Rewriting the Balkans: Memory, Historiography, and the Making of a European Citizenry

Dana N. Johnson

University of Massachusetts - Amherst
This research explored the work of historians, history teachers, and NGO employees engaged in regional initiatives to mitigate the influence of enduring ethnocentric national histories in the Balkans. In conducting an ethnography of the development and dissemination of such initiatives in Serbia, I queried how “multiperspectivity” is understood as a pedagogical approach and a tool of reconciliation, how conflict and controversy are negotiated in developing alternative educational materials, and how the interests of civil society intersect with those of the state and supranational actors. My research sought to interrogate the field of power in which such attempts to innovate history education occur, and the values by which these efforts seek and gain acceptance or are marginalized.

The following opinions, recommendations, and conclusions of the author are his/her own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IREX or the US Department of State.
On March 25, 2011, Serbia’s striking teachers’ unions took to the streets in protest. For months already the unions had been demanding that education be returned to its rightful place as a state priority. Government authorities repeatedly responded that they didn’t understand what the unions wanted. Striking teachers expressed frustration with their low salaries and the crumbling infrastructures of their schools. Parents replied that teachers were lucky to have jobs at all.

It is often when such controversy breaks out over a state’s educational system that the processes of negotiation and institutionalization of national narratives are laid bare (Hein and Selden 2000). The official history taught in schools is one that draws on “schematic narrative templates” (Wertsch 2002) and myths of Serbian heroic victimization (see Bakić-Hayden 2004; Čolović 2002) to ensure the continued hegemony of a monolithic Serbian national history.

Studies of history textbooks used during the 1990s in Serbia have illuminated the provocation of nationalism and xenophobia that made war possible (Stojanović 2004), and post-Milošević surveys have detailed the nature of those curriculum reforms accomplished in the past decade (Crawford 2003; Djurović 2005).

While excellent studies of textbook reform in postsocialist Eastern Europe have been produced by the Council of Europe (Slater 1995) and the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (Koulouri, ed. 2002), such analyses do not take as an object of inquiry the role of civil society or supranational actors in these reforms.

Bringing both civil society and institutional actors into dialogue with the field of memory studies, my research has built on these contributions by focusing critical attention on the development of supplemental teaching materials that challenge students to critically engage with the hegemonic history found in their textbooks.

I asked: How is the work of history education reform understood and carried out by the historians, history teachers, and NGO employees engaged in regional initiatives to mitigate the influence of enduring ethnocentric national histories in the Balkans?

Below the surface disruption in public and private life caused by the 2011 teachers’ strike is a deeper rift around how to best prepare Serbia’s youth for an uncertain place in the Europe of tomorrow. Nowhere are the corners of this debate more apparent than in history class; a school subject which, according to one interlocutor, is in danger of disappearing altogether. My research sought to interrogate the field of power in which attempts to innovate history education occur, and the values by which such efforts seek and gain acceptance or are marginalized.
RESEARCH PROCESS AND RESULTS

The central role of the institution of education in bolstering the legitimacy of the state and consolidating national identity has been well established (Gellner 1983; Smith 1991). The dissemination of official historical discourses through the apparatus of the educational system is one way in which the hegemony of the nation-state is perpetuated and the prevailing social order maintained. Of course, this process does not transpire uncontested.

Interesting initiatives have taken root at the nexus of the local, national and international capable of meeting the challenge of escaping a unified national narrative. While analysis of my ethnographic data is still in a preliminary stage, I offer below some initial insights into the following questions that shaped my inquiry: How is "multiperspectivity" understood as a pedagogical approach and as a tool of reconciliation? How are alternative approaches to history education situated within the field of reconciliation? And how are the interests of civil society mediated with those of the state and supranational actors?

My research included semi-structured interviews with nine actors variously engaged in the development of alternative educational materials. I also conducted participant observation at one teacher-training workshop in Serbia, as well as at two regional meetings of history teachers working on the development of a new alternative educational project.2 The documents I collected for analysis include alternative educational materials, NGO promotional publications, meeting reports, donor guidelines, and training materials. Prior to my IREX-funded research, I also conducted three months of participant observation at the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE), located in Thessaloniki, Greece.3

A Lesson of Methods

While a free market in textbooks exists in Serbia, schools and teachers are constrained in their choices by a curriculum that is, as one teacher put it, “overburdened with everything”. Serbia’s history curriculum remains outdated, with a chronological approach that bores students and fails to teach them critical thinking skills. Those with whom I worked have taken a radically different approach in the development of workbooks and model lessons, one that hinges on engaging students critically with historical sources. As Jonathan Even-Zohar, Senior Manager of EUROCLIO elaborated, “History is what you make of it to tell it. So, it's not about teaching that there is no truth, it's about showing how a truth is constructed...if you do it well, it hopefully empowers students to actually consider the value of their arguments” (Interview with author, May 12, 2011).

