

## **The South Eastern Europe Higher Education Area: Is it possible?**

**Assoc.Prof. L.D. Lacrama, Assoc.Prof. T.M. Karnyanszky**  
**“Tibiscus” University of Timisoara, Romania**

**ABSTRACT:** Through history, South Eastern Europe has been a difficult and highly heterogeneous area of the continent. Nevertheless, recent developments have proved that a better future is possible. An important component of this genuine healing process is establishing connections and partnerships among universities inside the region. The present paper advocates the use of modern educational technology in order to implement common scientific and educational programs in this area.

### **1. Introduction**

South Eastern Europe has been a problematic area in which empires, nations, religions and economic interests often clashed with one another. As a result of their disputes, bloody and destructive wars ensued. In the previous century, for example, this region was the theater of the first<sup>1</sup> and last<sup>2</sup> war inside Europe; it was also here the World War I began.

During the Cold War, the area was split between the NATO members, the Warsaw Pact members and the unaligned communist states. All over the region there were autocratic and oppressive governments and there were troubles even between countries inside the same political block (e.g. although both Greece and Turkey were NATO members, the relations between them were extremely strained).

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<sup>1</sup> The First Balkan War of 1912 set Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro and Serbia against Turkey.

<sup>2</sup> The 1998 Kosovo War, the last confrontations in former Yugoslavia, ended with a NATO military intervention against the Milosevici government.

Even now, there are some frozen conflicts in the Balkan area and some political analysts say that the absence of a dominant economic and political entity in the region is the reason for a possible future competition among the South East European nations for the status of regional leader.

On account of this historical evolution, the political map of the South Eastern Europe includes mainly small national entities afflicted by weak economies and unstable democracy. The education systems are as needy and old-fashioned as the countries they represent:

- **Albania**, which was formerly a communist unaligned country, has been most isolated European nation, politically as well as economically, for many years. At present its efforts to develop are set back by the poor economy and by the absence of true democratic traditions as well as inefficient institutions. Its education system is poor and obsolete;
- **Bulgaria**, a former communist country in the Warsaw Pact, had a very difficult transition to a capitalist economy during nineties and experienced extreme financial crisis. Yet, its emerging democracy proved reasonably stable and recently becomes an EU member. The Bulgarian educational system is not rich and modern, but as a result of co-operation within EU Programs good progress has been made;
- **Bosnia & Herzegovina**, which was formerly a republic in Yugoslavian Federation, became independent after a fierce civil war among its three ethnic components. Ethnic problems are still unsolved and the economic situation is down, but there are hopes for the future;
- **Cyprus** has been a UE member since 2002, but it is still divided between Republic of Cyprus and Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (not acknowledged by the international community). Although both parts of the island have emerging economies, their educational systems are outdated and largely dependent of external financial help;
- **Croatia**, a former component of Yugoslavia, gains his independence in the nineties, after a bloody and destructive war. It is one of highly developed countries in the region and has already initiated the accession talks to enter UE;
- **Greece** has been an EU member since 1981, but hasn't succeeded yet in becoming a rich economy. Consequently, its educational system doesn't reach the highest quality. Never the less, one important feature of the Greek education is its international dimension; well-known American and British Universities established local divisions in Athens, Thessalonica and other major cities;

