

The background of the cover is a photograph of a subway tunnel. Two escalators lead up and down the tunnel, flanked by rows of glowing spherical lights. The tunnel's arched ceiling and tiled walls create a sense of depth and perspective, leading the eye towards a bright opening at the far end. The overall color palette is warm, dominated by the yellow and orange tones of the lights and the tunnel's interior.

zois

Zentrum für Osteuropa-
und internationale Studien
*Centre for East European
and International Studies*

No. 2/2020 · April 2020

ZOIS REPORT

**HIGHER EDUCATION IN
EUROPE'S UNRECOGNISED
TERRITORIES:
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

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Content

| | |
|----|---|
| 03 | Executive summary |
| 05 | Introduction |
| 08 | Aim of this report |
| 09 | Higher education landscape |
| 09 | Abkhazia and Transdniestria |
| 13 | Northern Cyprus |
| 16 | Relations with Patron and Parent States |
| 16 | Parent state policies |
| 18 | Language issues |
| 19 | Patron states |
| 21 | International relations |
| 21 | Cultural exchange and foreign-language teaching |
| 22 | Student scholarships |
| 23 | Erasmus+ and other exchange programmes |
| 24 | Research and other cooperative projects |
| 25 | Conclusions and policy recommendations |
| 27 | Policy recommendations |
| 29 | Imprint |

Executive summary

Key findings

Universities in Abkhazia, Transdniestria, and northern Cyprus have fallen victim to the conflicts associated with these de facto states and been cut off from international academic exchange.

In Abkhazia and Transdniestria, higher education institutions (HEIs) are underfunded, struggle to overcome their Soviet legacy, and are slow to adapt to international trends. That has resulted in a variable quality of education and brain drain. In northern Cyprus, isolation has led to a commercialisation of higher education, resulting in some success stories but also to many cases of unregulated 'diploma mills'. In all three cases, HEIs are mostly excluded from the European Union's (EU's) Erasmus+ education programme, while academic staff and students lack opportunities for international collaboration.

International partners engage with the higher education sector in these territories without recognising their independence. This engagement is worthwhile for several reasons. The provision of good-quality higher education and academic exchange is a key part of a healthy society. Engagement with HEIs in de facto states can also help conflict-resolution efforts. Yet this engagement has proved difficult in practice.

Higher education has been internationalised over the last thirty years, mostly with positive effects. Europe's universities have a long tradition of autonomy and academic freedom, which encourages them to reach across borders and conflict divides. However, systems of harmonisation and quality assurance are aligned with nation-state education systems, and HEIs generally do not receive recognition if their home state is unrecognised. A lack of quality assurance also takes many HEIs in de facto states down the path of becoming diploma mills — especially in northern Cyprus.

Abkhazia and Transdniestria became isolated from international contact by the conflicts of the 1990s, and have only maintained academic networks, relations, and standards oriented towards their patron state, Russia, based on their Soviet experiences and practices.

Northern Cyprus has taken a different route, with a rapid proliferation of HEIs which accept international students. It has around twenty registered universities. Most HEIs are accredited by Turkey's Council of Higher Education (YÖK). International higher education is now a big source of revenue for the territory's economy, but the sector is highly unregulated and foreign students risk being exploited.

Policy recommendations

Policies of de-isolation of HEIs in these territories will have wide beneficial effects. There is potential for international academic cooperation in language centres in Abkhazia and Transdniestria. Scholarship exchanges should be expanded. Widening the Erasmus+ programme's scope would be a great opportunity for students, staff, and joint research initiatives. International cooperation can be developed on the basis of existing language and cultural exchange programmes.

Specifically, international actors should:

- make higher education and contact between HEIs a greater priority in official conflict-resolution initiatives of the EU, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the UN;
- begin dialogue with conflict parties on how HEIs in de facto states can take part in the Erasmus+ scheme; and
- offer knowledge transfer for academic staff at universities in de facto states on how to participate in international research programmes, in close cooperation with parent states.

Parent states should:

- encourage academic and student exchanges across conflict divides;
- approve bilateral contacts between international universities and HEIs in de facto states; and
- develop double degrees between universities across conflict lines.

De facto states should:

- de-register HEIs that do not meet international standards;
- use online teaching for exchange with international partners; and
- attract international staff and students for teaching, research, and cultural exchange.

Introduction

This report analyses the little-studied phenomenon of the state of higher education in three of Europe's de facto states: Abkhazia, Transdniestria, and northern Cyprus. We have chosen those three de facto states as they illustrate different approaches in their domestic dynamics, international relations and strategies of their HEIs.

Abkhazia

Overview:

Abkhazia, the homeland of the Abkhaz ethnic group, comprised an autonomous republic in Soviet Georgia. Disputes over rights, language, and identity resulted in clashes at the end of the Soviet era. Abkhazia has de facto been separate from Georgia since 1993, after a traumatic war in which 15,000 people died and more than 200,000 ethnic Georgians fled or were expelled. In 2008, Russia, Nauru, Nicaragua, Syria, and Venezuela recognised Abkhazia as an independent state.

Population estimate:

200,000–250,000. Mainly Abkhaz, Armenians, and Georgians; also Greeks and Russians.

Parent state:

Georgia

Patron state:

Russia

Main HEIs:

- Abkhaz State University (ASU), founded in 1932. Students: 2,564 in 2018. Budget: 144.7 million roubles (€2.0 million) in 2020.
- Sukhum Open Institute (SOI). Students: 449 in 2018.

