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**MOTORS FOR REGIONAL
DEVELOPMENT:
IMPACT OF REGIONAL
POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS
ON THE UNIVERSITY
COOPERATION
IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION**

Educational co-operation is one of the main aspects of the regional political agenda in the Baltic Sea Region. The article analyzes the political impact of the organizations, as perceived by the universities in the region and political decision-makers on national and regional levels. Based on the success of the OECD in becoming an influential actor in educational policies, this article discusses different strategies for the regional political organizations to enhance their influence.

Key words: higher education co-operation, regionalization, regional political organizations, CBSS, BSPC, NCM.



Introduction

The process of regionalization in the Baltic Sea Region has established a number of political organizations after 1990. The Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) has expanded its activities to the southern Baltic. The Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) with the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC) as the parliamentary equivalent was created for regional inter-governmental cooperation. Regional educational cooperation is the main issue on the agenda of the aforementioned organizations. How do universities evaluate the effectiveness of these organizations? The next section analyzes the impact of the NCM, CBSS and BSPC on the regional higher education co-operation policy. The empirical basis for assessing the impact of regional political organizations and their strategies for the education policy comprises thirty three interviews with the representatives of higher education institutions (e.g. international offices), national institutions of higher education (e.g. ministries) and regional political organizations. The interviews were conducted between September 2006 and August 2009 in Sweden, Germany, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Russia within the framework of the thesis on the higher education co-operation in the Baltic Sea region. To ensure the interviewees' anonymity, a data encryption system was used.

Regional University Co-operation and its Targets

The constructivist theory of *regional development* is the leading approach in social and human sciences used to research and analyze the development of co-operation and regionalization in the Baltic Sea region. It is noteworthy that various publications focusing on *regional development* stress that educational co-operation is a basis for emerging regionalization. In particular, the interaction of universities is described as the key point of

regional development [5, 6]. On the one hand, the existing university networks are regarded as empirical evidence for the process of *regional development* (university interaction as a part of *regional development*). On the other hand, political support for university networks and their development is described as an effective mechanism for enhancing *regional development*. This is the functional argument: the university co-operation helps to achieve social goals.

Firstly, there is an advantage for higher education institutions. In 1990 regional co-operation in the Baltic Sea region was regarded as a suitable way of transferring knowledge from North-West to South-East to reform and modernize the universities of the southern and eastern Baltic [19]. Efficient restructuring and modernization of universities were necessary to prevent the personnel out flows in the countries affected by these changes. In this regard the Baltic Sea region was considered as a suitable level of co-operation. Another reason to support the co-operation of the Baltic Sea universities appeared in the regional discourse after restructuring. It concerns the efficient regional co-operation at the academic level, which may contribute to the creation of the world-famous brand of the region. Common academic space in the Baltic countries can help universities take a leading position in the global knowledge-based society [1]. In addition, the Baltic Sea region was considered a good ground for academic co-operation.

Secondly, in the discourse of regional development external non-academic purposes are referred to as the subject of regional university co-operation. In the course of restructuring regional higher education co-operation has advantages not only in the academic area, but in some others as well. The regional transferring of curricula, teaching methodology and materials at the academic level, in addition to the regional exchange of academic staff is regarded as the enhancing factor for the formation of new political, economic and legal elites thus strengthening stability and security in the Baltic Sea region [18, S. 55]. There are two more reasons against restructuring. Regional university co-operation at the environmental level is considered as a way to improve protection of water resources in the Baltic Sea region [20, p. 26]. Joint research projects can help to increase environmental awareness, and educational co-operation promotes this knowledge. In this case, the Baltic Sea region is a natural level of regional co-operation for combating one of the major *secondary security threats* in southeastern Europe — the Baltic Sea ecosystem instability [11, p. 8—14]. Regional higher education co-operation at the economic level is considered as a way of bringing together the resources and enhancing cooperation efficiency in the region [9]. The university co-operation here should promote the region's economies in the international geographical competition.

