

## EDUCATION AS A PATH TO CULTURAL COHESION (HISTORICAL ASPECTS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BULGARIAN DIASPORA IN THE BALKANS)

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### Abstract

It is well known that the Balkans were defined in the 20th century as the powder keg of Europe and the related idea that it was from the peninsula that all troubles and wars for the continent originated. And as paradoxical as it is, this thinking about the Balkans still exists today, but - and this is symptomatic - it also characterises the Balkan peoples' understanding of themselves, but also of their neighbours. Balkan history and culture is indicative of cultural diversity, of the birth and development of separate civilizations: Ancient, Christian, Muslim, of the discovery of approaches for rapprochement and coexistence. The geographical space of the Balkans preserves cultural memories of different times and displacements. In fact, the neighbour of the Balkans remains in the category of "Other", regardless of civilisational, values, cultural similarities and intertwinings. The educational system also does not offer sustainable knowledge on the cultural identity of the neighbour, nor are approaches sought to make the cultural heritage created by the neighbour an object of study for a larger group of Balkan peoples. And in relation to this, of historically formed ethnic groups such as the Bulgarian diaspora. The study of the Bulgarian diaspora, its inclusion in the educational paradigms, it turns out, can be used as an example of expanding knowledge both about oneself and about the other, about the neighbor. Through education and particular organizational and institutional forms, cultural interweavings across eras, productive patterns of dialogue and identity preservation can be highlighted. Because, through education, on the one hand, the tribal identity, the memory of the I and the We of the Bulgarian, but also of any other diaspora, is preserved and developed, and on the other hand, the consciousness of belonging to the host country is enriched. The education of the Bulgarian diaspora in the Balkans includes not only the examination of the different forms - normative regulations, types of schools, but also the clarification of historical aspects related to the cultural mechanisms of existence of the Bulgarian diaspora in the Balkans.

**Keywords:** *Bulgarian diaspora, the Balkans, education, identity, cultural memories.*

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### 1. Introduction

The Balkans have been famously described as the powder keg of Europe. The notion that wars and social disorder emanate from the peninsula, as is well known, has its historical reasons. In the 19th century, the Balkans became a space of clash for the Great Powers, who used the unfolding national liberation movements, the natural urge for freedom of the Balkan Christian peoples, to settle their interests. In fact, this external interference is one of the reasons for the distrust between the Balkan peoples themselves, due to the toleration of one at the expense of the other. The great Balkan writer and Nobel laureate Ivo Andric has brilliantly revealed these processes of the temporary Balkan orientation towards foreigners in his classic novel, *The Travniska Chronicle*.

On the other hand, since the late 19th century, works set in a country in the Balkans, as Vesna Goldsworthy (Goldsworthy, 2004) points out, have been mass-produced in Western Europe (Britain). The emphasis in these novels falls on the representation of the Balkans as a place of chaos, senseless confrontations and savage manners. The analysis shows that even today, there are examples of such a reception of the Balkans. However, such thinking about the Balkans characterizes to a certain extent the understanding of the Balkan peoples especially about their neighbours, their manners, culture and way of life. These perceptions are also formed as a result of the centuries-long development of the formation of the Balkan states and the shifting of their borders (Kolev, 2022). During the Middle Ages (until the Ottoman

Empire in the 14th century), the main actors here in the Balkans were Byzantium, Bulgaria and Serbia, i.e., three Christian states, which were in constant war and conflict during this period. At the same time, the internal situation in the states themselves was extremely unstable due to the power ambitions of individual feudal lords. Subsequent generations of scribes and historians would repeatedly highlight these conflicts and strife as the main reason why the Christian states were conquered by the Ottomans.

In the late 19th century, as a result of Russia's victory over the Ottoman Empire, the free Christian Balkan states were born. Among them was Bulgaria, which set out on the path of the free nation-state on March 3, 1878, after five hundred years of Ottoman rule. (Stanimirov, 2022)

## **2. Aspects of the historical development of the Bulgarian diaspora in the Balkans**

The geographical space of the Balkans preserves cultural memories of times of turbulent state rise and respectable aesthetic achievements. Bulgaria, for example, in the Middle Ages (7th-14th centuries) included within its borders a number of Balkan areas populated by Bulgarian inhabitants. These areas were subjugated by the Ottoman Empire in the 14th century, but the populations there retained the memory of their ethnic origins. It is significant that in these areas the Bulgarian population created its own cultural heritage and cultural monuments.

The Bulgarian population in the period of the Ottoman Empire continued to live in the territories they had inhabited for centuries. As a result of an unsuccessful uprising against the Ottoman Empire in the 17th century, some of the Bulgarians from the North-Western region moved to the Austrian Empire, to the region of Banat - today Romania (Najdenova, 2012). Another part of the Bulgarian population, also in search of freedom outside the Ottoman Empire, emigrated in the first decades of the 19th century to southern Russia, the region of Bessarabia (today Moldova and Ukraine).

