



## Higher Education in Emergencies: The Case of Consociational North Macedonia

Francesco Bigagli\*

\* PhD, Independent researcher, Italy  
(Former Assistant Professor, Dhofar  
University, School of Applied Sciences  
and Languages, Salalah, Oman).  
E-mail: frabigagli@gmail.com

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**ABSTRACT** Eighteen years after the end of 2001 conflict between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians, North Macedonia remains a country deeply polarized along ethno-national lines with implications for the maintenance of peace. The peace-building policies introduced by the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) based on a consociational model of power-sharing have accommodated the demands of ethnic Albanians, including the right of access to higher education (HE) in the mother-tongue which represented one of the root-causes in the escalation of the 2001 conflict. The OFA's exclusive focus on access and availability through state funding for higher education in the Albanian language has however favored a process of ethnicization of the tertiary sector. This paper seeks to investigate the unintended consequences of the OFA-induced ethnic self-ghettoisation within the public higher education system and, by the same token, it critiques the OFA's lack of mechanisms to reach across the ethnic divide through the lenses of a rights-based approach to education. It ultimately argues that without a strong governmental commitment to deethnicize education by transcending the OFA's intrinsic limits, power-sharing remains permeable to political manipulation which critically hampers social transformation and increases the probability of inter-ethnic tension, further weakening the peace process.

### KEYWORDS

Higher education; education and peace-building; education and international development; North Macedonia.

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## INTRODUCTION

For many decades a low priority sector in the context of post-conflict humanitarian relief and development, higher education is gradually drawing attention from policy-makers, practitioners and researchers as a catalyst for economic and social recovery (World Bank, 2000; Milton & Barakat, 2016; Millican 2018; Milton 2018). As a positional good providing “unparalleled access to the best paid and most rewarding forms of employment” (McCowan, 2012, p. 117), quality higher education can play a pivotal role in increasing economic returns, strengthening social mobility and status, and can potentially contribute to peacebuilding and social transformation by tackling horizontal inequalities that are often at the heart of inter-ethnic conflicts due to significant disparities in access to the tertiary level; often resulting in elite stratification within distinct communities and exclusion of vulnerable groups from social and public life (Buckland, 2005; Millican 2018). Yet in war-affected and ethnically-divided societies, the role of universities for peacebuilding and conflict transformation largely depends on the appropriateness and long-term strategic vision of policies and programmes to ensure a positive impact on the dynamics of conflict (Milton, 2018). As Milton (2018) contends, “without a strategic approach to recovery” support to higher education can bring about “more harm than good” (p. 179).

Through the lenses of a rights-based approach to education, this paper seeks to investigate the unintended consequences of the peace-building policies introduced by the ratification of the Ohrid Framework Agreement in North Macedonia almost two decades on from the end of the inter-community conflict between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians. Based on a consociational model of power-sharing, the OFA accommodated the demands of ethnic Albanians, including the right of access to higher education (HE) in the mother-tongue which represented one of the root-causes in the escalation of the 2001 conflict (Czapliński, 2008). While it prevented an escalation of the conflict into a full scale civil war, it has been argued that the OFA had not only failed to introduce mechanisms geared towards building social cohesion but it had rather contributed to reinforcing ethno-cultural divisions along territorial and linguistic lines, resulting in the deepening of stereotypes, intolerance and lack of trust between the two dominant nations (Fontana, 2017; OFA Review on Social Cohesion, 2015; European Commission, 2018).

In recent years, research has mostly focused on the consequences of educational decentralization at school level in North Macedonia. Both Lyon (2011, 2013) and Fontana (2017) have argued that the school system largely reflects the consociational structures and narratives of power along “mutually exclusive communities” reproducing pre-conflict cleavages and tensions (Fontana, 2017, p. 280). However, a comprehensive study on the unintended effects of higher education in the mother-tongue in North Macedonia has yet to appear. This is particularly pertinent given the prominent role of higher education in conflict causation and the strong focus on equality of access established by the OFA. The main

research question seeks to explore whether access to higher education in the mother-tongue has effectively functioned as a conduit for peace-building and/or whether a univocal focus on access and availability has perhaps served as a (political) tool to cement divisions and reproduce ethnic nationalism along the Yugoslav “separate but equal” policies.

