



Multi-Cultural Education for Peace

Promoting the Reconciliation Process in
North Macedonia and the Western Balkans

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Promoting the Reconciliation Process
in North Macedonia and the
Western Balkans

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"LOJA made us all aware of the crucial interdependence of education and culture and has combined both elements in its efforts to promote multi-cultural education. This is of the utmost importance in a multi-ethnic environment like the Western Balkans."

Bashkim Shehu, writer and report editor of LOJA's conference on "Education and Cultural Diversity"

"One of LOJA's greatest achievements is that it has succeeded in institutionalising multi-cultural education at university level, thus safeguarding sustainability. This model should now be transferred to other post-conflict societies in the Western Balkans."

Orhan Ceka, independent evaluator of LOJA's achievements



Introduction

Peace is more than just the absence of fighting. A sustainable peace after a long history of conflicts and the last armed conflict requires inclusive social structures and the integration of all stakeholders on an equal basis, whilst respecting their differences. Often, this can only be achieved after a lengthy process of reconciliation, especially in a multi-cultural environment like the Western Balkans. And a crucial element to support steps towards more unity is education.

At the beginning of the Millennium, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Macedonia (now North Macedonia) set out to reconcile a society deeply divided by the legacy of the Balkan Wars and the cultural strife that had triggered the armed conflict. Its artistically minded activists performed theatre plays for refugee children and organised spare-time activities to bring young people from different cultural backgrounds together. These peace-building projects through education at an informal level attracted more and more people and became a hallmark of LOJA, the Center for Balkan Cooperation (CBC) in Tetovo.

LOJA means “play” or “game” in the Albanian language, and the name stands for the very programme of this NGO: The chosen approach for overcoming stereotypes and promoting peace and ethnic reconciliation is deliberately a playful one. Yet, or rather because of this, the impact speaks for itself.

CBC LOJA did not stop at the level of informal education, though. Its activists realised very soon that, in order to transform a society, they must tackle socio-cultural institutions as well. So they established contacts to local schools and later developed a university curriculum for inter-cultural youth work to be incorporated in the syllabus for future teachers. The goal was to equip these teachers with the skills required for effective multi-cultural education. Today, this special course is taught in six faculties at all the country's five universities. At the same time, inter-cultural integration became an important subject in all North Macedonian schools.

The next goal is now transferring this curriculum to universities in other Balkan countries. Exchange meetings of academic staff are already taking place, and the international study visits and conferences organised by LOJA have gained great popularity. With the wider adoption of the curriculum for inter-cultural youth work, formal education for peace would reach a regional level and thus enhanced sustainability.

Over two decades, CBC LOJA has developed from a grassroots organisation to a leading national and regional player, whilst maintaining its grassroots connection, too. Civic activism still plays a crucial role in its training programmes, not least with the aim of uniting diverse cultural groups in creative campaigns for common interests and

concerns. The initiatives launched by LOJA in ethnically challenged environments are now orientation models for many other organisations in North Macedonia as well as the wider Balkan region. Civil society activities, for example against pollution, have had a significant impact on local politics in many cities and districts.

At the same time, CBC LOJA has become a respected negotiating partner of national and regional governments whenever inter-cultural youth issues are concerned. LOJA was pivotal in founding RYCO, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office of the Western Balkans. RYCO is linked to the Berlin Process to enlarge the European Union to the Balkans and based on the Franco-German Youth Office which significantly helped to overcome post-World-War-II hostilities between Germany and France. Furthermore, LOJA is actively involved in the EU funded Regional Network for Cultural Diversity (READ) in cooperation with Goethe-Institut in Skopje and partners from the Balkan region

As a future goal, LOJA envisions to have its concept of multi-cultural education adopted at ideally all academic institutions (universities) in the Western Balkans. There are also plans for a new "Western Balkan Academy for Peace-Building and Civic Activism" to foster the process of implementation. It's certainly an ambitious goal, but LOJA is getting more and more support for this idea.

CBC LOJA has been a long-standing partner of KURVE Wustrow, the Centre for Training and Networking in Nonviolent Action, located in the North German Wendland. The cooperation was established within the framework of the German Civil Peace Service (CPS) which is supported by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The success story of LOJA can thus be judged as a success story of the CPS as well.







North Macedonia



The national flag and the coat of arms of North Macedonia

North Macedonia is a landlocked country in the Southern Balkans. For many years, it was officially referred to as the “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)”, until a long-lasting dispute with Greece over its name was finally resolved with the Prespa Agreement of 17th June 2018. On 11th January 2019, the parliament in Skopje, with a two-thirds majority, approved the constitutional changes for renaming the country from Macedonia to North Macedonia.