Universities in these territories have fallen victim to the conflicts associated with them. Policies, applied by most of the world, of not recognising the territories as independent states have also covered higher education. This sector has developed differently in the three de facto states discussed in this report. Abkhazia and Transdniestria suffer from brain drain, as higher education is barely internationalised and academic contacts are mainly limited to Russia. In northern Cyprus, by contrast, the sector is very internationalised and commercialised, leading to lack of regulation and exploitation of some foreign students.

Transdniestria

Overview:

Transdniestria is a strip of territory on the east bank of the River Dniester, with a mainly Russian-speaking population and an industrial economy. Transdniestria was part of Soviet Moldova. It stayed loyal to Moscow as right-bank Moldova campaigned for independence from the Soviet Union and de facto broke away after a brief conflict in 1992, in which around 1,000 people died. Russia supports the territory but does not recognise it as a state. In recent years, Transdniestria has become semi-integrated with Moldova in trade and other sectors. It has eight universities.

Population estimate:

375,000–470,000. Mainly Moldovans, Russians, and Ukrainians

Parent state:

Moldova

Patron state:

Russia

Main HEIs:

- Taras Shevchenko University (TSU), also known as Transdniestrian State University, founded in 1930. Students: 8,594 in 2019. Budget: €5.6 million in 2019.
- Tiraspol Interregional University. Students: 970 in 2019.
- Russian Federation University. Students: 204 in 2019.

The provision of good-quality higher education and academic exchange is not deemed internationally to be a fundamental human right in the way that primary and secondary education are, but it is recognised as a key part of a healthy society. In the higher education institutions (HEIs) of de facto states, students face difficulties in getting their qualifications certified, while academic staff lack opportunities to cooperate with foreign partners and participate in international debates. In Transdniestria, in a meeting of the 'Permanent Conference for Political Questions in the Framework of the Negotiating Process on the Transdniestrian Settlement' that took place in Berlin in 2016 an important breakthrough was achieved with an agreement to convert Transdniestrian qualifications into neutral university diplomas recognized by Moldova.

There are also good reasons to believe that engagement in HEIs in de facto states will help conflict-resolution efforts. A higher-quality higher education system that is better integrated into international academia should help create a more open society in which young people and professionals have an incentive to stay and think creatively about the future. This process should empower academics and students to be more active in cross-conflict dialogue projects — as many already are in the Cypriot context.¹

¹ For example, the Cyprus Academic Dialogue brings together scholars to debate difficult issues in the divided island's settlement process. See 'Cyprus Academic Dialogue', The Society for the Study of Peace, Conflict & Violence, 1 October 2016, <http://peacepsychology.org/peace-newsletter-blog/2016/10/1/cyprus-academic-dialogue>.

Northern Cyprus

Overview:

The two communities of Cyprus have been in conflict since the 1960s, and the island was divided by the Turkish military intervention of 1974. In 1983, the Turkish Cypriot leadership proclaimed a state, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), in the north of the island. It is recognised only by Turkey and was subject to economic embargoes. In the last two decades the conflict has eased, and the Green Line separating the two sides of the island was opened in 2003. However, plans to reunify the island have stalled since the failure of the UN's Annan Plan of 2004.

Population estimate:

350,000. Mainly Turks, including Turkish Cypriots and migrants from Turkey; also Maronites, Armenians, and foreign students.

Parent state:

Republic of Cyprus

Patron state:

Turkey

Main HEIs:

- Near Eastern University, founded in 1988. Students: 27,000.
- Eastern Mediterranean University, founded in 1979. Students: 18,000.
- Cyprus International University, founded in 1997. Students: 18,000.
- Girne American University, founded in 1985. Students: 18,000.
- European University of Lefke, founded in 1990. Students: 9,000.

The internationalisation of higher education and the closer integration of HEIs have been positive worldwide trends over the last thirty years. However, this has had some negative effects, such as the proliferation of 'diploma mills' — businesses that pose as universities and sell qualifications with no requirements for study, research, or examinations.²

There is no single accepted criterion for what constitutes a modern university. The World Higher Education Database, compiled by the International Association of Universities, is the most comprehensive list, with more than 19,000 entries, but it does not have a formal status.³ HEIs from contested regions appear in some lists but not others. The European Universities Association, which calls itself the 'Voice of Europe's Universities' and champions the autonomy of HEIs, has more than 800 members, including some from northern Cyprus.

2 'Diploma and accreditation mills', European Network of Information Centres in the European Region and National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union (ENIC-NARIC), Accessed 16 April 2020, <http://ear.enic-naric.net/emanual/Chapter17/introduction.aspx>.

3 'IAU WHED: The world of higher education at your fingertips', International Association of Universities and World Higher Education Database, last updated March 2020, <https://www.whed.net/home.php>.

This approach is consistent with a proud tradition of European universities as autonomous institutions which long predate nation-states. In September 1988, 388 university rectors affirmed this tradition when they signed the Magna Charta Universitatum in Bologna, declaring that ‘to fulfil its vocation [a university] transcends geographical and political frontiers, and affirms the vital need for different cultures to know and influence one another’.⁴

However, HEIs are also part of national education systems, which are chiefly responsible for the steadily more important job of accreditation and quality assurance. This tension between academic autonomy and national affiliation causes problems for engagement with the HEIs in disputed territories.