### **CURRENT STATE OF AN ETHNICALLY DIVIDED NATION**

On February 13, 2019, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia officially became North Macedonia (NM) putting an end to a decades-long dispute with neighboring Greece over the name row (The Economist, 2019, January 17). While observers contend that the deal will bring stability to a “region that still has pockets of uncertainty” (Erlanger, 2019, February 6), its ratification continues to trigger social unrest led by the Macedonian nationalist party, VMRO; which was removed from power in 2017 after a sustained political crisis resulting from revelations of corruption by the former Prime Minister (Marusic, 2017, May 22). A coalition Government comprised of the ethnic Albanian DUI and the left-wing Macedonian party, SDSM, took office in May 2017 (Marusic, 2017, May 31). This was in the aftermath of what analysts consider the most severe democratic setback since the 2001 conflict between Macedonian forces and the ethnic-Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA): On April 27, 2017, 200 nationalists broke into the Parliament as a reaction to the election of the first Albanian speaker of the Assembly and the formation of the new ruling majority, perceived as a threat to the interests of ethnic Macedonians (European Commission, 2018, p. 7; The New York Times, 2017, April 27); that is, the Macedonian-speaking Orthodox majority in the country that accounts to 64% of its 2.6 million population versus 25% represented by the Albanian-speaking Muslim community (State Statistical Office [SSO], 2002 Census).<sup>1</sup> Most recently, ethnic tensions flared up during the course of a retrial against 33 ethnic Albanians accused to have been involved in a two-day shootout in June 2016 against Macedonian security forces. The defendants contend to have been the victims of a political set-up by the VMRO (Balkan Insight, 2019, May 16).

After almost two decades from the finalization of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), which ended the 2001 conflict by introducing a consociational democracy through territorial decentralization and extended rights for the Albanian-speaking minority, amid a deteriorating economy and high unemployment, especially amongst youth at 46% (EC, 2018), the political climate continues to be fraught with tensions between ethnic-based parties that find their *raison d'être* in the politicization of ethnonational cleavages (Terry, 2017; Fontana, 2017) with implications for the country's fragile inter-ethnic environment (EC, 2018). A 2008 UNDP report indicates that 60% of Macedonians and 50% of Albanians respectively attribute the responsibility for fueling ethnic tension to parties belonging to the opposing community

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<sup>1</sup>Turks, Roma and Serbs represent smaller minorities.

(p. 63). The report also highlights that the two largest communities have different visions and sense of belonging to their country (p. 64).<sup>2</sup> Civil society representatives have repeatedly warned against deepening polarization. As Kosturanova, Head of the Youth Educational Forum, maintains: “Macedonia is a deeply polarized society, where citizens are being divided based on their ethnicity, language, religion, gender, political views” (The New York Times, 2017, June 1). The ethnic polarization encompasses all aspects of life: For instance, just 37% of Macedonians have professional relations with people from a different ethnic background. The percentage is slightly higher amongst Albanians. Social life is also polarized and media outlets are rigidly divided by languages (UNDP, 2008, pp. 60-61). The degree of ethnic separation is particularly striking amongst youth and, more specifically, in the education sector, including HE (EC, 2018; OFA Review, 2015). A 2009 UNICEF study highlights that in consociational North Macedonia a “model of parallelism and separation has been followed rather than a model of integration” (2009). The next section gives an overview of the language and education reforms as stipulated in the OFA as these continue to shape the inter-ethnic landscape with implications for the maintenance of peace.

