

CAFÉ EUROPE

Reviving multi-cultural values

Borjan Jovanovski's "open window towards Europe"

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Borjan Jovanovski presenting "Eurozoom". Photo: Eurozoom

"Tolerance is the basis, the fundamental pillar, if you want to make Macedonia a part of Europe," says Borjan Jovanovski, a Macedonian journalist who has dedicated much of his career to explaining the EU to the Macedonian public. For the past eleven years he has hosted "Eurozoom", a weekly TV show focused on life and politics in the EU. Jovanovski views his show as an "open window towards Europe."

Borjan Jovanovski was born in Skopje in 1966 when Macedonia belonged to socialist Yugoslavia. Like many ex-Yugoslavs of his generation who grew up in well-established urban families, he describes his childhood as "quiet, secure and happy." His mother was a journalist and translator, his father a known writer. Borjan recalls that the proceeds of a single book allowed his father to

buy a new car. The family was able to avoid the grey socialist housing complexes and afford a house with a green backyard in the outskirts of the city near Vodno, Skopje's landmark mountain. While Yugoslav citizens from poorer regions went to Western Europe to earn money, intellectual urbanites like the Jovanovskis travelled there for sightseeing and pleasure.

As Yugoslavia's economic and political problems became increasingly apparent in the 1980s, Borjan experienced personal difficulties with the federal state. At the time he was still a teenager and the drummer of the Macedonian pop band "Chaos in Laos" (*Haos in Laos*).

"Of course we wanted to record our songs. The only opportunity at that time was in Belgrade [the capital of the Yugoslav federation], because there was no record production in Macedonia. I was 16 years old. We called people in Belgrade and the first thing they said was: 'OK, in which language are you singing your songs?' We said: 'In Macedonian.' They then said: 'You have to translate it into Serbian, if you want to be considered for a possible record.'

Now, my mother is Serbian and I grew up in my mother's family. My grandfather and my grandmother are Serbian and the first language I learnt was Serbian. But I found this very strange, to say the least. Why shouldn't we be able to sing in Macedonian? That was the first time in my life I realized some of the problems of the Yugoslav federation."

After finishing secondary school in 1984, Borjan was required to serve in the Yugoslav People's Army. Young recruits usually were stationed far from home, in units comprised of young men of all of Yugoslavia's different nationalities. Obligatory military service was an important pillar of Yugoslav identity formation. Borjan was transferred to Zagreb in Croatia and faced another unpleasant experience with the joint state.

"I was declared a Macedonian nationalist. Why? There was a regulation in the army that if you are Macedonian, you could take your classes in the army in the Macedonian language, but nobody wanted to implement it. When I asked why, the captain declared me a Macedonian nationalist and a "Serbophobe". I was hurt, also because due to my mother I felt part Serbian myself. It was a huge frustration for me."

Upon the completion of his service, Borjan returned to Skopje to study comparative literature. Slobodan Milosevic came to power and the Yugoslav end-game began. Borjan says he still detests Milosevic, because he "filled the Yugoslav space with hate, nationalism and

intolerance". Borjan's ambition to become a journalist is "rooted in that period", he explains. In 1991, after finishing university, Borjan started to work for the state radio. In keeping with his family's literary tradition, his job was to present and discuss new books.

After Macedonia declared independence on 25 September 1991, the leadership of the public service broadcaster decided to bring a new generation of young journalists into the news programme. Borjan was one of these young journalists and in 1992 became a TV news reporter. A year later, the first private TV station, "A1", started to operate in Macedonia and invited the young news journalists from the state broadcaster to work at the new channel. Many of them, including Borjan, accepted.

After Macedonia had declared independence, Greece objected to the country's name, declaring it would constitute an inherent claim to the Greek province of the same name. For this reason, Macedonia was admitted to the United Nations in 1993 under the provisional name "former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (fYRoM). In 1995, Macedonia reached an "interim agreement" with Greece, widely considered as a step towards the resolution of the dispute. Many Macedonians hoped this would also open up the path to EU membership. Borjan moved to Brussels as a correspondent for A1. His mother had lived there in the late 1980s and Borjan had been a frequent visitor, picking up French and a liking for Brussels and Belgium.

"I found these people very tolerant. I never felt like a stranger in Brussels. It was the first place where I met people from the entire world. For me Brussels is a very exciting place."

Brussels is one of the most diverse cities in the EU, with 38 percent of the working age population (15 to 64 years) born outside Belgium. Only Inner London and Luxembourg have higher percentages. Borjan was reminded of his home country, though.

"Multiculturalism is something rather new for Brussels; in Macedonia, we have had this for centuries. My father was born in Prespa (in South-West Macedonia). Turks, Macedonians, Albanians, Roma, Vlachs – all these people used to live peacefully for centuries in this region. They met in one house, they made some food and then went to another house to drink coffee or tea. This multiculturalism is something that has been present in this region for a long time. But it was destroyed instead of

being used for positive developments; it was abused to make war and to kill people."

Borjan saw his experience of living in Brussels as "a privilege." He did an internship at RTBF, Belgium's French language public broadcaster. He was impressed not only by the professional journalistic work, but also by the functioning of Belgian society.

"I found a society where, for example, if a policeman beats somebody, he or even the interior minister could be dismissed. For me this was like discovering another planet. I was impressed by how the individual is valued, how people treat others, different people, black people or people like me, a foreigner from Macedonia.

Through my personal experience there, I somehow consumed the European idea. My question was, why not have these values in my country, why not live like this in my country? I saw the idea of European integration as an opportunity to re-import or to reanimate some of our values which had been infected or attacked by nationalists."

Borjan began to promote understanding for the requests of Macedonia's Albanians for more rights.

"Tolerance is the basis, the fundamental pillar, if you want to make Macedonia a part of Europe. So I started to report stories about interethnic relations. I pioneered reports criticising Macedonia because of its institutional attitude towards Albanians ... I try to make stories that are related to European values and analyze how these values could function in our country."

This was the basic idea for his programme "[Eurozoom](#)" which Borjan has produced and presented since 1998. His first shows were produced in Brussels, but in 1999 he moved back to Skopje. The programme features interviews with EU officials and other key actors, presentations of interesting books, and reports on the effect of EU standards on the daily lives of Europeans and what they would mean for Macedonians. The programme addresses issues ranging from police standards and human rights, to waste treatment, the professionalization of civil service, money laundering, fighting organised crime and models of attracting foreign direct investment.

Borjan took a break from the programme from 2001 to 2003 when – in the wake of Macedonia's 2001 conflict between Albanian rebels and Macedonian security forces – he served as spokesperson for the late Macedonian President Boris Trajkovski. He was hired in particular for

advocating the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement, which had ended hostilities and provided for increased rights for Macedonia's ethnic Albanian minority. In September 2003, a few months before Trajkovski's tragic death in a plane crash, Borjan returned to TV and his programme "Eurozoom", which is still running.

In 2005 Borjan Jovanovski married Amernis Nokshiqi, an ethnic Albanian actress, with whom he has two daughters. He also has a daughter from a previous marriage. ■