

## Constructing the Image of the ‘Threatening Neighbour’ in Macedonian History Textbooks

History textbooks, like all educational media in subjects inspiring a sense of identity and belonging, reflect what a society wishes to retain of its past, and what its ambitions are for the future. They often form an intersection between such divergent factors as pedagogic traditions, academic historiography, state educational policies, national ideologies, and social constructions of reality. In this sense, textbooks can help to identify the values being fostered in a given society.<sup>1</sup>

As is the case in many other countries, in Macedonia history is taught as a distinct subject in primary and secondary schools. The Bureau of Education Development is responsible for the development of history curricula, and authors of history textbooks are obliged to comply with the national curricula. According to officially established criteria, at least one of the authors should be an ethnic Albanian, or a member of the ethnic Turkish community. A textbook commission consisting of historians and ministry officials selects textbooks for each age group from the array of textbooks submitted in response to an open call by the Ministry of Education; finally, the Minister of Education confirms and approves the use of selected textbooks.

The constitutional changes made in 2001 led to the implementation of a new history curriculum in the 2005–2006 academic year.<sup>2</sup> The goal of the new cur-

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1 Christina Koulouri, ‘Introduction: The Tyranny of History’, in *Teaching the History of Southeastern Europe*, ed. by Christina Koulouri (Thessaloniki: Centre for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, 2001), pp. 15–25; Dubravka Stojanović, ‘History Textbooks and Creation of National Identity’, in *Teaching the History of Southeastern Europe*, ed. by Koulouri (2001), pp. 27–32; Niyazi Kizilyurek, ‘History Textbooks and Nationalism’, in *Teaching the History of Southeastern Europe*, ed. by Koulouri (2001), pp. 69–73 (p. 72); Falk Pingel, *UNESCO Guidebook on Textbook Research and Textbook Revision*, 2nd edn <<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001171/117188e.pdf>> (accessed 15 September 2016); Wolfgang Höpken, *Textbooks and Conflicts. Experiences from the Work of the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research* (2001) <[http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/278200-1121703274255/1439264-1126807073059/World\\_Bank.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/278200-1121703274255/1439264-1126807073059/World_Bank.pdf)> (accessed 29 September 2016).

2 After the independence of Macedonia in 1991, history textbooks were changed on two occasions; this was the third edition.

riculum, developed by an ethnically mixed working group appointed by the Bureau of Education Development (consisting of five ethnic Macedonians, four ethnic Albanians and one member of the Turkish community), was to include and represent various ethnic communities in history textbooks.<sup>3</sup> Their inclusion in the history curriculum has, however, been achieved at the expense of European and world history lessons.

National curricula for history teaching are centred on political and cultural history, the latter being understood in the traditional manner, i. e., as the history of architecture and the arts. The positivistic concept of historicism that is based on the development and transfer of political power and the construction of the 'nation' with its links to the world remains the dominant structuring principle of history curricula.

Macedonian history textbooks are developed around certain core geographical and chronological topics which follow a deductive principle: world and European history, Balkan history, and Macedonian history. While distinct chapters are devoted to lessons on Macedonian ethno-national history, lessons relating to Albanian ethno-national history are incorporated in the chapters on Balkan history. It should be noted that the history of ethnic Albanians taught to students in Macedonia fits into the shared Albanian ethno-national narrative found throughout the Balkans.

Compared with previous editions, the latest generation of textbooks, published in the 2005–2006 academic year, shows a more modern approach. Although the narration is primarily focused on wars, treaties, and the actions of politicians (especially in ancient history lessons), additional information on the economy, social life, and culture is now featured. Some effort has been made to provide a basic understanding of democratic values, as well as of the socio-political and economic processes of twentieth-century history.

The chapters on Balkan history include material on the history of neighbouring countries (Albania, Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria), which are presented in a reasonably positive light, while the history of all other Balkan countries, (e. g. Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, etc.) is almost completely absent. The intention appears to be that the Macedonian 'neighbourhood' should represent the entire Balkans and its history.

The aim of this chapter is, therefore, to discuss several examples from history textbooks for the upper grades of primary school (the seventh and eighth

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3 For more information on the commission, its composition and the dilemmas related to history curricula development for primary and secondary education, see: Robert Pichler, 'Historiography and Politics of Education in the Republic of Macedonia' in *'Transition' and the Politics of History Education in Southeast Europe*, ed. by Augusta Dimou (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2009) pp. 217–250. The interviews with commission members and ministry officials are particularly interesting: see pp. 230–233.

grades),<sup>4</sup> and to provide an overview of the manner in which images of the 'threatening neighbour' are constructed.

