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## **Alternative Teaching Schoolbooks for the Balkans** *History from the point of view of different countries*

Throughout the Balkans, history is made an instrument for political purposes. The schoolbooks used today are one-sided and nationally distorted. Recently alternative teaching material has become available, which deals with the events from the points of view of the different nations.

Historical memory plays an important role in politics in the Balkans, even if the often exaggerated events took place centuries ago. This is true for Greece and Turkey as well as for the countries of the former Yugoslavia. Time and time again, history is used as an instrument for political purposes and gets shaped according to national needs. The same historical events often get interpreted and presented in controversial and contradictory manners. This is reflected through the history books, which are used in schools on all levels. They strengthen the concept of “our enemies” and national prejudices.

### **Controversial Topics**

An alternative has recently become available. After seven years of work, in cooperation with more than 60 historians from all of the 11 countries of Southeast Europe, (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia -including Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Albania, Bulgaria, Rumania, Cypress, Greece and Turkey) the Thessaloniki based Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, has produced a set of four books, “Teaching Modern Southeast European History”. The topics of the books are four particularly controversial thematic issues; The period of the Ottoman Empire, the Establishment of Nation States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Balkan wars 1912/13 and the Second World War. The four books are available in English and were presented in Belgrade in the beginning of December. They have also been translated into Serbian.

The editor of the Serbian Version, Dubrovka Stojanovic, gave an interview to the Serbian weekly “Vreme” at the beginning of December, in which she spoke about the project. The historians began their research by examining the schoolbooks used in primary and secondary schools in the Balkans. The

experiences from this research were shattering. The same events were presented in such different ways that they could hardly be recognised as one and the same topic. What was equally alarming was the low quality and quantity of information about each country's neighbours. The little knowledge the student had about their neighbours was one-sided and nationally distorted. In the case of conflicts, the nationally distorted history had become a source of hatred, which has been used to justify policy and political attitudes.

Stojanovic also points to the fact, that the concept of the current history books is always the same. Each nation represents itself in the light of the "innocent victim" that has never committed any unjustified conquests. Themes and the use of language promoting attitudes such as "Our neighbours have always hated us, although we never did anything wrong to them" or "They have always betrayed us and exploited our vulnerabilities" are evident throughout the history books of the region. The history books, as she put it, are a kind of pre-military training.

### **Breaking with National Stereotypes**

Unique in this cross border history project is the fact that the historical events do not get presented from the point of view of one single nation or ethnicity, but take into account the views of the other nations involved. For this reason sources and documents from various countries and origins were inserted into the books. A lot of emphasis also was put on the accurate reporting of historical facts. It was often more difficult to find a historical consensus of a certain event within one country than in between the countries.

Teachers and students therefore have to reflect on controversial versions and interpretations of one and the same event. The multi-perspective approach is used to make a break with the national stereotypes. The intention is not to hide the differences, but on the contrary, to point them out. The aim of the project is to encourage teachers and students to think critically about history and to raise awareness about the notion that none of the sides has the monopoly on historical truth. The recognition and acceptance that ways of thinking different to one's own one are also legitimate, is a big step towards democracy.

### **Serbia as the pioneer**

Of course the new history books will not simply replace the material used in the different countries. They are designed to be an additional source, which the

teacher can use to elaborate the historical themes. Based on the information of the publishers, many history teachers in all of the Balkan countries have expressed an interest in using the books. 1,500 copies of the Serbian edition have been produced so far. The teaching material is currently being translated into Greek and the translation and production of the books in all of the languages of the remaining countries of Southeast Europe will take place in the coming year. Serbia has proven to be the pioneer in implementing this project by becoming the first of the 11 countries of the region to authorise the use of these books in schools. All public schools in the country will receive one copy.