

Albulena Karaga



Education as a Strong Agent of Social Change

“Dealing with the past” a very sensitive issue in North Macedonia—Divided ethnic groups unite in nonviolent action

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Albulena Karaga, born in 1988, is a peace worker and trainer for the KURVE Wustrow partner Peace Action in North Macedonia, focusing on peacebuilding and “dealing with the past”. As a peace activist, feminist and ethnic Albanian, Albulena is very much aware of the social injustice often experienced by minority groups in her home country. She believes that education is a strong means to overcome such injustices and divisions and sees it as a form of nonviolent resistance against stereotypes which harm peaceful relations in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural environment.



Photo: KURVE Wustrow/Peter Steudtner

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consider it an illusion to think that nonviolence isn't working when we haven't given it a chance. After all, violent interventions haven't achieved much in decades. We just have to try hard and long enough and provide the necessary resources in order to be successful with nonviolent action. And one of the most effective means is education." For Albulena Karaga, education can bring about sustainable change and is thus a powerful form of nonviolent resistance against social injustice. In her trainings in peacebuilding and conflict transformation, she and her team are particularly focused on "dealing with the past"—a highly sensitive issue in her home country North Macedonia.

As an ethnic Albanian, Albulena was confronted with the social injustice often experienced by minority groups at a very early age. She also lived through the armed conflict of 2001 when the Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA) rose up against the wide-spread discrimination meted out against minorities by the Macedonian majority. As she recalls, the experience of her childhood and youth made her aware of how important it is to work for peaceful relations. So she took up studies in this area, eventually finishing with a Master's Degree in Peace and Conflict Transformation from the University of Basel in Switzerland in 2013.

A couple of years before, Albulena incidentally attended a ten-day training course offered by the non-governmental organisation Peace Action in cooperation with KURVE Wustrow. "This was a turning-point in my life", she says. "Until then, I had thought I knew a lot about peacebuilding and conflict transformation, and I probably did in terms of theory. But I was not at all conscious of practical peace work. Now, however, I came across action tools for practical implementation, and I was fascinated with the interactive methodology. From then onwards, I knew exactly which area I wanted to work in, and I wanted to do it within Macedonia."

Originally, Albulena had planned to go as a volunteer to Nepal after university, but now she decided to stay in her own country. "There was and still is so much to do at home, and I want to be part of hopefully bringing about social change", she stresses. She eventually took up a post with Megjashi, the First Children's Embassy in the World, another KURVE Wustrow partner with a strong focus on peace education and the rights of children. Here, she mainly worked with teachers, focusing on the need for better inter-ethnic relations in schools in Macedonia. Since 2017, she has been a peace worker with Peace Action where she is also co-facilitating training courses, thereby applying similar methodologies like

the ones that have fascinated her so much since 2012.

Albulena's main focus lies on "dealing with the past"—not a topic that is usually discussed between people from different backgrounds in North Macedonia. The dominant narratives related to the past do not communicate with each other, not even chronologically. "In the eyes of ethnic Macedonians, the country's inter-ethnic problems started only with the Albanian uprising in 2001", Albulena explains. "Ethnic Albanians, on the other hand, talk of a long history of discrimination which led to the armed conflict. So we have to promote dialogue and reflect upon these narratives." For Albulena, it is vital to build trust and overcome the fear of "the other side" by instilling curiosity into the participants of her trainings. By this, she means an interest in different cultures and a willingness to listen to a different point of view, even if one doesn't fully agree with it. And most of all, it is important to see "the others" as human beings instead of upholding stereotypes.

The participants are chosen mainly by their motivation which they have to describe when applying for these trainings. Interesting enough, many of them stress that they want to discuss about what is being officially ignored, since the armed conflict and its legacy are hardly ever addressed openly in North Macedonia.

Peace Action tries to offer a forum for uttering grievances so that both sides can exchange their views and perspectives and also learn about the pain they all have suffered. In other project activities, implemented by some of Albulena's colleagues, such stories are collected and then published in the Macedonian and Albanian language so that eventually an equal voice is given to all parties, including the other minority groups in the country.

Albulena is convinced that this can transform a divided society and promote unity based on mutual respect. "This is reflected in lasting friendships that evolve from these trainings", she emphasises. "Participants begin to see themselves as members of the same community with shared values, and there is a growing willingness to work together on issues that concern all of them. For example, people from our trainings came together in various demonstrations for issues that are important for everyone in our society: women's rights, climate change, fighting pollution and so forth. Our educational trainings are thus contributing to nonviolent action for social change, and I always feel highly motivated when I observe such developments."

Nonviolent action is highly important to Albulena. "We should always ask ourselves what we, as individuals, can do to address injustice and

transform our society”, she stresses. “Our trainings make people aware of the power they have, as individuals and even more so when they unite in action. At the same time, we always stress that we all have a responsibility to act.”

Albulena has no doubts about the long-term impact of nonviolent action: “It seems unfair that people start to question its usefulness when they haven’t achieved all their goals within a very short time. One has to accept that peacebuilding is a lengthy process requiring patience, dedication, creativity and imagination. You can’t build trust in a day and overcome decades of grievances quickly. Also, the resources given to peacebuilding are so much smaller than those invested in military interventions. We just have to expand more energy on peaceful solutions. In the long run, this is the only way to spread hope and overcome social divisions.”

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