### **Education and Language Reforms in Consociational North Macedonia**

From 2005, the responsibility for a number of public services, *imprimis* basic education, had been entirely assigned to municipalities (Lyon, 2013) in accordance with the OFA which stipulated, *inter alia*, extended linguistic/cultural rights to persons belonging to non-majority communities, with an emphasis on access to education in the mother-tongue given the importance of education for conveying aspects of a group cultural identity (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000). The OFA not only reiterated the right of access to primary and secondary education in the mother tongue, a provision of the Yugoslav “separate but equal” policies which “fixed and crystallized ethno-cultural nations and were deliberately constructed as belonging to particular ethno-cultural nations” (Brubaker, 1996, p. 4) but introduced a principle of positive discrimination in the enrolments of minorities in State universities and prescribed publicly funded access to higher education in the Albanian language, considered as key conflict drivers (Czapliński, 2008; Bacevic, 2014). The OFA also established Albanian as an official language in addition to Macedonian in areas where ethnic Albanians make up at least 20% of the population. In January 2019, a new law that extends the use of the Albanian language across the country has come into force despite the refusal by the President to sign it and the fierce opposition of the VMRO claiming its unconstitutionality (Marusic, 2019, January 18). Ethnic Albanians see this as the last remaining stipulation of the OFA although strong disagreements with the VMRO over the interpretation of the normative provision remains (OFA Review, 2015). As Fontana (2017) argues, the education and language reforms have come to epitomize the new power relationship between ethnic Macedonians and the ethnic Albanian minority,

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<sup>2</sup>The status of Kosovo is seen by ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia as their political priority.

who had been mobilizing for greater collective and political rights since the country gained independence from Belgrade in 1991 and embarked in a predominantly mono-ethnic project of state nation-building, essentially through the preeminence of the Macedonian language (Bacevic, 2014).

While the introduction of a single official language is traditionally used as a nation-building (and nation-maintenance) tool to guarantee national cohesion, reinforce participation in public life and, ultimately, as a precondition to the integration of diverse groups (Deen & Romans, in Ulasiuk, 2018), there is always a risk that language can be employed as a means of domination to preserve the privileges of the majority group in society (Horowitz, 1985); resulting into a “nation-destroying process” (Walker, 1972) with the formation of antagonistic and profoundly resilient “minority nation-building” stances (Kymlicka, 2001, p. 233) that could work counter the exclusive state policies and lead to conflict and/or enduring tensions. This is because language constitutes one of the key “markers” of ethno-national identities and, by extension, not only any perceived threat to a particular language, both within and outside the education system, is construed as a threat to the survival of a group identity (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000) but language symbolizes the “worth and status of the community that speaks it” (Horowitz, p. 219). As Horowitz explains, if “the demand for a single official language reflects the desire for a tangible demonstration of preeminence, so linguistic parity is transparent code for equality” (p. 220). And yet, the question is whether improved language access and (educational) decentralization correlate with improved integration and cohesion. This is because a focus on access alone as a quantitative indicator in the measurement of progress does not necessarily translate into a more cohesive society. Access to education alone, for instance, does not, *per se*, fulfill the right to education. The conditions in which education takes place, the quality of education as well as the capacity of educational institutions to prepare graduates for political, economic and social life are equally important categories (Tomaševski, 2001; McCowan, 2011). As a result of educational decentralization, UNICEF (2009) reports a decline by more than 10% of “mixed schools” (under whose roof children are still ethnically split by language or taught in different shifts/buildings) in the 2001-2009 period and an increase in the number of monolingual ones (p. 7). UNDP (2008) indicates a reluctance to send children to a mixed school amongst 69% of ethnic Macedonians and 42% of Albanians (p. 61). Higher education has also expanded dramatically in consociational North Macedonia: In 1994-1995, only 1.95% of graduates were ethnic Albanians against 19% in the 2014-2015 period (Muhic & Memeti, 2016). The expansion, however, has occurred only along ethno-cultural and territorial lines with newly founded Universities delivering instruction exclusively in Albanian or Macedonian. Arguably, if increased access to mother tongue-based education can help preserve cultural identities and settle ethnic grievances, it can also contribute to cementing boundaries between groups along ethno-national identities in the absence of inter-communal points of contact and shared values (Preece, 2005); ultimately leaving little to no margin for “other ways of being and other forms of politics” (Finlay, in Fontana, 2017, p. 33)

other than identity politics. An OSCE study (2010) indicates a high level of adversity between Albanian and Macedonian students with nearly half of their school teachers appearing to have made derogatory remarks against the other community in their classroom. A review report on the implementation of the OFA (OFAR, 2015) takes stock of the increasing lack of cohesion, spreading of negative stereotypes, intolerance and mistrust between the two dominant nations.