Aim of this report

The aim of the report is twofold. First, we describe the field of higher education and its political context in three de facto states. Second, we analyse opportunities for positive intervention to improve the situation in the framework of ‘engagement without recognition’ or ‘non-recognition and engagement’. This discussion contributes to an ongoing debate in comparative political scholarship and policymaking. The concept of engagement without recognition was first formulated by political scientists Alexander Cooley and Lincoln A. Mitchell to offer an alternative model of relations between de facto states and the international community.⁵ It describes the practice of engaging with institutions and people in the non-recognised territories without recognising the territories. In 2009, the European Union (EU) formally adopted a policy of ‘non-recognition and engagement’ for Georgia’s breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁶ Since then, there has been active discussion of the terms, forms, and limitations of engagement with different de facto states.⁷

International engagement and relations with the higher education sphere in Europe’s de facto states currently focus mainly on individual students — through scholarship schemes and projects such as summer schools — rather than institutions. Yet this approach has limitations, as those students need good-quality institutions to attain certain professional standards. Development in higher education in de facto states depends on decisions made in the de facto states themselves, relations between them and their parent and patron states, and engagement from the international system of higher education.

The terms ‘parent state’ and ‘patron state’ do not imply a moral judgement. A parent state is one from which a territory has separated but on which

4 ‘Magna Charta Universitatum’, Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum, Accessed 16 April 2020, <http://www.magna-charta.org/resources/files/the-magna-charta/english>.

5 Alexander Cooley and Lincoln A. Mitchell, ‘Engagement without recognition’, *Washington Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (2010): pp. 59 – 73.

6 Sabine Fischer, ‘The EU’s non-recognition and engagement policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia’, European Union Institute for Security Studies, *European Seminar Reports*, 2010.

7 For a good overview, see Bruno Coppieters, ‘Engagement without recognition’, in *Routledge Handbook of State Recognition*, edited by Gëzim Visoka, John Doyle, and Edward Newman (London, New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 241 – 55.

it still depends because the separation has not been internationally recognised. A patron state is one that supports a de facto state through political, financial or military means.

This report describes the higher education landscapes of Abkhazia, Transdniestria, and northern Cyprus; these territories' relations to their parent and patron states; and their international relations.

The report draws on a number of sources. They include interviews with local students, academics and experts; university websites; statistics of universities and local authorities; and newspaper articles. The information in some online media sources may be available only for a limited time. Some information platforms clearly represent certain interests and opinions. We attempt to balance the sources used and assess the content of interviews.

Higher education landscape

Abkhazia and Transdniestria

Abkhazia and Transdniestria have Soviet-era universities which date back to the 1930s. The conflicts of the 1990s left these institutions in disputed territories and drastically reduced their international contacts. The two main universities in the territories suffer from similar problems: underfunding, low salaries for academics, a leadership that is cautious about innovation and international outreach, and brain drain as students go elsewhere.

► FIGURE 1

However, because of positive progress in negotiations between Chişinău and Tiraspol, the political context in Transdniestria is more benign than that in Abkhazia. As a result, the Taras Shevchenko University (TSU, also known as the Transdniestrian State University) now enjoys more possibilities for international exchange than in the past.

Many young people choose to leave these regions to study in Russia instead, contributing to a general brain drain and demographic crisis. In December 2017, 1,691 young Abkhaz were reported to be studying at Russian universities, 782 of them subsidised by the Russian government.⁸ Statistics also suggest that many others do not study at all: even accounting for those who go to Russia, student numbers in Abkhazia are much lower than the EU average.⁹ The Russian government funds around 600 free places a year for students from Moldova, of whom about 200 may come from Transdniestria.¹⁰

FIGURE 1
A travel agency in Tiraspol main street advertises to organise studying abroad



Source: Sabine von Löwis

8 'Abiturientam iz abkhazii budet proshhe postupit v rossiyskie vuzy', Parlamentskaja Gazeta, 13 December 2018, <https://www.pnp.ru/politics/abiturientam-iz-abkhazii-budet-proshhe-postupit-v-rossiyskie-vuzy.html>.

9 See 'Tertiary education statistics', Eurostat, last modified 11 March 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Tertiary_education_statistics.

10 'Otechestvennyy ili inostrannyj vuz kakoe obrazovanie vybiraet molodezh moldova', Sputnik Moldova, 22 July 2019, <https://ru.sputnik.md/society/20190722/26947918/otchestvennyy-ili-inostrannyj-vuz-kakoe-obrazovanie-vybiraet-molodezh-moldova.html>.

FIGURE 2
Abkhaz State University (ASU)



Source: Thomas de Waal

Abkhazia has two HEIs, the Abkhaz State University (ASU) and the smaller Sukhum Open Institute (SOI).¹¹

ASU was founded in 1932 as a pedagogical institute and was re-established in 1979 as the Gorky Abkhaz State University. In that year, teaching was allowed for the first time in the Abkhaz language at university level. ASU has suffered from years of chronic underfunding and lack of innovation, although the Russian government has supported a renovation and reconstruction programme in the last few years. ASU is classed as a state institution, 100 per cent funded from Abkhazia's government budget. Student grants are very modest, with the basic grant just 1,000 roubles (€11) a month, rising to 1,500 roubles (€17) for advanced students — less than one-tenth of the average local salary.¹² Local companies offer additional stipends to students with high marks or who are active in extracurricular activities. ► **FIGURE 2**

The university has basically kept its old structure, with nine faculties divided into 42 chairs. There are almost no vocational education courses and little opportunity to study more vocationally oriented subjects such as business studies or tourism. A few departments have unilaterally moved away from the old five-year degree structure with intensive coursework to the Bologna model of a four-year bachelor's and a two-year master's degree. However, this reform was not popular, as many locals believed that a shorter course meant lower standards. No new curricula were established, and

11 'Abkhazia v tsifrax za 2018 god', State Statistics Committee of the Republic of Abkhazia, Accessed 16 April 2020, <http://ugsra.org/abkhaziya-v-tsifraxh/2018-god.php>.

