operating from Kosovo began to penetrate into western Macedonia in the spring of 2001. Many young men from Albanian villages joined them.

As a frequent visitor to Macedonia in my capacity as the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, I was struck by the importance that Albanian parties attached to the subject of education. There were Albanian language primary and secondary schools, but apart from the subjects of arts and history, there were virtually no opportunities to study in the Albanian language at the state universities of Skopje and Bitola. I tried to convince the government to provide more opportunities, but with limited success. The introduction of Albanian language courses in the teacher training curriculum for the lower classes of primary schools remained the only significant reform. In 1995, the radical Albanian leader Fadil Sulejmani took the initiative to start an Albanian language university in Tetovo without any consultations

with the government. After a number of violent incidents, the government decided it would tolerate the existence of this university as a private institution, but it would not recognize the diplomas which the students might eventually acquire. This impasse has continued up till the present day. Rector Suleymani demands unconditional recognition of his institution as a state university; the government wants him to respect the law on higher education according to which diplomas can only be recognized after an accreditation procedure has been successfully completed.

As it soon became clear that this deadlock might continue for a long time, my thoughts began to turn increasingly towards an international initiative for the creation of a university in which teaching would take place in both the Macedonian and the Albanian languages. But such a plan could only be successfully completed if I were able to find positive answers to a number of preliminary questions.

The first was, of course, what the views of the Albanian community were regarding such an initiative. It soon became evident that one of the Albanian parties, the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP), continued to hope for a solution to the problem of the recognition of the Suleymani University, even though it had not been able to find a formula which would lead to an end to the impasse regarding this issue. On the other hand, the largest Albanian party, the Democratic Party of the Albanians (DPA), showed positive interest in setting up a university with Albanian language courses under international auspices.

The second question was whether to try to promote the creation of a state university or to aim at setting up a private university. It soon became clear that the first option would lead to a debate on the question of whether this would require a change in the Constitution - a debate which would probably lead to a considerable loss of time, possibly of even more than a year. It therefore seemed preferable to opt for the creation of a private university.

The next dilemma was whether such an initiative would be compatible with the provisions of the Law on Higher Education which was in the process of being prepared. There seemed to be one major difficulty: In its provisional form, the draft law stipulated that in institutions of higher education, including private ones, only teaching in the Macedonian language and in what was called the world languages would be allowed - a formulation which was opposed by experts of the Council of Europe. Fortunately, this problem and some other smaller ones were solved in long discussions between the Minister of Education, Gale Galev, international education experts and myself. It was agreed that teaching in the Albanian language could take place in private institutions of higher education.

Once this problem was out of the way, the road was cleared for the establishment of structures to implement the project. On 29 November 2000, an international board was created, whose first urgent task was to secure international funding for the project taking into account that the government of

Macedonia had declared itself unable to make any financial contribution. The government restricted itself merely to the donation of a piece of land in Tetovo on which the university premises could be constructed. However, the board did not confine itself to fundraising, it also assumed the responsibility of serving as a framework for the implementation of the project as a whole. The international board in its original composition consisted of well-known international educational experts: Dr George Papadopoulos (France); Professor Rolf Dubs (Switzerland); Professor Roberto Carneiro (Portugal); Professor Jan de Groof (Belgium); Dr Dennis Farrington (UK) and Dr Alajdin Abazi (Macedonia). Professor Papadopoulos was elected vice-chairman and I myself was elected chairman.

One of the first acts of the board was to choose a name for the University: the South East European (SEE) University. It was further decided that the ethnic Albanian leadership in Macedonia would be invited to propose candidates for a local board which would work in close co-operation with the international board. I will refrain from going into details of the activities of the two boards. Let me just mention that thanks to generous contributions of the United States (which provided about 50 per cent of the funds required), various European countries, the Commission of the European Union and the Soros Foundation it proved possible to collect more than 90 per cent of the money required for starting this new university and for the construction of its premises.

On 11 February 2001, a ceremony took place in Tetovo to mark the beginning of the construction of the new university. It seemed to be a good omen that Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski, leader of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) as well as the leader of the DPA, Mr Arbën Xhaferi, spoke on this occasion. However shortly after this, Albanians of the so-called National Liberation Army, the (UCK/NLA), began to infiltrate Macedonia from Kosovo. For a while it seemed that a full-scale civil war was inevitable. On a number of occasions, the security situation in Tetovo, the second largest town in Macedonia with an Albanian majority, had become so precarious that the workers building the new university would have to be sent home. However, thanks mainly to the resolute action of the EU, NATO and the OSCE, it proved possible to avert a catastrophe. The so-called Ohrid Agreement, negotiated under international auspices, led to the acceptance on the part of the main Macedonian parties of a number of reforms that the Albanian community had been demanding for a long time. In return, the UCK/NLA rebels agreed to end the fighting and to disband their organization. As a result, it was possible to complete the construction of the SEE University with only a few weeks delay. On 20 November 2001, the university was officially inaugurated. Initially, it consisted of five faculties: law, business administration, public administration, communication studies and pedagogic methodology for teachers. Dr Abazi was appointed as rector. Further, it was decided that

the international board would be merged with the local board; the new joint board was given the task of acting as the governing organ of the university.

A few weeks before the inauguration of the SEE University, the governmental accreditation board granted it accreditation. Another development was the creation of a partnership with the University of Indiana which has already proved to be of great value for the SEE University. Plans are now being developed to set up a similar partnership with one or more European universities.

When the SEE University was inaugurated, 900 students were enrolled, more than expected because even a few weeks earlier it was still uncertain whether the security situation would enable the university to open its doors. Ten per cent of these students were non-Albanians; 40 per cent women. More than 200 transferred from other universities, many of them from the Suleymani University.

In the months preceding the opening of the university, considerable time was spent on formulating its aims and principles. I summarized these as follows in my address at the opening ceremony:

Allow me now to say a few words about the aims of this new university. This is a university, which will have as its special task to provide new opportunities for young Albanians to study, and in this process to serve the interests of the Albanian language and culture. But, at the same time we want to make clear, that this university is equally of interest for members of other ethnic groups. Let there be no misunderstanding: The doors of this university will be open for all students in this country, whatever their ethnicity. This new university will do its utmost to improve inter-ethnic relations and to promote ethnic harmony, and thus to contribute to peace and stability in Macedonia. Each ethnic group has its own specific interests, but they also have a common interest in promoting a peaceful and prosperous Macedonia. Our university will have Albanian Language courses, but also courses in Macedonian and English. It will thus be a trilingual University. We want to be a genuinely international university, which will be especially aware of the European vocation which Macedonia has chosen.

In the months that have passed since the SEE University was inaugurated, both the Albanian and the Macedonian community became more aware of what it had to offer. With the start of the new academic year on 1 September 2002, the number of students rose to a total of 2,300. Plans are already being made to add four more dormitories and to build an additional lecture hall.

In the meantime, there are increasing signs of a crisis at the university of Mr Suleymani. Many students have begun to realize that as long as he is in charge, the problem of diploma recognition will not be solved. If a new rector were to take over and the university were to change its course, there might be

a possibility for co-operation and a division of labour between the two universities. It also seems likely that whatever course the Suleymani University might follow in future, a growing number of its students might become interested in a transfer to the SEE University, particularly when one takes into account the quality of its teaching.

The creation of the SEE University was in many ways a unique experiment. The experience of the first half year of its existence seems to indicate that its founders are succeeding in realizing its objectives: to contribute to the quality of higher education in Macedonia and to contribute to the stability of the country by promoting inter-ethnic co-operation and understanding.