As Fontana (2017) contends, the emergence of a “parallel” education system can result in the development of a sense of belonging of one group against another (and even against the State) and education is often used in deeply divided societies as a “gatekeeping” tool by manipulative ethnic mobilisers to nurture exclusive identities and challenge the legitimacy of other groups’ discourses (p. 42). Higher education is not free from attacks and manipulations due to its relevant political role. As Milton (2018) claims, higher education is not only often perceived as a hotbed of political radicalism (i.e., through student activism, production of critiques against the *status quo*) but can become a “focal point” of ethnic mobilization (p. 90). The next section provides an account of the role played by HE in the escalation of the 2001 conflict and how the HE landscape has changed since. The historical context *vis-à-vis* the current situation is deemed relevant to the scope of this paper.

### **The Role of Higher Education in Conflict Causation**

Analysts argue that the problem of access to HE in the mother-tongue represented one of the main drivers in the process of ethnic mobilization during the ‘90s by ethnic Albanians (Czapliński, 2008; Bacevic, 2014). As Czapliński (2008) claims, citing the then OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), Max van der Stoep, “He believed that the solution to the problem of Albanian language HE was a prerequisite for achieving progress in other aspects of minority rights and, after it had been addressed, it would be much easier to move on other issues” (p. 218). While mother tongue-based schooling was guaranteed by the Constitution, higher education was exclusively delivered in Macedonian (Bacevic, 2014). According to Czapliński (2008), the widespread inability to speak the state language and discriminatory practices on the grounds of ethnicity, resulted in great disparities in access to HE among ethnic Albanians in the ‘90s. This, in turn, hindered access to employment opportunities, representation in decision-making institutions and was perceived as a threat to Albanians’ longing to become a constituent nation.

As Silva (1978) declares, in the context of multicultural societies, ethnic communities tend to measure the level of discrimination and equality on the number of university enrollments (in Milton, 2018). While some ethnic Albanians would pursue HE in Kosovo (Czapliński, 2008), the banning of Albanian at the University of Prishtina in the ‘90s, as part of Milošević’s strategy to restrain Kosovo-Albanians’ mobilization for independence, put a stop to this trend (Kostovicova, 2005). This paved the way for the creation, in 1994, of the (illegal) Albanian-language University of Tetovo (UT), on the north Macedonian border with Kosovo

and epicenter of the 2001 conflict, perceived by the Government of Macedonia as a hotbed of ethnic Albanian separatism with links to the NLA (Czapliński, 2008). On the 17th of February, 1995, to prevent the start of classes, Macedonian forces opened fire on students killing one (Ackerman, 1999). This ignited a spiral of inter-ethnic violence and prompted the direct involvement of the HCNM who sought to resolve the problem of access to HE in the Albanian language by proposing the establishment of a trilingual (Albanian, Macedonian and English) higher education provider in the town of Tetovo: South East European University (Czapliński, p. 88). Often referred to as a “peacekeeping university” (EUA, 2018, p. 4), South East European University (SEEU) was conceived as a key social agent in supporting peace-building and rapprochement efforts (Czapliński, 2008; Bacevic, 2014). In line with the newly adopted Law on HE (2000), which consented teaching in minority languages by private providers (Czapliński, 2008), the SEEU project was accepted by all political camps in June 2000.<sup>3</sup> However, the Kosovo crisis (1999) acted as a catalyst for renewed violence across Macedonia delaying the opening of SEEU until September 2001 in the aftermath of the OFA. As a 2004 OECD report indicates, 2303 ethnic Albanians enrolled in the first two years at SEEU, “thus, virtually at a stroke, the total current participation rate of Albanian students in higher education rose to 9%” (p. 20). Ironically, while the SEEU proposal purported to guarantee access to HE in Albanian, the OFA “had created the conditions to pursue the old agenda of Albanian political parties” (Bacevic, 2014, p. 192) precisely by prescribing publicly funded access to higher education in the Albanian language. As a result, the University of Tetovo, located within a short walk from SEEU, was legalized in 2004. A decade later, another public Albanian-language institution, Mother Theresa University (MTU), was established.

