

Responding to War: An Educational Imperative

The monumental tasks of attempting to maintain the functioning of an academic oasis are recounted here by the author.

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Introduction

The American University in Bulgaria was founded in 1991 as a joint initiative of the Bulgarian government, the U.S. government, the City of Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria, and the University of Maine. It currently has 656 students from 19 countries. It has graduated five classes of students, or 643 individuals. The average SAT score for admission is 1300 and the TOEFL score average is 630. All instruction is in English. The University is supported through a quasi-endowment from USAID, generous funding from the Open Society Institute (Soros Foundation), as well as gifts and grants from private donors, corporations, and foundations. The mission of the American University in Bulgaria is to educate future leaders committed to serving the needs of the region by promoting the values of an open, democratic society.

Prologue

The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia began on the evening of March 24, 1999. We watched and sensed it was coming but found ourselves in disbelief and not fully prepared for the next few months of our existence as an educational institution located 12 kilometers from the Macedonian border and a mere 110 miles from Pristina. Not to mention the fact that we had students from all of the neighboring countries.

On Friday evening, March 26, 1999, I was the only senior AUBG administrator present at the University, or in Bulgaria for that matter. This was due to some poor planning on our part. I contacted the Regional Security Office at the U.S. Embassy in Sofia to determine my steps and be certain that we were secure for the weekend. What should I say, if anything, to the university community? How do I tell our students, staff, and faculty to be extra vigilant, that we have increased security, but don't panic? My administrative dilemma, caught up with personal emotions of fear and frustration as well as fatigue, was nothing compared with the human tragedy unfolding only 110 miles away. What about our students from Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia, their families, their friends? With their attendance at the American University in Bulgaria, they had been imagining a very different future. They took time to acknowledge their frustration, their fear, and to support one another – truly a miracle in which diversity enhances and young people, being educated for future leadership in the region, cross the boundaries of nation and ethnicity in support of one another. Their optimism speaks most forcefully and dramatically about our future, their future, and their imagining of what could be.

The Educational Imperative

To keep our Board of Directors (one half of whom live outside of Bulgaria) briefed, I composed three "updates" much of which I share with you here. Some comments, however, are taken from my journal and speak more to my own feelings and observations. These entries are noted in italics, and interspersed among the "update" comments.

March 24, 1999 – NATO bombs Serbia! Only administrator here. The burden of responsibility feels very heavy.

March 25, 1999 – Life goes on. Added security. Participants in the Higher Education Support Program of the Open Society Institute arrive for conference. Annual City Officials Evening as scheduled. Special guests from USAID and the City of Auburn (twinning program with Blagoevgrad). There is sure to be a future.

March 26, 1999 – Anti-NATO demonstrators at the U.S. Embassy in Sofia. Security tight. Added security at AUBG. To those in the U.S., even with our close connection, Kosovo is light years away from them and from Blagoevgrad! Reinforces for me the feeling of isolation.

April 6, 1999 – Update to Board
I have taken a few minutes to update you all on the situation here in Blagoevgrad.

As I look out at the plaza in front of our main building, calm prevails and life seems to go on as normal. There is no shortage of goods in the stores and the nice

spring weather is bringing people out for coffee on the sidewalks and shopping in the many little stores.

Beneath the surface calm there is a lot of fear on the part of many people. In the newspapers yesterday and today and in one national tabloid there is a very strong anti-American, anti-NATO sentiment expressed, including targeting AUBG (again) as a front for the CIA. AUBG has grabbed the headlines, in part, because of the NATO Forum held last Wednesday. In addition, we are being attacked because of some arrangements we made for the 38 Peace Corps volunteers from Macedonia to stay at the Alen Mak Hotel when they exited Macedonia last week. They were put up at the hotel at our AUBG group rate, which probably was a mistake, but there was a series of miscommunications and we will leave that to the PC to take care of. Our relationship with the Peace Corps is very strong because of past conference work we have done for them. How are our students doing? By all reports they are doing very well. I had a full briefing this morning by staff of our Student Services Office. Our basic thrust is to lessen tensions that have or may develop. The Student Services Office tabs this as a "Stress Release Plan" and is implementing many small things all the way from special food in the canteen, popcorn and fruit available in the residence halls, a continuation of the Friday Flicks, the continuation of intramural and free play sports, with next week marking the beginning of the baseball, softball, tennis, and cricket season. Building managers are providing free

telephone cards to affected students and the telephone in Student Services Office is available for direct contact with families.