In the 19th century the capital of the Ottoman Empire, Istanbul, became an important educational and cultural centre for the enslaved peoples, including the Bulgarians. The leaders of the Bulgarian reform and cultural movements completed their education in reputable open colleges. In Istanbul, the foundations of a Bulgarian church were laid (the St. Stefan Church), and buildings with a Bulgarian character typical of the period were erected. Newspapers and books were published in the capital to serve the enlightenment of the Bulgarians (Velev, 2020).

From the middle of the 19th century, the cities of Brasov, Galatz, Bucharest in present-day southeastern Romania became the center of Bulgarian political emigration, which realized cultural tasks fundamental for the Bulgarian rise. In 1870, as a result of decades of struggle, the Bulgarians won the right to an independent church. The document issued by the High Gate established the Bulgarian Exarchate, which included those geographical territories in the then Ottoman Empire inhabited by Bulgarians. (Buzhashka, 2017)

In 1878, as a result of Russia's victory in the Russo-Turkish War, a peace treaty was signed in the town of San Stefano, as a result of which the free nation-state of Bulgaria was born. The charter for the establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate served as the basis for defining the borders of free Bulgaria. Only a few months later, in Berlin, the Great Powers reshaped this decision, significantly reducing the territory of Bulgaria and leaving behind its borders millions of Bulgarians. The following decades are indicative of the complicated fate of these Bulgarians: numerous uprisings, struggles, displacements, etc. An additional, fateful significance for the Bulgarians in the Balkans was the Treaty of Neuilly, according to which new lands settled by Bulgarians were detached from the territory of Bulgaria - the so-called Western suburbs. As a result of these processes, some of the Bulgarians in the Balkans emigrated to free Bulgaria, others remained residents of neighbouring Balkan countries. (Dobrev, 2022a)

The formation of the Bulgarian diaspora is the result of a long historical process. From this point of view, it is accepted in science to divide the Bulgarian diaspora into two large groups: historical and contemporary. The historical diaspora was formed mostly in the Balkans. This includes the Bulgarian communities in today's countries: the Republic of Albania (Golo Brdo, Mala Prespa, Gora), the Hellenic Republic (Aegean Macedonia and White Sea Thrace), the Republic of Kosovo (Gora and Župa), the Republic of Romania (Banat, Wallachia and Northern Dobrudja), the Republic of Northern Macedonia, the Republic of Serbia (Bosilegrad, Tsaribrodsko, Pomoraveto) and the Republic of Turkey (Eastern Thrace), as well as smaller groups in the Republic of Croatia, the Republic of Montenegro and the Republic of Slovenia (Eldarov, 2022).

### 3. Education in the Bulgarian diaspora in the Balkans as a way to preserve identity

Today, the Bulgarian diaspora in the Balkans participates in the cultural life of their countries of residence - Bulgarian children study in local schools, complete the stages of secondary and higher education. In Romania, Serbia and Albania Bulgarians have a recognised status of national minorities, while other Balkan countries - Greece, North Macedonia, Turkey and Kosovo - do not recognise the Bulgarian community. These situations are a prerequisite for new problems and obstacles for the Bulgarian diaspora related to approaches to preserve and develop Bulgarian identity. The attitude of the central government towards diaspora issues, forms of discrimination and persecution is also not without significance.

In this case, something else should be pointed out. The prevailing notion of the neighbour in the Balkans. On the one hand, the neighbour carries the meaning of a close person. But in the Balkans, precisely because of this disregard for the rights of some of the historically formed ethnic groups, such as the Bulgarians, the image of the neighbour is placed in the content of the category of the Other, regardless of civilizational, values, cultural similarities and intertwining. The educational system does not offer sustainable knowledge on the cultural identity of the neighbour, nor does it look for approaches to study the cultural heritage created by the neighbour on the territory of the respective Balkan country as an example of cultural cohesion. (Dobrev, 2022b).

One of the possible approaches undertaken at the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies (ULSIT) is the research, collection and synthesis of facts and documents related to the life of the Bulgarians in the Balkans. In disciplines such as "History of the Balkans", "Cultural Interactions in the Balkans", along with the emphasis on one's own national history, there is also a focus on the cultural specificity of today's Balkan countries where Bulgarians live. As a result of a research project, a digital map has been produced, which integrates historical facts that are crucial for the Balkan countries, highlighting the most characteristic of their political history and existence. In this way, students acquire knowledge about the civilizational patterns of the Balkans, about cultural convergences and intertwining, about differences, but also about the search for cultural bridges.

The Academic Workshop has been functioning within the University for several years. Here the students' humanities training is complemented by expanding their knowledge and competences in history and literature, especially about the cultural circumstances of the Balkans. The Academic Workshop promotes research on various aspects of the artistic and creative worlds of Southeastern Europe, as an integral part of *the cultural and educational policy of the power executive organizational structures*. (Velev & Nusheva, 2019)

The Centre for the Study of Bulgarians Abroad was established at ULSIT by a decision of the Academic Council. In this line facts and phenomena from the history of the Balkan countries are collected and analyzed. It also collects data on the cultural heritage created over millennia by the representatives of the Bulgarian diaspora, today part of neighbouring territories of Bulgaria. It includes Orthodox churches from the Middle Ages erected by Bulgarian rulers and painted by Bulgarian artists; cultural topoi identified through a variety of materials and literary sources as directly related to the development of Bulgarian culture as part of Christian civilization in the Balkans; building stock from the 19th century period, etc. The very discussion of this variety of cultural monuments - tangible and intangible - turns out to be an occasion to study in detail the culture and history of the Balkan countries, and through lectures and seminars the students discover the common places, interweavings and convergences between the neighbouring nearby cultures. As V. Velev points out, the issue of overcoming the differences between the different communities - ethnic and religious, with the affirmation of the understanding *that the individual ethnicity is the bearer of a different and specific culture of its own kind is relevant for the modern stage. It is also dictated by its religious affiliation, which it defends over time and develops regardless of its place of residence* (Velev, 2016).

