

History and Society: Fact, Fiction and Reform in the Serbian Education System

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Abstract:

History instruction is a means of disseminating political and cultural “truth” in societies all over the world. History occupies only a small space in the educational schemes that socialize and politicize children to their societies, but it could be argued that it plays a disproportionate role in these processes. In societies with contentious historical records and/or histories of conflict, it is particularly important to examine the role that history instruction does in fact play, as it can have positive or disastrous consequences over the long term. Serbian society provides one example of the potential effects of incomplete, politically influenced historical education. To date, the state exercises a great deal of control over the curricula and textbooks in primary and secondary schools in Serbia, and continues to promote a nationalistic view of history, first inserted in texts and curricula during the 1990s conflict and Milošević’s regime. The Ministry launched a brief period of reform in 2000, which was halted and only recently restarted at a much slower pace. In the place of comprehensive institutional reform, several organizations have launched alternatives that attempt to deal with these issues. The Association for Social History - EUROCLIO, the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, the Council of Europe, and the Petnica Scientific Center, are each attacking the problem in their own ways, promoting teacher training, the creation of alternative materials, and/or alternative programs for interested, intelligent students. They are making headway, as the ministerial efforts proceed slowly.

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“Our identity and relations are primarily shaped by religion and history...history is usually a record of our achievements, or others’ great injustices’ towards us. It is essential to develop a positive awareness of every group within society. Ignoring them is only escapism...presenting them as the enemy tends towards hostility and self-destruction.”¹

Introduction:

Schools are the gateways to societies. They are, apart from parents, the primary instruments for the socialization and politicization of children. Schools produce citizens, and human beings with distinctive ideas of truth and normality. In fact, the educational authority selects knowledge, controls its meaning, and has the power to decide what will become socially legitimate.² As is the case elsewhere, politics are inexorably linked to everyday life in Serbia and one of the places they continually express themselves is in the textbooks and lessons of schoolchildren. Some might argue that the Serbian public school system reflects an era of politics that is in now in the past, with the government’s monopoly on information reflecting an autocratic rather than democratic society.³

The question of the relationship between the two institutions, politics and education, is particularly important in the Serbian nation. It is important both because of the ways in which history has been manipulated in the past, to disastrous ends, and for the implications historical interpretations have in the Serbia’s transition, and its process of “dealing with the past.” The concept of ‘dealing with the past’ refers to the process of

¹ Hanna Kassis, “Perceiving the Religious ‘Other’ in a Secular Educational Context,” in *Clio in the Balkans: The Politics of History Education*, ed. Christina Koulouri (Thessaloniki: Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, 2002), 373.

² Dijana Plut, “Socialization Patterns of Elementary School Textbooks,” in *Warfare, Patriotism, and Patriarchy*, ed. Ružica Rosandić and Vesna Pesić (Belgrade: Center for Anti-War Action, 1994), 13.

³ Dubravka Stojanović, press conference given by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, attended by author, written notes, Belgrade, Nov. 30, 2005.

accepting the roles that were played in the past as well as their consequences.⁴ The process needs to occur, and is in the process of occurring on a number of different levels in Serbia. The educational system represents just one piece of society that needs to reflect acceptance of past events.

Rather than helping society to heal itself through an honest reflection of Serbia's role throughout history, textbooks and curricula presently reinforce a nationalistic view of history. This is very unfortunate, since the perspectives reinforced by schools are the same ones that gathered support for Slobodan Milošević's campaigns in the 1990s. The rhetoric currently contained in textbooks was originally placed there by intellectual Milošević supporters, who were given access to the educational system and mass media as tools to fuel his propaganda campaign.⁵ Now their assertions linger, breeding negative ideas towards neighboring countries and patriotic feelings for the Serbian nation.

During the 1990s, the horrors of World War II in this region were heavily drawn upon, with media and textbooks inflating the number of Serbs killed at the Ustaše concentration camp Jasenovac, and omitting the atrocities committed on the Serbian side. This was done in order to argue that the 1990s conflict with Croatia was inevitable.⁶ A third and fourth grade history text even went so far as to say that in "comparing the events of the 1941-1945 war with the events of 1991-1995 in the same areas, one must conclude that the actors, crimes and agitators are the same."⁷ In 1994, an analysis of texts claimed

⁴ *Dealing with the Past in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia and Montenegro: Regional Synthesis Report* (Belgrade: Quaker Peace and Social Witness, 2003) 2.

⁵ Lenard J. Cohen, *Serpent in the Bosom: The Rise and Fall of Slobodan Milošević* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002), 149.

⁶ Radina Vučetić-Mladenović, "Textbooks and the Teaching of Twentieth Century History in Serbia Since 1989," in *After the Wall: History Teaching in Europe Since 1989*, ed. Martin Roberts (Hamburg: Körber-Stiftung, 2004), 154.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

that there was “a systematic intention of schools and textbook authors” to create readiness for war.⁸ These sentiments are still present in the history texts of Serbian schoolchildren, and are now accompanied by an account of the Četnik movement which praises the soldiers as defenders of the Serbs against the evils of fascism.^{9 10} This is a disturbing trend which will hinder the transition of the Serbian state.

It has often been argued that the failure on the part of the Yugoslav state to deal with the legacy of World War II in any meaningful way actually created mistrust and became a factor in the recent conflicts.¹¹ Logically then, it is important this time around that society learns from that very costly mistake and undergoes a sober, thorough analysis of what their roles throughout history have been, utilizing multiple sources containing multiple perspectives, to arrive at a healthier approach to history. The destruction of these nationalistic master narratives will facilitate social change in the direction of a democratic society.¹²

⁸ Vesna Pesić, “Bellicose Virtues in Elementary School Readers,” in *Warfare, Patriotism, and Patriarchy*, ed. Ružica Rosandić and Vesna Pesić (Belgrade: Center for Anti-War Action, 1994), 64.

⁹ Jelena Popović, secondary school teacher, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23, 2005.

¹⁰ The Četniks were a militant organization of Serbian nationalists during World War II. They fought against the fascist regimes of the era, as well as against the Partisans, the group under Joseph Broz Tito’s command. The Četniks, as well as the Croatian Ustaše, who were active at the same time, were reportedly very brutal in their treatment of members of the opposite ethnic group. They were condemned as violent nationalists during the period of S.F.R.Y., in deference to the Partisans and their “brotherhood and unity,” but have now reappeared in school textbooks as heroes of the Serbian nation. The role that they played continues to be a source of contention amongst Serbian scholars and historiographers.

¹¹ *Dealing with the Past in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia and Montenegro: Regional Synthesis Report* (Belgrade: Quaker Peace and Social Witness, 2003) 1.