In recent years, research has mostly focused on the consequences of educational decentralization at school level in NM. Both Lyon (2011, 2013) and Fontana (2017) have argued that the school system largely reflects the consociational structures and narratives of power along “mutually exclusive communities” reproducing pre-conflict cleavages and tensions (Fontana, 2017, p. 280). However, a comprehensive study on the unintended effects of HE in the mother-tongue in NM has yet to appear. While often “neglected” (Milton) as a sector in development, recent research shows that HE can not only contribute to economic recovery after conflict but could play a role in peace-building and conflict transformation (Millican, 2018; Milton, 2018; Milton & Barakat, 2016). This is particularly the case for NM given the prominent role of HE in conflict causation and the strong focus on equality of access established by the OFA. However, the question is whether access to HE in the mother-tongue is *per se* conducive to sustain peace and/or whether a univocal focus on access has perhaps served as a (political) tool to cement divisions and reproduce ethnic nationalism along the Yugoslav “separate but equal” policies.

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<sup>3</sup>In line with the HE Law (2000), SEEU was conceived as a private not-for-profit provider. Its status changed to private-public in 2008 and currently receives 20% of its funding through the State.

## THE ETHNICIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

In line with the OFA, non-majority students have the right to study in their mother-tongue at all levels of education with the State language (Macedonian) being introduced at fourth grade. Data shows that 64,51% of pupils at primary level study in Macedonian, 32,17% in Albanian, and the rest in Turkish (3,05%) and Serbian (OFAR, 2015). For a total of 346 primary schools, 247 are mono-lingual and the rest bilingual or trilingual (p. 171). Similarly, at secondary level, 66, 89% of children learn in Macedonian, 29,26% in Albanian, 2,01% in Turkish and 0,26% in Serbian for a total of 103 schools. Although a quarter of schools (primary and secondary) are bilingual or trilingual, only 13% of these have students *de facto* studying under the same roof (Bakiu & Dimitrova, 2016). This is because in the so-called 'mixed schools' pupils attend classes in detached buildings or different shifts with little to no interaction among different ethnic groups (*ibid.*). This is particularly relevant in the case of ethnic Macedonian and Albanian children who study in an ethnically mixed environment but rarely have contact with each other. According to the OSCE (2010), "one third of children (i.e., 30% Macedonian and 35% Albanian) claim that they have mutual contact outside of the classroom environment and if they do is mostly not out of personal initiative" (p. 20). In a nutshell Macedonian and Albanian students study in their mother tongue and almost all Roma and Serbian students attend classes in Macedonian. While the majority of Turkish students study in Turkish, a large percentage of them follow instruction in Macedonian (UNICEF, 2009). Albanian students are therefore the most isolated with respect to other ethnic communities. However, the degree of ethnic separation is mostly pronounced at higher education level. This section addresses the peace-building implications of ethnic self-ghettoisation exclusively within the public HE system and challenges the OFA's exclusive access-oriented policy in this regard.

The country has five fully publicly funded universities that provide teaching predominantly in Macedonian, except for teacher training faculties where instruction in minority languages is consented (Law on HE, 2008, art. 103), or Albanian; as the law requires taking Macedonian as a separate subject in addition to two other courses delivered in the state language within Albanian-language institutions (art. 103). A look at graduate rates, disaggregated by ethnicity, from public HE institutions, provides an idea of the level of "voluntary self-segregation" (Lijphart, in Fontana, 2018, p. 33): In 2017, the number of ethnic Albanians that graduated from the three largest public Macedonian-language institutions, that is, the University of Skopje (UKIM), Bitola and Shtip, represented respectively 7,4% (of which 60% studied at the Faculties of Philology/Pedagogy which deliver instruction in Albanian), 1,6% and 0,58% compared to 85,19%, 91,7% and 94% of ethnic Macedonians against the total number of graduates which includes other smaller minorities (SSO, 2019). Although there is no data available for the newly established Mother Theresa University, ethnic Macedonians that

