TEACHING PEACE STUDIES AT THE HIGHER EDUCATION LEVEL IN BULGARIA: AN EXOTIC IDEA OR A NECESSITY

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Abstract

Peace education represents an important tool to fight the repercussions of armed conflicts as well as to prevent the latter from occurring. Nonetheless and despite the existing challenges in terms of demographic trends, ethnic tensions, and the refugee and migrant flows, peace studies education in the Republic of Bulgaria at the tertiary education level has not still been developed to meet today's peace and security challenges. What is more, the education system remains highly dependable on state funding, which in turn results in lack of understanding of the importance of peace studies and even in some controversial practices regarding the higher education in the country.

The present paper explores the current challenges to implementing peace studies programmes at the higher education level in Bulgaria, and states that the education system in terms of peace studies should not depend only on state funding and market necessities. Taking this into account, and based on both quantitative and qualitative data, the paper is trying to raise awareness of the importance of having peace studies programmes at the tertiary education level in Bulgaria, as well as to provoke discussions on the topic among university teachers and researchers.

Key words: *peace studies, armed conflicts, peace education, tertiary education, peacekeeping*

1. INTRODUCTION

Peace studies have an important role in forming a peaceful world and future leaders. We are living in a time, when wars, famine and suffering are still present, despite the big achievements in technology, communications and medicine. In fact, armed conflicts continue to represent one of the biggest threats to global security and peace. In 2017 alone some 99 000 people died due to armed conflict (McEvoy & Hideg, 2017), whereas in 2018 some 70.8 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide (UNHCR, 2019). A host of countries and regions are being disrupted politically, economically and socially, affecting the rest of the world. Armed conflicts provoke many complex and interconnected challenges and problems to international peace and security, such as terrorism, organized crime, structural violence, refugee and migrant flows. These are further aggravated by corruption, poverty and marginalisation, which in the end request billions of U.S. dollars for coping with their consequences. Under such circumstances education could play a vital role. In conflict regions, for example, there are many obstacles to provide even basic education to children, which contributes in the long run to marginalisation and poverty, spread of criminal activities, violent extremism and radicalization. At the same time, in countries that for decades have not had an internal armed conflict or have not been involved in other armed conflicts, apart from involvement through peace operations, as it is the case of most of the European Union (EU) member states, the education is easily accessible to almost anyone, at least in terms of primary and secondary levels.

However, when it comes to peace studies and its presence at the higher education level, the situation is different. The university curriculum differs across the countries, depending on the national context and political discourses. This is particularly true in the Republic of Bulgaria, where peace studies programmes in civil higher education institutions are absent or far from being developed according the requirements of the today's peace and security challenges. A similar lack could be seen even as an educational gap, especially given the country's recent political leadership aspirations to lead the Balkans toward a peaceful future (Barber 2018) as well as to be an essential part of the global effort to secure the world. Considering all this, the need for implementing peace studies programmes at the

higher education level in Bulgaria not only may be seen as necessary in terms of education, but also as a prerequisite through which the country will be able to contribute to the international peace and security.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

From a historical point of view, peace education emerged in early 20th century and then throughout the whole century, accompanied by two world wars and other major wars. Today peace education cannot be given a single definition. This is due to the fact that it differs across the countries and usually reflects the current security challenges, including the presence or absence of an armed conflict, the given national and regional context, as well as a host of other political, economic, social and cultural aspects, including the meaning of peace in the respective country. As Burns and Aspeslagh (1996, p. 7) note, peace education "emerges in concrete settings at particular times, through the interaction of past and present". In fact, peace education should be adapted to problems and conflicts, related to cultural and political backgrounds (Iram and Wahman 2003, p. 60). As Harris (2007, p. 7) states that peace education comes in different shapes as peace educators tend to address different forms of violence depending on the social context.

Fountain (1999, p. 1) regards peace education as "*a process of promoting the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to bring about behaviour changes that will enable children, youth and adults to prevent conflict and violence, both overt and structural; to resolve conflict peacefully; and to create the conditions conducive to peace, whether at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, national or international level*."

It is widely accepted that peace education plays a vital role in raising awareness on a host of political, economic and social issues. Peace education is also seen as a conflict prevention tool, focusing on the role that academic institutions can play in conflict prevention. Salomon and Cairns (2011, p. 5), for instance, associate peace education with the process of teaching people about the threats of violence and peace strategies. However, as Iram and Wahman (2003, p. 58) rightfully note, peace education is not able to bring peace on its own, rather it may contribute to the development of a culture of peace. In addition, peace education is an important tool to build trust and cooperation between different ethnic and religious groups within a given society as well as between countries, hence it helps in building a culture that contributes to reduce the likelihood of a violent conflict.