In addition to these "small" tension relievers, one of our faculty members has held two "Kosovo Forums" in the residence halls, providing a time and space for students to talk through these issues of such importance. Other Forums are scheduled as needed. Another faculty member has especially close ties to the Serbian students and is using his positive relationship with the students to help them deal with the issues of anger and fear and to plan for an uncertain future.

Our Counseling Center is providing "crisis intervention" services by being available with a special room where students can just go and talk with a counselor or be alone in a safe space. The counseling staff is also available at the Kosovo Forums. All students from Albania, Kosovo, and Serbia have been contacted personally by staff of the Counseling Center.

One senior administrator and his wife invited all students from Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia to dinner on Sunday. About 32 were in attendance. Stress release was provided with games and great food. Politics were not discussed, but the option was available.

Still to be implemented: A safe space room, monitored by the staff of the Counseling Center; weekly non-alcohol dance for the duration of the semester; briefings with Resident Assistants; weekly

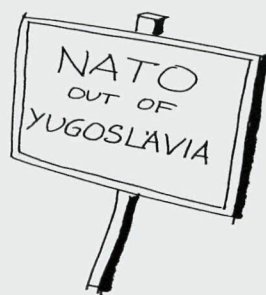
"monotony breaker" in the canteen; letters to families and Study Abroad officers at the American Students' home schools and Soros Foundation offices, updating them on safety issues of their students here; weekend swim trips to Sandanski; a continuation of weekend skiing trips; students will develop a "top ten list" of ways to help each other through the stress and post it around the University.

We have had two major forums for presentation and discussion in the past week. On Monday, March 29, Ivan Krastev, a very fine and well-known Bulgarian political scientist presented a lecture/discussion on campus. This was attended by an overflow audience in the Red Room. And on Wednesday, March 31, we held a NATO Forum at which Ambassador Bohlen (U.S.), Ambassador Six (Netherlands), Solomon Passy (Atlantic Club of Bulgaria), Col. William Hall (U.S. Defense Attaché), and Ivan Sotirov (NATO Information Center) were present as a panel. The AUBG auditorium was absolutely packed. Actually, this was a change of program from what we had agreed two months earlier to do as an arrangement for "Days of NATO" being held throughout the country. Questions from our students were direct and to the point. Some persons from the community were present, the UDF MPs from Blagoevgrad region were present, the new Deputy Regional Governor was present, and the press were invited and present. From this Forum, we are getting some negative and highly provocative headline coverage in the national press. However, I think it was good to go

ahead with the Forum and to have the opinions expressed and debated. This is, of course, the purpose of a university as I so contextualized in my opening remarks at the Forum.

March 31, 1999 — NATO Day with modifications. I felt such tension over this event. Easy decision would have been not to do it. Lots of risk with security and possible protests. Security was tight, but appropriate balance.

Prior to the Forum, there was a very small demonstration out front with about 6-8 people with a small sign "NATO out of Yugoslavia." As you can imagine, we have increased security around our buildings. We also have asked all of our students, faculty and staff to be extra vigilant during this time of tension.



On the more human side of things, our students—Albanian, Macedonian, Serbian and Kosovar—are fully supportive of one another. They are continuing their normal lives and activities as students in spite of the troublesome distractions. The Serbian students

are fearful that other students will dislike them because of what is happening. The Kosovar students are very fearful for their families and friends in Kosovo. Both groups consider themselves Yugoslavian and there is some unity in this.

Two of our students, one Serbian and one Kosovar Albanian, are heading off to the Netherlands to represent AUBG as our debate team in an international competition. They are both in Sofia today picking up their visas.

The weekend of March 26-28, we hosted the program directors of all of the HESP-funded programs throughout the region. 20 participants came from as far away as St. Petersburg, Minsk, Kyrgystan, Slovakia, Warsaw, and Vilnius. (As we were meeting and in a deep discussion about the education of minorities, I heard a lot of noise out front of the building and thought for sure it was a demonstration. In fact, it was a Roma wedding party in full swing). HESP, by the way, is the Higher Education Support Program of the Open Society Institute. This is the agency from which our Soros funds come.

I have asked appropriate staff to plan for the possibility that some of the students from Albania, Serbia, Macedonia, and Kosovo may want to remain at AUBG this summer. You may recall that we made such arrangements in the summer of 1997 when Albania was in such turmoil.

For your information we

currently have 28 Albanian students, 10 Serbian students, 3 Kosovar students, and 6 Macedonian students.

We are in the wonderful position of helping our students work through difficult times and we are succeeding with little or no visible ethnic tensions (in fact, this may be a unifying time for our students). This certainly doubles our commitment to the mission of AUBG. It is a visible demonstration that education within a multicultural environment can work very well to assure a peaceful future. There is absolutely no question in our minds as to the important and successful role of AUBG in these difficult times. It is just the kind of practical alternative problem solving that the world needs.