Independence from former

Yugoslavia:

- 8th September 1991

Neighbouring Countries:

- Greece in the south
- Serbia in the north
- Kosovo in the north-west
- Bulgaria in the east
- Albania in the west

Capital:

- Skopje (also the largest city with about 500,000 inhabitants)

Population (according to the latest census of 2021):

- 1.84 million people

Ethnic Groups (according to the last census of 2021):

- 58.44 % Macedonians
- 24.30 % Albanians
- 3.86 % Turks
- 2.53 % Romani
- 1.30 % Serbs
- 0.87 % Bosniaks
- 0.47 % Aromanians

Languages:

- Macedonian—official national language
- Albanian—co-official language at state level, but excluding defence, central police and monetary policy—official in local government units in areas where 20 % or more of the population are Albanian speakers
- Turkish, Romani, Serbian, Bosnian and Aromanian also official languages in areas where they are spoken by at least 20 % of the population

International Memberships:

- member of the United Nations since 1993—until 2019 as Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)
- candidate for accession to the European Union since 2005
- member of NATO since 2020

The Situation in North Macedonia



North Macedonia, the southernmost state of former Yugoslavia, gained independence on 8th September 1991. It was admitted to the United Nations two years later as the “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)”, this official name being insisted upon by Greece. The southern neighbour was worried about possible territorial claims on the Greek parts of ancient Macedonia as well as secessionist tendencies there—the more so as the government in Skopje stirred up nationalistic emotions by hailing Alexander the Great as the nation’s direct ancestor.

The long-lasting name dispute with Greece was finally resolved with the Prespa Agreement of 17th June 2018. On 11th January 2019, the parliament in Skopje, with a two-thirds majority, approved the pertinent constitutional changes for renaming the country from Macedonia to North Macedonia. This opened the door to a full membership of NATO one year later, which until then had been blocked by Greece.

Skopje’s contacts with its other neighbours have often been troubled, too. There is a long-standing dispute with Bulgaria which argues that the Macedonian language should be viewed as a mere Bulgarian dialect and also objects to Skopje claiming Goce Delcev, a Bulgarian-Macedonian freedom fighter from Ottoman times, as its own national hero. In late July 2022, “France’s EU Proposal” for North Macedonia and Bulgaria was presented aiming at a resolution of the dispute. Although approved by both parliaments, within North Macedonia the necessary constitutional changes are in a deadlock and, as a result, the country’s accession process is blocked.

Like Greece before, Bulgaria now objects to a future EU membership of North Macedonia and this, in turn, troubles Albania whose application for EU accession is processed in a package with its eastern neighbour.

A dispute with Serbia over the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church is not fully resolved, but at least not noticeably obstructing relations.

What looms largest, however, are internal conflicts within North Macedonia. There has always been a sizeable Albanian population in the north-west, now amounting to about a quarter of the country’s citizens. Ethnic Albanians have frequently been discriminated against, especially after independence from Yugoslavia. Minority rights which existed in the old Socialist Republic of Macedonia were reduced when the new government

took a pronounced nationalistic stance. Ethnic tensions started to rise and were exacerbated during the Kosovo War of 1999. At that time, about 380,000 Kosovo Albanians sought temporary refuge in Macedonia, but the government took no steps for their integration. In early 2001, the charged atmosphere led to an uprising of the Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA). Only severe pressure from the international community prevented an all-out civil war.

With the help of international mediators, the so-called Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) was drawn up in August 2001. It ended the armed conflict and set out the groundwork for improving the rights of ethnic Albanians and other domestic minorities, in particular with regards to their mother-tongues. Whenever a certain language is spoken by more than 20 % of the local population, it will now become co-official with Macedonian in the respective municipality. This means that besides Macedonian and Albanian, in some parts of the country Turkish, Romani, Serbian, Bosnian and Aromanian are now official languages, too.

Apart from that, however, the intended inclusive spirit of Ohrid was hardly ever followed on the ground. The political institutions missed the chance to address the reasons why the country came to the brink of civil war. Instead, the Agreement was just used as a reference point for numbers and percentages which frequently triggered additional divisions.

The existence of different official languages was never viewed as a cultural asset, but is still leading to measures that manifest the separation of Albanian and Macedonian societies even further. Since the times of Yugoslavia, children have usually been segregated into different language classes, and since the last conflict even in different school buildings, especially in areas with enough Albanian pupils to make separate schools viable—like in north-western Tetovo. Consequently, different cultural groups hardly ever mix, not even in their spare-time. Mistrust and stereotypes still abound, even two decades after the 2001 uprising,

It is here where CBC LOJA wants to make a difference by promoting multi-cultural interaction, especially amongst the





youth. More unity seems even more necessary when looking at all the other challenges young people in North Macedonia are facing nowadays. Youth unemployment stands at around 34 per cent and is exacerbated by an education system that often fails to equip students with 21st century skills. Many young people are leaving in search for better employment prospects abroad. Young families often leave out of disillusionment with their country in which they see no future for their children. This has contributed to a net decline of the total population from 2.07 million to 1.837 million between 2014 and 2021, as the latest census shows.

Among those who stay, a wide-spread disappointment in political institutions tends to result in a lack of social engagement—which again is detrimental to community-building efforts. And the Corona pandemic has only enhanced many of these unresolved problems. LOJA's striving for multi-cultural reconciliation and integration is therefore as relevant today as it was at the turn of the Millennium.

LOJA's Approach to Culture and Education



BC LOJA, a non-governmental, not-for-profit organisation with no political affiliations, was registered in 2000 within the framework of the Law for Citizens Associations in the Republic of Macedonia, as the country was then still called. Its main activities lie in the field of education and culture and include, for example, arts festivals, exhibitions, dance, stage performance, cinema, film and video production or computer courses as well as capacity building for staff members and partners.

