

Mixed School Causes Rumpus

Author: [Nikola Lazic](#)

It sounds like a wonderful idea, but the vision of Albanian and Serb children studying under one roof has some people foaming at the mouth.

For a whole decade, during the Nineties, the yard of the secondary school in Bujanovac resounded to the thud of soldiers' boots rather than the cries of clamouring pupils.

After the town got an army garrison in 1992, which was accommodated in the premises of the Albanian-medium school, the pupils and teachers Mihajlo Pupin had to withdraw.

They moved several hundred metres away to classrooms in the neighbouring Naim Fraseri primary school, where they stayed in effective exile until 2002.

It was only after the July 2002 local elections, which Albanian parties won in Bujanovac for the first time, that matters improved with the help of the government's Coordination Centre for South Serbia and the federal and republican governments.

The military garrison moved to the nearby decrepit industrial facilities of the Kragujevac-based Zastava car manufacturer, while Albanian schoolchildren were allowed to return to their old classrooms.

"We encountered a real mess at school," a member of the teaching staff told IWPR. "The infrastructure was broken down, the school inventory had been smashed, while the schoolyard was overgrown with weeds and covered with dirt. Somehow we managed to get things moving."

Schools, like most other aspects of daily life in south Serbia, have never escaped the effects of the region's ethnic polarisation between Serbs and Albanians.

This antagonism reached a climax on November 21, 2000, when armed Albanians seized a part of the then buffer zone between Serbia and Kosovo in the municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja.

The conflict between the rebels and the security forces lasted until May 20, 2001, when the Statement on Demilitarisation was signed in the Bujanovac municipality village of Konculj by NATO representatives and rebel leaders.

The Albanians then disbanded and the democratisation process in the region led to local elections in which Albanian political parties won and formed Bujanovac's local government.

In the summer of 2003, after judging that inter-ethnic relations in Bujanovac had somewhat improved, a US government organisation, Community, Habitat and Finance, CHF, reached an agreement with the Serbian ministry of education and sports to build the town's first multi-ethnic school.

The chosen location was Mihajlo Pupin school.

But it soon became clear the idea would not come to pass so easily, thanks partly to events that occurred during the time when the army garrison first came to Bujanovac.

As the school building and schoolyard were not big enough for the army's needs, the then local authorities purchased neighbouring plots of land from private owners.

But the title to this property was never officially transferred, and 24 of the former owners have since turned to a representative on the town council, Trajko Trajkovic, alleging misuse of their former land.

They "do not want to allow the plots to be used for different purposes", according to Trajkovic, who says they sold the plots solely to help the army.

"Their motive for the sale was purely patriotic and the plots were given to the army as the most important stabilisation factor in the region," he explained.

The former plot owners dispute the right of Bujanovac's current town council to use the land for a multi-ethnic school, even though they have all been duly paid.

According to Nebojsa Stamenovic, head of Bujanovac's land registry, the municipality, as the buyer, officially settled accounts with each of the former owners individually, which can be verified by official records.

"The case is now under the jurisdiction of the Serbian Geodetic Bureau, to which the former owners submitted their complaints as the competent institution of second instance," said Stamenovic.

"But everything's absolutely clear in this case since they haven't ceded, but effectively sold, their plots, and there are, I repeat, valid proofs of this."

One of Trajkovic's objections to the construction of a multi-ethnic school is that he doubts Albanian and Serb pupils can even study under one roof.

The Albanian-led local government is "putting pressure on Serbs to move out of Bujanovac", he adds, and the multi-ethnic school forms part of the plan.

"The construction of the school will only serve Albanian pupils coming to the town, to a school that is to be built on Serb land," he said. "Such experiments have always been at the expense of Serb interests."

Trajkovic forwarded his complaints in the letter to several institutions and individuals in the country this summer, declaring that "the Albanian extremists' political objective is to reconquer this area".

Ilija Juric, head of finances at the Serbian ministry of education, said Trajkovic's appeal was unlikely to yield much result.

In the meantime, he added, objections would not slow down realisation of the project.

"A public competition for the design of the multi-ethnic school in Bujanovac has already been completed," he said. "The Serbian Architects Association has short-listed two proposals, one of which will ultimately be chosen."

Juric emphasised that the republics' Land Directorate, the official owner of the Mihajlo Pupin school building, had transferred the right to use the property from the military to the ministry of education.

"The school is now under the jurisdiction of our ministry, which is supportive of the whole idea," Juric concluded.

At CHF, which is one the initiators of the project, along with the US Agency for International Development, USAID, officials say their only aim is to meet the needs of the local government and citizens.