Purpose:

In this paper, in the above described context, I explore the current status of the Serbian education system and current and past attempts to reform it. Specifically, I examine the structure and function of the present system, the ongoing efforts to reform it, and alternatives to comprehensive institutional reform, in an attempt to understand what role they play in Serbian society.

Methodology:

My investigation began with an interest in the ongoing process in Serbia of so called “dealing with the past,” and the role that education reform might play in that process. As my investigation progressed however, I began to also frame it in the context of socialization and politicization of students through education. The following study is severely limited by several factors, including the short time frame in which it was completed, and the lack of knowledge I possessed at its outset.

Originally, my goals were to gather a basic understanding of the existing education system and the proposed and ongoing efforts to reform it. I wanted to investigate these topics through secondary sources, and interviews with teachers, reform oriented non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the Serbian Ministry of Education and Sport. In addition, I hoped to gather the perspective of other NGOs who were

¹² Hanna Schissler, “Beyond National Narratives: The Role of the Textbook,” in *Teaching the History of*

working on the issue of dealing with the past, on how they thought education reform fit into their wider goals.

I began by speaking with my mentor, Radina Vučetić, and gathering the names of people in Belgrade who might assist me in my work. Through her, I was able to get in touch with, and eventually interview three history teachers who are employed in the Belgrade school system. One was a primary school teacher, one a secondary school teacher, and one dabbled in both. In addition, all three served a double purpose in my study, having been involved with reform efforts with the Association for Social History - EUROCLIO, The Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE), or the Ministry of Education. All three then, were able to offer me information from more than one perspective. Fortunately or unfortunately however, all three had a fairly progressive mindset with regard to education reform and none of the three were able to help me access any of their more conservative colleagues.

After my initial interviews with the three of them however, I was able to visit a primary school in New Belgrade, where one of the teachers, Vesna Dimitrijević, taught. There I was able to observe the classroom environment and meet some of her students. I also had the opportunity, through Jelena Popović, to interview three high school boys from the Fifth Belgrade High School on their perspectives of their experience learning history in school.

In a very fortunate turn of events, the Serbian-language translations of four supplementary workbooks which were produced by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE), were released during my stay in Belgrade. They were officially introduced at a press conference given at the Hyatt

Regency Hotel Beograd, in New Belgrade on November 30, 2005. I was present at this press conference, as were representatives of CDRSEE, including the chairwoman of the textbook committee, Christina Koulouri, Dubravka Stojanović, an author, professor, and local authority on the subject, as well as the Minister of Education. This was a wonderful opportunity as it allowed me to gather the perspectives of all of these people, even without being able to obtain interviews with them personally.

In addition, I was able to secure an interview with Dr. Drago Roksanđić, a professor of history at the University of Zagreb, who is involved with an organization called the Scholars' Initiative. The Scholar's Initiative is an international effort, concentrated in Serbia, to compile regional accounts of controversial events in Balkan history. The interview was at the tail end of the independent study period, but never the less provided me with interesting information. As it turns out, however, the Scholars' Initiative is more pertinent for my personal interests than it is to the purpose of this report.

The other interviews I conducted were with representatives of NGOs in Belgrade, including Aleksandar Rafailović, of the Petnica Scientific Center, and Ružica Rosanđić of the Center for Anti-War Action. The Petnica Center is a unique place, providing supplemental instruction in history to area gifted students. The center's approach includes a focus on research methods and analysis, which is lacking in the public school system. Mr. Rafailović was able to give me a bit of insight into the necessity of reform, as well as the advantage of supplementary materials and classes that are independent of the public education system. Ms. Rosanđić, the coeditor of a volume on textbook analysis, was able to offer me her expertise on the subject, as well as an NGO perspective

on where education fit into the broader context of dealing with the past. I was also able to utilize the remarks of Radovan Kupres of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, made in an interview early in the semester, for commentary on this subject. Unfortunately I was unable to secure an interview with a representative of the Ministry; my phone calls and emails went unanswered, and so for their view I relied on secondary sources and the public statements of the Minister at the November 30th press conference.

These interviews, limited classroom observation, and extensive reading of secondary source material provided the information for the study that follows. The scope of my finding is however, very limited, due to the small number of interviews I conducted, and the wide-range of opinions on this subject. This is the best synopsis of the situation I can offer, given my time and resource constraints.

Findings:

The State of the Education System Today:

History in the Serbian education system is very structured, thorough, and content heavy. Students first receive historical instruction in the fifth year of primary school and finish in their third or fourth year of secondary school. They receive instruction a maximum of two times per week in primary school, in forty-five minute blocks, and two or three times a week in secondary school, for two, three, or four years, depending on their course of study^{13, 14}. Though this seems like a relatively small amount of instruction

¹³ There are two different types of secondary schools in Serbia. The first, gimnasia, has a general education curricula in which students concentrate either in math and science or the humanities. The second option are vocational schools. These are available in fields ranging from medicine to law to economics as well as many others.

from a U.S. perspective, history actually occupies a fairly high-rank in the totem of fourteen subjects that students are occupied with each week.¹⁵

The content of classes varies by year, with antiquity being taught in the fifth year of primary school and the first year of secondary school, and the middle ages being taught in the sixth year and second year of primary and secondary school respectively. The fifteenth through nineteenth centuries are taught in the seventh and third year of study, and the mid-nineteenth through the end of the twentieth century in the eighth and forth.¹⁶ History is taught almost exclusively through lectures, during which teachers rely primarily on information that is contained in the students' text. The students are then required to commit the material to memory, in preparation for exams and/or interrogations, which determine their marks. Interrogations consist of a series of questions posed to a student by their teacher, which they must then answer either orally or on paper. There is little to no discussion in the classroom, and alternative assignments are seldom given.¹⁷ Jelena Popović a, a secondary school teacher at the Fifth Belgrade High School, described the system as one in which teachers lecture, the students listen or pretend to listen, go home, learn the material they've been presented with, and come back to school to reproduce it ten days later for a mark. It is not what she considers an adequate system for learning what history is really about.¹⁸ Dubravka Stojanović compared learning history in Serbian schools with memorizing an address book.¹⁹

¹⁴ Jelena Popović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23 2005.

¹⁵ Emina Dautović, primary and secondary school teacher, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23 2005.

¹⁶ Christina Koulouri ed., *Clio in the Balkans: The Politics of History Education* (Thessaloniki: Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, 2002) 4.

¹⁷ A fourth year student at a Belgrade secondary school, audio recording, Belgrade, Dec. 2 2005.

¹⁸ Jelena Popović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23 2005.

¹⁹ Press Conference given by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, attended by author, written notes, Belgrade, Nov. 30, 2005.