Important for the development of the educational system, as the examples of the Bulgarian diaspora show, are the activities developed by Bulgarian cultural societies abroad. One of their results is that in the early 1990s a new normative system was developed in Bulgaria to legitimise contacts with Bulgarians abroad. First of all, the Law on Bulgarians Living Outside Bulgaria was adopted. It established the normative process of contact and communication between the diaspora and official state institutions. At the request of the diaspora, the Bulgarian state assists with textbooks, teaching aids, specific Bulgarian cultural signs, the study of the Bulgarian language, Bulgarian literature, Bulgarian history and Bulgarian geography. Bulgaria may also send relevant specialist teachers to assist.

From the same period (the 1990s), two decrees were developed, aimed at the Bulgarian diaspora. Decree No. 103 covers both groups of Bulgarian communities - the historical and the contemporary. The focus is mainly on the largest historical community - the Bessarabian Bulgarians. According to Decree No. 103, the Bulgarian State admits representatives of the Bulgarian diaspora as students according to certain procedures and conditions. Additionally, and by virtue of bilateral international agreements, Bulgaria sends teachers of the native language, literature, history and geography to Moldova, Ukraine, the Black Sea regions, Tavia, O. Crimea, etc. With the recent update of Decree No. 103, the opportunities for all representatives of Bulgarian communities abroad to apply to Bulgarian universities have been expanded.

Regulation No. 228 has been in force in the Bulgarian education system since 1997. It applies mainly to foreign citizens of Bulgarian origin in the Republic of North Macedonia, who are given opportunities to study in the Republic of Bulgaria in their chosen specialities. The statistics show that the graduates of the Bulgarian diaspora, especially under Decree No. 228, return to the neighbouring countries, i.e. to their country of origin.

On the other hand, through non-formal education, the Bulgarian state stimulates the development of Saturday-Sunday schools, where subjects related to the ancestral homeland are studied. They are organized on the initiative and with the active participation of representatives of the diaspora. Bulgaria's assistance consists mainly in sending up-to-date curricula and syllabuses. They are called Saturday-Sunday schools because the students' education is organized on the days that are not school days in the country of residence - Saturdays and Sundays. In fact, in these schools, the areas of cultural convergence, of contact between the types of identities - tribal (ethnic) and national (of the country of residence) - stand out. The emphasis is on the common, on the unifying principle, rather than on historical divisions and contradictions.

It has become a tradition for the Bulgarian diaspora in the Balkans to maintain their own cultural festivals. As everywhere, and in the examples of the Bulgarian diaspora, these celebrations are essential for the preservation of Bulgarian identity. Among these holidays are Bulgaria's state holidays - 3 March, Liberation Day; 24 May, the Day of the Holy Brothers Cyril and Methodius, of the Bulgarian alphabet, education and culture, and of Slavic literature; 6 September, Unification Day. But along with these days are celebrated, also with great solemnity, and typical for the community holidays. For example, in Adrianople and Lozengrad the Bulgarian Diaspora organizes the Days of Thrace, which bring together both representatives of the Diaspora and Bulgarians from Bulgaria. The Republic of North Macedonia and the Hellenic Republic also hold cultural festivals related to the Bulgarian holiday calendar. Unfortunately, these cultural events often remain closed within the Bulgarian community, mostly due to the political attitude of the successor state.

#### 4. Conclusion

In relation to the historical path of the Bulgarian diaspora, its formation in the Balkans, it is promising to achieve new knowledge about oneself (historical destiny and cultural memory), but - and this is especially important - about the neighbour, about cultural convergences and knowledge about common trends, common civilisation patterns and values through its study, its inclusion in educational paradigms. It is through education that tribal identity is preserved and developed. However, it also gives impetus to the positive development of a sense of national belonging to the country within which the diaspora lives.

In turn, the country of origin has the opportunity to integrate as an integral part of the educational paradigm - both in higher education, but also in individual secondary education lessons - the presentation of the historical and cultural profile of the diaspora. This can support further research into the factors that have contributed to the formation and current existence of Bulgarian communities abroad. Incorporating this knowledge about the Balkans into appropriate educational forms creates the preconditions for building bridges of understanding and active cultural dialogue.

#### *Acknowledgements*

Special thanks to the Scientific Research Fund of the Ministry of Education and Science of Bulgaria for the support of the research under the project "**Bulgarians in the Balkans beyond the border after 1878. The code of survival.**", contract № **KP-06-PN70/3** from 3.12.2022.

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