It is immediately striking that when neighbouring countries are addressed in their own chapters and lessons (i.e. in the lessons on the Balkan peoples), the texts refrain from using negative imagery or vocabulary, when quite the opposite is true of the chapters and lessons relating to events in Macedonian or Albanian ethno-national history. In the latter contexts, images of the neighbour often bear negative connotations, creating a subtle representation of a 'threatening Other'. It is worth stressing that, regardless of the veracity of the descriptions of historical events, a narrative can still convey stereotypical and anachronistic messages. A valid historical claim can be charged with additional and sometimes contradictory meanings through the style or choice of language used, or the frequency with which certain words are repeated.

Macedonia's modern-day neighbours are often depicted as (historical) enemies with permanent ambitions regarding Macedonia. A good illustration of this is a local variant of a rather universal example: 'the location and natural resources of Macedonia have *always* been attractive to Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece. Each has tried to conquer Macedonia, but none has been capable of doing it alone'.<sup>5</sup> In a similar context, lessons dealing with the 'armed propaganda' of neighbouring countries at the turn of the twentieth century at times over-emphasize negative images by repeating words with threatening connotations, such as 'terror', 'violence', 'robbery', 'evil', etc.<sup>6</sup>

Alternatively, some textbooks adopt a selective approach whereby a historical event is read only in relation to one's own ethno-centric perspective. Thus a section purporting to cover the 'Constantinople Conference' during the so-called Eastern Crisis and around the time of the Albanian Question does not contain any information whatsoever about the event itself – the Conference – but rather emphasizes the territorial expansion of Serbia at the expense of what is perceived to be Albanian ethnic lands, and which at that time was in fact Ottoman territory.<sup>7</sup>

An example of the revival of old threats and animosities is the representation of the Bucharest Treaty of 1913, which sanctioned the partition of the geographic (Ottoman) Macedonia among Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece. This event is one of the most controversial historical topics in the Republic of Macedonia. Its treat-

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4 Blaže Ristovski et al., *Istorija za VII Oddelenie* (Skopje: Albi, 2009); Violeta Achkoska et al., *Istorija za VII Oddelenie* (Skopje: Tabernakul, 2005); Blaže Ristovski et al., *Istorija za VIII Oddelenie* (Skopje: Albi, 2009); Vlado Velkovski et al., *Istorija za VIII Oddelenie* (Skopje: Prosvetno Delo, 2008).

5 Achkoska et al., *Istorija za VII Oddelenie* (2005), p. 114.

6 Ristovski et al., *Istorija za VII Oddelenie* (2009), p. 125.

7 Achkoska et al., *Istorija za VII Oddelenie* (2005), p. 52.

ment often appears as being tied to a cycle of eternal collective trauma and victimization. The following extract, with its dramatic wording and use of the historical present, illustrates how narration can perpetuate an inherited suffering, keeping it alive in the collective memory of the 'national Self':

*The Peace Treaty of Bucharest* had significant political, ethnic, and economic consequences for the Macedonian people, amongst which were the destruction of the territorial and ethnic unity of Macedonia, a process of ethnic exile of the Macedonian population, and colonization by a non-Macedonian population with the aim of altering the traditional historical character of Macedonia.<sup>8</sup>

The suffering and victimization experienced by the Macedonian people after the Bucharest treaty in 1913 is also described in the following sentences: 'The period between the two World Wars left a very deep impression and had great consequences for Macedonia. Macedonian people *everywhere* had been facing economic, political, social, and national problems'. While it is not clear at first glance to what 'everywhere' refers in this context, clarification comes with the next sentence: 'The appetites of the neighbouring Balkan bourgeoisie were directed towards the occupation and exploitation of Macedonia'.<sup>9</sup> The latent meaning of the umbrella term *everywhere* can be clarified by reference to ideology. It is inherited from the socialist period, as is the term 'the neighbouring Balkan bourgeoisie'. As the last Ottoman province, Macedonia has undoubtedly undergone various transformations with far-reaching social, political, and economic consequences since the Balkan Wars. This does not, however, affect only the ethnic Macedonian population. The other inhabitants of post-Ottoman Macedonia are simply forgotten in the narrative of this textbook, as is their eventual suffering or exile.