While peace education has its place at the primary and secondary education levels, peace studies is related mainly to the tertiary education level. This interdisciplinary field is aimed at forming a mixture of practical skills and theoretical knowledge necessary to contribute to a situation of lasting peace, including to the creation of such conditions or to conflict prevention and conflict solving. In this regard, one of the leading peace research institutes, *Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies* (n.d.), highlights that "peace studies aims to understand the causes of armed conflict, develop ways to prevent and resolve war, genocide, terrorism, gross violations of human rights, and build peaceful and just systems and societies". Following this line of thought, Loadenthal et. al (2019) notes that this field "focuses on developing a nuanced and contextually embedded model for understanding the different forms of violence, from the direct (e.g., war, physical assaults) to the structural (e.g., poverty, racism)". Barash and Webel (2008, p. 20) also state that peace studies focuses on the conflict prevention, de-escalation and solution, highlighting that this is supposed to be achieved through peaceful/nonviolent means.

Since peace studies is an interdisciplinary field, it is understandable that researchers from different fields are involved in its development. Regarding this, Lawler (2013, pp. 73-75) states that peace studies brings together researchers that have been previously trained in other areas of education and practice such as natural sciences, economics, psychology, anthropology, education and sociology, etc.

Following the idea of Johan Galtung (1969) of peace, this paper regards the term peace, not only as negative peace, that is, the absence of war/conflict, but it includes also the so-called positive peace, that is, the presence of the preconditions for a society where there is no structural violence or social

injustice. In fact, many existing peace education programmes and peace related ones focus on either negative or positive peace.

As for the peace studies related literature in Bulgaria, it can be said that the education programmes and research fall mainly within the broader field of security, and do not necessarily focused on peace education or peace studies. Hence, the literature regarding this topic is very limited. It is interesting to note that some of the works were published before the beginning of the so-called democratic changes in 1989, which can be explained to some extent by the then position of the country in political, economic and military terms. In fact, Tchakarov (1983, p. 409) states that *education for peace* creates "fighters for peace", i.e., individuals who are enlightened from political, economic, scientific, technical and cultural perspective and who are well aware of the interdependence of nations. He claims that the country is engaged in peace activities and the then government actually put efforts to achieve it, including through education. Mihaylov (1984, p. 57) also focuses on the term education for peace, paying particular attention on human rights at the higher education level.

3. PEACE STUDIES AND THE ROLE OF TERTIARY EDUCATION

Tertiary education is a major driver for innovation and research and has an important role in shaping societies and countries in economic, political and social terms. Higher education systems are aimed at preparing specialists, professionals and highly qualified manpower to meet the needs of governments, of industry and business, and all branches of society (UNESCO 1991). Furthermore, they are also expected to "educate highly qualified graduates and responsible citizens and to preserve its role as a pillar of endogenous capacity-building, the consolidation of human rights, sustainable development, democracy and peace, in a context of justice, while ensuring that the values and ideals of a culture of peace prevail" (UNESCO 1998). In addition, article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "education should promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace" (UN General Assembly 1948).

Certainly, many students choose their university and field of study out of economic prospects for their future. As a matter of fact, many studies and data indicate that there is a clear connection between the education level and the level of income (Valletta 2015; Lindley & Machin 2016). Others indicate a positive correlation between the education level and the unemployment rate (OECD 2012), although this may not be the case in some regions and countries or it could differ depending on the sector of employment (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos 2018).

However, nowadays literacy and education are also of utmost importance for peace and security all over the world. In many cases the higher number of students enrolled in secondary and higher schools means lower risk of armed conflict. In the opposite case, many children and young people that remain outside schools are likely to become an easy target for recruiting from crime, terrorist and other armed groups, depending on the country they live in. The main reason for this is that having a lower education level or lacking even basic education, leads to less economic opportunities, which in turn makes the above-mentioned groups very attractive from a lucrative point of view, especially in countries with high levels of poverty, social exclusion and extremely high percentage of children of the total population (UNODC 2017, p. 10).

In addition, peace education in general is also an instrument for building trust and cooperation between different social, ethnic and religious groups within a given society as well as between countries, hence a culture that contributes to reduce the likelihood of a violent conflict. Considering this, one of the main aims of higher education is to provide the students with the necessary theoretical knowledge and practical skills for their future professional life. In the narrow sense of peace studies, this can be seen as an opportunity for students, that in most cases are young people, to acquire those skills and knowledge through which they would be able to empower themselves and act toward a more peaceful society and world. Concerning this Skelly (2002, p. 59) states that peace studies should have a more central role in political and academic terms, highlighting that the way of talking indeed influences actual practice and one's way of thinking. Also, developing and introducing peace studies

programmes could be seen as a tool for countries and societies to act in a preventive way, not only in the aftermath of an armed conflict. What is more, for peace education and peace studies often reflect local and regional aspects, *"such skills, attitudes and knowledge can be used to tackle a whole range of problems which can be personal, interpersonal, national, regional and international in nature"* (Chinyere 2013, p. 340).

4. WHY PEACE STUDIES IS NEEDED IN BULGARIA

Peace education in general and peace studies in the narrow sense, could form a mindset, which would increase one's role in preventing and solving conflicts, as well as it could contribute to the State's role in peace and security related matters, including the efforts of the international community in this field. Furthermore, peace should not be limited only to the political, military and/or religious actors' agenda. In this regard Pandey (2016, p. 39) notes that ideas of peace often derive from a certain religion or a political school of thought as well as from opposing theorists such as power or idealistic ones.

