

Kosovo: History Revision Calls Sparks Anger

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International calls to tone down Albanian patriotic references in school texts has infuriated the authors of many of them.

Teenage student Gent Salihu's history book is at the centre of growing row. He knows the history taught at his Ismail Qemali primary school in Pristina is highly coloured, but now the involvement of the international community in the contents of his books is threatening to ignite a conflict.

"Our history books say Albanians are stronger and smarter than our neighbours, the ones who suffered most but were the biggest winners too," the 15-year-old said.

Salihu's history lessons are based on texts devised in the 1990s for the parallel semi-underground school system that Albanians set up to counter the Serbian-controlled state institutions.

After Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic scrapped Kosovo's autonomy in 1989, most Albanians abandoned the government-funded Serb schools and set up independent institutions that they paid for themselves.

The books have not altered much since 1999 when Serbia was forced to withdraw its forces from the province, which remains in a legal limbo under international custody.

But now the European Council wants the Albanian school texts to moderate their tone. In a recommendation to Kosovo's provincial government made through the European Union's Stabilisation and Association process, it asked for a review of the history curriculum by May 2004.

EU and UN representatives are calling for a more balanced history presented, which avoids offending any of Kosovo's minority communities.

In a letter to the ministry of education, Francesco Bastagli, deputy special representative to the UN secretary general, accused Kosovo's current history books of stirring ethnic hatred and of blocking the path to a multi-ethnic society.

Sven Lindholm, for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, said creating a history curriculum that was acceptable to all communities would help persuade Serbs to give up running a parallel school system in Kosovo.

The authors of the criticised books are furious. Fehmi Rexhepi, a political advisor at the ministry of education and a history author, said the EU or UN had not even clarified exactly what they objected to.

Rexhepi said the real reason for demanding changes was because the books referred to Albanian demands for an independent Kosovo, while UN resolutions treated Kosovo as a province of former Yugoslavia.

Jusuf Bajraktari, director of the Kosovo History Institute, said history books all over the world aimed to nourish feelings of patriotism and Kosovo's historians had merely done the same. "Writers of history cannot

avoid mentioning people simply because it puts them in a bad light," he said.

But some voices in the Albanian community agree that the school texts are problematic. One objection is that they tend to address only the history of the Albanian people rather than the history of Kosovo.

This goes against the grain of the rhetoric of Albanian leaders in Kosovo who say they want to build up a Kosovar identity that embraces all ethnic communities, Serbs included.

Enver Hasani, professor of International Law at University of Prishtina, said the school texts were unprofessional and were written with a communist mindset.

They were also far too reverential towards the largest party in the region, the Democratic League of Kosovo. "The LDK and its leader Ibrahim Rugova as well as the Kosova Liberation Army are referred to with too much praise and servility," Hasani said.

Though he conceded faults in them, Hasani added that the international community's idea of how history should be represented reminded him of the old communist approach, "They want books either not to talk of any war between Albanians and Serbs, which reminds me of the old slogan about 'brotherhood and unity', or they want it portrayed to show all parties were equally guilty."

Denisa Kostovicova, a research fellow at the London School of Economics, who has specialised in the Albanian parallel school system, said the textbooks were conceived as a tool to celebrate an Albanian national identity and to promote the Albanian cause in Kosovo.

"They portray only conflictual aspects in the long history of Serbian and Albanian co-existence in Kosovo," she said, "while extreme language is used uncritically."

"They say a genocide took place every few years. Genuine grievances and injustice suffered at Serb hands are thus discredited. They nourish an Albanian sense of grievance and martyrdom."

Kostovicova added that the Serb texts used in the part of northern Kosovo that the Serbs controlled were similar, portraying Albanians as villains and intruders intent on snatching Kosovo away from them.

The sensitivity of the history issue in Kosovo was highlighted at a recent UN press conference when spokesperson Isabelle Karlowitz caused fury by describing the 1999 bloodshed as an armed conflict, not a war.

Karlowitz was following an international legal definition of war as hostilities between states, and as Kosovo was not a state, she deemed the term armed conflict legally appropriate.

But local press and historians voiced outrage at what they saw as a clinical reference to events that involved the expulsion of half a million people and the deaths of 10,500, according to a report by the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Somewhat surprisingly, it was Kosovo's small Turkish community, not the Serbs, who brought the issue of the history textbooks to prominence.

In January, they lodged an objection to the inclusion of a picture that showed a medieval Albanian warrior-hero riding over an Ottoman Turkish flag.

Kosovo Turks objected to the picture and to the description of the Ottoman Empire's 500-year-long rule over this part of the Balkans as a crime.

Bajraktari retorted that the fact that Albanians rose at least 40 times against the Ottoman Empire gave the community's historians the right to describe this period in such a way.

In Kosovo's politically charged atmosphere, changes in history books, it seems, are always going to upset someone.

Some of those they most directly affect, however, take a fairly pragmatic view. "I am sceptical about the history lessons in our textbooks, but I learn them well so I can score an 'A'," said Gent Salihu. "That help my chances of getting into an international high school."

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Location: Balkans
Macedonia
Albania
Serbia

Focus: Balkans: Regional Reporting & Sustainable Training

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kosovo-history-revision-calls-sparks-anger>