As I write this report for you, I am mindful that it could all change in a matter of minutes. Keep us in your minds and PLEASE let me know if you have questions or if there is additional information that I can provide.

April 7, 1999 – Still the War!! Always there in the back of our minds. Do we hear explosions in the night, imagination or is it for real or is it thunder across the border mountains with Macedonia? (Was for real)

April 8, 1999 – Still the War!! Does it make any difference? Children playing outside – might as well be Grant Street, Maine, in the USA.

April 28, 1999 – Update to Board

Today is again a calm but rainy day in Blagoevgrad. Our

students are very consumed with completing their coursework and preparation for final exams next week. As you can imagine, the computer laboratories and the library are full all day with students doing that last minute course preparation. The Faculty Assembly held its final meeting of this academic year and completed some very important business.

In view of the continuing crisis next door, our staff and faculty continue their tireless efforts in working with students (and the entire university community) to deal with the concern, anger, fear, and frustrations that surround our lives. For those of us who may not be directly affected in a personal way, there is that constant anxiety in the back of our heads about what is taking place, how it seems far beyond our control, and how we can best continue without significant distraction our important mission as an educational institution.

The following evening, students who have formed the "Kosovo Forum" came together and held an auction to raise money for the refugees. They raised a total of 1 250 000 lv. Chuck Grim's necktie and hat were the real winners at auction.

Again, on Wednesday, April 21, Student Government held its elections. A Kosovar Albanian student was elected Student Body President and the newly elected student representative to the Board is one of our Hungarian students. The latter student came as part of our Study Abroad pro-

gram funded by the Salgo Noren Foundation and transferred to complete his studies at AUBG. He is also the editor of the newspaper VOX.

We have prepared a proposal and submitted it to the Open Society Institute in Budapest that, if funded, will allow students from Albania, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia to remain at AUBG for Summer School. This will relieve a great deal of tension and concern on the part of our students about the immediate future. This extended stay also involves arrangements with the local police for an extension of the "blue passports."

Staff in Student Services continue to provide leadership in assuring that we have the appropriate counseling services available, phone cards available, and monotony breakers in the dining canteens. The "stress room" that I mentioned in the previous update is in use under the supervision of staff from the Counseling Center. Equally, our faculty have responded to the challenge with support, guidance, and an immensely positive role with our students.

Our friends from the Peace Corps in Macedonia have left. The Macedonian program has been suspended and the volunteers released from their service. I met with the director last Friday before her return to Skopie to keep the office there open with its Macedonian staff. They are clearly looking to the future reinstatement of the program.

The arrangements surrounding the Commencement on

May 10 are nothing short of amazing. Much will be decided at the last moment and not by us but in cooperation with security, press, and advance teams from the Department of State. And to think we previously worried only if it would be raining! We have scheduled a Forum of several faculty members and about 15 graduating students to meet with Secretary of State Albright before the Commencement Ceremony.

April 30, 1999 – Albright not coming. Mild depression then relief.

As for the political situation in Bulgaria, be assured that we continue to have the support of City Hall and many others, in spite of the fact that there has been one protest demonstration in Blagoevgrad. On Monday, Stanimir Ilchev did an information session on the situation for the President's Advisory Council. Approximately 70% of the Bulgarian population oppose the war and any involvement of Bulgaria in it. The Socialist Party staged the demonstration in Blagoevgrad on Monday wherein about 4-500 people attended in the middle of the town. One sign said "Americans Go Home. We are thankful to the mayor for insisting on this venue rather than letting the demonstration take place in the plaza in front of AUBG. Last evening, Prime Minister Kostov was in Blagoevgrad and spoke in the Peyo Yavorov Hall next door. Needless to say, there is a great deal of political activity surrounding the Bulgarian Government's position in support of NATO. How we will experience this in conjunction with our Commencement is not fully

known or understood.

We look forward to seeing you, Directors and Trustees, at the upcoming meeting and for the Commencement Ceremony. Our attention should and must be on the continuation of our mission as an international, regional educational institution that is preparing a new generation of leaders. The graduation of 120 students and the acknowledgment of their academic achievements will be a glorious day in their lives. We owe them nothing less.

May 10, 1999 – Amid all of our exhaustion from the board meeting, commencement seemed electric. Students so excited. Had to negotiate with border crossings so that Serbian and Albanian parents could come through for the graduation of their kids.

May 21, 1999 – Drive back from Sofia to Blagoevgrad. Head-on accident. Two men killed. But lightning in the sky – was lightening or bombing?? A bit disconcerting to say the least.