According to its website (<https://cbcloja.org.mk>), LOJA's cultural activities are dedicated to the improvement of cultural and social life and inter-cultural relationships in North Macedonia and the Balkan region. The NGO wants to provide the facilities for cultural production and involve creative individuals and groups as well as cultural organisations and institutions plus all ethnic and social communities in the region.

In the field of education, LOJA aims at extending cooperative ties between all institutions within the educational system in order to support peaceful coexistence and prevent violence in schools. Its major focus lies on transferring inter-cultural knowledge to all North Macedonian schools through specially trained teachers, the latter being equipped with the skills and competencies needed to promote multi-cultural integration. To this end, LOJA has designed a specific university curriculum which will be dealt with in detail later on.

More than two decades ago, the difficult circumstances and conflicting multi-narratives prompted young artists to address the situation through the theatre play "LOJA", (original name "Games in the backyard" by Edna Mazia)—the violent story of Dvori Mahnas, a 14-year-old girl, told from different perspectives. While working on this play, the artists developed activities for refugee children in which highly delicate topics like rape and torture during the Balkan Wars were raised, obviously in a very sensitive and



child-oriented manner. This was followed by extra-curricular activities for all interested youths in eight main cities in the country with a special focus on the greater Tetovo area. After the violent troubles of 2001, such a project to bring people from hostile ethnic groups together was a very courageous one.

The NGO LOJA faced this challenge by offering involvement in creative spare-time activities without ever mentioning the ethnic divisions directly. Informal personal contacts were meant to break the ice and overcome mutual distrust and stereotypes of culturally diverse young people. At CBC LOJA, they often meet for the first time in their lives, even today, just like many of their parents and teachers. Reconciliation and peace-building is supposed to be achieved by just getting to know each other and constructively playing together—an approach fully in line with LOJA's name. Such strategies of informal education were later extended to the formal educational sector as well.

During many of the still ongoing creative activities, interpreters translate between Albanian and Macedonian. English is often used as the lingua franca. No cultural group or language is allowed to dominate, and all participants are required to embrace LOJA's prevailing motto: **"RESPECT"**.



CBC LOJA and KURVE Wustrow

In developing its strategies, CBC LOJA got invaluable input from KURVE Wustrow. First contacts were established in the year 2000, and two years later a formal partnership was struck. By that time, former Macedonia had become an official partner of the German Civil Peace Service, which made it possible to deploy civil peace workers there. KURVE Wustrow thus sent a CPS expert to LOJA with the declared goal of “furthering inter-ethnic tolerance and understanding, strengthening democracy and civil society and improving the conditions of life”.

LOJA’s strategies to engage culturally mixed groups in spare-time activities were now supplemented with trainings in peaceful conflict transformation and mediation. Target groups were the young people reached by LOJA as well as so-called multipliers in youth work—and through them, eventually, the wider population of Tetovo and its further surroundings. The courses focused, amongst other things, on team-building through interactive methods which, at that time, were fairly unknown in the country.



Bujar Luma, the founder and Director of LOJA, recalls:

“We learnt new strategies on how to analyse a conflict and articulate different views of historical events without getting into a fight. Discussing all this with a peace consultant from Germany gave us a new perspective of our own situation and enabled us to see things differently. That’s exactly where the added value of a civil peace worker from abroad came in.”

Additionally, KURVE Wustrow put CBC LOJA into contact with international networks and institutions. “All this helped us to increase our standing at home and abroad”, says Bujar Luma. This proved particularly useful when LOJA moved its peace-building activities further to the socio-political level.

It soon became evident that really effective multi-cultural education had to be institutionalised in schools, thus moving from the informal to the formal level. This, however, required teachers who were fully aware of the need for better inter-cultural relations and confident as well as competent in fostering them in their classrooms. Therefore LOJA, again with invaluable input from KURVE Wustrow, designed a new project with the goal of “anchoring multi-ethnic youth work in the university curriculum for future teachers”.



Two Examples of LOJA's Training Methods

Activity for Team and Trust Building

In the training room or outdoors, a path with obstacles of boxes and pieces of furniture is set up by the facilitator. Without seeing this path before, the participants are asked to choose one person as their “eyes” to lead them along this path while all others will be blind-folded. Verbal communication and physical contact is not allowed during the activity, but the participants are given time to agree on a set of non-verbal signs by which the “eyes” person can guide them to avoid the obstacles. While the group is moving along, the facilitator can add extra barriers to make the path more difficult. The “eyes” person will have to react to this and make sure that the participants can follow her or him until the end of the path one by one. The activity is followed by a discussion on how people felt and how, with hindsight, they judge their agreements on the pertinent non-verbal signs.