It is reasonable to think that some States would be more concerned about the peace agenda as they are directly involved either in an armed conflict or its solving, or their economic and political interests are intertwined with the consequences of a given armed conflict and other regional and global peace and security matters. Against this background peace studies in Bulgaria is a relatively unknown and less popular field among students and even among researchers. If we look at civil universities' curricula, we find out that as of January 2019 there is not a single bachelor's or master's peace studies programme. However, it should be noted that there are some undergraduate and graduate education programmes that do include certain courses related to peace and mainly conflict studies. Such programmes and courses are presented at both military and civil universities and to a certain extent this can be regarded as one of the main reasons behind the lack of a higher education programme entirely focused on peace studies.

According to data from the Register of Higher Education Institutions (2019), currently in Bulgaria there are 51 higher education institutions, of which 37 are public and 14 private ones. Among the civil higher education institutions that offer courses related to peace studies are, for instance, the University of National and World Economy, that delivers courses in Conflict Management and International Peace Operations, and Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" that has a Master's Programme in Crises, Conflicts and Diplomacy in World Politics, 16th – 21st Centuries. However, these are courses and programmes that involve the broader topic of security or international relations.

The need for peace studies programmes in Bulgaria is also determined by other factors such as demographic trends, past conflicts, current ethnic tensions in the Balkans and the foreign influence that still divides the region. For example, according to some demographic projections, Bulgaria is going to face a considerable population decline till 2050: it is expected that the population would shrink to between some 5,4 million (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2019) and 5,8 million people (National Statistical Institute 2015). Such a decline will very likely mean that the current proportion between the percentage of ethnic Bulgarians and Bulgarians of Turkish and mainly of Roma origin will significantly narrow. On the other hand, possible significant (regular) migration flows combined with the already existing ethnic tensions in the Balkans and the interest of the different external actors could lead to serious challenges to national security.

In addition, some important political, economic and social processes in recent years, such as the refugee and migrant crisis have also shown the need for peace studies programmes in Bulgaria. The reactions of the government and the locals, and even of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (2015), have demonstrated that the country needs people with the adequate education and experience in order to cope with such events more efficiently while respecting the human rights of the newcomers and the interests of the Bulgarian citizens. What has been done so far in this respect is far from that. The crisis has been used mainly by certain political parties for gaining more public support, whilst fuelling not only populism, but also the spread of ethnic and religious tension. At the same time the local population perceives the refugees and migrants, mainly through the media, which often are closely related to the interests of the same political actors. Fear, wrath, unconcern towards the needs of

those who suffer and opposing any different idea due to the lack of enough information are widespread. It can be said that, in turn, this reflects to a large extent the lack of media freedom in the country, whose 111th place in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders 2020) is understandable for many in Bulgaria. To all this it can be added that we are still witnessing significant divisions among the Bulgarian citizens based mainly on ethnicity and to a much lesser extent on religion, while certain interests and influence of external actors are also presented, usually through economic and political means.

Also, students and youth in general, interpret a lot of information through social media, which is of great importance when it comes to peace and security matters, especially taking into account that Bulgaria has not been a field of a violent conflict for decades. Therefore, launching peace studies programmes could lead to more informed and professionally involved young people (and not only), that will have the opportunity to act at both the local and international levels as well, spreading and using their knowledge and skills to fight prejudices, hatred, inequality, violence and populism. In addition, through developing and introducing programmes in peace studies at the higher education level, Bulgaria would make an important step to prevent armed conflict from occurring even within its own territory.

5. CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING PEACE STUDIES EDUCATION AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL IN BULGARIA

Launching undergraduate or graduate peace studies programmes might seem easy enough on paper for a given university. However, in practice this is far from the truth and requires a host of challenges to be overcome, most of which are usually intertwined. Generally, when it comes to peace education (to peace studies too), such ones are, for example, the lack of state capacity, insufficient investments in education, inadequate, poorly paid and/or unmotivated teaching (Mwaniki 2017) and administrative staff, the lack of understanding of the importance of peace studies within the state and society, as well as the lack of nexus between the tertiary education and the practice. The most significant challenges are presented below.

5.1. The lack of nexus between the higher education and the practice

One could easily state that the lack of nexus between the higher education and the practice in the case of Bulgaria is visible enough. In this regard, a report of the EU Commission (2017) indicates that the employment rate of recent tertiary graduates was 78.5 % in 2016, while the EU average was 82.8 %. In other words, it can be assumed that the labour market relevance and the quality of higher education need to be further improved. What is more, the same report reveals that some 35% of those graduated at the bachelor level have a job position that does not require a higher education degree. At the same time some sectors received a much higher number of graduates (in 2015, 50% studied social sciences, business and law) in respect to the EU average (33%), while only 7% graduated in health-related studies (in the backdrop of the EU-28 average 13%). Furthermore, the already happening automation and robotization, including the use of AI technologies, will push the higher education institutions to look for even stronger collaboration with the private sector, in order to make their diplomas relevant to the needs of the labour market (Mellul 2018, pp. 15-22).