12 'Studentam Abkhazskogo Gosuniversiteta uvelichat Stipendiu', Sputnik-Abkhazia, 26 April 2019, <https://sputnik-abkhazia.ru/Abkhazia/20190426/1027196228/Studentam-Abkhazskogo-gosuniversiteta-uvelichat-stipendii.html>; 'Kabmin Abkhazii Odobril Povyshenie Zarplat Osnovnym Kategoriyam Byudzhetnikov, Sputnik-Abkhazia, 22 August 2019, <https://sputnik-abkhazia.ru/Abkhazia/20190822/1028236388/Kabmin-Abkhazii-odobril-povyshenie-zarplat-osnovnym-kategoriyam-byudzhetnikov-na-2020-god.html>.

FIGURE 3
Taras Shevchenko University (TSU)



Source: Sabine von Löwis

students' parents demanded that the university reintroduce an optional fifth year.

SOI offers diplomas in a range of subjects, including more commercial ones such as tourism. However, it has a mixed reputation and has periodically lost its licence to operate due to disputes with the Abkhaz authorities.

Transdnestria's largest HEI, the Taras Shevchenko University (TSU), is located in Tiraspol. It dates back to 1930, when the Moldavian Institute of National Education was founded. After Transdnestria split from the rest of Moldova in 1992, the de facto state's authorities renamed the institute a university. TSU has two other branches in the towns of Bender and Rybnica.¹³ ► **FIGURE 3**

Transdnestria has eight other HEIs, including five smaller state-funded universities specialising in art, music, law, and military studies. The universities' resources are limited. In 2019, TSU received government funding of just 98.8 million Transdnestrian roubles (€5 million).¹⁴ In 2019, 5,118 students out of 9,671 in state universities received government funding for

13 'Press vypusk: Osnovnye pokazateli deyatelnosti gosudarstvennyh organizacij vysshego professionalnogo obrazovaniya pmr na nachalo 2019/2020 uchebnogo goda', Gosudarstvennaya sluzhba statistiki, Accessed 9 April 2020, <http://mer.gospmr.org/gosudarstvennaya-sluzhba-statistiki/informatsiya/svedeniya-ob-obrazovatelnyh-uchrezhdeniyah/press-vypusk-osnovnye-pokazateli-deyatelnosti-gosudarstvennyh-organizacij-vysshego-professionalnogo-obrazovaniya-pmr-na-nachalo-20192020-uchebnogo-goda.html>.

14 'Zakon pridnestrovskoy moldavskoy respubliky o respublikanskom byudjete na 2019 god', The Supreme Council of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, Accessed 9 April 2020, <http://www.vspmr.org/legislation/laws/zakonodatelnie-akti-pridnestrovskoy-moldavskoy-respubliki-v-sfere-byudjetnogo-finansovogo-ekonomicheskogo-nalogovogo-zakonodatelstva/zakon-pridnestrovskoy-moldavskoy-respubliki-o-respublikanskom-byudjete-na-2019-god-.html>.

FIGURE 4

Big billboard advertisement of the Russian Federation University at Tiraspol main street



Source: Sabine von Löwis

their studies.¹⁵ Teachers' salaries are below the average income in Transdnistria, and staff recruitment is a problem.

The structure of TSU still bears the imprint of the Soviet education system in its teaching practices and curriculum. There are limited opportunities to study business or international relations. However, the university has voluntarily moved away from the Soviet one-tier, five-year system of studies to a structure closer to the two-tier Bologna model of bachelor's and master's programmes, bringing it more into line with institutions in Europe and Russia.

Despite the brain drain, TSU is an important institution for the socialisation of youth in the region. Due to a lack of jobs, many young people go to university after finishing school. They use this opportunity to get free higher education near their home, so their families do not incur excessive financial costs. The chance to study at university frequently delays young people's emigration from Transdnistria.

In addition to the six state universities, there are two non-governmental universities. A significant university for higher education and postgraduate studies is the Tiraspol Interregional University.¹⁶ It was founded in 2002. Subjects taught include economics, management, law, and some technical disciplines. In 2019, the university had 970 students.¹⁷

15 'Predelnyj uroven tarifov na uslugi GOU 'Pridnestrovskij gosudarstvennyj universitet im.T.G. Shevchenko' na 2019 god', Pravitelstva PMR, 5 March 2019, http://spsu.ru/images/files/sveden/Stoimost_obuch_05.03.2019.pdf.

16 'Tiraspolskij mezhregionalnyj universitet', Accessed 9 April 2020, <https://tmu-pmr.ru/>.

17 'Press vypusk: Osnovnye pokazateli deyatel'nosti negosudarstvennyh organizacij vysshego professional'nogo obrazovaniya pmr na nachalo 2019/2020 uchebnogo goda', Gosudarstvennaya sluzhba statistiki, accessed April 9 2020, <http://mer.gospmr.org/gosudarstvennaya-sluzhba-statistiki/informacziya/svedeniya-ob-obrazovatelnyh-uchrezhdeniyah/press-vypusk-osnovnye-pokazateli-deyatelnosti-negosudarstvennyh-organizacij-vysshego-professional'nogo-obrazovaniya-pmr-na-nachalo-20192020-uchebnogo-goda.html>.

A similar new institution is the non-state Russian Federation University, which has branches in Russia and other former Soviet countries, including one in Tiraspol since 2018.¹⁸ In 2019, this institution attracted 204 students.

► **FIGURE 4** Both universities advertise that students receive diplomas based on Russian higher education regulations. These universities compete for students in a region whose population is shrinking.