completed their studies at the University of Tetovo in 2017 represented 4,3%<sup>4</sup> of its total graduates against 82,66% comprised of ethnic Albanians. Considering the predominantly Albanian-inhabited region of Tetovo, SEEU, a private-public provider, represents a significant exception in terms of ethnic heterogeneity: In 2017, 67,84% of its graduates were ethnic Albanians *vis-à-vis* 14,50% of ethnic Macedonians with a remaining 17,66% comprised of Turks, Roma, Serbs and Albanian-language students from neighboring countries, mainly Albania and Kosovo (SSO, 2019). Clearly, while HE for ethnic Albanians is both publicly available and accessible, the question is whether graduates from ethnic universities are being prepared for social, political and economic participation and, most importantly, if this leads to improved social cohesion. As noted, despite an exponential increase in the number of enrollments amongst ethnic Albanians, signaling a consistent demand for HE and political commitment to fulfill it (Fontana, 2017), the institutional “ethnicization” of higher education risks reinforcing ethnic identities and further divisions between groups. Besides, while evidence shows that an increase in HE enrollments amongst minorities can lower the chances of a relapse into conflict, the creation of a “youth bulge” with no employment prospects and/or perceived employment/income inequalities can generate new grievances and lead to inter-ethnic tension (Milton, 2018, pp. 94-95). In this regard, the OFAR (2015) indicates that ethnic Albanians are still under-represented within both “budgetary institutions” and the public sector (pp. 19-20). Terry (2017) contends that the “Macedonia’s ethnic-political system has resulted in many jobs being restricted to ruling party elites and loyalists, who have predominantly been ethnic Macedonians” (p. 73). Terry further maintains that the lack of connections with the parties in power constitute a barrier for minorities. Albanians also continue to earn less than Macedonians with a monthly average of 165 versus 350 Euros (pp. 73-74). The necessity to bridge the ethnic divide should therefore be regarded as a national priority.

While “structural diversity” does not necessarily translate into the development of meaningful contact with the other (Allport, 1979, p. 276; Gurin, Dey & Hurtado, 2002), it is a prerequisite to create opportunities for interaction that could, if well administered by relevant institutions, foster mutual understanding and acceptance (Allport, 1979, Feuer, Hornidge & Schetter, 2013). In short, “contact is good, and the more of it the better” (Hughes, in Fontana, 2018, p. 230). Kymlicka (1995) argues that multination states must ensure that its citizens respect diversity as much as the “particular ethnic groups and national cultures with whom they currently share the country” in order to guarantee stability (p. 191). The North Macedonian education system, however, seems to support existing segmental cleavages by defying the “practices of recognition of difference” (Jenson, 1998, p. 16) which educational institutions, including HE, should implement through the promotion of a sense of belonging

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<sup>4</sup>This 4% could be represented by Muslim Macedonians or Torbeši, a community in the Tetovo region fluent in Macedonian, Albanian and Turkish (Dikici, 2008).

based on inclusion and shared beliefs. A commitment to the values of diversity as part of identity formation processes in deeply divided societies is especially relevant at HE level, in the years between adolescence and adulthood, that is, when youngsters' "sense of personal and social identity is formed" on the basis of similarities with and differences from their peers (Gurin *et al*, 2002, pp. 334-335). As Gurin *et al* (2002) maintain, the experience of diversity is particularly influential and thus conducive to the formation of inclusive identities when the social background of higher education substantially differs from students' community and house environments. In addition, as McCowan (2012) contends, besides its "positional and instrumental benefits" (p. 117), HE has the potential to play a role in "developing criticality" (p. 118). That is, in building the capacity for independent thinking which feeds into a better understanding of oneself and the Other by challenging "established truths and decode and resist the messages of power-holders and violent ideologues" (Schendel, in Millican, 2018, p. 50).