To the above-mentioned it can be added that other challenges such as the demographic trends, including the declining number of students, and the unknown job opportunities for those who decide to pursue a diploma in peace studies in Bulgaria. All this makes a diploma in this interdisciplinary field less attractive to (prospective) students compared to other university education programmes.

5.2. Declining number of students

The constant decline of the number of students in recent years (Figure 1) and the controversial formula for funding universities based on the number of students among other things (regarded below), have resulted in the idea (strongly backed by politicians) that the university curricula must depend on the market. If we follow this line of thought, then we could suggest that if the market had demanded it, then it should have so far created peace studies programmes.

Moreover, forasmuch as some bachelor's and master's programmes indeed include courses related to peace studies, launching a programme entirely focused on that topic seems like as an unnecessary activity with a dubious impact on the given higher education institution. With regard to this, the decision of the government to fund as a matter of priority certain professional areas and the so-called 'protected specialties' (The Council of Ministers 2016), that is, those that are considered important for the market and the state, is another problematic issue. Actually, it could be seen as a deterring factor for universities in terms of developing and launching new undergraduate and graduate programmes in other professional fields that will likely give results in years.

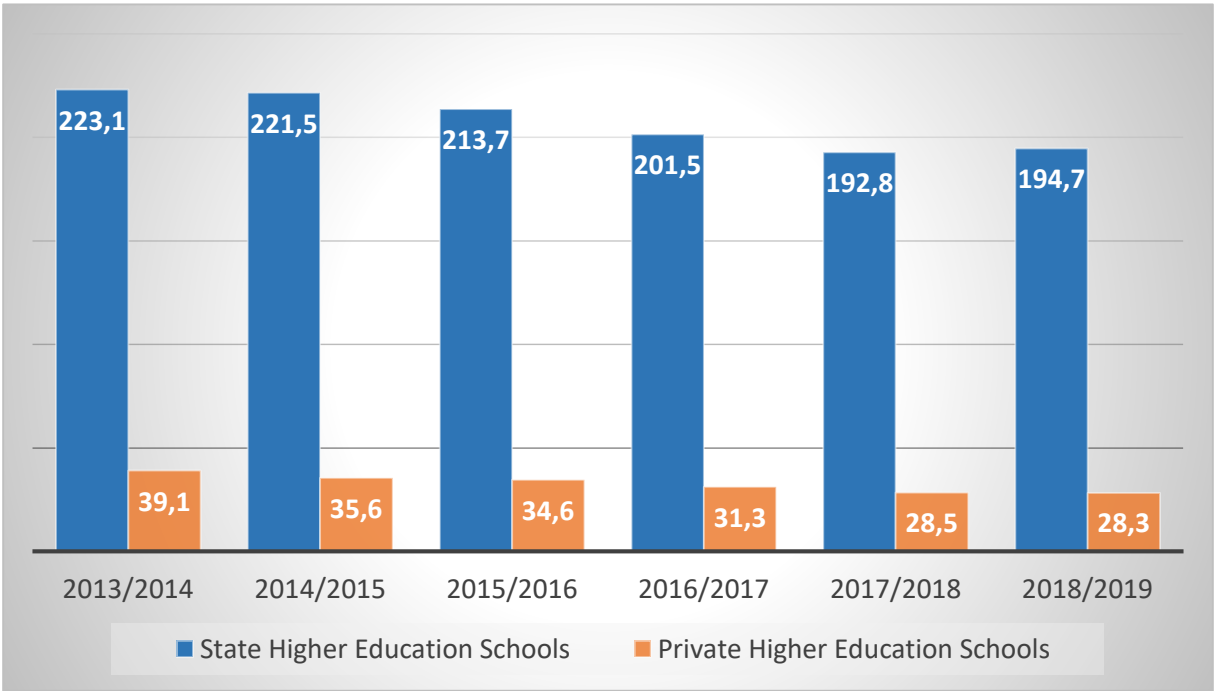


Figure 1. Number of students (in thousands) in the Bulgarian State and private higher education schools in the period 2013/2014-2018/2019 academic years

Source: National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria

5.3. Strong competition between higher education institutions

The declining number of students leads also to another challenge: **a strong competition** between universities offering seemingly similar bachelor's and master's degree programmes, that in some cases results in very controversial and unethical academic practices such as for example lower entry and semester exams.

In terms of the competition between the Bulgarian higher education institutions, there is a relatively widespread assumption, according to which matters, for instance, related to war studies, should be an area reserved for the military universities. In fact, it is believed that there is a strong competition in the country between them and the civil universities. The same applies to the presumed rivalry between the latter and the Police Academy in Sofia, regarding other security topics. A possible reason for that is the role of those higher education institutions in the defence and security sector during the communist rule in Bulgaria.