The text with which students are provided, is developed and published under the supervision of the Serbian Ministry of Education and Sport. The ministry has an unofficial monopoly on textbook production, working closely with one publishing house, and has not, up until now allowed free import and export of texts. One book is developed and printed for each year of study. The texts divide the content related to Serbian or National History, from that which would fall under the category of World History. There is a very small component of regional history included in the texts. A study analyzing the content of Serbian textbooks that was completed in the 1990s claims that in the sixth grade, forty-seven pages of text are devoted to world history while 161 pages are devoted to Serbian history, in the seventh grade the ratio is forty pages to 156, and in the eighth grade, it is forty-four pages to 160.²⁰ The number for sixth grade may differ slightly now, since the content of the books for the fifth and sixth grade has, since the study, been reformed and integrated.²¹ The content of secondary school textbooks contains an even greater imbalance, covering the post World War II period, including the re-alignment movement in six pages, and fifteenth through eighteenth century European history in only sixteen. National history is said to account from more than 73% of the content of secondary school texts.²²

The textbooks follow a common model. They “tell stories of greatness about their own state, they tell of political and statehood continuity and emphasize

²⁰ Dubravka Stojanović, “History Textbooks Mirror their Time,” in *Warfare, Patriotism, and Patriarchy*, ed. Ružica Rosandić and Vesna Pesić (Belgrade: Center for Anti-War Action, 1994), 84.

²¹ Emina Dautović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23 2005.

²² Dubravka Stojanović, “History Textbooks Mirror their Time,” in *Warfare, Patriotism, and Patriarchy*, ed. Ružica Rosandić and Vesna Pesić (Belgrade: Center for Anti-War Action, 1994), 87.

victimization, territorial loss, and treat expansion of their borders as common sense.”²³

The heavy emphasis on national history diminishes the space devoted to outsiders, often reducing their discussion to conflict situations or to “short stupid adjectival phrases that are isolated and make the construction of stereotypes relatively easy.”²⁴

The texts are also guilty, according both to studies done, and a local teacher, of taking true facts wildly out of context. Emina Dautović, a primary and secondary school teacher in Belgrade claims that many students “think Serbia is a very big and very influential country.” She blames this at least partially on the ethnocentric view that the textbooks take, as well as on the lack of detail included about world history. She claims that it leads to students not possessing a “really clear view of our part in world history or world politics.”²⁵ An example is provided by this segment taken from the ministry approved third grade text, describing the end of the First World War: “After Bulgaria, Austria-Hungary, and Germany also laid down their weapons before the Serbian army advancing from Salonika and World War I ended in 1918. Maybe it is just very poorly written, but this example could easily lead children to think that the crux of World War I was a conflict between the aforementioned states, and that the global conflict ended due to the “Serbian victory after the breakthrough at Salonika.”²⁶

In addition to the publication of approved textbooks, the ministry’s other primary role in educational development lies in the creation of curricula. There is actually a separate body in existence, call the Institute for Development who determines the

²³ Snježana Koren, “Yugoslavia: A Look in the Broken Mirror. Who is the Other?,” in *Clio in the Balkans: The Politics of History Education*, ed. Christina Koulouri (Thessaloniki: Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, 2002), 199.

²⁴ Ružica Rosandić, “Patriotic Education,” in *Warfare, Patriotism, and Patriarchy*, ed. Ružica Rosandić and Vesna Pesić (Belgrade: Center for Anti-War Action, 1994), 57.

²⁵ Emina Dautović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23 2005.

curriculum for a given year, but they work in association with the Ministry of Education. There is some involvement on the part of people outside of these bodies however, because the Institute works out perceived problems in the curriculum with a team that consists of a few teachers, as well as academics from local institutes and the University. The program that finally results from this process becomes official once it is published in “Službeni glasnik,” a government publication where new bills and laws are printed,²⁷ and from September 1st of the following year onwards, it must be implemented.²⁸ The consensus amongst teachers seems to be that it is mandated that they abide by whatever program is developed for seventy to eighty percent of their instruction, while they may improvise as they see fit for the remaining twenty to thirty. Several of them voiced their opinion however, that in practice, they have even more freedom in what and how they teach.²⁹

There is little to no administrative oversight within the schools themselves, however, the Ministry of Education does employ a representative who is directly responsible for checking up on teachers. Emina described the official as “overbooked,” and claims that in her experience, even when he does come to observe, he is more interested in the teaching ability of the instructor, rather than the content of the history they are teaching.³⁰ Another local teacher, Jelena claimed that in her experience, the inspector seldom bothered to observe at all. Instead he just inspected her planbook, and if everything was in order, he would be on his way. In this way, she said, teachers have

²⁶ Dubravka Stojanović, “History Textbooks Mirror their Time,” in *Warfare, Patriotism, and Patriarchy*, ed. Ružica Rosandić and Vesna Pesić (Belgrade: Center for Anti-War Action, 1994), 87

²⁷ Vesna Dimitrijević, primary school teacher, interviewed by author, email correspondence and note taking, Belgrade, Dec. 1 2005; and Emina Dautović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23 2005.

²⁸ Press Conference given by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, written notes, Belgrade, Nov. 30, 2005.

the freedom to do what they wish, provided that they write down what they are supposed to write down. She claimed, “no one actually controls you in the classroom.”³¹ Vesna Dimitrijević commented on the fact that this is the first period in her teaching career, apart from the time when “it was very difficult to live here,” where she has not felt some ideological pressure from above. Vesna said that there are no restrictions on 1st through 4th grade teachers, nor on university professors, it is only 5th through 8th grade primary school teachers, as well as secondary school teachers who are subject to them. She said, even in these cases however, there is very little control, so once teachers are informed they can implement alternative teaching methods as they see fit. The problem then is the lack of information provided to the average teacher, as they then do not know what is expected of them. Vesna said that since she was involved with some of the Association for Social History - EUROCLIO organizing, she is aware, and this is an advantage. She said that she teaches how and what she feels is necessary, and that she is not afraid to do so. In addition, although supplementary materials are becoming available, they are not really accessible, since teachers will be required to buy them on their own and do not have adequate access to facilities to reproduce materials, etc. She claimed that apart from finances, the only obstacle to teacher’s formulating their own lessons is the possibility of irritating some parents or students with what they might think of as a bad interpretation of a particular theme or event. She has personally yet to experience such a scenario, however she worries about it sometimes, as other teachers have.³²

²⁹ Vesna Dimitrijević, interviewed by author, email correspondence and note taking, Belgrade, Dec. 1, 2005;

³⁰ Emina Dautović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23, 2005.

³¹ Jelena Popović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23, 2005.

³² Vesna Dimitrijević, interviewed by author, email correspondence and written notes, Belgrade, Dec. 1, 2005.