In this sense, universities could be uniquely positioned to support peace-building processes as traditionally heterogeneous spaces of civic socialization and through their intrinsic role in fostering independent thinking since the subject-specific curriculum would represent, with the exception of specific courses (e.g., peace education), a less viable avenue to promote tolerance (Feuer *et al*, 2013). As Milton and Barakat (2016) put it, while primary education is essentially formative, "higher education has the possibility to be transformative" (p. 414). However, higher education can also operate counter conflict transformation by strengthening the social roots of conflict through, for instance, the presence of negative ethnic stereotypes in textbooks or the attitude of faculty members geared towards the exclusion or belittlement of minorities. The employment of teacher-centered pedagogies and rote-learning methodologies that stifle students' initiative and creativity can also undermine peace-building efforts by making students more vulnerable to political manipulation (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Milton, 2018). The lack of opportunities to engage with diversity on campus also affects the quality of the educational experience while inhibiting the chances to "mediate the identity bases of conflict" (Milton & Barakat, 2017, p. 415). In the context of Macedonia, as Muhic (2017) contends, "universities can be an important channel through which to promote social cohesion (. . .) Thus, if education policy is not sensitive to the issue of social cohesion and does not incorporate the perspectives of a variety of communities, it can divide and alienate non-majority communities" (p. 21). In this regard, recent reports by the European University Association address the need to enhance student-centered learning across all Macedonian public monolingual institutions and strengthen higher order thinking and life skills to promote students' critical and communicative abilities (EUA: 2017a, p. 17; 2017b, p. 21; 2017c, pp. 20-21; 2017d, pp. 17-18). The ethnicization of higher education represents, nevertheless, a dangerous element of the "hidden curriculum" (Apple, 2004) by undermining students' ability to develop a critical perspective on society while strengthening prejudices and encouraging identity politics. As Allport (1979) claims, "segregation markedly enhances the visibility of a

group; it makes it seem larger and more menacing that it is" (p. 269).<sup>5</sup>

Although diversity could be experienced through specific curricular content, evidence suggests that without a direct exchange of ideas with the Other, this could even have negative effects on students' development (Gurin *et al*, 2002). Muhic and Memeti (2016) claim that while North Macedonia's public higher education providers offer courses in multiculturalism, delivered as electives mainly across pedagogical faculties, the lack of cultural competence among faculty is worrisome. As Muhic (2017) maintains, whenever faculty incorporate topics about diversity in their subjects, they do so in an "unstructured and non-critical way" which could result in reinforcing existing stereotypes by "trivializing" ethnic cultures (p. 22). Significantly, ethnic prejudice seems most prominent amongst students from ethnically homogeneous campuses (Muhic & Memeti, 2016). The lack of heterogeneity among staff within ethnic universities (Muhic, 2007) and the absence of any kind of cooperation with providers from the 'opposing' community (OFAR, 2015) ultimately characterize North Macedonia's public higher education institutions as ethnic cloisters and incubators of "national identity-based projects" (Bacevic, p. 192) that could hamper conflict transformation by acting as "perpetrators of conflictual identities" (Milton & Barakat, 2016, p. 414) rather than promoters of mutual ones based on shared fundamental values (i.e., respect for the rule of law, tolerance, common vision/sense of belonging).

### **The OFA's "just" vision of multicultural North Macedonia: A path to national dis-integration?**

The issue with the OFA's "just" vision of the North Macedonian society", to use Kymlicka's terminology (2002, p. 16), based on consociational power-sharing, is simply that it does not encourage integration (Bacevic, 2014). With regard to education, for instance, to recall Tomaševski, an exclusive focus on availability/access does not fulfill the right of education which must take into account the importance of quality, including the conditions in which education is delivered, and the ability of institutions to adapt to changing social circumstances. Critics of the OFA and, by extension, consociationalism, argue that while it contributed to prevent a worsening of the conflict and secure peace, at least in the short term, it has achieved that at the expenses of inter-ethnic cohesion (Lyon, 2015) as it basically relies on the "division it is supposed to solve" (McGarry & O'Leary, in Fontana, 2018, p. 37). As Fontana (2016) contends, if (educational) decentralization can contribute to "conferring legitimacy to a peace process by eroding inequalities and promote social mobility" while ensuring the protection of distinctive identity markers, mother-tongue education can also weaken conflict transformation by "isolating communities" (p. 859) and limit their "access to equal participation in society" (Freedland & Patrick, 2004, p. 1); especially in the absence of mechanisms to bridge the inter-ethnic gap - which the OFA had essentially failed to establish while substantiating and thus strengthening the Yugoslav "separate but equal" policies,- and

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<sup>5</sup>Ethnic divisions have had a profound impact on the collapse of Yugoslavia and regional conflicts (Hammel, 2010).