Activity Related to Discrimination

All participants are assigned a certain role which they must not reveal to the others. They then form a line and listen to statements from the facilitator. If the statement holds good for them, they move one step forward, if not, they have to stay behind. The roles vary from an unemployed single mother to a disabled person, a member of a discriminated minority group or the owner of a big company, to mention just a few. The statements relate to whether a person can have good food, go to the cinema or on holiday, has access to education and the internet, feels respected in the community and does or does not feel threatened by the police. This is followed by a discussion on how the participants felt in their respective roles—especially the ones who were left behind—and to what extent this reflects issues of discrimination within their society.

The University Curriculum



for Multi-Cultural Education



The essence of this course is to combine theoretical studies of multi-culturalism with practical implementation, including teaching internships in schools. As this was a totally new idea more than a decade ago, it took quite some time to convince educational authorities and institutions of the usefulness, if not societal necessity, to embrace such a concept.

The South East European University (SEEU) in Tetovo was the first academic institution in former Macedonia to take up the new curriculum as a pilot project in 2008. Being a private university, it had a higher degree of freedom to adopt courses outside the ministerial accreditation process. The contents fitted SEEU's declared mission of "offering a multi-cultural and multi-lingual education with equal opportunities for all, based on impartiality and merit".

The course with the title "Post-Conflict Reconciliation and Inter-Ethnic Youth Work" was integrated into the Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication which incorporated Pedagogy. It was taught in English which meant that no national language would dominate. Rather, it gave students the chance to express themselves in a neutral language, which often made it easier to discuss sensitive inter-cultural

issues, as experience showed. A Civil Peace Service expert, sent by KURVE Wustrow, assisted with the process of implementation. She also functioned as a neutral contact person for all stakeholders in this CPS supported project. This proved invaluable for students, educators and university authorities alike.

The curriculum contained a theoretical section on human rights issues, including non-discrimination and the rights of disadvantaged or minority groups, studies of culture and ethnicity, nationalism and multi-culturalism. Furthermore, culturally responsive teaching as well as teaching for peace, democracy and social justice became parts of this course, and finally students were given practical teaching assignments.

The course was complemented by an “Interactive Training in Constructive Conflict Resolution”—a six-day residential seminar outside of Tetovo organised by LOJA. The objectives were:

- Raise awareness for the importance of an integrative society
- Facilitate trust-building amongst the participants
- Obtain knowledge about different forms of violence and discrimination and how to counteract them
- Create awareness for the mechanisms and dynamics of conflicts as well as stereotypes and prejudice
- Raise consciousness about “active citizenship” and the participants’ responsibility for the society they live in
- Collect ideas for multi-cultural projects in schools.

This seminar with its interactive methods was a revelation to most of the students, as many enthusiastic comments confirmed at that time. The university course as well as the LOJA trainings may have been adjusted over the years, but they are still going strong and are now offered to students in six faculties at all five North Macedonian universities.

The response of the participants is still the same:

“These trainings provide skills not just for teaching, but also for life. We learnt a lot about freedom of expression and that one should value every person’s point of view—rather than upholding the idea that only one opinion is right and all others are wrong.” *Dragana Ilievska, student at UKIM in Skopje*

“There is still so much discrimination going on in our country—in schools as well as in society as a whole, against different cultures and also against women or the poor. That’s why it’s so important to bring people from different backgrounds together from an early age onwards. We should all work together for a better future.” *Sena Hoda, student at UT in Tetovo*

The second academic institution to take on LOJA's curriculum for multi-cultural education was the State University of Tetovo (UT) in 2012. The course was integrated into the Faculty of Pedagogy, but students from other humanity departments, especially from the Faculty of Philosophy, are encouraged to choose it as well. Also in 2012, the Saints Cyril and Methodius University (UKIM) in Skopje introduced LOJA's curriculum into its Department of (higher) Education. The UKIM Faculty of Pedagogy, which trains elementary school teachers, followed later in 2017. In 2014, the University Goce Delcev (UGD) in Stip as well as the University St. Clement of Ohrid (UKLO) in Bitola embraced LOJA's concept of multi-cultural education, too. Since the beginnings at SEEU in 2008, the course has been attended by thousands of future teachers, the great majority of them being women, as is common in the field of education.

Professors value LOJA's concept of multi-cultural education as positively as their students:

"Students are transformed by this course. It provides them with skills which will benefit them forever. I remember a rather timid young girl who came back from the LOJA trainings as a much more confident person."

Lulzim Ademi, Pro-Dean of the Faculty of Pedagogy at UKIM in Skopje

"Students learn to respect cultural differences and deal with them openly. There was a young woman wearing a veil in my course, and most of the others initially shunned her. But later we had a very constructive exchange about different cultural perceptions." *Valentina Gulevska, Professor for Education at UKLO in Bitola*

A random survey, compiled at UKLO in 2018 among 60 students, proved clearly that multi-cultural education brought different ethnic groups closer together. All the 30 interviewees who had attended the LOJA trainings stated that they did have friends from other cultural and religious groups. All of them also stressed that they would like getting to know even more people from different ethnic communities and learning more about their culture and religion. Of the 30 interviewed students who had not taken part in LOJA's course, only 9 had friends from different ethnic groups and most were not particularly keen on learning more about their culture.

Memet Memeti, Professor of Contemporary Social Sciences at SEEU, sums up:

"We are proud of having created a pool of young people with excellent multi-cultural skills. This will improve inter-cultural relations in our schools and have a multiplier effect on our whole community."