Jelena had just such an experience during her first year of teaching secondary school history in Belgrade. She was teaching a unit on everyday life in the second Yugoslavia, trying to draw out some of the positive themes, and emphasizing the connections between the peoples of the Former Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia. She also discussed the possibility of the former republics sharing some sort of common future. She went into the class with an idea of how she thought she should teach the subject, feeling confident in her knowledge and assertions about the country and the period she grew up in, but in her words, she neglected to take into account that “there were 80% of refugees among students,” almost all of them having immigrated (presumably by force) to Serbia from Croatia during the 1990s. She said, “their reaction was so emotional, they came with different experiences and they came with things they had heard from their parents and older generations. So I failed completely, it didn’t work.” She said that they were simply unable to rationalize or rectify the lesson with their experiences, they were simply “too emotional about everything.”³³ Jelena no longer teaches that lesson emphasizing the positive aspects of the S.F.R.Y., and to a large extent it is not taught at all. This underlies an issue facing the educational system Serbia today. The question of the treatment of recent history in school sanctioned accounts.

History texts were severely overhauled for the first time in recent years in 1992. The books abandoned their communist era rhetoric of “brotherhood and unity” and shifted gears, now presenting nothing less than nationalistic rhetoric as historical fact. The publicly stated reason for the overhaul, was that a “deideologization” was necessary,

³³ Jelena Popović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23, 2005.

or a removal of the Marxist approach.³⁴ This was not however the only reason, the texts were in fact to become one mechanism aiming to re-socialize the Serbian population to “the ‘cult of the past’ or the ‘cult of the ethno-nation.’”³⁵ In them, the Serbian state is depicted as “eternally righteous,” and accounts are manipulated to serve that end. Any morally questionable acts are dismissed or blamed on the “other.”³⁶ The goal of the reform was not a factual account, but rather a “contribution to the national goals.”³⁷

There have been some changes to the texts in the last ten years, but they still, for the most part, present events as “black and white,” dismissing social, cultural, and gender history, while looking upon the most painful periods, like the wars of the 1990s, without any real reflection on Serbia’s role in the course of events.³⁸ The books are full of language that propagate stereotypes and denigrates neighboring people through the use of derogatory terminology.³⁹

In addition, the focus on national history excludes even the most notable events of European and World history in the latter half of the twentieth century. The topics most commonly covered in other European countries include “the Cold War, the European Union, ‘glasnost’ and ‘perestroika’,” the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the transition

³⁴ Snježana Koren, “Yugoslavia: A Look in the Broken Mirror. Who is the Other?,” in *Clio in the Balkans: The Politics of History Education*, ed. Christina Koulouri (Thessaloniki: Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, 2002), 199.

³⁵ Lenard J. Cohen, *Serpent in the Bosom: The Rise and Fall of Slobodan Milošević* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002), 148.

³⁶ Radina Vučetić-Mladenović, “Textbooks and the Teaching of Twentieth Century History in Serbia Since 1989,” in *After the Wall: History Teaching in Europe Since 1989*, ed. Martin Roberts (Hamburg: Körber-Stiftung, 2004), 154.

³⁷ Niyazi Kizilyuek, “History Textbooks and Nationalism,” in *Teaching the History of Southeastern Europe*, ed. Christina Koulouri (Thessaloniki: Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, 2001), 70.

³⁸ Radina Vučetić-Mladenović, “Textbooks and the Teaching of Twentieth Century History in Serbia Since 1989,” in *After the Wall: History Teaching in Europe Since 1989*, ed. Martin Roberts (Hamburg: Körber-Stiftung, 2004), 159.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 154-155.

of many central and eastern European states towards free and democratic societies. Serbian textbooks do a very poor job covering these major topics, and ignore some of them all together.⁴⁰ In other words, they are still badly in need of reform. Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the texts is the manner in which it is presented. Many students, even bright, well-traveled ones, believe blindly in the truthfulness and objectivity of the accounts with which they are presented. When asked about any bias present in history textbooks, one student replied “there isn’t any subject of opinion from anyone. It is objective, and those are all historical facts. They can not be changed.”⁴¹

Reform of the Current System:

Ministerial Attempts:

The Ministry of Education in Serbia has undergone several transformations in the post-Milošević years. The Minister that took charge in 2000 under Đinđić, Gašo Knežević, tried to take quick and decisive action on reforming the school system and diminishing the ethnocentric focus of the curricula. A campaign was undertaken to write and reform history curricula and texts, beginning with the fifth grade and continuing upwards. The reform aimed to integrate Serbian and World history, thus uniting lessons under common themes and chronologies. The focus was drawn away from political history and the greatness of the Serbian nation. It also introduced more local history to the curricula, and offered accounts on regional events from the perspectives of the

⁴⁰ Ibid.,153.

⁴¹ A forth year student at a Belgrade secondary school, audio recording, Belgrade, Dec. 2 2005.

region's three major religions. With side by side accounts of events, comparison was logically made easier. The textbooks were reformed for the fifth and sixth graders, but then the reform was abruptly halted, though there are conflicting accounts as to why.

Emina Dautović cited finances as the reason the reforms were stopped, although she did mention a change in ministers as contributing to it as well. Never the less, she reiterated that the biggest roadblock in the way of continuing the reform was money, and that a lack of it ended the reform and later resulted in the new slower pace of change.⁴² Jelena Popović on the other hand, claimed the reform's end was entirely the fault of political change; the result of the combination of an aggressive plan for reform and a conservative education minister, Ljiljana Čolić of the Serbian Democratic Party, who wanted to go so far as to make "Darwin optional."⁴³ Whatever the cause, there is now a marked contrast between the books provided to the fifth and sixth grade students, and the ones provided for their older peers.

Since the advent of the very conservative Minister of Education, another one has come into office. Slobodan Vuksanović is young, energetic, and reportedly supportive of change. The pace of the reform to date however has been sluggish and slow. Emina and Vesna both commented on the continued strength of the Serbian nationalistic parties, and their political influence on education. Vesna specifically mentioned that in her opinion, the minister was in a tough position, balancing reform and his job. She believes that he is being as supportive as possible while guarding his position in the system. At a time when civil society is so actively precipitating change, education is the last thing that the

⁴² Emina Dautović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23 2005.

government wants to deal with. The minister, unfortunately has to consider that when making decisions on the subject.⁴⁴

Now, rather than continuing with reform at the breakneck speed in which it began, the Ministry is advocating baby steps. It is currently establishing benchmarks for knowledge, setting standards for what it would like all students to know after completing a given grade level. Once this is done, a standardized test will be established in order to assess how well individual students and school systems are doing relative to one another. Once it has been determined what students should know, and what they do in fact know, reforms will be implemented in order to bridge the gap between the two.⁴⁵ Depending on how this plan is carried out, it could have the same effects as the original reform over the long term, or it could completely ignore the task of integrating history and establishing some elements of multiperspectivity. Vesna actually alluded to the fact that the new reforms may try to derail the old ones, after she claimed that children were actually harmed by the reorganization of information in the original reform.⁴⁶ This sharply contrasts with Emina's evaluation of the previous changes.