The concept of “multiperspectivity” is central to the innovative pedagogy championed by my interlocutors. Simply put, multiperspectivity is “a way of viewing, and a predisposition to view, historical events, personalities, developments, cultures and societies from different perspectives through drawing on procedures and processes which are fundamental to history as a discipline” (Stradling 2003:14). Multiperspectivity is thus rooted in the

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methodology of academic historians. The recognition that this method should be translated into classroom practice is the result of a convergence of wider educational trends that have garnered support over the past forty years. These trends seek to move away from a knowledge-transmission educational model, instead placing emphasis on teaching students to think historically, focusing on the erased histories of women and ethnic minorities, and preparing students for life in a multicultural Europe (Stradling 2003:9-11).

Such a “way of viewing” history is at odds with how history has traditionally been taught across the region. And in Serbia, where, as one of my informants quipped, “everyone is a historian and a football coach,” such challenges to the transmission of a unified national narrative are routinely resisted.

But multiperspectivity does not challenge the national narrative directly. Rather than promoting a new historiographical narrative, the workbooks of CDRSEE’s Joint History Project comprise a rigorously collected set of sources that “propose to rewrite history through a lesson of method rather than content” (Koulouri 2009:10). As series editor and historian Christina Koulouri explained, “the aim of the project was not to replace the one and only national history with the one and only new Balkan history. Our effort focused on presenting the various and complex aspects of a shared past. Besides, there is not only this shared past. The Balkan nations also followed different paths and there are not only similarities; there are also differences” (Interview with author, June 28, 2011).

The revelation that multiple interpretations of the same event exist is a novel idea for most students, and the first step in challenging them to reconsider what they know to be true about the past and about their neighbors. “Multiperspectivity is not about showing that there is no truth; multiperspectivity wants to show that there is not only one dogmatic, nationalistic truth” (Christina Koulouri, Interview with author, June 28, 2011). Such an approach also has the effect of aligning the Serbian educational experience closer to that of Western European countries.

Reconciling the Past
The methodology of multiperspectivity allows for difficult and controversial history to be addressed in schools without requiring that a consensus on the past first be reached. In this way, such projects situate themselves in the field of reconciliation while distinguishing their approach from truth-seeking and consensus-building efforts. By acknowledging the existence of multiple truths, such efforts challenge the taken-for-granted link between “truth” and “reconciliation”.

“We think of reconciliation quite generally in terms of tensions – tensions between two or more beliefs, tensions between two or more differing interpretations of events, or tensions between two or more apparently incommensurable sets of values” (Dwyer 1999:85). The alternative educational materials that were the focus of this research do not attempt to resolve the tensions between the national narratives of the Balkan nations. Rather, they understand reconciliation in the practical terms of managing difference. As
Nenad Šebek, Executive Director of CDRSEE explained, “You know this mantra, ‘you can't reconcile without facing the past’? Yes, it's true, you can't reconcile without facing the past. But we have to accept the fact that you and I will never see the past eye to eye. We never will. And, starting with that difference, we should work towards something” (Interview with author, July 25, 2011). Such projects can perhaps more accurately be said to promote peaceful coexistence through fostering mutual understanding of the Other.

Meeting Challenges
Even when beginning from the acknowledgement of multiple truths, the process of producing and disseminating multiperspective educational materials is a fraught one. Those involved in such projects must negotiate which themes and events to address, and how. They must also navigate complex relationships with governmental bodies as well as US- and EU-based donor organizations.

In Post-Milošević Serbia, civil society and governmental institutions are still sorting out what their respective roles in public life ought to be, classroom included. One interlocutor commented that while she viewed the now frequent cooperation between NGOs and schools as a positive development, an unintended consequence is that the relevant state institutions now seem to regard aspects of their mandate to be within the purview of NGOs. Organizations promoting alternative educational materials run the risk of further aggravating this tension by highlighting the question of “whether the goal of history instruction is to promote critical thought and reflection on texts – that is, to engage in the practice of analytical history – or to inculcate collective memory grounded in ‘state-approved civic truth’” (Wertsch 2002:71). As discussed above, such projects do not aim to directly reform textbooks or curricula, and yet they are frequently perceived as challenges to the nation-state and its institutions.