The Universities of North Macedonia

South East European University (SEEU)

SEEU was founded in 2001 on the initiative of the High Commissioner for National Minorities of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The main campus of this private-public not-for-profit institution is located in Tetovo with an outside branch in Skopje. SEEU has six faculties attended by about 4,000 students, two thirds of them ethnic Albanians. The language of instruction is mainly Albanian, with many courses also being held in Macedonian and English. In 2008, SEEU was the first university to adopt LOJA's curriculum for multi-cultural education.

State University of Tetovo (UT)

UT was founded in 1994 by ethnic Albanian academics and NGO activists and was meant to be an institution of higher education for the country's Albanian minority. It was not recognised by the former Macedonian authorities as a university until 2004. UT has eleven faculties attended by about 9,400 students, up to 90 per cent Albanians. The language of instruction is mainly Albanian, but also Macedonian or Turkish on demand. LOJA's course on multi-cultural education was established in 2012.

Saints Cyril and Methodius University (UKIM) in Skopje

UKIM was founded in 1949 and is the oldest and most prestigious university in the country. It consists of more than 30 faculties and research institutes, attended by around 30,500 students, more than 90 per cent being ethnic Macedonians. The language of instruction is mainly Macedonian, unless there is a specific demand for minority languages. UKIM's



Department of Education has already existed as a teaching institute for over 100 years. It adopted LOJA's curriculum in 2012. UKIM's Faculty of Pedagogy followed in 2017.

University Goce Delcev (UGD) in Stip

UGD was founded in 2007 and is ranked as the second most prestigious one of North Macedonia's state universities. It has twelve faculties and three academies attended by about 8,000 students, mostly ethnic Macedonians, but also from the Turkish and Roma minority. The language of instruction is Macedonian. LOJA's curriculum was adopted in 2014

University St. Clement of Ohrid (UKLO) in Bitola

UKLO was founded in 1979 to serve the south-western region of Macedonia. It has more than ten faculties, attended by about 4,800 students, mainly ethnic Macedonians. The language of instruction is Macedonian. LOJA's curriculum was adopted in 2014/2015.

Multi-Cultural Education in Schools

Much praise for LOJA's multi-cultural education curriculum is focused on its unique balance between theory and practical implementation. "LOJA brings you out of the ivory tower", is a frequent comment to be heard. Pedagogy students confirm again and again that they view this course as most useful for their chosen career:

"During my school internship, I was given the chance to teach a whole class for one hour. I had noticed some bullying before, so I distributed a paper where the pupils were asked to describe their personal experience with bullying. During interactive games that I had learnt at the LOJA trainings, I then guided them into a very fruitful discussion. I really look forward to implementing what I've learnt, and I will lobby our educational authorities to make multi-culturalism and peace education a mandatory subject in all our schools."

Hajrije Ademi, Student at UKIM in Skopje

In recent years, teachers who had been trained along the lines of LOJA's curriculum have become pivotal in promoting multi-culturalism in North Macedonian schools. "There is still an inter-cultural divide, so bridge-building is as necessary today as it was two decades ago", says Gresa Ibrahim who is teaching mathematics at an elementary school in Tetovo. The concept of respect for other cultures should determine all lessons, including scientific subjects. Gresa admits that older colleagues are sometimes reluctant to change their often outdated teaching methods, but more and more teachers now support multi-cultural ideas.

Maja Muhic, Professor at SEEU, even thinks that multi-culturalism as a theory is no longer the major issue in North Macedonian education:

"It is now widely accepted that all cultural groups should have equal rights,

and there are charts available for assessing the extent to which such ideas have entered school curricula. What is much more important now, however, is practical inter-cultural exchange. There are still too many cultural ghettos in our country, enhanced by the fact that the different groups usually don't speak each other's language. It's getting better, though, with English becoming more widely used as the lingua franca amongst young people."

The authorities have responded to the need for inter-cultural exchange. In 2011, the US-funded "Inter-ethnic Integration Project (IIEP)" was started. This was followed in 2017 by a joint project of North Macedonian education authorities up to ministerial level together with NGOs with a focus on multi-cultural education. It combines elements of inter-cultural integration, civic education and school renovation, as Nebojsa Mojsoski, Programming Director of the Macedonian Civic Education Center, explains:

"The project aims at strengthening students' self-esteem and encourages them to interact in joint activities that bring our different cultural groups closer together. Inter-cultural integration is combined with civic education for teachers which includes addressing curricular issues and even reviewing text books that might perpetuate stereotypes. And as an incentive to implement this project, schools are provided with new teaching material, like LED projectors, and are also aided with necessary renovations."

The programme includes curricular as well as extra-curricular activities like sport events, music and dance performances, picture painting, science clubs, English lessons and many more. Well over 4,000 such special classes have taken place within four years, and more than 90 per cent of North Macedonian schools are now participating, as Nebojsa Mojsoski points out. He also stresses the urgent need to continue with these efforts:

"We've made quite some progress over the last ten years, but if we stopped now, there is an acute danger that everything collapses. Inter-cultural integration is an ongoing process which must be nurtured and given continuous impetus. But if we carry on, we'll stay on a good track."