While the pace of reform coming from within the Ministry of Education is slow, it is coming. In the meantime, the Ministry communicates with teachers and addresses their concerns through what seem to amount to monthly neighborhood board meetings. There is apparently a meeting each month in each district of the city during which teachers can bring complaints or questions to a liaison for the Ministry. Unfortunately however, it does not seem too effective, as Vesna cited frequent miscommunication, and

⁴³ Jelena Popović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23 2005.

⁴⁴ Vesna Dimitrijević, interviewed by author, email correspondence and written notes, Belgrade, Dec. 1, 2005.

⁴⁵ Emina Dautović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23 2005.

⁴⁶ Vesna Dimitrijević, interviewed by author, email correspondence and written notes, Belgrade, Dec. 1, 2005.

a general lack of information for teachers as common.⁴⁷ In addition, the Minister of Education took the opportunity at the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe's press conference on November 30th to publicly pledge his support to their efforts, and the efforts of teachers and scholars in the area who are working on the issue of education reform. He specifically appealed to Dubravka Stojanović, a very active member of the community in this field, to come to him with her needs and requests. Finances were his only caveat.⁴⁸ Perhaps most importantly, after reiterating that "this ministry is not biased," he revealed that he is currently negotiating an international agreement with at least fifteen other countries, which will liberalize the import and export of textbooks between them. He did not name any of the other countries that are involved in the negotiations, but called the process "complicated," as a result of the number of ministries which are playing a role. In addition, he claimed that he had recently resolved the problem of minority inclusion in textbooks, but liberalizing that market in conjunction with the National Minority Councils.⁴⁹

Since 2000, the Ministry has gone from being very supportive of reform and active in bringing it around, to completely opposed to change, to its present middle ground. This middle ground is a good place from which outside organizations can launch their attempts at alternatives in the absence of comprehensive reform. Unfortunately however, some of them are drying up, but others continue to forge ahead.

EUROCLIO:

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Slobodan Vuksanović, press Conference given by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, attended by author, written notes, Belgrade, Nov. 30, 2005.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

EUROCLIO is an international organization devoted to the improvement of history teaching. The affiliated Serbian organization, the Association for Social History - EUROCLIO was founded on 8 December 2001, as an association of primary and secondary school history teachers. This association is voluntary, and independent of the school district's official teachers' association. The Association for Social History - EUROCLIO cooperates with the international organization, as well as with Serbia's government, the universities, and local institutes. Through cooperation with these entities, they aim to improve the quality of history teaching in the country by running workshops and printing bulletins, as well as assisting in the efforts of their partners.⁵⁰

Recently, the idea was raised to establish a network of teachers' associations from around the region, organized from and based in Belgrade. The Association in Belgrade would therefore facilitate dialogue amongst teachers throughout southeastern Europe including all of the countries of the former Yugoslavia, Turkey, Cyprus, Greece, Albania, Romania, and Bulgaria.⁵¹ More frequent interaction amongst the region's educators might help them to more quickly address the problems in their respective school systems. This idea is in its infancy however, and plans for its implementation have yet to be drawn up.

The Association for Social History - EUROCLIO is currently involved in several projects. One, Eustory, is a history competition for secondary school students that is organized in conjunction with a German institute Körber Stiftung in Hamburg. This German non-profit organized what is referred to as the Eustory Competition network,

⁵⁰ Radina Vučetić, Association for Social History - EUROCLIO (Association for Social History - EUROCLIO Serbia and Montenegro, 2001) <http://www.udi.org.yu/ec/econtent/onama.html>, accessed on December 2, 2005.

⁵¹ Radina Vučetić, interviewed by author, written notes, Belgrade, Dec. 5, 2005.

which is an affiliation of organizations in eighteen participating European countries. Each year, the eighteen organizations hold a competition in which participating students research and write on a specified topic concerning their country's local history. The written product is important, but the emphasis is placed on the research process. The Association for Social History - EUROCLIO has thus far succeeded in organizing two rounds of the competition, and is presently involved with planning the third. The first two research topics were "Remembering Childhood," about childhood in Southeastern Europe in the past, and "Living in the City," from 1945 -1991. In Serbia's case, the competition is important for two reasons. First, it exposes the participants to research processes. The students are required to gather evidence, interpret that evidence, and present it to the organizers. Secondly, the themes of the competition have, up to now anyway, focused on aspects of regional history that are common to all of the nations that live here. In both of these respects, the competition fills a void left by the formal school system.⁵²

In 2000, the Association for Social History - EUROCLIO launched a project entitled "Childhood in the Balkans" in conjunction with the Universities of Graz (Austria) and Blagoevgrad (Bulgaria). The idea was to connect the findings of history researchers and the teaching practices of secondary school history teachers, in order to make public education more academic. The project meant to create supplementary materials that integrated historical anthropology, in order to shift the focus for a bit away from political history.⁵³ The Association for Social History - EUROCLIO is also periodically involved with their Danish counterparts, who played a big role in the

⁵² Jelena Popović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23, 2005.

⁵³ Heike Karge, "Regional Workshop on 'Developing New History Textbooks,'" November 4-5 2003 and "National Seminar on 'Textbooks and Teaching Materials: Their Development and Use in the Classroom,'" November 6-7 2003 (Belgrade: Council of Europe, 2004) .

founding of the Belgrade chapter. The two associations run workshops, seminars, and facilitate teacher exchanges.⁵⁴ The Association for Social History - EUROCLIO is also currently involved with teacher training seminars and with the production of alternative teaching materials in conjunction with the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe. The details of that effort will follow.

The Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE):

The Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE), created an initiative in 1995 called the Joint History Project (JHP). The project is organized and carried out by an international team of scholars from around the region who recognize the need to address the way their national histories are presented to their respective societies. Their original aim was to offer a tool to teachers, so that they could improve their teaching and overcome the deficiencies of textbooks. The project aimed to include the entire Southeast European region, and eventually all of the following countries signed on: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovenia, and Turkey. In 1999, the organizers of the project divided themselves into two committees, the Academic Committee, and the History Education Committee, formally the Textbook Committee. The former was and is primarily engaged in fostering communication between scholars in order to combat the nationalistic tendencies that pervade research in the region, as well as in promoting young scholars with an interest in the region. The latter is comprised of teachers and researchers,

⁵⁴ Radina Vučetić, interviewed by author, written notes, Belgrade, Dec. 5, 2005.

textbook authors and editors, and individuals that have been involved with curricula setting. All of them are concerned with the way in which history is taught in their countries and would like to be actively engaged in changing it. While both committees have been instrumental in bringing about the achievements of the JHP to date, the textbook committee is of tantamount concern in the issue at hand.⁵⁵ The committee is chaired by Christina Koulouri, Assistant Professor at the University of Peloponnesus.

