

Tracing (Dis)Continuities: Education Reforms in Socialist Yugoslavia and its Successor States

Dora Komnenović

Abstract:

Contrary to what the title might suggest, this volume offers a compelling analysis of the correlation between educational policies and the wider socio-political context they stem from and partially shape. By examining three 'critical junctures' from the (recent) past, i.e. the vocation-oriented education reform in socialist Yugoslavia, the introduction of religious and civic education in post-Milošević Serbia, and the establishment of 'ethnic' universities in post-conflict Sandžak, Kosovo, and Macedonia, Bacevic argues that some educational policies reproduced or even exacerbated existing divisions. This contributed to the creation of certain subjectivities and group identities.

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Dora Komnenović

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Education policies are never solely about education and they inform the future as much as the present. It is with these apparently simple, yet often forgotten considerations that the author approaches education reforms in (post-)Yugoslavia and challenges the well established 'education gospel' according to which all kinds of issues can be solved through schooling. Education is often invoked as a universal remedy that can prevent conflicts, improve social mobility and enhance post-conflict development. However, former Yugoslavia and its successor states clearly contradict these assumptions: a country with considerable percentages of highly-educated people descended into war and gave life to divided societies where increasing social inequality seems to be the norm. Consequently, "the crux of this book is concerned with how education policies – intentionally or not – interact with political processes and thus contribute to the imagining of political subjectivities" (p. 18). In order to answer this and other questions, Bacevic resorts to an analysis of the implicit and explicit dimensions of policies that can sometimes seem irrational or paradoxical. By doing so, she defies simplistic explanations that interpret education either as an antidote to or the main cause and perpetuator of exclusivist discourses conducive to bigotry and war.

The book scrutinizes three "critical junctures" in (post-)Yugoslav history and three different levels of education: the introduction of vocational-oriented secondary education (VOE) in the 1970s and 1980s in socialist Yugoslavia; the introduction of religious and civic education in post-Milošević elementary schools; and the creation of 'ethnic' universities in Serbia (Sandžak), Kosovo, and Macedonia. With these three examples, the author describes the changes in the political context (from a one-party system to "post-liberal governance"), i.e. policy environment and policy focus (from class to identity).

A 'product' of the 1970s wave of reforms, initiated after the 1968-1971 unrests, the VOE reform did not achieve much: besides being bureaucratically onerous, it did not diminish unemployment or ameliorate the functional integration of education and labour industries. Aimed at eradicating class divisions and increasing the social valorization of manual over intellectual work, it actually cemented the existing divisions. Bacevic in fact argues that the most important (and, very likely, unintended) consequence of the reform was that it fixed once and

for all the same principle embodied in the 1974 Constitution: the 'containment' of social and political life within the constituent units of the federation" (p. 75). Moreover, "Its anti-intellectualism provided the ideal setting for the conservative 'backlash' during the break-up of Yugoslavia" (p. 77).

On the other hand, the reintroduction (for the first time after 1952) of religious (and civic) education in post-Milošević Serbia is, according to the author, an evident example of pragmatism in politics. With the introduction of religious education into schools, the new government was hoping to acknowledge the support of the Orthodox Church in the opposition to Milošević and to minimize the reactions to potentially more demanding tasks on their agenda such as the extradition of the war-time leader to the Hague. Furthermore, the measure also had a symbolic meaning, i.e. the reconnection with the pre-WWII Kingdom of Yugoslavia, thus distancing the country from the legacy of the two previous regimes. The introduction of an "alternative subject" sanctioned the division between two Serbias: First (traditionalist and religious) and Second (civic and progressive), which was seen as natural, coherent and long-lasting. While the VOE reforms were addressing the sources of class conflict and advocating change, the introduction of religious and civic education promoted rights based on a historical belonging to a particular tradition or group. In this way, "class becomes conflated with identity" (p. 123).

The developments in the post-conflict areas of Sanžak, Kosovo, and Macedonia were characterized by a larger presence and involvement of international actors in education, but not without the mediation of local players. This interplay between international and local (f)actors created "hybrid political arrangements" (p. 189), such as the so-called 'ethnic' universities in the analyzed countries. Education policies in these instances were driven by identity, state and nation-building considerations more than any other. According to Bacevic, this represents the last phase of transformation from class-based to identity-based policies.

As the above-mentioned examples show, the author presents her arguments in a clear and coherent way: she convincingly argues education is neither emancipatory nor reproductive. Her nuanced explanations transcend the frequently cited uni-dimensional accounts on the break-up of Yugoslavia, the subsequent transformation of education policies in the region, and the often preached "Europeanization-cum-communist-legacy construct". Education does not merely suffer the consequences of a conflict, but also shapes and creates them. In order to be truly transformative, the author concludes, education policies after Yugoslavia call for a critical self-reflection and a "utopian imagination".

The selection of case studies is well founded and thoroughly explained. However there are limited references to the war period, as the author explains, because "during the worst of conflicts in the 1990s formal state policy in the domain of education hardly existed" (p.21). Nevertheless, even limited references to the revocation of the VOE reform in most successor states in this period would make a meaningful addendum to such an analysis. In sum, this volume is a valuable and refreshing contribution to the study of education policies in former

Yugoslavia and the correlations between conflict and education in general; an inspiring piece of writing crucial for anyone interested in the region and/or the topic at large.