In the same manner, the narrative depicts the desperate situation of Macedonians who found themselves within new political and state borders. For instance, Macedonian people in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes 'suffered injustices and had imposed upon them a project of great Serbian national assimilation'.<sup>10</sup> The situation was even worse in northern Greece because 'every Macedonian, regardless of age, was forced to go to school and to learn Greek. Macedonians were forced to speak Greek even in their homes, surrounded and watched by secret police'.<sup>11</sup> The image of the 'threatening neighbour' is constructed by the logic of simple binary opposition, creating dichotomies between peoples in the format *we*/'good' versus *they*/'bad'. Since the peoples featured in such oppositions are by default delineated with reference to nationality,

8 Ristovski et al., *Istorija za VII Oddelenie* (2009), p. 131.

9 Velkovski et al., *Istorija za VIII Oddelenie* (2008), p. 51.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

this approach hinders students when differentiating between governments and peoples, or between different groups and individuals within the same nation. Given the binary outlook of the narration on the 'neighbour', one could raise the following questions: would students in the country be willing to cooperate or form alliances with these 'bad' peoples (Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians)? Would they be open to the influence of members of these 'bad' communities who are fighting against negative stereotypes and old and new prejudices, and defending democratic values in their own countries today?

It is also worth mentioning that the persistence of the images mentioned above could also be attributed to the continuous conflict regarding the identity markers of the Macedonian ethno-nation. Greece does not recognize the country's name, Serbia rejects the independence of its national church and Bulgaria does not accept the existence of a Macedonian nation and language. The naming issue is the most widely-known dispute. Athens refuses to accept the name 'Macedonia', claiming that it belongs exclusively to Greek history and heritage. Greece has used this assertion to systematically block Macedonia's entry into the EU and NATO, asking that the country change its name before entering into negotiations. Bulgaria, on the other hand, was the first country to recognize Macedonia's independence, yet it still refuses to accept the existence of a Macedonian nation and language. Although Serbia recognizes Macedonia under its constitutional name, the Serbian Orthodox Church does not accept the independence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, proclaimed in 1967.

Similar expressions of territorial loss and historical injustice at the hands of an eternal aggressor can be found in the Albanian narratives. There, particular emphasis is given to the Berlin Congress of 1878: 'According to its decisions, the Ottoman empire was forced to return to Serbia and Montenegro some of its Balkan territories, inhabited by an Albanian population'.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Serbs are depicted as permanent Albanian enemies from the Middle Ages onwards. The text states that during the time of the King Stephen Dušan in the fourteenth century,

the Serbian state implemented the Serbian administration everywhere. Albanian feudal lords were replaced by Serbian feudal lords. Several monasteries were built in Kosovo [...] The Catholic Church was replaced by the Serbian Orthodox Church. For anyone disobeying, rigorous measures were taken: seizure of property, expulsion, looting, and death sentences. However the Albanian population retained its traditions and did not succumb to the assimilation process.<sup>13</sup>

An interesting textual solution, whereby the parallel ethno-centric views on the 'threatening Other' are brought together, is found in some textbooks. This is a

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12 Ristovski et al., *Istorija za VII Oddelenie* (2009), p. 62.

13 Nenad Naneski and Behar Mehmeti, *Istorija za VI Oddelenie* (Skopje: Zvezda, 2006), p. 74.

compromise in the spirit of the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement. We thus read: 'In their allied agreement, the Balkan allies Serbia, Montenegro, and Greece intended to capture all regions with Macedonian and Albanian populations and to divide them among each other.'<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the attempts of Macedonian textbooks to ameliorate the image of the country's neighbours through recent reforms, an implicit negative 'threatening' image persists in them. This image is predominantly conveyed in the text and manifests itself in four main ways: (1) the particular wording used to narrate an event; (2) the frequency with which relevant (negative) words or expressions appear in a textual sequence; (3) the selection of topics, or the aspects accentuated in the elaboration on a given historical event; and (4) the use of the historical present (tense) to create a sense of drama around historical events. Further work on these aspects can bring about the changes to history textbooks required for a critically oriented history teaching. These textbooks are not filled with exclusively negative images of the neighbour. On the contrary, one can also find examples of cooperation between neighbouring communities during important historical events, such as certain anti-Ottoman uprisings in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, my intention here has been to point out sections in the textbooks which require further scholarly attention and revision in order to improve intercultural and civic education, an undertaking of great importance for the future of Macedonia.

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14 Ristovski et al., *Istorija za VII Oddelenie* (2009), p. 85.

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