While many of these functional arguments are discussed from the non-constructivist point of view, one of them is exactly the approach of *regional development* and its constructivist-basis, as the emerging national identity is a central argument for *regional development*. Universities as discourse platforms create regional symbols spread at conferences; exchange of academic staff and curricula promote the establishment of regional identity [18, p. 42].

Thus, the study of regional discourse reveals various arguments in support of university co-operation, especially in the aspect of regional development. The second stage, which enables the study of the impact of political organizations in the region, tackles the analysis of their political strategies. Will we find here the argumentation pertaining to academic discourse? The next section analyzes the way the CBSS, BSPC and NCM support regional university co-operation.

Educational Co-operation as the Agenda of Regional Political Organizations

The analysis of various declarations and projects worked out by political organizations in the region reflects the impact of the ideas shaped in the course of scientific debate on education policies. In 1990s the activities of those organizations were focused on restructuring in the South-Eastern Baltic; since 2000, however, they have been promoting economic competitiveness and addressing regional issues (e. g. protection of water resources).

Support to restructuring through projects of educational co-operation

Since 1971 the NCM has been responsible for the coordination and co-operation between the Nordic countries. The Nordic Council of Ministers decided to extend its educational commitment to the Baltic Sea region due to the new situation in the region after the fall of the Iron Curtain and to enhance security and stability in the region. K. Musial sums up the NCM higher education policy in the 1990s and points to its versatility: "...the NCM became the first institution implementing a consistent policy that contributed to academic staff and student exchange of students, academic staff and scientists across the region. It was focused on the overall stability and security in northern Europe. Apart from other ways, this was also achieved by training people who were to take the responsibility for the development of post-communist civil societies." [18, p. 55—56].

CBSS education policy was also noted for multi-functional character of higher education co-operation in the course of restructuring. A year after its founding, the CBSS had launched the EuroFaculty project in the Baltic countries. The idea of versatile educational co-operation was a fundamental reason to support restructuring. New democratic institutions involving external experts appeared in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. However, to manage the reform in higher education effectively, local academic staff with appropriate training was required. Due to the lack of knowledge in the new independent states, in 1993 the CBSS has decided to support the major universities (in Vilnius, Riga and Tartu) in the creation of basic curricula, training of local academic staff and upgrading of libraries [7, p.7]. The second CBSS EuroFaculty program in Kaliningrad was launched in 2000, and in 2009 the CBSS decided to launch the third EuroFaculty program in Pskov. Imple-

menting the EuroFaculty program in different cities, the CBSS clearly outlined higher education co-operation as one of the main issues of its agenda and used the argument of versatility to prove its justifiability.

Talks on the knowledge-based development of the Baltic Sea Region

The CBSS educational activities and communiqué in 1990's focused on its EuroFaculty program. Since 2000 declarations of the CBSS have covered a wider range of issues, taking into account not only its own activities. The 10th CBSS Ministerial Session was held on 7 June 2001 in Hamburg, Germany. It was noted: "The Council underlined that the development of human resources and the ability to advance and implement innovations successfully are crucial for the competitiveness of the Baltic Sea region. <...>The Council approved the proposals made by the expert meeting on the Knowledge-based Society in the Baltic Sea Region held in Berlin on 4—5 May, and expressed interest in all endeavors to increase student mobility and curricula compatibility, e. g. through a Baltic Sea Summer University. The Council called on the subsequent presidency to analyze the conclusions of the meeting and to continue efforts to advance the idea of developing the Baltic Sea Region as a trademark for Knowledge-based societies." [4].

In this case, two aspects are important. First, the quotation reflects the CBSS strategy to attract experts by holding regional conferences. Therefore, the academics supporting regional development approach took the opportunity to present their ideas to the Council. The symbol of the Knowledge-based Baltic Sea region was the key point in the discourse of regional development at the beginning of a new century [10]¹. Secondly, boosting the competitiveness of the region was named as the external aim of educational co-operation [21]. As in a similar BSPC meeting in 2003, another argument in support of regional development was obvious [2].