5.4. Limited State funding for education

The limited financial resources from the State budget are often regarded as a main factor for the presumably low quality of the sector. However, this is only partially true. As it can be seen in figure 2, the state budget for education purposes in 2019 was 3.6% of the country's GDP. While this is less in

respect to what other EU states spend on education, it is not less than the budgeting of other state sectors in Bulgaria such as defence, internal security and health care. It is worth mentioning that there are also other factors that have an impact on the mentioned low quality of the education in Bulgaria such as obsolete curriculum, bad financial management as well as the previously noted existence of many institutions of tertiary education offering similar curricula.

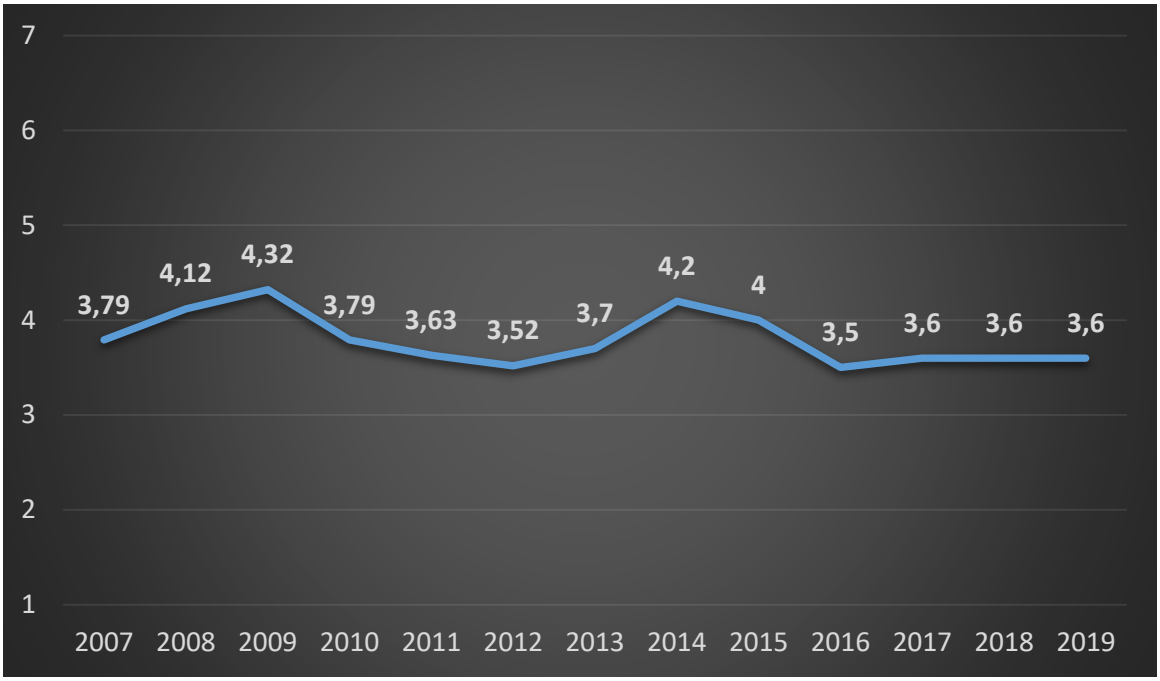


Figure 2. Education budget in Bulgaria in 2007 – 2019 (% of GDP)

Source: Eurostat

It has also to be noted that the so-called system of delegated budgets, launched with the idea to decentralize financial management of basic and secondary education and affirm the financial autonomy of schools has so far created incentives for them to retain students at all costs, including the widespread vicious practice of enrolling and keeping on paper students, who do not actually attend the given school (Nikolov 2017, p. 6). Such practices and the demographic crisis in Bulgaria have also resulted in providing the universities with students, which interests in obtaining a quality education might be placed in serious doubt. This in turn leads to lack of motivation among professors and even students who are supposed to work and respectively study in a context that creates more challenges than incentives to them.

In addition, and given the above-stated, in recent years lowering the requirements of the entry tests and semester exams at the tertiary education level is a common practice more often than not. This is due to the fact that the state subsidy is tied to the number of students the universities have, as well as to the professional fields and evaluation for accreditation, while in general the quality of the education provided remains questionable. In other words, the public universities are strictly resource dependable on state funding, which affects negatively the whole education system.

In this line of thought, it can be said that the Bulgarian public universities are still far from the full development of the so-called academic capitalism, that is, the pursuit of market and market-like activities to generate external revenue (Slaughter and Rhoades 2009, p. 11). Behind the reasons for this, however, are not only the lack of understanding by state actors, but also resistance to change, for such development will inevitably lead to serious changes in even faculty employment as well as to a stronger struggle for students among the universities. Nowadays, most Bulgarian public universities

are trying to survive and do act to some extent as capitalist entities, however, often at the expense of the quality of education they provide. At the same time, the latter inevitably affects the research activities within the same universities, that subsequently fail to reach higher positions in the international rankings. Such results are usually viewed critically by governments, the public and the media (Somers et al. 2018, p. 33), and lead to less academic freedom, for the universities are expected to act more as corporations (Murray 2018).