Key people in implementing this project are certainly the teachers who attended the university course designed by CBC LOJA. They have become important multipliers of multi-cultural education and have often been successful in winning over their more sceptical colleagues. They also know how to get students involved in civic activism. Results have been murals to smarten up school buildings, designs for better playgrounds or support for elderly people, to mention just a few.







Civic Activism as a Catalyst for Cultural Integration



It has repeatedly been emphasised that CBC LOJA encourages civic activism at grassroots level. Therefore, regular training courses are being offered in order to sensitise people for issues of concern within their society and explore ways of doing something about them. Creative and constructive action is usually an ideal opportunity to unite different cultural groups for a common goal, as has become evident ever since LOJA's beginnings.

As explained before, the goal to “raise consciousness about active citizenship and the participants’ responsibility for the society they live in” is an integral part of the LOJA trainings which supplement the university curriculum for multi-cultural education. In



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addition to these seminars for students, similar workshops are being offered to all interested citizens, not only from North Macedonia but also from neighbouring countries. Participants are chosen on the basis of their declared motivation. Until today, many applicants state that they want to do something for their community—and they want to do it together with people from other cultures whom they hardly have a chance to meet otherwise.

Oliver Musovik and Gjorgje Jovanobic, regular trainers at LOJA, both agree on the effect this six-day workshop has on its participants:

“These people are ready to get out of their comfort zone. It’s always fascinating to see with what great ideas they come up after the trainings in order to transform our society. They turn out as totally different people with a high commitment to social change.”

Oliver and Gjorgje are artists, and they show in their trainings how the arts can be used for raising awareness as well as being a catalyst for change. Results could, amongst others, be large murals—like the ones three female arts students from Pristina created in Tetovo as well as in the city of Ferizaj in Kosovo. The painting process alone got a lot of attention, since people found it most unusual to see women working high up on scaffolds. The Kosovan arts student Emona Deda explains the idea behind these murals:

“We wanted to show that a city can look much nicer for everybody when we work together for improvements. And we also wanted to show that women are very capable of doing things that society associates only with men. This way, we are challenging stereotypes at many levels.”

The arts are only one of many fields for creative civic activism. Participants of the LOJA trainings have started campaigns against pollution, garbage problems or missing recreation sites and playgrounds. They have lobbied for the integration of the disabled, the homeless and other marginalised groups. They have also pilloried corruption and broken promises of politicians.

Sasho Oggenovski, a translator of literature from Bitola, explains his motivation for taking part in such activities:

“I love the methodology of the LOJA trainings. The approach of multi-culturalism is bringing different groups together in united action, and this will make us a more united country in the end. I believe that we should all develop a multi-cultural identity.”



No Additional Casinos in Tetovo

A make-shift building is erected on the central square of Tetovo. At one end, there is the dummy figure of a smartly dressed man who is about to enter. At the other end, a doll in rags is coming out, totally ruined by visiting this establishment. A banner on top reads "Casi-NO". The activity criticises the spread of more and more casinos throughout Tetovo and sends out the warning message: "Casinos make you poor".



The "Trash Wedding"

In the centre of Tetovo, a wedding couple poses to cameras. The dress of the bride and the suit of the groom are made from rags, sheets of plastic and other trash material. More rubbish is being collected from the streets and offered to the couple as a wedding gift. The message: There is too much trash lying around in the city because of inadequate rubbish-disposal services by the local authorities.

Raising Awareness by Civic Action— Some Examples



Create your own Park

Green carpets, blankets and towels are rolled out on a wide concrete area. Building blocks in various sizes are added so that children can climb on them or play with them. The message: There are not enough green recreation areas and hardly any suitable playgrounds in Tetovo. As the city council is doing nothing, citizens must create their parks themselves.



Demands for a Public Transport System

A cardboard model of a commuter bus is carried through Tetovo, pushed by an activist in a wheelchair. Roads are partly blocked in order to move the “bus” through the heavy traffic. The message: There should be an efficient public transport system in the city. This would give all people a chance to get around at a reasonable price rather than only in private cars or taxis. It would also ease traffic congestion and combat pollution.



Exposing Broken Promises of Politicians

Activists form a large human chain in the centre of Tetovo. They hold up big yellow signs with the promises local politicians made during the last election campaign. Under each such statement, they pose the question of what has been done to fulfil these promises. The message is clear: Politicians must be held accountable for their action or rather non-action and must not get away with broken promises and corruption.

Multi-Cultural Education for Regional Integration



It has become clear by now that LOJA has been pivotal in anchoring multi-cultural education in the relevant institutions of North Macedonia—in universities as well as schools. This has had an impact on neighbouring countries, too. Having built up good contacts to educational institutions all over the Balkans, LOJA has been able to organise exchanges, study visits and conferences which gained a high reputation amongst students and academics alike.

Snezana Mirascieva, Professor for Pedagogy at UGD in Stip, refers to a conference held in the Greek city of Thessaloniki in 2019:

“The programme was just fantastic. There were so many interesting topics with a focus on peace education, and we had the chance to meet very interesting people. This exchange should definitely be continued and extended.”