The History Education Committee's first step was to document what was actually going on in schools in every country in the region, and to undertake an analysis of the region's textbooks. After this preliminary research was completed, it was decided that the project would create four workbooks dealing with four periods common to the curricula of all eleven countries: The Ottoman Empire, Nations and States in Southeast Europe, The Balkan War, and The Second World War. The idea was that the books would help teachers and students use the idea of multiperspectivity in history teaching by showing them the perspectives not represented in officially sanctioned texts. It was decided that the texts would be completed in English and then translated into all of the local languages.⁵⁶ The books also had a secondary goal: to show the "new face of the Balkans" to the western world, a world in which the region was portrayed as nothing more than an area full of brutal savages.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Maria Todorova, *Balkan Horizons: The Academic Dimensions of the Joint History Project* (Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, 2004a) <http://www.cdsee.org.yu> accessed on Nov. 29, 2005.

⁵⁶ Press Conference given by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, attended by author, written notes, Belgrade, Nov. 30, 2005.

⁵⁷ Costa Carras, member of CDRSEE's board of directors, press conference given by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, attended by author, written notes, Belgrade, Nov. 30, 2005.

The English version of the workbooks were completed in June of 2005. They are, or at least attempt to be, balanced compilations of primary sources from all of the Balkan countries that are contextualized with introductions, chronologies, and questions for the reader. If effective, they will invoke critical thinking on the part of the students, and provide a tool for a more comparative teaching by instructors.⁵⁸ The books reflect the work of the committee since 1999. Since that time they have been looking at history in a regional context and focusing not only on conflicts but on parallels as well. The committee has tackled some difficult historical issues together, including the question of Macedonian identity, the ever-present Cyprus question, and issues of the Albanian past. They kept the difficult issues in mind when constructing the workbooks, conscious of traditional textbooks' deficiencies in presenting them.⁵⁹

To the surprise of all involved, Serbia, "a late-comer" to the project, was the first to complete their translation of the workbooks, which was officially launched at a press conference at the Hyatt Regency in New Belgrade on November 30, 2005.⁶⁰ At the press conference, the need for these books not to replace national histories, but rather to provide a supplement was reiterated, and the audience was reminded that their purpose was simply to focus on Balkan history, and the region's common social and cultural past.⁶¹ The books were originally designed to be supplementary because of the nature of the educational authorities in this region, but they were in fact designed to be

⁵⁸ Christina Koulouri, press Conference given by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, attended by author, written notes, Belgrade, Nov. 30, 2005.

⁵⁹ Maria Todorova, *Balkan Horizons: The Academic Dimensions of the Joint History Project* (Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, 2004) <http://www.cdsee.org.yu> accessed on Nov 29, 2005.

⁶⁰ Costa Carras, member of CDRSEE's board of directors, press Conference given by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, attended by author, written notes, Belgrade, Nov. 30, 2005.

⁶¹ Christina Koulouri, press Conference given by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, attended by author, written notes, Belgrade, Nov. 30, 2005.

supplementary.⁶² Therefore, although the Minister of Education made a nice gesture, saying that these books could be the primary texts as far as he was concerned, they would really not serve that purpose well.⁶³

The Council of Europe:

The Council of Europe has a broad goal when it comes to education, mainly to help to “incorporate the principles of human rights, democracy, tolerance, and mutual respect, the rule of law, and peaceful resolution of conflict into the daily practice of teaching and learning.” It is the opinion of the Council that schools are an optimal place to educate people on tolerance and other values that will help to build friendships between people of different countries, ethnic groups, and religions.⁶⁴ They are currently developing several projects throughout Europe, including one called “Teaching 20th Century European History,” which is creating a teacher’s guide on how to teach difficult issues from multiple perspectives, including unpopular ones. The projects aims are very similar to the JHP, undertaken by CDRSEE, as it also shuns foci consisting of only “facts, figures, and battles,” and encourages the use of primary sources to investigate the past. The Council of Europe sees historical research as a great way to understand the links between the past and the present, as well as a tool to develop critical skills.⁶⁵

While the ongoing initiatives of the Council of Europe have yet to impact Serbia and Montenegro, the Council did play an active role in promoting dialogue about reform

⁶² Costa Carras, press Conference given by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, attended by author, written notes, Belgrade, Nov. 30, 2005.

⁶³ Minister of Education, press Conference given by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, attended by author, written notes, Belgrade, Nov. 30, 2005.

⁶⁴ Council of Europe Educational Projects (Council of Europe, 2002) <http://www.coeint/T/E/culturalco-operation/education/> accessed on Nov. 17, 2005.

in Belgrade back in 2003. In November of that year, the Council of Europe under the leadership of Alison Cardwell, hosted two different workshops in Belgrade. The Council of Europe worked with the Ministry of Education, which was then in the process of implementing its reform, to bring about the workshops. One was focused specifically on problems within the Serbian education system, while the other was a forum for discussion of regional issues. The national seminar had 100 participants and 5 organizers, and was looking at the need for a more balanced view of history during the transition period towards a democratic European state. The regional seminar aimed to bring regional players together to discuss problems of textbook development in a comparative way. Its aims were for the participants to share experiences, identify common problems, compare approaches on dealing with minority issues and controversial or sensitive subjects, the principles of multiperspectivity, and ideas for future cooperation.⁶⁶ The national seminar focused on questions of history education specific to Serbia, and the development of new textbooks and additional materials.⁶⁷

Petnica Scientific Center for History:

In the beginning, the Petnica Center was founded by a young biologist. Petnica, a small village, has a very small but defined ecosystem, and he saw it as an ideal place to engage students in the hands on study of science. In addition, they have caves and a great view of the sky, and the first three programs were thus biology, archeology, and

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Heike Karge, “Regional Workshop on ‘Developing New History Textbooks,’” November 4-5 2003 and “National Seminar on ‘Textbooks and Teaching Materials: Their Development and Use in the Classroom,’” November 6-7 2003 (Belgrade: Council of Europe, 2004) 9.

astronomy. Over the last twenty-five years, the center has grown to include three departments, each containing a set of loosely related programs. These include the natural sciences, comprised of biology, chemistry, geology, and hydrology; deductive sciences, including mathematics, physics, computer science, and astronomy; and the social sciences, made up of history, ethnology, psychology, and linguistics. History at Petnica is only in its fifth year, and is thus the youngest program in existence at this time.⁶⁸