Zarko Sunderic, CHF's spokesman in Serbia, said they believed that the new school would benefit all young people in the Bujanovac area.

"The future school will offer a quality curriculum both for Serbs and Albanians," he said.

Sunderic told IWPR the new facility would accommodate about 1,000 pupils in a building of 2,500 - 3,000 square metres. There are plans to offer accommodation for students, in order to attract to Bujanovac young people from the whole of the region.

At the moment, about 1,300 pupils attend Bujanovac's two secondary schools, while the needs exceed the existing capacity, in Aliu's view, by 50 per cent.

The estimated price tag of the project, says Sunderic, is around 2 million euro. "All the necessary funds have not been raised yet, but we're hoping we'll receive assistance from many foreign non-governmental organisations, the Serbian government and local government," he said, adding that the preliminary design for the new school had been financed by CHF.

Nehat Aliu, head of social activities on Bujanovac local council, says the row over the land ownership is simply a pretext for efforts to "score political points".

The former plot owners, he says, are pressing wholly unfounded claims. "The state has fulfilled all its financial obligations to the former owners. As far as I know, not many people share Trajkovic's view," he said.

Aliu says Bujanovac desperately needs the planned school. "Our goal is to improve our co-existence here," he said. "Besides, we'd like to bring pupils from the whole of Serbia and Kosovo to this school. Children will choose which language to use for studies, and we won't impose anything on anyone," he said.

In the meantime, Serb and Albanian politicians are divided on the issue, with most Albanians supporting the project and most Serbs voicing reservations.

Fatmir Asani, local chairman in Bujanovac of the Party for Democratic Action, which now holds most seats

in the local assembly, told IWPR that the initiative would boost "the overall stability of the region and the rapprochement of the two peoples".

The remaining three Albanian political parties in south Serbia, the Party for Democratic Progress, PDP, the Albanian Democratic Party, DPA, and Democratic Union of the Valley, DUD, seem broadly to share that view.

Sevdail Hiseni, mayor of Bujanovac and a senior PDP official, said he "enthusiastically supported" the project. "Young people are the ones to begin establishing new relations between Albanians and Serbs," Hiseni said.

Serb politicians are less keen. Novica Manojlovic, deputy mayor of Bujanovac and a member of the Democratic Party, DS, said the project was "a good idea" - in theory - but "unfeasible in the next twenty years or so".

As for the local representatives of Serb nationalist parties, the Serbian Radical Party, SRS, and the Serbian Renewal Movement, SPO, comprising the "Survival Coalition" on Bujanovac council, they are still less enthusiastic.

One coalition official told IWPR that Trajkovic was correct to complain about an Albanian takeover. "The ultimate objective of this all is the Albanian occupation of Bujanovac," he said.

The politicians' views are reflected among local parents. Most Albanians IWPR talked to favoured multi-ethnic education, while most Serbs "were not against it" but they would prefer their children not to be part of the first generation at the new school.

Of course, there are exceptions. One Serb parent told IWPR he would be "delighted" to see Serbs and Albanians attend the same school. "It is the only way to bridge the gap of prejudices and misconceptions we have," he said.

Nor are all Albanians in favour of the idea. "For the time being, everything should stay as it is," one of the Albanian parents said.

The children in Bujanovac, whom the issue concerns most, echo their parents' divisions. Most of those questioned, among both ethnic groups, said they could not conceive of the possibility of multi-ethnic education.

A psychologist at an elementary school in Bujanovac said such behaviour was logical, as most of these children had grown up in "small, enclosed mono-ethnic environments", where the other ethnic group was usually mentioned in a negative context.

"Children of that age, including the older ones, have hardly even travelled to Belgrade, let alone gone abroad," she explained. "They haven't seen anything apart from the harsh reality in Bujanovac and have heard nothing except for stereotypical stories about each other."

She still had hope, however. "The most important thing is what a child brings from the home," she said. "I can always recognise children who have been raised well by their ideas on co-existence and tolerance."

Nikola Lazic is a journalist with the newspaper Novine Vranjske.

This article is part of a special issue produced by journalists from South Serbia who attended an intensive two-day workshop in Nis, organised by IWPR in October 2004, with financial support from the British Embassy in Belgrade.

The training session is a component of the Serbia Inter Ethnic Media Training Project which aims to bring together local Serbian and Albanian journalists.

The package of articles is intended to shed light on the specific problems of this much neglected region.

Location: [Africa](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/mixed-school-causes-rumpus>