Civil society initiatives to reform history education also face numerous obstacles in light of their reliance on support from US- and EU-based donors. While local NGOs have struggled to professionalize and master the vocabulary and norms of “project society” (Sampson 2003), they are still commonly favored for funding over truly regional efforts. My interlocutors enumerated numerous other challenges including donor wariness of potentially controversial projects and donor preference for projects with immediate, measurable results.

Finally, implementing such projects very much relies on history teachers themselves – their interest in adopting new methods as well as their willingness to engage with contentious issues in the classroom. Providing training and fostering strong networks of educators and historians across the region is thus of critical importance.

As one person involved with the Joint History Project put it, “If people weren't interested in changing the way they teach history, to change the way that their students perceive history, then it would be a good book, but with no use. So that's why I believe the actual teachers are the most important actors, and through them we make an impact on the new generation”.

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CONTINUING RESEARCH

The results of this research suggest numerous avenues for further inquiry. While the impacts of alternative educational projects are difficult to measure and may not be visible for years to come, one approach would be to focus on how multiperspectivity is taken up and interpreted in the classroom. To what extent are teachers able to make use of new methods in the absence of systemic curriculum reform? Are they able to register changes in their students’ learning? And how do students reconcile such an approach with the one found in their textbook and the versions of history they learn in other settings?

While classroom ethnography would certainly yield fruitful results, I first plan to delve deeper into the dynamics of the development and dissemination of alternative educational materials. As groups engaged in this work attend to more and more contentious historical periods, questions that continue to interest me include: how are conflict and controversy managed in project development and implementation? How are decisions reached within the regional networks of history teachers, professional historians and Western donors undertaking these projects? My future research will include in-depth interviews with a wide range of stakeholders and extensive participant observation across the multiple sites of history education reform.

RELEVANCE TO POLICY COMMUNITY

In this moment of crisis in Europe, there is great uncertainty about the place of the countries of the former Yugoslavia in the Europe of tomorrow. As one historian asked me rhetorically, “why don’t the countries of the region want to write the history of Yugoslavia? You don’t have an idea? Because all the countries are moving away from each other, but to where? Serbia still has one foot in Yugoslavia, a country that no longer exists. And where is the other foot?”

Serbia has for years been regarded as the prime regional exception to a successful postsocialist transition to democracy. While enduring an extended “transition” during which many have seen their standard of living sharply decline, the promise of a “return to Europe” has become synonymous with joining the European Union. Despite recent progress towards status as an EU candidate country, this prospect has long ago lost its sheen.

Although membership in the European Union has become popularly accepted as plausible, support for joining the union is at its lowest level since 2000. While there are certainly many reasons for declining support in Serbia for EU membership, chief among them is the perception that the EU is a club with an uncertain future. The ambivalence with which Serbs have met Europe in this context can be characterized as part “patriotism of despair” anchored in a sense of traumatic loss (Oushakine 2009), and part ironic obstinacy (Živković 2007).

US engagement thus remains crucial to bolstering civil society, reforming history education, and promoting sustainable peace in Serbia and across the Western Balkans. My research suggests that a productive policy agenda would: support deep reform of the educational system to move the curriculum to a skills-based approach; provide long-term support for alternative history education projects such as the Joint History Project; support civil society in efforts to develop stronger working relationships with governmental bodies; and support projects that encourage regional exchange and cooperation amongst both teachers and students.
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ENDNOTES
1 Photograph by Drew Adamek. Used with permission.

2 The regional meetings I attended were the first working sessions of the EUROCLIO project “History that Connects: How to teach sensitive and controversial history in the countries of former Yugoslavia”. The project brings together history teachers and historians from across the former Yugoslavia to develop alternative teaching materials focused on controversies from 1900-1945. This project builds on previous EUROCLIO-organized initiatives in the region (for more on the work of EUROCLIO, see www.euroclio.eu).

3 The flagship project of CDRSEE is the Joint History Project, begun in 1998 to foster democracy in southeast Europe through multiperspective history education. The main focus of the JHP has been the production of a series of workbooks that serve as supplemental classroom materials on contentious episodes in the region’s past. The four workbooks published to date focus on World War II, the Balkan Wars, the Ottoman Empire, and nations and states in southeast Europe (for more on the work of CDRSEE, see www.cdsee.org).

4 Photograph by Dana Johnson.
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