

Kosovo: “Rise Above!” - Students fearless in defence of higher education reforms

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LeftEast Editor’s note: For a couple of weeks now hundreds of citizens of Kosovo- have been rallying in support of greater autonomy for the University of Pristina. Gathered under the slogan ‘For University’ they joined in support of the Rector’s proposed reforms for improving the quality of higher education. Yesterday’s dismissal of the Rector by the Governing Council of the University, sparked outrage amongst his supporters from “For University”, who called for a protest scheduled to start at 11:00, on 22nd of October outside the Ministry of Education in Pristina.

The Student’s Political Club is one amongst a number of groups of students and individuals who are supporting the protest. One of their activists, Eurisa Rukovci presents here an account of the challenges in higher education which the wider student movement is fighting to overcome.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Paraphrasing the Marxist educator, Paulo Freire in his masterpiece, “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”, an authentic vision for education is that which aims to transform the social structure that surrounds academia. Neo-liberal apparatchiks who manage our education system want to push teachers in a narrow minded focus of “audit trails” and “managing systems”, as a way towards achieving efficiency in classrooms. The same problem is present within the education system in Kosovo. The post-war period gave way to neoliberal reforms and neoliberal management which has ruined the education system all the way from primary levels to higher education. This is especially the case with the University of Pristina, which has historically been a hot-spot for political activity that paved way to social changes and solidarity amongst students. Worth mentioning are the leftist protests of the “National Liberation Front of Kosovo” in 1968, 1981 and 1997. This paved the way for the Liberation Army to use the university as a political hub from which to recruit a large number of soldiers. The University of Pristina can be seen as a live embodiment of dialectics, where bad and good, just and unjust battle each other. With these constant battles that have revolutionary character we can see that in the past years good has always triumphed over evil. However, since the war of 1998-1999, the recent unlawful policies have tipped the scales in favour of the defiling and corrupted government and its puppets (the majority of professors, deans and student organisations).

Seeing the troublesome circumstances a group of students who have left ideals decided to gather and start the student organisation- Students’ Political Club (KPS) in 2010 to combat all the corrupt and undermined structures in the University. A common goal united us, founded on the model for universal equality and social equity. When the organisation was set in motion, its main goals were

not nationalistic and it didn't intend to bring forth nationalistic propaganda fuelling the easy emotions that are present in the population. It had left tendencies from the start. In the beginning we started as a debate club where we read, listened and watched everything left. After establishing ourselves as a group, we moved on to other things. First off, we started going out on the terrain at protests and political actions which started off by opposing the increased rates of tuition, demanding better conditions in lecture halls and dormitories etc. After 2012 people started paying more attention and we caught the mainstream media's eye with the blockade of the faculty of philosophy.

The culmination of our activities has been marked by the protests of January and February of 2014 together with the "SKV Movement". We started off with 50 students and after two weeks we gained the support of over 5000 protesters. The police expressed violence using force, tear gas and even kidnappings. With this we managed, as Žižek wrote, to transform the daily objective violence of the system to subjective violence. From that moment until now, the positive side to tell this is that we have a larger number of activists. We are continuing with political activism that targets the Electricity Company, government corruption, women's rights etc.

Exploitative system- exploitative education

We continue to oppose the political societal formations where we live. Although we have a critique against the general political situation in Kosovo, we are concentrated in the critique for higher education. We oppose the neoliberal reforms and the Bologna process that is being implemented in our university. Considering the fact that in our country the political formation and its development are capitalist, the relations of production are exploitative. This implies that higher education as part of the superstructure operates in an exploitative manner also. Wilkinson and Pickett in their book "The spirit level: why equality is better for everyone", have shown that countries that have more inclusive policies and a lower rate of inequality have an education system that is higher in quality. Countries with low inequality, mainly the Scandinavian countries have a more qualitative education in comparison with Greece, Italy, USA and other countries that use free market logic.

Unfortunately this "Chicago Boys" logic has devalued and commercialised our education system. After the 2014's protests, there were changes in the administration. The past rector surrendered in the midst of the student protests after it was uncovered that his academic work was published in a questionable pay-to-publish journal in India. After the fall of the corrupted rector in 2014, there was a temporary man in charge for about six months.

Following those events, a new rector was appointed, Ramadan Zejnullahu. The University of Pristina has been broadly condemned for its relationship with corruption, political parties, and absence of literature. The new rector vowed to stop all of this and was immediately challenged by the corrupt 'leaders' of the University including professors and student organisations that are tied to parties and corruption that is overwhelming in our country. The Students' Political club has announced to the media the incrimination of the Senate and the Board of Directors and the ways in which they are still trying to keep corruption alive, and for each one of them we have exposed their academic shortcomings, plagiarism, and their ties to the corrupt political parties. They organised protests to overthrow the rector clinging to the lie that the reforms are going to harm students.

This paved the way for the student march on October 9th, which gathered student activists and members from civil society in support of the new rector. In support of the new reforms and in support of fighting crime in our university.

Even though the call for mobilisation was made in a short time, 24 hours to be exact, we had more than 200 people that joined us. What followed was a blockade at the rector's office from the Student

Parliament that lasted two days. We decided that we had to radicalise our attitude and decided to graffiti slogans all over the university's campus. The symbolic action of October 18th, was challenged by the police resulting in the arrest of five of our activists. Even though they were released overnight, our activists were attacked and threatened with guns and rubber truncheons in the University of Education, dean of which is a man with political power. This just proves our argument and we see clearly that even the security guards that are employed to guard the university are in service to the oppressive reign and they are used as militants to push political agendas with violence.

We are against and in favour of a notion and a concept

We stated that we are not defending anyone and we are not against anyone in particular. We are against and in favour of a notion and a concept. We are against the notion of a corrupt University, corruption that has been described and recorded that absolutely demonstrates that personal gain eclipses and overpowers the trust that has been put in the hands of those in charge of the education of students. We are in favour of the new reforms that are taking place that will make the University a better academic institution that has higher standards and is not pulled by the levers of power to advantage the people in function at the expense of the rest of us.

For more details about the activity in question and the general activities of KPS we have a statement from the activist Eroll Gashi who says that, recently KPS has co-organised a march which expresses support for many progressive processes that the university is going through. "Also, we have sought autonomy for the University and as a last demand, we stated that the budget that is being given to the education needs to become the country's priority", said Gashi adding that the university definitely needs to be politicised because knowledge in itself is political and that students must have an ideological-political formation. "Our critique against the student organisations that are the levers of the government and other corrupted parties lies in the fact that these parties aim to depoliticise the student and the university, and this is what they serve to. While in contrast from them we have a political critique and articulation on the university and we have ideological clarity, thus aiming to make radical transformations of all society," said Gashi, and added that KPS will continue to make the university a political factor of society and to make society a political concern of the university.

I often go back to the early years of my teenage life when performing was my hobby and I think back of the song "Rise Above" from "Black Flag". With it I always get reminded of the struggle that we have to fight for a better society, especially the verse "We're gonna rise above, we're tired of your abuse, try to stop us, it's no use." I began this article and I'm concluding it with these verses that reflect the grave situation in our university in hopes of radically transforming it.

Eurisa Rukovci

P.S.

* "'Rise Above!': Students of Kosovo fearless in defence of higher education reforms". LeftEast. 22 October 2015:

<http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/rise-above-students-of-kosovo-fearless-in-defence-of-higher-education-reforms/>

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