- **Macedonia**, a former republic of the Yugoslavian Federation, has surprisingly gained its independence without getting involved in the 1990's West-Balkans wars. The internal balance between the Macedonian majority and Albanian minority is still rather delicate, the economy is poor and relationships with some of the neighboring countries are cold. The educational system development is obstructed by the country's poverty;
- **Moldavian Republic**, which was a former republic in the Soviet Union, is now the poorest European country. Soon after having won its independence, a short interethnic war led to the formation of a *de facto* independent Transnistria (not acknowledged by the international community) and consequently to an endless frozen internal conflict. The education is as poor as country itself; a lot of gifted intellectuals emigrate to neighboring Romania<sup>3</sup> or to the West;
- **Romania**, a former communist country in the Warsaw Pact, experienced a problematic transition to democracy during the nineties facing multiple political, economical and social crises. At the present time, it has a reasonably stable democracy and its emerging economy is developing quite well. Consequently it entered EU on 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2007. The educational system is still quite poor and old-fashioned, but just like in Bulgaria, the EU Programs and some other international partnerships provided important funds for modernization;
- **Serbia and Montenegro** come out from the two not break-away republics of former Yugoslavia. The 1990's wars and political sanctions, which virtually destroyed the economy, had a great impact over the whole society. Except for the Kosovo region, where there are still unsolved problems, S&MN are about to regain its internal stability and the economy situation starts to improve;
- **Slovenia**, a former republic of the Yugoslavian Federation, has gained its independence without a war with Serbia. Slovenia is the richest nation in the area and has already become member of the EU since 2002. Its educational system is quite satisfactory for its internal needs, benefiting from a close partnership with Austrian and Italian universities;
- **Turkey**, which has been the dominant empire in the Balkan Peninsula for centuries, is still the largest nation in the area. Its

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<sup>3</sup> Since Moldavia is mainly populated by Romanians it has been no problem whatsoever for its cultural elite to move to Bucharest.

economic power is not as notable as its army and the political regime is far from being a stable democracy. Although internal problems came both from Muslim fundamentalists and Kurd nationalists, the army leaders proved to be an efficient and loyal defender of the Ata Turk secular state tradition. In spite of the fact, Turkey started in 2005 the accession talks for entering EU, most political analysts say that it will never be accepted and an “associate-membership” status will be an adequate compromise. Concentrated mainly in big cities like Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, the Turkish state-controlled educational system has big gaps in areas. Meanwhile, the Muslim-controlled educational system tends to gain control over the neglected rural area. Only a small number of universities are close to the European standards.

Even though Austria, Italy and Hungary are not included in the Balkan Peninsula, they are closely linked to it from historic, ethnic, economic and politic point of view. That applies particularly to the education, because student exchanges and even research partnerships have been established between universities in the Balkans and the ones from Vienna, Rome, Turin, Budapest etc.

## 2. Current problems and future solutions

Present level of the co-operation among universities inside South-Eastern Europe is far from flourish. Mainly this unsatisfactory situation is caused by four major factors:

- a. Language incompatibilities;
- b. Poverty and poor life standard;
- c. Low performance in university management;
- d. Lack of modern transport and telecommunication infrastructure.

**a. Language incompatibilities** The Balkan area is very diverse from the linguistic point of view. There are some medium size national homogeneous communities representing the majority inside countries like Turkey, Romania, Greece and Bulgaria, but also a quite large number of smaller nations and ethnic minorities with a remarkably different language, culture and traditions. In fact these ethnic minorities are heterogeneous

depending on their geographical position and their appurtenances to a country or another<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, the national education systems are restricted inside linguistic areas and it is far easier to find partnerships between a Balkan university and a western European one, than a co-operation between two universities of different language inside the region.

Nevertheless there are solid partnerships between universities sharing same or related languages. For example there are a pretty large number of students and teachers moving from:

- Cyprus (Greek part) to Greece;
- Moldavia to Romania;
- Macedonia to Bulgaria or Serbia;
- Muslim&Croats from Bosnia to Croatia;
- Hungarian minority of Romania to Hungary.

These co-operations are based on common traditions and interests. Such links are usually encouraged and even financed by the host countries governments and/or by the local authorities.

Therefore, in order to build an international university in the region, one should evaluate two alternative options:

- Teaching the entire curricula in English,
- Teaching each course in at least three or four languages.

The first alternative, imply that a preliminary year is needed for some students in order to get them to an acceptable level of English speaking abilities<sup>5</sup>, thus a supplemental year to pay. The second alternative also means that the education cost is higher because more teachers are needed.

**b. Poverty and poor life standard** For the moment, there are no really rich nations in Balkans. Some countries do have now good economic performances, but many years will pass before this evolution will produce a welfare society. Consequently, there isn't any famous and prosperous university able to exert an intense attraction in order to pull on a great number of students from all over the south-eastern Europe.