5.5. Lack of interest

Another challenge that many could point out today is the lack of interest from students in civil universities in terms of undergraduate and graduate programmes that are not clearly tied to the market necessities, which is just one more argument for universities not to launch peace studies programmes. However, according to data from the National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria (2019), in 2017 total of 1927 students graduated from universities in the broad field of security, of which 758 from bachelor's degree programmes, 1146 – from master's degree ones, and 23 – from PhD ones, while in 2018 their number was respectively 890, 1292 and 43 (a total of 2225 graduates). Furthermore, during the academic year 2017/2018 there were 4 953 bachelor's degree students, 1698 master's degree ones, and 107 PhD students, enrolled in security related programmes (National Statistical Institute 2019). How many of all those students would pursue a diploma in peace studies is difficult to say, but their number could actually mean that leading universities should take this matter seriously. In fact, this is one of the fields that attract many students globally, which is not only due to market-driven choices.

Even if we admit the market's leading role in university curriculum development as well as in launching certain courses within faculties and departments, peace studies should not depend entirely on the market necessities. This is mainly because of its importance for promoting peace, including handling the possible consequences of even a single violent conflict. The civil war in Syria, that has been conducting for more than 8 years, is a case in point.

The lack of interest could also be explained, although only to a certain extent, by the political and economic discourse in Bulgaria over the last few decades. The communist rule and the so-called democratic changes after 1989 did little to contribute to the development of peace studies. At the same time, for example *Norway and Sweden were the first states in the world to support the establishment of institutionalized peace research*, which was possible due to their social-democratic welfare programmes put in place (Lawler 2013, p. 79).

5.6. Limited presence in peace operations

The challenges mentioned so far, however, are not the only factors that define the very poor presence of peace studies in the Bulgarian higher education system. It may be said that the *country's current scarce presence in the EU- and OSCE-led peace operations, and especially in the UN-led ones* also plays an important role in this respect. The very limited number of military and police forces and civil staff in peace operations and missions is a precondition for the lack of role models for youths to follow. In this line of thinking, it is worth admitting that in recent years Bulgaria has not been enjoying strong positions in terms of diplomacy, political, economic and military power globally and thus the country tries to stick to a policy that does not lead to confrontation in any way with its neighbours (most of which once were enemies) and the so-called big powers. Actually, often the political behaviour of government representatives may be understood as a lack of a clear position in terms of certain political discourses, as they try to be a trustworthy partner of the EU and NATO member states, while taking a soft stance on some very sensitive security and human rights related topics involving, for example, Russia and Turkey.

In regard to the above-mentioned the country's relatively strong military presence in NATO-led operations over the last 15 years is primarily understood in terms of the Bulgarian membership in the Alliance. Put it simply, it is seen as something normal and expected, which, however, remains entirely a military issue when it comes to the required level and type of education or preparation. Moreover, due to the pro-Western and pro-Russian views, and respectively the anti-Western and anti-Russia

perspectives among the Bulgarian politicians and citizens, those operations are also often seen in a negative light, that is, as in the interest of given countries and/or as an economic burden for Bulgaria.

It is also important to highlight that launching peace studies programmes may require further *training of teachers and administrators*. For instance, the development of specialists who are qualified in both teaching and research takes time (Poudin 2013, pp. 479-480). Nevertheless, in times when competitiveness plays a major role, certain decisions can be taken without considering the lack of time, which may result in poor teaching programmes and less interest from students. Subsequently, even ideas of developing such programmes are being rejected at an early stage of planning.

5.7. Research institutes and centres.

The role of research institutes and university research centres in peace studies as well as of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can also be considered a challenge to the launching of such programmes in Bulgaria. The former were among the pioneers in promoting peace studies in the mid-20th century and nowadays, a number of research centres and institutes all over the globe offer training courses in peace and security related topics or/and other usually short forms of peace education in general. Many university research centres and other research institutes, related to the broader security and defence field, exist also in Bulgaria. Normally such a research centre is being created within a given university department, but there are also others that are founded and maintained with an external financial aid. However, despite of the fact that some of these entities participate in national and international projects dedicated to peace and security, they remain relatively unknown to the general public, students and media. The reasons for this are different – from bad or lacking marketing to poor funding and lack of adequate staff. It is also known that many of these research centres are being founded with the idea to participate in externally funded projects and not necessarily with the aim to educate students.

At the same time universities and other research centres are not the only actors that provide forms of peace studies education. Among them are also the NGOs, which today play an important and sometimes even vital role in peace related activities such as providing humanitarian assistance and post-conflict society reconstruction. By their involvement in peace activities, they are often seen as an integral part of peace-making and peacebuilding (Jeong 2017, p. 41), as well as important actors in promoting peace and development in general.