Unfortunately, the Corona pandemic brought many of these activities to an abrupt halt, but LOJA found new outlets. In December 2020, it hosted—in Tetovo as well as online—an international scientific conference on “Education and Cultural Diversity”, attended by academics from about a dozen European countries. Report editor Bashkim Shehu, an Albanian writer living in Spain, commented:

“LOJA made us all aware of the crucial interdependence of education and culture and has combined both elements in its efforts to promote multi-cultural education. This is of the utmost importance in a multi-ethnic environment like the Western Balkans.”

As a next step, LOJA Director Bujar Luma envisions having such a curriculum for multi-cultural education adopted by ideally all universities of the so-called Western Balkan

Six—the six countries that have already built up formal structures for cooperation within the framework of the Berlin Process to enlarge the European Union. Besides North Macedonia, these are Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia.

One formal structure is RYCO, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office of the Western Balkans. It is based on the Franco-German Youth Office which significantly aided reconciliation between Germany and France by bringing young people together after World War II. Bujar Luma played a decisive role in setting up RYCO as a moderator of the founding process which was supported by the former German Chancellor Angela Merkel und the former French President François Hollande. RYCO now has offices in the capitals of all six countries and a secretariat in Tirana, Albania. Bujar Luma views this platform as an additional opportunity to increase linkages of the educational systems throughout the region.

Another project aiding the spread of multi-cultural education throughout the Western Balkans is the EU funded Regional Network for Cultural Diversity (READ). Implemented by the Goethe-Institut in Skopje, it cooperates with regional NGOs, including LOJA, in order to “promote inter-cultural reading skills and democratic values through reading culture and the handling of supra-regional high-quality literary works”, as its mission states. Again, such regional networking opportunities are supposed to foster reconciliation and inter-cultural tolerance.

Regional networks for a more formal cooperation amongst Western Balkan universities are in the process of being intensified, too. Valentina Gulevska, Professor for Education at UKLO in Bitola, is involved in one such project:

“The aim is bringing together researchers as well as practitioners to promote inter-cultural education and democracy. We want to foster inter-cultural learning and empower our students accordingly. And here, the curriculum for multi-cultural education designed by LOJA will come in as an invaluable tool.”

To advance this process even further, CBC LOJA wants to set up the “Western Balkan Academy for Peace-Building and Civic Activism”. It would combine theoretical studies with practical implementation models whilst also supporting creative grassroots activism. All what LOJA pursued over the last two decades would thus be extended to the Western Balkan Six and beyond. The Academy would cooperate with academics, researchers and practitioners throughout the region, liaise with university authorities to sustain multi-cultural education and also offer the specific training courses that have become the hallmark of LOJA.

It might sound a rather ambitious project at the moment, but Bujar Luma can draw on more and more support in academic circles. Tatjana Atanasoska, another Professor for Education at UKLO, emphasises:

“It will certainly take some time to set up such an academy but, being an optimist, I think it’s an attainable goal. It would certainly aid the process of Western Balkan integration. To embrace multi-culturalism is simply a must in our region, as we must overcome our historical problems.”



Conclusion and Future Outlook



BC LOJA has come a long way from a small grassroots organisation at the beginning of the Millennium to a key player in multi-cultural education, peace-building and civic activism in North Macedonia and beyond. Its cooperation with KURVE Wustrow, which is providing financial and logistic support, is still going strong and has contributed to its constant capacity development. LOJA's focus on regional integration seems a very logical next step now. Independent evaluators agree—like Orhan Ceka, Executive Director of the Liberal Alternative Institute in Tetovo and a specialist on Monitoring & Evaluation:

“One of LOJA's greatest achievements is that it has succeeded in institutionalising multi-cultural education at university level, thus safeguarding sustainability. This model should now be transferred to other post-conflict societies in the Western Balkans.”

Shqipe Malushi, an artist from Kosovo who lived in New York for many years and did some coaching and training at LOJA, finds such a transferal desirable as well as necessary:

“Young people in our region shouldn't grow up with the idea that different cultural groups are either friends or enemies and that conflicts between them, including armed ones, are quite normal. That's why multi-cultural education is so important, and LOJA has done an absolutely amazing job in this area.”

And yet, changes on the ground seem to be slower than many observers might have hoped for. As stated before, different cultural groups usually live separated from each other in their own cultural ghettos with only limited inter-cultural exchange. Yet, LOJA is determined to continue with its peace-work for integration. Blerim Jashari, a regular trainer, comments:

“Sustainable changes within a divided society take a very long time and require efforts from many different quarters. We are only one piece in a very big puzzle. Yet, we have been able to influence many people at a personal as well as institutional level.”

The German diplomat Gudrun Steinacker, former Ambassador to former Macedonia, also sees progress:

“There are fewer barriers amongst the different cultural groups these days. Especially amongst youth and intellectuals there is now much more exchange than in previous decades. But it is a slow process. One major obstacle is the difficult economic situation which is often abused by nationalistic circles to promote their own agenda. So we can only move on in small steps and should not expect miracles.”