The idea behind the center is that it provides a place for students who want to learn more and who want to learn in a more interactive way. As Aleksandar Rafailović, the director of Petnica's history program said, "students are active, not like in school." The participants research and write and do work independently. In history, students do not study national or world history but rather local history, oral history and social history. They are encouraged to work in the archives and with primary sources.⁶⁹

Each October, the center sends out brochures and application forms to all schools in Serbia, outlining admission requirements and instructions. The program is open to students that are enrolled in secondary schools, not only in gimnasie but in vocational schools as well. In addition to identifying information potential students must provide their academic interests, and write an essay. Examples of the essay questions include, "If I were the president...", or "if I were the principal of a school...", or "the best thing I did in the year 2020...etc." They are designed to make the applicants exhibit their creativity as well as their writing ability. After considering the essays, the students' marks and teacher recommendations, the Petnica staff selects a group of students each January.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁸ "Core Events 2004," Petnica Science Center Almanac, no.21(April, 2005): 7.

⁶⁹ Aleksandar Rafailović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Dec. 5, 2005.

⁷⁰ "A View Into the Selection Process," Petnica Science Center Almanac, no.21(April, 2005): 17.

The history program receives an average of seventy-five applications yearly, and selects twenty-five participants and four alternates. Approximately 1200 students matriculate at the center each year, and are drawn from not only Serbia and Montenegro, but from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Slovenia as well. The school also runs an annual conference, bringing together students from these countries and facilitating an exchange of ideas.⁷¹

The center, runs on the calendar year, rather than directly coinciding with the school year. Students participate in the first session during the winter, traveling to Petnica for seven days. There is then a spring workshop for two and a half days, followed by two weeks in the summer, and two and a half more days in the fall. The bulk of their work then is done in the summer, and projects are submitted during the final workshop.⁷²

Aleksandar said that in order to graduate from secondary school in Serbia, a research paper must be done. He said that traditionally, the paper is little more than an exercise in copying and pasting from several books that are available on a particular subject, as students rarely, if ever engage with resources. The projects at Petnica aim to encourage a different approach. He said for example, he might give an assignment where he asks a student to look at the names of the streets and research who those people were and what they stood for etc., or instead ask about the students family or about games that were played in the past or something similar. He encourages students to go to the

⁷¹ Aleksandar Rafailović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Dec. 5, 2005.

⁷² Ibid.

archives and read old newspapers and letters, to read memoirs and diaries, to look at old photographs, and to see everything: posters, media, etc. as historical resources.⁷³

In his work with Petnica, Aleksandar cooperates with several local institutes, the archives, and the Faculty of Philosophy. He has freedom to teach as he thinks is appropriate. He said it is not so in the schools, where curricula are fairly strictly regulated by the ministry. He commented on the fact that the government does not seem to understand that pupils who have skills, who know how to write, think, analyze, and research independently are better for the state. Since the government lacks this understanding, they instead prescribe this many lectures and this many interrogations when instructing teachers, leaving little to their judgment, despite the fact that teachers are the ones who are in constant contact with their pupils and are probably better at assessing their needs.

Aleksandar thinks that reform is necessary. He said that school in Serbia “is only facts, facts, facts, facts.” In his opinion, today’s kids have very small imaginations due to growing up with constant visual stimuli, and they can not function at an optimal level without the conditions to which they are accustomed. The materials they are presented with in schools therefore do not cater to their needs. He sees materials and assignments that engage students as an absolute necessity. When kids are active they are interested and want to learn.

Aleksandar said that in the original ministry reform there was a plan to leave thirty percent of the curricula to the teacher’s determination. Given the content of the rest of the curricula, it would be logical that much of this would go to local and social

⁷³ Ibid.

history and more interactive assignments like those completed at Petnica. Aleksandar, sees the program as a possible model for that thirty percent.⁷⁴

Reflections on Reform:

The reforms undertaken by third parties were met almost exclusively with praise. Workshops run by the Association for Social History - EUROCLIO, CDRSEE, and The Council of Europe, were all optional, and thus perceived as a great opportunity for networking and discussion amongst interested educators. The idea of supplementary material was also met with praise from teachers, scholars, and the Minister of Education alike. Teachers commented on the supplementary nature of the CDRSEE publications as being positive, not only because they would provide an additional resource, but also because they were not perceived as threatening the status quo, and thus would not be met with much opposition.⁷⁵ The minister called JHP and the project's materials "reasonable, practical, and pacifying." He also said, that after the "horrendous things in the last 15-20 years in these territories" the materials will provide "a chance for this generation to learn in a more objective and a more peaceful manner," as well as something to help them to "understand the horror of the present time."⁷⁶

The ministerial attempts at reform received mixed reviews. Emina thought the original track of the reforms was very positive, and the thematic content made for easier comparisons between the situations and opinion of different groups throughout history.

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Emina Dautović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23, 2005.

⁷⁶ Minister of Education at Press Conference given by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, attended by author, written notes, Belgrade, Nov. 30, 2005.

She also looked upon current efforts as positive although she lamented the pace at which funding levels were allowing them to proceed.⁷⁷ Vesna on the other hand, well she thought the reforms were a positive step, placed a great deal of emphasis on the need to finish them as started. It is her belief that it is harmful for students to start on the reformed program and then be subject to the original curricula for the rest of their educational experience.⁷⁸

Those who voiced opinions on exactly what they would want out of the next round of reforms also had different opinions. Vesna and Jelena both expressed a desire for additional materials without any out of pocket expense for educators. Jelena seemed to desire material for her students as well, but said that even additional books for her to reference would make teaching from more than one perspective far easier.⁷⁹ Aleksandar, armed with the stark contrast between his experiences at the Petnica Center and three months of substituting for a teacher on medical leave, was far more demanding. He wants to see reform that enacts teaching methods and employs historical resources similar to those employed at Petnica. He wants an active and engaged classroom where students are stimulated, involved, and interested.⁸⁰ He seems to be most in tune with the students, whose only request was to have a discussion and exchange of views with instructors.⁸¹ A relatively simple task if both parties agree to it.

Whether or not widespread reform would be welcomed by the teaching community it is anybody's guess. Emina was confident in her colleagues, saying that

⁷⁷ Emina Dautović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23, 2005.

⁷⁸ Vesna Dimitrijević, interviewed by author, email correspondence and written notes, Belgrade, Dec. 2, 2005.

⁷⁹ Jelena Popović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23, 2005.

⁸⁰ Aleksandar Rafailović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Dec. 5, 2005.