where there is a perceived opposition to the state language. In 2007, the ethnic Albanian Minister of Education, introduced English from first grade while deferring the study of Macedonian, in which Albanians still struggle to express themselves, from first to fourth grade (in Fontana, 2017, p. 211). This controversial shift is symptomatic of the degree of political instrumentalization with repercussions on education which remains at risk of political influence (EU, 2018). It could also be argued that since North Macedonia's accession into the EU is evaluated on the basis of the implementation of the OFA, there is fertile ground for political manipulation.<sup>6</sup> This is because lawmakers may be “contented when they have strictly followed the rules that a limited interpretation of the rights impose on them” (Robeyns, 2006, p. 78) fulfilling, perhaps, a hidden political objective aiming at separation rather than integration. Robeyns maintains that governments are, in some cases, “part of the problem, rather than part of the solution” (p. 77). In this regard, Lyon (2015) warns of the influence of North Macedonian municipal officials who contribute to mobilize local ethnic identities around the idea that mixing in educational institutions is not safe in order to secure electoral consensus (p. 107). According to Fontana (2017), the failure of the MoE’s Strategy for Integrated Education (2010), formulated to address the fragmentation of the education system, was essentially due to a lack of political will on both sides.

Arguably, if the right of access to HE in Albanian contributed to ending the 2001 conflict, the presence of ghettoized campuses and lack of instruments to promote rapprochement, undermines the significance of what Robeyns (2006) terms “the personal and collective instrumental social roles of education” (p. 74) and, in turn, the possibility of engineering a social change. As Tomaševski (2003) explains, “education should prepare learners for parenthood and political participation, it should enhance social cohesion and, more than anything, it should teach the young that all human beings - themselves included - have rights” (p. 33). This is because a right cannot be fulfilled without the “active, meaningful and critical participation” (Coysh, 2014, p. 109) of rights-holders. A “rights-based approach to development” (RBAD) relies on mutual responsibilities between those accountable to protect and promote people’s rights (duty-bearers) and rights-holders as key agents in the process of social change. However, if the fulfillment of a right arguably constitutes the goal of a RBAD, “the quality, legitimacy and sustainability of the outcome depends on the process used to achieve it” (Gready and Ensor, 2005, pp. 9-10). A ‘myopic’ interpretation of the OFA’s rights-based educational policies, exclusively based on access/availability, which has essentially failed in creating an intercultural environment based on shared civic values and intellectual autonomy, could therefore hinder the setting in motion of the process itself precisely as it does not only confines communities to an “imposed locality” (Roter & Busch, in Ulasiuk, 2018, p. 175) but constrains individuals within fixed group identities which limit and/or influence their right to freely express their views or make decisions for themselves with serious

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<sup>6</sup>See Art. 8e of the EU Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992).

implications for the future of democracy. A failure to fully comprehend educational rights, “in conjunction with other rights” (i.e., civil, political, economic; McCowan, 2011, pp. 290-291; Tomaševski, 2001), therefore makes education no longer a “key empowerment right” (Coomans, 2007, p. 184) or “a good thing” (Robeyns, 2006, p. 75).

## CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to analyze the unintended consequences of higher education in the mother-tongue in consociational North Macedonia given the prominent role of the tertiary sector in conflict causation and the strong focus on equality of access established by the OFA. Arguably, while the 2001 conflict has certainly served as a catalyst for pre-existing ethnic and cultural divisions which, as Baumann (2009) argues, “continue to shape the post-war society” (p.110), the peace-building policies introduced by the OFA clearly fall short in providing any recommendations on how to foster ethnic rapprochement and ensure social cohesion. One might even contend that the OFA has failed in securing a permanent state of ‘peace’ for as long as the presence of “negative, endogenous structures are left over as virulent factors, the danger of society’s return to violence is eminent” (Baumann, p.112). In conclusion, without a strong governmental commitment to deethnicize education by transcending the OFA’s exclusive access-oriented policies, the persistence of a situation of “voluntary apartheid” (Baumann, p. 112) makes consociational power-sharing permeable to political manipulation which critically hampers social transformation and increases the probability of inter-ethnic tension, ultimately weakening the peace process.

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