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<sup>4</sup> For example the Latino-phone populations south of Danube represent around 2 millions inhabitants from the Istro-romanians in Slovenia/Croatia to the Vlahos in Greece. They are all descendants of the people in antique Roman province of Moesia, but extremely different from each others.

<sup>5</sup> Within the young people, the number of English speakers is larger than German or French speakers. Anyway, the percentage of people knowing foreign languages is rather unsatisfactory.

This state of poverty has also the effect that most families are not able to send their children to study far from home. Therefore, they will be very happy to have a university in a town nearby where little or no transportation cost is required.

**c. Low performance in university management** Modern management is still *rara avis* all over the economic and social life in the region. Therefore, the university management is not an exception. Of course, partnerships with western or central European universities succeeded to impose some improvements, but, while in Balkan universities teaching and managing is not completely separated, the professional leadership is quite irregular.

Consequently, the little education budgets are sometimes made even more ineffective, because the spending are influenced by bad economic judgment or corruption. This leads to low payment for the teachers, no infrastructure investments and finally low quality teaching.

Another important fact to be mentioned here is that the national job markets are not very sensitive to the quality level of the universities. For most of the local employers it is not a significant difference between a diploma from a renowned university and one from an institution with any quality references. Thus, the option for the nearest university explained at (b) has almost no counterarguments.

**d. Lack of modern transport and telecommunication infrastructure** Even Balkan Peninsula is a wonderful place for tourists, and many countries do traditionally have large shares of their budgets coming from tourism, the transportation and telecommunication are here worse than in the other parts of Europe. Ironically, the pre-war Yugoslavia was an exception with its modern highways and its western technology phone network, but of course, now they are no more in good shape.

Anyway, in the last years this problem received some attention and international/local investments starts to move things toward a better prospect. Especially the EU efforts to establish modern traffic pan-European routes force the local governments to start built/repair the highways, improve railways, port and airport facilities, etc. Unfortunately, for many people, traveling is still quite expensive and free passage is obstructed by too many borders.

In fact, the most important improvement in the region came from the progresses made by the telecommunication networks. Mobile phone companies Vodafone and Orange completed impressive investments in the area and now speaking, images, internet and all other kind of computer data

are conveyable wireless all over the area. Also, the Greek company OTE succeeded to buy some important phone operators around and there is hope they will find a way to fulfill integration also in the field of wire communications.

Thus, even that for the moment it seems not very easy to realize, the Balkan integrated University/Consortium can become a reality in a reasonably near future if its founders will be able to implement this five rules:

- The University/Consortium structure must be dispersed in many locations, using a common standard curricula, but local facilities and teachers<sup>6</sup>. Teaching language can be local language in the first year and English afterwards;
- The telecommunication opportunities must be used intensively in combination with modern teaching techniques like distance learning and remote team work through virtual environments;
- The University/Consortium management must be fully professional, implying both going by the standard rules and adapting to the local realities when needed;
- The staff must have the chance to move periodically from one location to another and to be involved in common research projects or writing common teaching materials in English or multi-language versions;
- The University/Consortium must provide for it's students stages of study or practice in alternate locations, educating them not only as experts in their field of activity, but also man able to adapt in a globalize economic environment.

## **Conclusion**

The South Eastern Europe is still, a rather difficult area of Europe. Last years developments proved that a better future is possible, but these promising evolutions must be supported by common actions done both by the countries inside the area and by EU.

An important component of such a healing process is establishing partnerships among universities inside the region over passing the political

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<sup>6</sup> Of course local facilities need improving investments and teachers need to be trained with great care

and the language borders. This could lead even to integrated structures with common standard curricula, multiple locations and mixed teaching staff.

Such a consortium/university will have to use extensively the modern telecommunication facilities together with the innovative ways of teaching and training. This way is a good chance for ending the old anger that tormented the area for many hundreds years in order to change it in a constructive competition inside a multicultural academic community able to educate valuable experts and good European citizens.

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