Northern Cyprus

Before 1974, Cyprus had no universities, only a few technical colleges and teacher-training institutions. For higher education, students overwhelmingly went to Greece, Turkey, or the United Kingdom (UK). In the last four decades, northern Cyprus has unilaterally built its own higher education system and now has around twenty institutions that call themselves universities. That almost certainly gives northern Cyprus the largest number of students per capita of any territory in the world, with more than 100,000 students out of an overall population of around 350,000. About half come from Turkey, while a third are from farther afield, chiefly Africa.¹⁹

The sector is now extremely commercialised. Around five of the twenty-odd universities are considered serious academic institutions. The Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU) in Famagusta, founded in 1979, is a respected institution (see box). The Near Eastern University, Cyprus International University, the European University of Lefke, and Girne American University also have international connections. Others are of much more dubious quality. ► **FIGURE 5**

The Eastern Mediterranean University: A success story

The Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU) in northern Cyprus is a rare example of an HEI in a de facto state which, through its own efforts, has broken through problems of non-recognition to be an internationally respected institution.

EMU began operating as a small higher-technology institute in 1979. In 1986, it was converted to a 'state university' by the de facto state, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). EMU is still technically such, and its Turkish Cypriot students study there for extremely low fees, but it has taken on a very different character. In 2019, the university had just over 18,000 students, of whom 3,500 were Turkish Cypriots, 6,600 were from Turkey, and 8,000 came from the rest of the world.

In 2004, after the United Nations (UN) reunification plan for the divided island of Cyprus was supported by Turkish Cypriots but rejected by Greek Cypriots, and the future seemed to offer only more isolation for northern Cyprus, academics at EMU adopted a more entrepreneurial

FIGURE 5
Eastern Mediterranean University



Source: Thomas de Waal

18 'ANO VO 'Rossijskij novyj universitet Tiraspol'skij filial, Accessed 9 April 2020, <https://ros-noutir.ru/>.

19 Information from YÖDAK, northern Cyprus, 2019.

strategy. They built bilateral relationships with universities abroad, including Warwick University in the UK and Queen's University in Canada. This allows for exchange schemes and shared degree programmes. To circumvent the issue of accreditation of diplomas, EMU invited international accreditation agencies to certify different faculties.

EMU now figures in the top 1,000 universities in the Times Higher Education rankings, scoring especially highly on international outlook. It is also a member of the Brussels-based European Universities Association, from which it commissioned a report on how to raise standards.

According to EMU's vice rector, Cem Tanova, international isolation was a positive stimulus for the university to work to improve its quality. Generally, universities in small recognised states 'don't try and get international recognition or assessment because they already have state accreditation. For us, we have the ambiguities, we are not recognised, so we need to go beyond state mechanisms, we turn our face more to the outside.'²⁰

Yet, the non-recognition of northern Cyprus still poses problems for EMU. An example is the 2017 collaboration with the Nuffield Department of Women's and Reproductive Health at the University of Oxford to collect data on women's health in Cyprus.²¹ The Oxford partner received a letter from the Republic of Cyprus's high commission in London objecting to its partnership with an 'illegal university'.²² To these objections, EMU now has a standard response, which assures potential partners that 'there is no need to be alarmed' and that it is an institution with a long track record of international collaboration.

Property is also a point of vulnerability. In 2009, a European Court of Human Rights judgement held Turkey responsible for a property claim by Christos Saveriades, the former Greek Cypriot owner of a building now on the university's campus who was displaced by the Turkish military intervention of 1974. The building in question was a Greek Cypriot school. After 1974, it was turned into EMU's first rectorate and is now the Communications Faculty.²³ According to the vice rector, visiting diplomats raise this issue. He said discussions had been held on giving the building to the municipality of Famagusta so that it, rather than the university, would be legally liable to the former owner.

EMU's problems are not just with the Greek Cypriots. On the domestic front, the proliferation of low-quality universities causes problems as well. 'We need to differentiate ourselves from other universities,' said

20 Interview at EMU, April 2019.

21 'Cyprus women's health research initiative', Accessed 9 April 2020, <https://kisaainsiyatifi.com/en/>.

22 'Initiative to collect women's health data in Northern Cyprus supported by multiple donations, 5 October 2017 <https://www.wrh.ox.ac.uk/news/initiative-to-collect-womens-health-data-in-northern-cyprus-supported-by-multiple-donations>.

23 European Court of Human Rights Case of Saveriades v. Turkey, 1 March 2010, <https://lovdata.no/static/EMDN/emd-1990-016160.pdf>.

Selcan Timur, dean of the Business Faculty. The distinction between EMU and the new colleges, she said, is that 'we are trying to find good students; the other universities are trying to find any students'.²⁴

De facto government officials and education professionals ascribe the proliferation of HEIs to an effective trade embargo imposed by the Republic of Cyprus after Turkish Cypriots declared the de facto state of the TRNC in 1983. They say that this forced northern Cyprus to reorient its economy, first towards tourism and, more recently, towards cheap higher education for international students. The sector brought in revenues of \$765 million (€ 686 million), or 9.3 per cent of northern Cyprus's budget, in 2018.²⁵ The sector is now protected by powerful business interests.²⁶

Many of these universities are low-quality diploma mills that sell degrees to international students. What is more, new universities are being planned all the time, despite the objections of YÖDAK, the Turkish Cypriot higher education accreditation agency.²⁷ Two such new universities are City Island University and Cyprus West in Famagusta. A slick promotional video from Cyprus West is clearly aimed at African students.²⁸ You can get a degree in dentistry from City Island or in civil aviation management from Cyprus West for an annual tuition fee of \$5,950 (€5,336).²⁹ But it is questionable how much these degrees are worth, as neither university is even accredited by Turkey's Council of Higher Education (YÖK).