Gudrun Steinacker describes the work of LOJA as invaluable in this context, including its plans for a “Western Balkan Academy for Peace-Building and Civic Activism”:

“The very fact that exchanges between the Western Balkan countries have been kick-started is an asset in itself. We have to move towards cooperation and society structures that safeguard ownership by all the people on the ground. This message has to be spread throughout the region, and LOJA is doing a great job to promote integration through multi-cultural education.”

And LOJA's Director Bujar Luma points out:

“The Balkan countries have been largely democratic and peaceful for the last two decades. This is unique in our history and thus in itself a tremendous success. But the process still needs to be consolidated in order to be really sustainable.”

LOJA's Work Assessed on the RPP Matrix

The success of LOJA's strategies is clearly reflected in all the boxes that make up the so-called Reflecting on Peace Practice Matrix. This four-cell matrix shown below is a useful tool for evaluating programme strategies in several dimensions. Within this framework, analysts focus on the different approaches of peace initiatives plus who is being engaged and what type of change is being sought.

Individual/personal change More people strategies	Individual/personal change Key people strategies
Socio-political change More people strategies	Socio-political change Key people strategies

In the beginning, CBC LOJA set out to involve more and more people in its inter-cultural youth work—mainly children and young people as the immediate target group, but also their parents and teachers as necessary supporters of LOJA's projects. This can be classed as non-formal education. Contacting teachers then involved approaching socio-political, i.e. formal, institutions as well.

The "More People Approach" in the first cell of the matrix is based on the belief that peace can be built if more and more people become involved in the process—even incidentally like the young people who took part in LOJA's early spare-time activities. Just getting to know "the other side" personally can help people to overcome mistrust,

prejudice and stereotypes and stop them from fighting. So the main goal is to change attitudes on an individual/personal or informal level.

At the same personal level, so-called key people were involved in the early LOJA projects as well—those who exert power or influence and are thus critical for peaceful relations. Who is “key” usually depends upon the context of a conflict situation, sometimes these key people can’t even be defined as clearly different from “ordinary” people. LOJA targeted virtually everybody who could have an influence on young people, referred to as the “multipliers in youth work”. Key people could thus include official as well as unofficial youth group leaders, including those who might be most likely to perpetrate violence. Likewise, parents were involved—as well as teachers who, as stated above, provided the link to the socio-political level and thus to formal education.

When approaching educators, the LOJA officers operated within various cells of the RPP Matrix. First, they had to win over more and more teachers as individuals but also as representatives of their educational institutions. Finally, when multi-cultural youth work was anchored in the university curriculum for future teachers, key people at the socio-political level had to be engaged—university authorities, faculty heads, ministerial offices. Likewise, the beneficiaries of this course, the future teachers, had to be won over at a personal level first, but also bearing in mind that they were key people as future representatives of socio-political institutions—i.e. schools and other formal educational facilities.

Whilst recognising the interdependencies and linkages between the four cells, the work of LOJA can thus be summarised within the RPP Matrix as follows:

Individual/Personal Change— More People Strategies

- Performing theatre plays on sensitive issues for children in refugee camps
- Organising spare-time activities for youths from different cultural backgrounds
- Organising arts events which bring people from different cultural backgrounds together
- Offering facilities to artists and make them familiar with LOJA's inter-cultural philosophy, incidentally or in a targeted manner
- Continuing with grassroots activities to raise people's awareness of issues within their community and offering advice on civic action

Individual/personal change— Key People Strategies

- Involving official and unofficial youth leaders in spare-time activities
- Targeted workshops for youth leaders/ multipliers on inter-cultural relations and conflict transformation
- Getting educators interested in LOJA's work so that they encourage their students to join the activities
- Targeted workshops for future teachers whose personal attitudes will be pivotal in the education of future generations (this is linked with the socio-political level)
- Organising national and international study visits for university staff in order to get more and more academics interested in implementing multi-cultural education (also linked to the socio-political level)
- Targeted workshops to promote civic activism

Socio-political Change— More People Strategies

- Getting more and more teachers and university lecturers interested in inter-cultural youth work
- Getting more and more students of educational sciences interested in this special course
- Mobilising citizens to lobby for socio-political change, e.g. with regards to pollution, the rights of children, the integration of the disabled and many other topics

Socio-political Change— Key People Strategies

- Working with university authorities in order to introduce courses on multi-cultural youth work into the syllabus for future teachers
- Working with education authorities at all levels in order to get multi-cultural youth work anchored in schools and universities throughout the country
- Contacting university authorities in other countries of the Western Balkans with the aim of establishing a curriculum for multi-cultural education there as well
- Being a pivotal member of RYCO, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office in the Western Balkans, and of READ, the Regional Network for Cultural Diversity
- Promoting the vision of a "Western Balkan Academy for Peace-Building and Civic Activism"

During its move through all the four cells of the RPP Matrix, CBC LOJA developed from a local grassroots organisation to a leading player in educational matters at national level. From there, it moved further to become a respected negotiating partner of national and regional governments whenever inter-ethnic youth issues are concerned.

Yet, LOJA's grassroots connections have never been lost, as its numerous civic activism initiatives show.

Spreading Nonviolence



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