The situation in Bulgaria, however, differs from what this sector represents in Italy for example. Civil society organizations (CSOs), including NGOs in the former find it difficult to attract employees, as they cannot offer the long-term stability and high salaries in contrast to other sectors (United States Agency for International Development Bureau for Europe and Eurasia Technical Support Office 2017, p. 65). In addition, volunteer activities in third countries are still not popular among Bulgarians, although many are indeed involved in volunteer activities in Bulgaria. The reasons for that could be different: from poor media coverage and even deliberate disinformation, including in terms of the recent refugee and migrant crisis in the EU, to the lack of examples to follow.

In addition, the public approval of the NGOs has been in decline over the last few years. For example, although the environmental activists are usually seen in a positive light, this has recently changed, mainly because of occasions when the corporate interest coincided with those of the local population in mainly tourist regions. Also, many NGOs have been founded by figures who are member of political parties or closely related to them, that is, they act as government or opposition related structures, which negates the NGOs role in shaping and/or supporting the public opinion in terms of important issues to the society. Furthermore, many NGOs and CSOs in general receive project funding from other States (for instance through America for Bulgaria Foundation and the European Economic Area (EEA) and Norway grants), which is seen as interference in the domestic affairs of the country and promoting of ideas that are not shared by many Bulgarian citizens.

6. CHALLENGES AS OPPORTUNITIES

Whereas the very limited presence of peace studies in Bulgaria can be seen as another lacuna in the education sector and in the country's ambitions to play a bigger role in maintaining international peace and security, it also represents an opportunity. Launching peace studies programmes could benefit from those already existing around the world and hence, avoid some errors while doing so. For example, it is reasonable to think that a programme tailor maid for a given university in the United States of America or in Kenya could not be just copy-paced and make it work in Bulgaria.

The obstacles in political, economic and social aspect created as a result of the refugee and migrant movements represent another impetus for discussing the need for peace studies at the tertiary level. Besides, by launching such programmes, the system of higher education could actually contribute to national and international peace and security. The same would apply to the Bulgarian state in case it is keen to invest in education that it is not visibly tied to the current market necessities in the country.

What is more, the demographic trends suggest significant changes in political, economic and social terms. The education sector is not immune to such changes as well. In fact, there have already been certain modifications in the school curriculum at the basic and secondary education levels, and as a result, this has led to public discontent, for many see some of the changes even as attempts to replace historical facts and attempts to change the country's history in general. However, such public discontent is very unlikely when it comes to the tertiary education level, as it is not mandatory and besides, the universities have their academic autonomy, that is, academic freedom and academic self-government.

Despite some negative aspects of the political and social context in Bulgaria, however, the country can be seen as a good example in terms of a peaceful coexistence of different religions and ethnicities. Almost five centuries under the Ottoman empire's rule and 45 years of communist regime did not lead in the last several decades to an armed conflict based on ethnicity or religion. Moreover, Bulgaria has one of the largest Muslim populations in the EU as a share of the state's total population: 7,8%, according to the last National Census (National Statistical Institute 2011), and the largest one (11,1%) according to the 2016 estimations of the Pew Research Center. Nonetheless, it should be mentioned that almost every year there are cases leading to ethnic tensions mainly between ethnic Bulgarians and Bulgarian citizens of Roma origin. Yet, most of those cases are politically influenced and instigated. On the other hand, given the already mentioned demographic trends, such cases are one more reason for implementing peace studies at the higher education level.

It is also worth highlighting that while in general the number of students enrolled in universities has been declining over the last several years, there has been an increase in the number of foreign students enrolled in Bulgarian higher educational institutions (Figure 3). Very likely such a trend is mainly due to the lower fees in comparison to other countries in certain university programmes such as Medicine, but as Lane states (2012, p. 12), it also derives from the willingness of some states to outsource the higher education of their students to other nations, which are considered more advanced in this regard. This means that in a competitive environment at the higher education level, such a trend could serve as a further impetus for developing new programmes, more precisely in the peace studies field. Although related to the broader field of security, as an example in this respect can be regarded the International Master's programme "Defence and Security Economics" with a specialization in "Nuclear Security" at the University of National and World Economy, which attracts mainly foreign students, showing that the education system is expected to be more open to new regional and global realities.