Northern Cyprus is an attractive destination not only because it offers low tuition fees but also because it has no visa restrictions. Around 23,000 of northern Cyprus's international students come from Africa, especially Cameroon, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe.³⁰ Recently, there have also been reports of educational refugees from Syria and Libya coming to study in the territory. As Cyprus is a former British colony, English is widely spoken and most HEIs teach in English.

However, there are many problems. Agents, paid on a commission basis, recruit students with promises of a cheap European lifestyle and high-quality education. Many students do not understand that they are coming to an unrecognised territory and are disappointed when they learn that they cannot cross the Green Line to the southern part of the island.

The influx of many international students from Africa and the Middle East into a small and conservative society causes tensions. International

24 Interview at EMU, April 2019.

25 Information from finance ministry of northern Cyprus, 2019.

26 Interviews in northern Cyprus, April 2019. In May 2019 the Turkish Cypriot government fell, partly over allegations of an improper tender for construction of a new university named after the founder of the TRNC, Rauf Denktaş. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2019/05/08/northern-cypriot-finance-minister-denktas-resigns>.

27 Interview with Adile Büke, head of YÖDAK, April 2019.

28 Cyprus West University home page, Accessed 16 April 2020, <https://cwu.edu.tr/#lg=1&slide=0>.

29 City Island University Faculty of Dentistry, Accessed 16 April 2020, <https://adakent.edu.tr/fakulte/3/faculty-of-dentistry?dil=en>; Cyprus West University Civil Aviation Management, accessed April 16 2020, <https://cwu.edu.tr/faculty-of-economics-administrative-and-social-sciences/civil-aviation-management/>.

30 Interview with education ministry of northern Cyprus, April 2019.

students suffer from problems that range from petty racism and high rents to serious allegations of human trafficking. A new organisation called VOIS acts as an advocacy body for the thousands of international students in northern Cyprus and documents their problems. According to Emmanuel Achiri, one of the founders of VOIS, 'students are seen as cash machines' and 'because competition between universities is high, there is no incentive to control the agents'.³¹

Relations with Patron and Parent States

Parent state policies

The three parent states considered here — Moldova, Georgia, and the Republic of Cyprus — have all adopted different policies towards HEIs in the de facto states.

In 2004, **Moldova** adopted a regulation harmonising high-school and university diplomas to allow students from Transdniestria to attend Moldovan or international universities. The diplomas are examined and equalised with Moldovan curricula and may involve additional exams.³² Since 2007, Moldova has offered a number of places in its own HEIs for students from Transdniestria. In 2018, Moldovan universities provided 278 such places, which were filled by 170 students from Transdniestrian schools. In recent years, more places have been offered, but the number of applicants falls every year.

In 2018, Moldova began issuing certified diploma forms.³³ Under the scheme, TSU graduates apply to the Moldovan Ministry of Justice in Chişinău and pay a fee to place an apostille on their diploma. The form calls their university Transdniestrian Taras Shevchenko University (not Transdniestrian State University.) This makes students eligible to apply for further study elsewhere in the world in the same way as Moldovan university graduates. In March 2020, 354 students from TSU were reported to have had their degrees certified under the scheme.³⁴

The three parent states have all adopted different policies towards HEIs.

31 Interview with Emmanuel Achiri, northern Cyprus, 2019. See also VOIS Cyprus Blog, Accessed 16 April 2020, <https://www.voiscyprus.org/blog>.

32 'Regulamentul cu privire la efectele juridice ale actelor de studii eliberate de către instituțiile de învățămînt din raioanele de Est ale Republicii Moldova și or. Bender', Ministry of Education, Culture, and Research of the Republic of Moldova, 2004, <https://mecc.gov.md/ro/content/regulamentul-cu-privire-la-efectele-juridice-ale-actelor-de-studii-eliberate-de-catre>.

33 'Protocol of the official meeting of the permanent conference for political questions in the framework of the negotiating process on the Transdniestrian settlement, Berlin, 2-3 June 2016', OSCE, 3 June 2016, <https://www.osce.org/moldova/244656>.

34 Information from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe office in Chişinău; 'Un an de la primele apostilări ale diplomelor de studii eliberate de către Universitatea „Taras Şevcenco” din Tiraspol', Guvernul Republicii Moldova, 4 April 2019, <https://gov.md/ro/content/un-de-la-primele-apostilari-ale-diplomelor-de-studii-eliberate-de-catre-universitatea-taras>.

Relations between the government of **Georgia** and the de facto state authorities in Abkhazia are much more strained, due to a heavier legacy of conflict and ongoing disputes about the status of Georgians in Abkhazia's Gali region. Tbilisi recognises the existence of ASU in Abkhazia only as a former Georgian HEI, and the government maintains that to have full recognition, ASU needs to join the Georgian higher education system.³⁵

In a 2018 initiative, Step to a Better Future, the Georgian government unveiled a scheme under which students from Abkhazia and South Ossetia can apply to be given a personal number, which does not indicate their citizenship. They can use this to register as a legal entity, receive grants, and access banking services and education. Students at Abkhaz and South Ossetian universities who wish to transfer their studies to Georgian institutions are also promised full funding without having to pass any additional exams.³⁶

The project aims to replicate the relatively successful scheme in healthcare, where thousands of Abkhaz have crossed into western Georgia and beyond to receive Georgian healthcare. However, the uptake on offers of education has been low, almost certainly because there is a social stigma in Abkhazia attached to receiving Georgian government benefits. Whereas accessing Georgian healthcare can be done quickly and is tolerated as an urgent measure, the decision to study in Georgia is perceived as much more unpatriotic and could hurt the career prospects of an Abkhaz. If a person wants to use Georgian accreditation to study abroad further, the difficult issue of documentation and passports also arises.