⁸¹ A fourth year student at a Belgrade secondary school, audio recording, Belgrade, Dec. 2 2005.

efforts to reform the system would be welcomed by all those involved, while Jelena took the opposite tack.⁸² She admitted that there are a lot of enthusiastic teachers in the system, but regrettably insisted that there are also many who would not welcome change. She correctly asserted that it is easier to stand in front of a class and lecture, send students home, and test them on the material later, than it is to engage them in conversation, explore alternative viewpoints, and discuss the effects of historical knowledge on the present. Unfortunately, for a lot of people, teaching is simply a job, and in that context, anything that brings more work is likely to be unwelcome. She did however, say that should change come it would be accepted, but teachers will only change if they are forced to. There simply are not enough of them actively seeking it.⁸³

Conclusions:

“There are not few analysts and historians who, in their nationalistically colored, biased, patriotic interpretations of recent and distant history, wrote mutually exclusive, inconsistent, versions of historical events with completely questionable political and ethical messages. Too often, history is not instrumental to learning...” but instead is a “partial chronology of past events, full of myths and prejudices.”⁸⁴ Unfortunately, examples of these biased, patriotic, partial chronologies can be found in the backpacks of Serbian students today. History class and history textbooks in Serbia are full of facts and lacking context. Students are presented with a version of historical “truth,” that some, if

⁸² Emina Dautović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23, 2005.

⁸³ Jelena Popović, interviewed by author, audio recording, Belgrade, Nov. 23, 2005.

⁸⁴ Velibor Zirojević, “Dealing with the Past: Experiences of the ‘Big’ and Messages to the ‘Small’ Nations,” Culture of Peace Magazine, Dealing with the Past (2005 Special Edition): 4-6.

not many or most, can not conceive of as only one version. Today's students are left to fend for themselves with an irrational, skewed perception of the importance of their nation and its role in history. The pace and direction of change in the system will likely correspond with social change generally, hindering or facilitating efforts coming from numerous places within society, as schools, to a great extent, determine the nature of their audience.

Currently there are several different efforts underway to reform curricula, provide teachers with training and supplementary materials, and to challenge students to become engaged, to research and investigate independently and to draw their own conclusions. These small steps from NGOs, coupled with an at least nominally supportive ministry will probably lead to wide spread changes over the long term. Systematic change seems unlikely in the near future, as it would require new curricula, new books, teacher training featuring multiperspectivity and the use of supplementary materials, as well as administrative oversight capable of forcing teachers to adhere to a new approach. With any luck, some of this will begin to materialize under the leadership of concerned citizens who have committed their lives to education. There are a surprisingly large number of these people in Belgrade, and none of them seem to be giving up.

Personal Reflections:

I found my independent study period valuable and rewarding, though not in the way I necessarily expected. I am no stranger to the research process, and although I did not have a great deal of experience interviewing people, I did not find it difficult, in fact I

found it very enjoyable. There is something amazing and unique about sitting down over coffee and having a genuine exchange of information, ideas and opinions, particularly I think in a cross-cultural setting.

The people that I met and engaged with were genuine and full of energy and hopeful for their society's future. It was very inspiring. I don't necessarily want to say "more importantly," but I will anyway: More importantly, I learned a lot about myself during this period of the semester, and realized for the first time how deeply ingrained every individual's cultural norms are. I have traveled before, and spent the entire semester in this region without ever once feeling too uncomfortable or shocked by major cultural differences. The lack of big things smacking me in the face caused me to overlook the little ones.

Several times throughout this process, my independence, confidence, and age was commented upon (the age- visually younger, conversation-wise -older ☺), and I began to think where these qualities came from. I find in the States I am less self-assured than many of my peers, but by comparison to the students I met here, and the descriptions of youth from the teacher's perspectives it seems as though we are worlds apart. I never quite realized the power contained inside the walls of a school, but it is a tremendous amount. It is strange to think of my high school (which no longer exists ☹) with its god-awful seventies carpet that was peeling up, its crushed in lockers, graffiti, four-thousand students, and a thirty-five percent dropout rate as having the power to turn unsuspecting kids into human beings adjusted to be Americans. But in retrospect, I think it did.

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Appendix:

Guidelines for Interviews:*⁸⁵

Question Set One: Primary Organizations:

1. Could we start by you telling me about the formation of your organization...what was the impetus for it, who were the major players at the time, what were the primary goals of the organization?
2. Have your goals changed at all? If so what are they now, and if not, how have you progressed towards them?
3. Just for my benefit, can you tell me a bit about your personal role in this process that you've just outlined?
4. (If it was not adequately covered in the first two responses...) What is your impression of the status of history education in public schools?
5. What are the mechanisms that are going to allow your organization to alter the content of history education in public schools?
6. To address the other side, is there anything or anybody that will seriously impede this process?
7. How are teachers and/or administrators involved in the process of altering curriculum content?
8. How much oversight does the Ministry of Education have in this process?
9. What do you hope will result from this endeavor should it be completely successful?
10. As you're aware, there seems to be a push from within civil society to so called "deal with the past," how do you see this project fitting into that broader context?

11. Out of curiosity, do you see this process as an effort to establish and distribute historical truth, or as an effort to disseminate a different opinion than the one that has been distributed up to now?

Question Set Two: Primary and Secondary School Teachers:

1. If you wouldn't mind, start by telling me a bit about yourself, including how long you have been a teacher in the public school system...
2. Can you explain if you know, who sets the curriculum, and what the process is for doing so?
3. How strictly must you adhere to the curriculum and/or how strictly do you adhere to it?
4. Do you teach history that could be considered controversial in a regional context?
5. If so, can you cite some examples, if not, why is it eliminated?
6. Do you think that the content of history classes matters a great deal in the formulation of public opinion on regional events?
7. To your knowledge, or in your opinion, is there a segment of educators who would be in favor of curriculum change? If so, what do they think the new formulation should be?
8. Do they think that change is necessary now, or that it would be better to wait some time before addressing historical events that could still be emotionally charged?
9. Do you believe that there are serious roadblocks on the path to implementing changes in the curriculum?

⁸⁵ *These are only guidelines. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured style, allowing for many other questions and topics of discussion to surface. This is meant only to provide the reader with an idea of the types of questions that were asked.

10. What do you think of the current attempts to revamp curricula that are coming from NGOs? (Brief them on what is going on if it is obvious throughout the interview that they are unaware)
11. Would it be at all possible for me to sit in on a class, and/or borrow a textbook from you for a couple of days?

Question Set Three: Secondary NGOs:

1. Briefly, can you outline your organization's main activities that are relevant to the concept of "dealing with the past."
2. Can you please explain why you think "dealing with the past is so important?"
3. Are you aware of the work of (insert all primary NGOs)? (If not explain the work that is being done) How do you think their work fits into the scheme you just described?