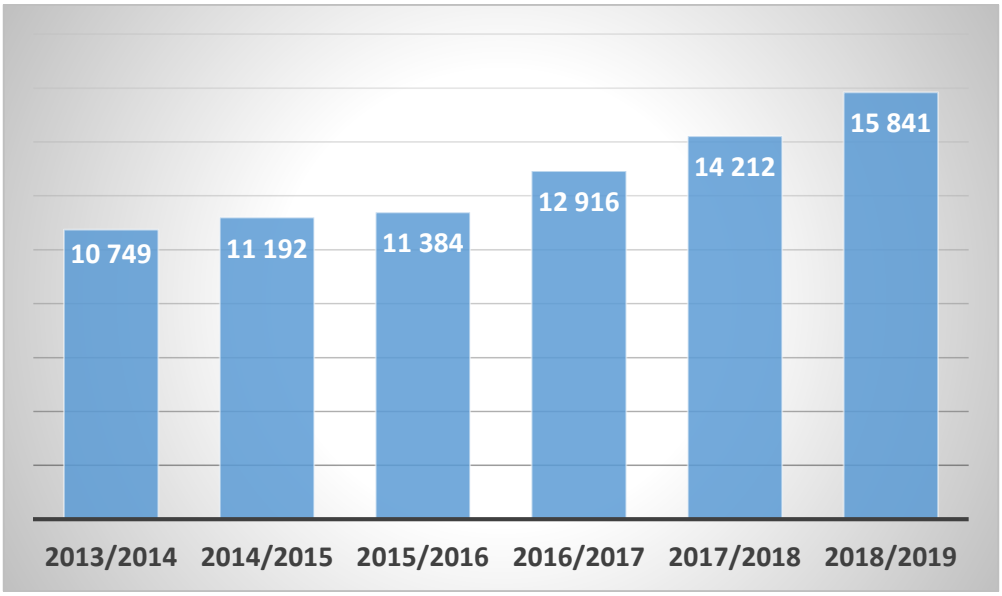


Figure 3. Number of foreign students in Bulgarian higher education institutions (2013/2014 - 2018/2019)

Source: National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria

Likewise, it has to be underlined that peace studies education leads to job opportunities all over the globe, having particular meaning to those working in this area, which can be also used to attract both national and international students. At the same time, it should not be disregarded the opportunity a given Bulgarian university to become a regional leader in providing peace education.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although in Bulgaria there are some undergraduate and graduate programmes that include peace studies related courses, the need for programmes at the tertiary education level entirely focused on this interdisciplinary field is needed for a number of reasons of political, economic and social nature: from the role the country wants to play at the international level to the interactions between Bulgarian citizens and migrants and refugees, to the importance and place of the universities in the academic field at the national and regional level.

Many challenges still exist for tertiary education in Bulgaria: budget limitations, resistance to change, demographic and student enrolment trends and many more are seen by universities as deterring factors when it comes to new ideas, that are not entirely related to the market necessities. However, whereas launching peace studies programmes is impeded by such obstacles and challenges, certain recommendations can be made. For example, as stated previously, a peace studies programme in the country should not be simply copy-paced from a foreign university or narrowed in scope due to some administrative/bureaucratic issues. Instead, peace studies education at the tertiary level in Bulgaria should pay attention to national and regional context, disparities and social inequalities. An important point would be that such a programme should also be developed in an inclusive way in terms of minority groups in order to create bonds between different ethnic groups to work together for a common peaceful and prosperous future. Further, by reflecting the national and regional context, it might attract more students from the region and even avoid, to a certain degree, the competition of other universities out of the country. In this way, such a programme could also avoid accusations of spreading external to the country political and economic interests, at least when it comes to the public higher education institutions.

As for the existing competition at the tertiary level, it can be said that a competitive environment at the higher education level has always served as a further impetus for universities to develop and launch new undergraduate and graduate programmes, including single courses. Therefore, the competition could be useful once again, this time in terms of peace studies programmes. However, it is important to highlight that a situation in which several universities in the country offer peace studies programmes out of ambitions to attract more students and other benefits has to be possibly avoided. Otherwise, it is likely that peace studies education at the tertiary level in Bulgaria follows the destiny of other professional fields in the country, that is a lower quality of the education provided. In addition, it would be better if initially that higher education institution, that decides to launch a peace studies programme/programmes, is among the leading universities in the country in terms of related matters, for the credibility and image at both the national and regional levels would be of great importance.

On the other hand, taking into account the challenges many universities in Bulgaria face, another approach towards creating undergraduate and/or graduate programmes in peace studies could be "a joint venture" between two or more tertiary education institutions, including foreign ones. The joint programme within *the NOHA Network on Humanitarian Action* can be indicated as a successful example of the latter. As a matter of fact, in recent years there have been some successful developments in the field of international cooperation between Bulgarian higher education institutions and foreign ones, including signing contracts for joint educational activities between Bulgarian and foreign institutions, which shows that some steps in respect to launching possible joint peace studies programmes at the tertiary level would not be entirely unknown or discouraging.

When it comes to the teaching staff, since peace studies are dedicated not only to issues of national interest, but of regional and global interest as well, it would be opportune that apart from Bulgarian teaching staff, foreign lecturers also participate actively in a future programme in this field. By providing peace studies education in Bulgaria with both Bulgarian and foreign professors it can be avoided situation in which external actors are viewed as new missionaries promoting external interests, as it is the case of some NGO's and research centres' education and training initiatives, while valuable experience will also be accordingly used. At the same time, valuable knowledge and know-how will be used and be of great benefit for the respective programme.

Last but not least, peace studies should be addressed to students with the scope to help them realize the role that it can play not only in their personal life, but also in the global world they live in, including in terms of conflict prevention and conflict solving. This is mainly due to the fact that peace is not a static process but a dynamic one. Therefore, the Bulgarian higher education system should and is expected to be more proactive rather than passive and reactive, that is, to act in a conflict-preventive way, even if a conflict looks far from occurring. This is especially true when it comes to positive peace, including structural violence, which to some extent is common in Bulgaria.

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