Of the three parent states, the **Republic of Cyprus** adopts the harshest line towards HEIs on the other side of the conflict divide, in accordance with its strict non-recognition of Turkish Cypriot de facto institutions. This is despite the fact that on a non-governmental level, there are strong bilateral contacts between Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot academics. Many scholars from the north attend events in the south, but as private individuals with no institutional label.

The Republic of Cyprus adopts the harshest line towards HEIs on the other side of the conflict divide.

In a government position paper, the Republic of Cyprus declares the entire university sector in the north to be unlawful, stating, "The "universities" operating in the area of the Republic of Cyprus which remains under Turkish military occupation since 1974, are unlawfully operating "educational institutions", since they are not in compliance with the relevant Laws and Regulations of the Republic of Cyprus on Higher Education."³⁷

The two sides in the conflict differ in their interpretation of the Republic of Cyprus's 1960 constitution, which is the legal touchstone for Greek Cypriots in the settlement process. According to that constitution, education on the island comes under the competence of the two communities. As the

35 For more details on the Georgian-Abkhaz case, see 'The realm of the possible: Finding ways forward in the Georgian-Abkhaz context: Challenges in education', Conciliation Resources, July 2016, <https://www.c-r.org/resource/realm-possible-education>.

36 'A step to a better future', Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civil Equality of Georgia, 2018, https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/prev/Education__9dd0e9dc.pdf.

37 'Political situation in the occupied areas', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Cyprus, last modified 17 January 2019, <http://www.mfa.gov.cy/mfa/mfa2016.nsf/All/663178FC5592CDE3C2257F9C0034A158?OpenDocument>.

constitution was written at a time when there was no higher education on the island, it mentions only school education.

Based on this, the Greek Cypriot side recognises Turkish Cypriot high-school diplomas and permits school exchanges and dialogue via the UN-mediated Technical Committee on Education. However, it maintains that all higher education on the island is now the responsibility of the Republic of Cyprus's legacy institutions. The Turkish Cypriot position is that the Republic of Cyprus's Ministry of Education is a newly founded Greek Cypriot body and not valid under the 1960 constitution.

In practice, this means that Greek Cypriot officials and diplomats apply a policy of non-recognition quite aggressively. They protest if Turkish Cypriot academics attend international conferences as representatives of universities which they consider unlawful under Greek Cypriot law. In March 2009, a Japanese physics professor, Tomotako Kitamura, was deported on arrival in Larnaca airport when he told immigration officials that he was attending a conference at EMU in Famagusta.³⁸

Andreas Demetriou, who served as education minister of the Republic of Cyprus in 2008–11, made proposals to break the deadlock. He suggested that HEIs in the north could be assessed by an international evaluation body, such as the European Universities Association, and then be eligible to become members of the Conference of Rectors of the Universities of Cyprus. Through that route, they would automatically gain both state and international recognition. However, the proposal was rejected by all sides at the time and has not been revived.

In conclusion, of the three parent states, Moldova has the best relations with the de facto state in the higher education sphere, although even here there is little institutional cooperation between HEIs across the conflict divide. In Georgia, there is very little contact, while in Cyprus cooperation on higher education issues is hostage to a wider political settlement.

Language issues

The politics of language in education was one driver in the conflicts over Abkhazia and Transdniestria and continues to be a source of tension between Georgia and Moldova, on the one hand, and the two territories that broke away in the 1990s, on the other. In Cyprus, the language of education is not an issue, as the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities have traditionally taught in their own language, and much of the higher education sector teaches in English.

In Soviet times, the suppression of the Abkhaz language was a vital issue for the Abkhaz, who were an ethnic minority in the autonomous republic named after them. The first serious outbreak of violence in Abkhazia occurred in 1989 with a deadly dispute over the status of ASU. Georgian students called for the leadership of ASU to be dismissed and a separate

The politics of language in education continues to be a source of tension between Georgia and Moldova and their break away territories.

³⁸ 'Professor turned away at Larnaca Airport', Kathimerini Cyprus, 27 March 2019, <https://knews.kathimerini.com.cy/en/news/professor-turned-away-at-larnaca-airport>.

university to be created, subordinate to Tbilisi State University. The Abkhaz side objected. In turbulent events in June 1989 in and around ASU, nine Georgians and five Abkhaz were killed.³⁹

Abkhaz and Russian are now the official languages of Abkhazia. Although up to 50,000 ethnic Georgians live in Abkhazia's Gali region, the Georgian language is no longer permitted as a language of instruction in schools — despite the objections of parents and complaints by international organisations.

This position has ensured that most young people from Gali pursue their education in government-controlled Georgia. In 2019, there were 160 Georgian-speaking students from Gali in Georgian universities and only thirty at ASU. What is more, the Abkhaz authorities threatened to withdraw residence permits for people who stayed outside Abkhazia for more than six months, for example to study.⁴⁰

A major reason for the start of the conflict over Transdniestria in 1990 was a new language law passed by the Supreme Soviet in Chişinău that gave special status to the Moldovan language (as written in the Latin script). That move was perceived as a threat in Russian-speaking Transdniestria. The territory's official languages are Russian, Moldovan in the Cyrillic script, and Ukrainian, but its HEIs teach almost entirely in Russian. The language of school tuition is a controversial issue for Chişinău, and the right of eight schools to teach the Moldovan language in the Latin script is one of eight steps on which the two sides agreed in 1995.⁴¹

Patron states

The three territories' relations with their patron states — Russia for Abkhazia and Transdniestria, and Turkey for northern Cyprus — have helped the higher education sectors in the territories in sometimes controversial ways.

