

## **The Western Balkans : Analyzing a Higher Education Problem Area**

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The summer 2012 issue of *International Higher Education* (no. 68) included articles on higher education in two countries from the former Yugoslavia—Philip G. Altbach on Slovenia and Stamenka Uvalic-Trumbic on Serbia—and a review of developments in another Balkan country—Romania, by Paul Serban Agachi. The picture that emerges from these reviews is of higher education systems with undoubted strengths, struggling to overcome dysfunctional historical legacies, dating from before and after the formally communist period, but certainly strongly conditioned by it.

It may be worthwhile to compare the situations reported in these countries, with those found across the countries of the fragmented region now known as the Western Balkans—Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Montenegro, as well as Serbia. Albania is a special case, not having been part of the Yugoslav state and having suffered under the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha from 1945 to 1985—a regime that may justifiably be termed lunatic. All these

countries are struggling still to come to terms with the situation created by the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, between 1991 and 1995. All are trying to build economies based on national borders that define small states, with few natural resources and poor communications. Several have internal ethnic divisions and unresolved postconflict situations, which exacerbate other difficulties. These countries are seeking European Union membership, which, however, seems a distant prospect for varying issues that include dysfunctional political structures, unreliable legal processes, weak economies, and endemic corruption. This group of small countries, then, presents the most intractable reconstruction and development challenge found in Europe today.

#### **SMALL COUNTRIES, BIG PROBLEMS**

As might be expected, the higher education systems of these countries reflect these wider difficulties. Their chronic lack of resources, while pressing, will probably be easier to deal with than their fragmented structures, organizational rigidity, intellectual isolation, and endemic corruption; and what Serban Agachi, speaking of Romania, calls “fake values,” “lack of initiative,” and “hidden disobedience” from the communist period. The issues that Altbach identifies, as priorities for change in Slovenian higher education—particularly stronger internal leadership, sustainable funding, differentiated missions and selectivity, and internationalization—apply with even greater force across the Western Balkans.

In addition, certain features of the higher education systems of the Western Balkans stand out. Perhaps most obviously, the small sizes of these systems must be problematical. Montenegro, with a population of 600,000, has

one public university; Macedonia, with a population of two million, has two reasonably significant public universities and one well-established private nonprofit university. It is hard to see how viable, modern higher education can be possible in these situations, even if there are effective administration at ministry and institutional levels. The difficulty is not institutional numbers or sizes, while some of the universities are actually rather too large. Yet, as Altbach hints, small systems without preexisting international traditions are prone to insularity.

As if these countries were not already small enough, ethnic tensions create internal subdivisions, in Macedonia and especially Bosnia-Herzegovina, a country with four and a half million people, has 14 ministries of education, although not all of them deal with higher education. The internal division between the Bosniac/Croat-dominated federation and the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska prevents any sensible national restructuring plans; and even within the federation, ethnic tensions have led to the creation of two universities, one Croat and one (clearly unviable) Bosniac, in the small city of Mostar. Here, universities are being used as symbols, to identify a set of political aims. Higher education is being used to demonstrate the area's power and to reward the supporters of local politicians—to help implement divisive programs of identity politics.

#### **FRAGMENTED UNIVERSITIES IN FRAGMENTED SOCIETIES**

Fragmentation is also a characteristic of internal university organization in the region, stemming from the Yugoslav tradition of strong faculties and chair systems within them. Expansion took place by creating new chairs, leading to

sprawling, unwieldy structures; institutional restructuring was rare. Despite current attempts in places to integrate faculties for creating stronger unitary universities, this internal conflict persists—making institutional change hard to manage, because of multiple and competing sources of authority. A formal institutional mission of differentiation is hardly attempted. Though not historically justifiable, it is hard to avoid seeing these institutional divisions as mirroring the fragmentation found at national and regional levels.

In her article, Uvalic-Trumbic identifies academic corruption as a key problem for Serbian universities. It remains a serious issue throughout the region and, obviously, undermines any attempts to persuade Western universities to trust claims about academic standards there. The still-widespread use of frequent one-to-one oral examinations is one factor that facilitates academic corruption, but simply changing processes (as with the move to written examinations in Serbia or new, quality-assurance procedures) is unlikely to eradicate a deep-rooted problem. (I described one such attempt in Georgia in *International Higher Education* no. 42, 2006.)

Uvalic-Trumbic also notes that the alleged implementation of Bologna reforms in Serbia has probably “been merely cosmetic.” This was also our conclusion from around the region, where typically the Bologna process has had little impact in practice. For example, in several instances, 3+1 or 3+2 degrees (that is, in Bologna terms, a first-cycle degree combined with a master’s degree) were being offered to maintain the traditional four- or five-year first-degree pattern, supported by the professorial hierarchies, but thereby losing the efficiency gains that Bologna structures are intended to provide. This seems to be another sample of the inward-looking nature of the higher education system,

subverting the formal adherence to modernization and European standards. It is tempting to conclude, noting Serban Agachi's comment about "hidden disobedience," that the large gap between policy and practice is a carryover from communist days, where formal statements of ideological principle were used to mask their actual practices.

## CONCLUSION

This article draws on work undertaken for the Open Society Foundation. One way forward for Serbian universities, Uvalic-Trumbic proposes, is "to develop joint doctoral studies with other countries of the region. Creating regional disciplinary networks . . . might be a mechanism for reducing the number of universities, increasing quality, and reinforcing the relevance of study programs." Work we have undertaken for the Open Society Foundation led us to similar conclusions, suggesting support for small-scale research collaboration between groups of universities in the region and one or more international partners. The precise topic of the research, we suggested, would be less important than being one in which the regional partners have an interest and have some basic capability on which to build. This approach could encourage interfaculty, interinstitutional, transregional, and international collaboration—thereby, mitigating to some extent the problems of fragmentation. It could provide a context for much-needed transfer of expertise, in subject knowledge, pedagogy, and research methods.

It would be naive in the extreme to think that rather limited reforms in university processes might somehow overcome the multiple problems of the deeply divided societies in the region. Nevertheless, there might be wider

benefits through demonstrating that collaborative activities within the region can have positive results. That is to say, change may be more likely to percolate upwards from the universities rather than downwards from dysfunctional political structures.

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