May 22, 1999 – Why do we have this stupid, senseless war going on – no exit in sight.

June 3, 1999 – Looks like a peace agreement – didn't believe that this would really happen.

June 4, 1999 – Peace text being published – must be real. Moving quickly on the implementation.

June 9, 1999 – Still no peace in Kosovo.

June 11, 1999 – Peace in Kosovo on

the way. A general sigh of relief. Bulgaria made the right choice, this should raise self-esteem and help deal with the inferiority complex. Storks in the fields, in the nests and flying low over the fields.

June 21, 1999 – Update to Board

It should come as no surprise to any of you that we are VERY relieved to have the bombing to our west suspended and to see refugees begin returning to what is left of their homes in Kosovo. We know that the implementation of a just and sustainable peace will be difficult, but there is a general sigh of relief among those of our AUBG Community.

We are awaiting information about the possibility of having refugee students in our third summer session. You'll recall that this was an initiative suggested at the May Board meeting. OS Macedonia as well as OS Sofia are the partners getting this in place—handling the legal issues in both countries. We have been told that with NATO entering Kosovo, they are recruiting English speakers as interpreters—this may mean that many of the student refugees that we would be interested in having at AUBG mid-July to mid-August may take this opportunity to work with NATO. Nonetheless, we continue to plan for the students and as requested by OS Sofia, I have sent a letter to the Deputy Prime Minister seeking his support for this initiative.

A student initiative of the AUBG chapter of the European-wide student association AEGEE (Association des Estantes Generaux

des Etudiants de l'Europe) for a conference on the topic "Peace and Nationalism on the Balkans" is of special note. The conference is scheduled for October 1999 at AUBG. Invited are the Ministers of Foreign Affairs from Romania and Bulgaria. We are actively fundraising for this important event and have the support of Dr. Zhelu Zhelev and Ambassador Peter Metzger of Germany to write letters in support of funding for the conference. Dimi Panitza has also committed funds from the Free and Democratic Bulgaria Foundation in support of the conference. Thanks, Dimi.

We have been told by staff of UMaine that one of the University of Maine study abroad students who was with us this past fall semester has returned to Albania to work in the refugee camps this summer. Bravo! Our own Kosovar students frequently cross the border into Macedonia, looking for their friends. Last weekend, however, they were turned back. Jill Rasmussen, our Director of Residential Life, reports that we continue to give free telephone cards to the Yugoslavian students so that as the power permits they are able to keep in contact with their families. Jill also reports that there is a certain relaxed feeling on campus. All summer school students are living in the Skaptopara as are the visiting professors, thus fostering a positive informal dialogue and discussion about the situation in Kosovo.

September 1, 1999 – Update to Board

Monday marked the opening of our 1999-2000 Academic Year—the 9th for AUBG. We have welcomed 158 new students, including transfers, making our total for this semester right around 660. International students number 150 and are from 19 different countries.

We are actively working with USAID on the Kosovo Project. This is a commitment of \$1 million for the specific purpose of scholarships for students whose education has been disrupted by the Kosovo crisis and the on-going tensions and for short-term training in English language, computing, business and journalism. Chuck Grim, who has been shepherding this project through, will report on it at the Board meeting.

Epilogue, January 2000

Our lives have settled back into the routine of the academic calendar, but there are constant reminders of the Kosovo Crisis. Students' lives are still disrupted, but they are continuing on their educational journey. We learned the importance of trust in one another in facing the difficult days of NATO bombing and the days beyond.

On November 22, 1999, President Bill Clinton, the first U.S. President to visit Bulgaria, met with a group of 11 of our students in a roundtable conversation that lasted for one and one half hours. Our students were Albanian, Bul-

garian, Slovenian, Kosovo Albanian, Romanian, Kazakhstani, Macedonian, and Serbian. At the close of the conversation, President Clinton, according to one of the students, "assigned us the high responsibility to come up with practical ideas of how to reach a necessary critical mass in each of our countries. A small group of people dedicated to making a difference would be able to begin carrying out these ideas of democracy, participation, ethnic and national harmony in order to bring about the desired changes." President Clinton said later that day in a public presentation, "Earlier today, I had the opportunity to meet some of Boriana's classmates" (Boriana, an AUBG student, introduced President Clinton at the mass rally in Sofia on the evening of November 22 at the American University in Bulgaria.) "They were from Bulgaria, and from other countries throughout this region. And they were profoundly impressive to me — in their intelligence, in their compassion, in their determination to build a brighter future."

These students are now engaged in the development of a Young Balkan Leaders Program. □

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