Protection of water resources

The Baltic Sea ecosystem instability is one of the major secondary security threats in the region, and university co-operation is regarded as one possible solution to this regional problem. This functional argument in support of higher education co-operation in the Baltic Sea region can be traced in the agenda of regional political organizations. For example, the Agenda 21 for the Baltic Sea Region "Baltic 21" has a key role in the regional efforts to attain sustainable development of the region, according to the Haga Declaration (2000) [3]. The second example is the Baltic University program financed by the NCM and aimed at promoting the joint curriculum development on environmental sciences [16].

¹ The knowledge-based Baltic region was discussed as a symbol of region identity. The use of this term by CBSS means that the objective of regional identity formation has been adopted by regional political organizations.

Assessing the impact of regional political organizations

There is a certain similarity between the scientific discourse and the agenda of the CBSS, NCM BSPC within the framework of educational co-operation. It is necessary to describe the impact of the CBSS, NCM and BSPC as a regional forum for discussing ideas in the academic community; it is a center of regional discourse. But how influential are those political organizations? Do their projects find recognition in the higher education sector in the region? Are they important for creating a regional forum? The interviews with the representatives of regional political organizations, higher education institutions and education sector show that, unfortunately, there are no indicators that directly assess the efficiency of EuroFaculty program implementation.

Neither the EuroFaculty Final Report [7], nor the detailed description of the development and implementation of the project published by its director [14] could provide any information on the employment of the students involved in the project, or the changes the curricula underwent within the framework of the project. However, the university representatives emphasize that there were some difficulties in the implementation of the project, and that the project did not entrench itself at an academic level. "Success could only be seen at a personal level: teachers had had additional income, but they were not truly involved with the project" (interview #5, Universities)¹.

Only the University of Tartu in Estonia had succeeded in implementing a continuous project (Eurocollege). The interview reveals that there were many problems with the project implementation. As a result, the effectiveness of its impact on regional co-operation was fairly low.

However, the regional political organizations tended to influence education policy not through their own projects alone. In its seminal Declaration (the Copenhagen Declaration) the CBSS designated education as an area of co-operation. The intention of the CBSS and BSPC to create knowledge-based space in the Baltic Sea region indicates an attempt of regional political organizations to form regional discourse. But higher education institutions did not respond to this strategy very intensively. One of the logical reasons for this is the structure of organizations, especially that of the CBSS. Presidency of the Council is annually devolved from one member state to another, "each Member State under presidency needs its own program. It results in a lot of talk and little action" (interview #10, Universities). Short-term management slows down the process of combining work program planning and the development of specific political strategies, but it is this relationship that determines the success of the OECD education policy [12, S. 251—252]. As a result, the CBSS work planning has no proper impact on the agenda of higher education institutions.

¹At the academic level the interviews were conducted only at the universities of Baltic States implementing EuroFaculty program. In Russian universities projects were corrected with respect to the experience and critique of the Baltic project.

Interviews with the representatives of international departments show that the regional university networks are important for the development of co-operation in the region. They believe that participation in such programs as Baltic University and The Baltic Sea Region University Network, as well as in specialized networks including, for example, universities of forestry, veterinary and agriculture in the Nordic and Baltic States (BOVA-NOVA) and The Baltic State University of Science and Technology, is the key to regional cooperation.

Quantitative research confirms this point of view and shows that the participation in regional university networks significantly strengthens the co-operation of higher education institutions [8, S. 228]. The NCM has acquired a regional impact supporting such networks in the Baltic Sea region: "Within the framework of academic staff exchange programs in the early 90s (in the Baltic countries. — Sh. E.), almost all experts came from the Nordic states. They helped to update the curricula and to develop networks such as BOVA-NOVA and BALTECH. They were almost entirely financed by the Nordic states, mainly through the Nordic Council of Ministers" (interview # 5, the national institutions of education policy).

According to the respondents, the NCM has played obviously a greater role than the CBSS and the BSPC, especially in support of university networks. At the same time, the loss of "euphoria" is noted in relation to the development of regional co-operation in the Baltic Sea region since the late 1990s under the influence of the Bologna process (the interview # 4, the national institutions of education policy). Thus, what strategies can help regional political organizations to improve the impact and reinvigorate the development of regional co-operation? The next section analyzes various approaches to these issues.

