

EU –Black Sea Relations Examined from an Educational Perspective

The Black Sea region is an area with a vast history, which dates all the way back to Ancient Greek mythology. Leaving from a Greek city now referred to Volos, Jason and the Argonauts began their quest for the Golden Fleece, making their way to the isle of Lemnos, a part of modern day Turkey, and eventually travelled to Colchis, which is known nowadays as the west coast of Georgia.

Tales of struggle, fame, and fortune are an essential part of the Black Sea region's history. These stories are also much more than mythology. Archeologists have found artifacts from ancient Greek colonists along the coast of the Black Sea that have dated all the way back to the 5th century, B.C, which lead them to believe that there are vast amounts of history which have yet to be uncovered. While the Black Sea's past is rich with mystery and intrigue, today I will focus primarily on another topic. With the relatively recent introduction of Romania and Bulgaria to the EU, interest in the Black Sea region has increased exponentially in many different sectors. Being the Rector of a university in the Black Sea region, my forte lies within that of the educational sector, which is why I intend to discuss EU and Black Sea relations from the standpoint of higher education.

The EU has implemented several programs that have had a profound impact on higher education in the South Caucasus and Black Sea region in general, two of them being Tempus and Erasmus Mundus. Both of these programs seek to improve the capacities of higher education institutes through encouraging networking with their peers, as well as EU countries. Consequently, not only do the institutions involved in these programs further internationalize themselves, they also collaborate and build relationships with other institutions working towards similar goals. Students, staff, and academic faculty, not to mention the higher education institutions themselves all benefit from these programs – most noticeably in terms of increased mobility opportunities and program development. Erasmus Mundus focuses directly on creating mobility opportunities, while Tempus works to improve the facilities and opportunities within the network of higher education institutions themselves.

More specifically, Tempus program focuses on reforming and developing universities in such a way that promotes cooperation and partnership building. As an example of its method, one selected TEMPUS project, which my university, Tbilisi State University, was involved in, implemented a Master's in Applied Biosciences at five universities in the South Caucasus region –Yerevan State University, Armenian State Agrarian University, Akaki Tsereteli State University, and TSU. The end results are what make the TEMPUS program so influential. Through this project, new MA programs such as Applied Biosciences, that were not present previously were developed and then implemented at TSU and the other partner universities involved in the project.

Another example of the TEMPUS program's successes was the results of a TEMPUS project on implementing distance and eLearning courses in the biomedical sciences. The outcome of this project was the creation of a distance learning Master's program in Medical Molecular Biology between Tbilisi State University and the University of Westminster in the UK. Students who enroll in this program take courses at TSU, as well as online courses, and upon the completion of their degree, are able to earn a degree from the University of Westminster. Furthermore, this program has incredible practical value – it can prepare students for PhD studies in medicine and research, as well as provide them with the training necessary to immediately enter the job market, should they choose to do so.

To share some statistics with all of you, from 2006 to 2009 Georgia was a part of 35 Tempus projects. To date, Tbilisi State University has been a part of 21 Tempus projects.

Erasmus Mundus is another demonstration of the EU's interest in positive relations with the Black Sea and South Caucasus region. The program creates mobility opportunities through helping universities band together to create exchange programs with each other. These programs typically involve upward of 12 higher education institutions, with that majority of them being "3rd country partners".

Erasmus Mundus offers numerous types of mobility opportunities: individual opportunities for students and faculty, as well as networked opportunities, where students, staff, and faculty members of all participating institutions are eligible for a mobility opportunity. Since 2010, there have been 7 Erasmus Mundus projects that have involved Black Sea countries. Each of these projects offered a significant amount of individual scholarships for BA, MA, PhD, post-doctoral students, as well as faculty members.

To share some statistics with all of you, this year, TSU was a 3rd country member of 7 Erasmus Mundus action 2 partnership proposals. It is also a part of the ATEI of Thessaloniki EM project, which has sent over 50 students from Georgia alone to various schools in the EU.

Shifting away from mobility opportunities, the 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development has also had a significant impact on the Black Sea region, and especially in Georgia. Since 2007, FP7 has funded 26 projects in Georgia that have contributed to scientific research and development in numerous areas. The Black Sea Interconnection (BSI) project is one of the results of an FP7 project. The goal of BSI was to establish a high bandwidth research and educational network, which would enable Black Sea countries to participate in joint research projects, as well as information sharing. In terms of development, one of the long-term goals of the project was to help close the gap between European and Black Sea countries in terms of research capacity.

BSI established two major networks. First, with Turkey as the coordinating country of the project, it unified the South Caucasian National Research and Education Networks of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Second, the now unified network was connected to GÉANT2, which is a network that connects the National Research and Education Networks all across Europe.

Another European initiative of interest is the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States program (TACIS), which now goes by the European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument within Georgia and other ENP countries. In 2007, Tbilisi State University implemented its first and only European Studies master's program through the TACIS program.

While most of these initiatives are the focus of the European Commission, there are also projects initiated by individual European countries that have also had a significant impact on the improvement of education in the South Caucasus and Black Sea region at large. With the aid of the Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid of the Estonian Foreign Ministry, the Estonian National Examinations and Qualifications Centre, and 8 Estonian vocational schools the Georgian Ministry of Education and Science is in the process of implementing the second phase of the "Support for the Development of Georgian Vocational Education and Training", which will run until October 2013. This project will help to further align Georgian vocational education programs with that of the

EU's objectives through implementing quality assurance systems, as well as developing and implementing new curriculums within vocational schools.

As all of these different endeavors clearly show, Europe has made its interests transparent – it wants to show its support for the educational sector of the South Caucasus and Black Sea region. At the same time, however, it is also important for Black Sea countries to take on their own initiatives and work towards strengthening their ties with each other.

For a moment, I would like to shift back to the stories of Ancient Greek mythology. Archeologists believe that there is great potential for uncovering a lot of the Black Sea region's past along the eastern coast of the Black Sea. Between the 7th and 6th century BC, Greek colonists came to the area of Colchis and established cities in the area. One of the settlements they established, Phasis, became a popular area for trade amongst merchants. A survey that was conducted in 1999 by a group of archeologists seems to confirm this potential, as they discovered a modern area that has connections to the ancient city of Phasis. Even further, they also were able to collect over 1000 artifacts made from several different types of materials that when tested, dated all the way back to the 5th century BC. With that said, there is a lot of potential for educational endeavors between Black Sea countries, and a way for higher education institutions of the Black Sea region to further establish themselves as leading research institutions - especially in the field of Nautical Archeology.

In summary, the EU's interest in the Black Sea region has undoubtedly worked to expand the horizons of higher education. Using Georgia as an example, in 2004 the government began sweeping reforms of its higher educational system. Through the opportunities provided by programs such as Tempus, Erasmus Mundus, and FP7, Georgian higher education institutions, like Tbilisi State University, have been able to implement new degree programs, increase their capacity for research, and in general become more competitive with universities worldwide.