Education Policy Influence Enhancement Strategies

The interview analysis indicated that the NCM exerted considerable influence on the regional university co-operation but at the same time the role of two other organizations (i. e. CBSS and BSPC) in the development of this co-operation is comparatively small, at least as it is viewed by the higher education institutions. So what strategies could enhance the regional political organizations influence on education? The present article claims that the successful education policy of the OECD might be taken for a model to follow, at least to some degree.

Besides conducting effective education policy, the OECD has been occupying influential position in the mentioned sphere for the last ten years. While trying to explain this phenomenon, K. Leuze and his co-authors enumerate various forms of education governance introduced by the given organization. Despite the fact that the OECD has a rather limited right to formulate legal issues and the budget allocated for educational policies is relatively scarce the OECD managed to gain educational influence thanks to four strategies, i. e.: work program planning, comparative analysis (the benchmarking method), network co-operation and the distribution of ideas

by highly qualified specialists.[15] As the regional political organizations have approximately the same budget and legal status, they could regard the introduction of these governance forms in order to enhance their influence in the Baltic Sea Region.

Work Program Planning

In order to avoid perpetual alterations of the work program CBSS expert groups are elaborating long-term priorities. This strategy is obviously useful for the higher education policy as well. But the work program planning strategy should take into consideration the autonomy of the university. This planning will be successful only in case regional issues are connected with academic ones. And the regional political organizations understand it perfectly well: "We are the political forum and we can fling the doors open, but universities always have their own autonomously implemented projects that are independent from the government. <...>In that case the CBSS would not support but rather impede the implementation of the projects, as the universities are more competent in this area. (Interview # 3, *Organisations*).

The second and the third parts reviewed the relation between the academic discourse and the educational planning activities of CBSS, BSPC and OECD. Now specialists are creating conditions for the more efficient work program planning strategy. Official representatives of higher education organizations and national educational institutions believe the aim of co-operation in the Baltic Sea Region to be one of the major issues to discuss at the regional level. If the universities are to participate in the regional projects they should clearly see the advantages of regional co-operation exceeding the boundaries of the European higher education sphere. (Interview #6, *the National Institutions of the Educational Policy*).

Network Cooperation

The NCM strategy can be regarded as an indirect method of the network co-operation support. To be more precise, the NCM enhances its regional influence inviting the networks to become its strategic partners, as was the situation with the Baltic University Program. The Baltic Sea Region governance is considered to be unique in the context of civil society and various narrowly specialized networks participation. [13, p. 6] It is confirmed that the same is true for the education policy. The network co-operation strategy aimed at the involvement of the given networks into the political organizations activities of the region could contribute to the influence enhancement of CBSS, BSPC and OECD.

Comparative analysis

One of the factors of the OECD success is a comparative analysis strategy. As K. Martens claims, the "comparative approach" is a key to understanding the successful influence of the OECD on the educational policy.

[17] The core of the comparative analysis strategy is represented by various international research programs including comparison (e. g. PISA, the Program for International Student Assessment), as well as publishing the indicators of educational materials which enable to draw the international education institutions rankings. However, it is hardly possible to view this strategy as a model for the political organizations of the Baltic Sea Region. At present the list of educational policy efficiency values has already been elaborated, e. g. by the OECD and the EU. Nevertheless, the comparative research projects could be considered on a regional level as a regionalization enhancement instrument.

Conclusion and Perspectives

The article views the influence of the Baltic Sea Region political organizations on the education policy and higher education co-operation. The analysis of the interview with universities and political organizations personnel reveals that their influence is estimated as relatively weak. We believe that the success of OECD education policy could serve as a platform for discussion of the possibilities to enhance the influence of the Baltic Sea Region political organizations, especially BCSS. It is obvious that the BCSS can serve as a regional forum which gives rise to hopes of successful implementation of the work program strategies and network cooperation development. The formulation of various aims of regional university co-operation is the main topic which if discussed is capable of promoting the development of higher education regionalization.

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