'We are in Russia's educational space,' noted one teacher at ASU in **Abkhazia**.⁴² The Russian government has helped fund the university's renovation, but there is little evidence of bigger institutional support. A diploma from ASU has only limited validity beyond Russia. Even accreditation in Russia was problematic before 2017 and required complex bureaucratic procedures. The process was simplified after the Abkhaz and Russian education ministries signed an agreement on the mutual recognition of diplomas in December 2017.⁴³ This should ease the accreditation process for Abkhaz stu-

39 'Obostrenie Gruzino-Abkhazskogo Konfliktka v Iyule 1989-ogo goda', Kavkazsky Uzel, 31 July 2014, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/246527/>.

40 'De facto Abkhazia plans to revoke "residency permits" of local students receiving higher education on Tbilisi-controlled territory', Agenda.ge, 26 November 2019, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2019/3214>; 'All 190 students from occupied Abkhazia enrolled after facing obstacles to sit university exams', Agenda.ge, 26 July 2019, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2019/2034>; 'Students from occupied Gali cross so-called border to participate in summer school in Tbilisi', Agenda.ge, 16 July 2019, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2019/1928>;

41 'The Moldovan-Administered Latin-Script Schools in Transdniestria: Background, Current Situation, Analysis and Recommendations', Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, November 2012, 51, <https://www.osce.org/moldova/99058>.

42 Interview at ASU, Abkhazia, October 2017.

43 Interview with ASU teacher, 2019.

Transdniestria began to take part in Russian state exams.

dents, although there are anecdotal stories of students encountering problems getting their diplomas accredited.⁴⁴

Access to Russian universities is not always easy for students in **Transdniestria**. The 150 international partners listed by TSU are mostly Russian universities, but collaboration depends on continuous negotiations.⁴⁵ In 2013, a consortium was established that connects staff of Russian universities to TSU staff to adapt to Russia's education system, which is not functioning well.⁴⁶ The following year, Transdniestria began to take part in Russian state exams — a precondition for students to attend Russian universities.⁴⁷ TSU established a centre for Russian higher education that prepares students for these exams.⁴⁸ This provides opportunities for people to emigrate to Russia but also creates brain drain from Transdniestria.

As an internationally acknowledged Russian diploma is essential for the vast majority of Transdniestrian students, the two Russian universities in Tiraspol, with their promise of diplomas that are accepted in Russia, are attractive. Thanks to agreements with the Russian education ministry, when Transdniestrian students finish their studies they can receive documents that let them continue studying at universities in Russia.

The status of the diplomas of Transdniestria's state universities is under continuous negotiation. TSU aims to come closer to the full status of a Russian HEI, so that its students' diplomas are identical to those of Russian graduates.⁴⁹ This requires constant discussions with Russia and Moldova about the recognition of Transdniestrian diplomas. TSU has close ties with Russia, Russian universities, and the Russian education ministry and adjusts its examinations and degrees to Russian requirements.

Russia's cautious outreach to Abkhazia and Transdniestria contrasts strongly with Turkey's firm support for the higher education sector in **northern Cyprus**. Turkey has a much stronger developmental agenda for the TRNC than Russia does for the de facto states it backs. Two prominent Turkish universities, the Istanbul Technical University and the Middle Eastern Technical University, have campuses in northern Cyprus.

Turkey firmly supports the higher education sector in northern Cyprus.

More importantly, Turkey's Council of Higher Education (YÖK) licenses universities and accredits diplomas in most, but not all, of the territory's universities. That enables graduates from northern Cyprus to hold degrees which are accepted internationally in most instances. This also applies to some institutions. For example, northern Cyprus's Near Eastern University

44 'Rossiya i Abkhazia podpisali soglasenie o vzaimnom priznanii obrazovaniya', 19 December 2017, TASS, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/4824703>.

45 'Partnery PGU', Transdniestrian State University, Accessed 9 April 2020, <http://spsu.ru/international/partnery-pgu>.

46 'Konsortsium vuzov', Transdniestrian State University, Accessed 9 April 2020, <http://spsu.ru/international/konsortsium-vuzov>.

47 'EGE RF', Transdniestrian State University, Accessed 9 April 2020, <http://spsu.ru/international/ege-rf-olimpiady>.

48 'Centr rossijskogo obrazovanija', Transdniestrian State University, Accessed 9 April 2020, <http://cro.spsu.ru/>.

49 'Stepan Beril: "PGU - delo moej zhizni i ee smysl"', Pervyj pridnestrovskij, 28 May 2017, <https://tv.pgtrk.ru/ru/news/20170528/57516>.

Medical School is included in the World Directory of Medical Schools under a Cyprus listing but thanks to its Turkish accreditation.⁵⁰

International relations

For historical and political reasons, northern Cypriot HEIs feel the effects of non-recognition but do not suffer strongly from isolation. In Transdniestria, and even more so in Abkhazia, international contact is still limited. This is in part due to political caution in the parent states; but it is also because of a lack of capacity both abroad and in the HEIs themselves, which are slow to embrace international assistance. Moreover, in Abkhazia experts speak of a trend of self-isolation, as stakeholders often do not embrace opportunities for international engagement.⁵¹

Cultural exchange and foreign-language teaching

There are many examples of cultural engagement between the de facto states and international partners. The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) has been active at TSU and ASU and organised seminars and workshops for students, teachers, and academic staff. In Abkhazia, the service operated in 2016–17 through its Yerevan office, but cooperation has stopped for now. In Transdniestria, the Chişinău office is regularly in touch with the German-language chairs in Tiraspol and Rybnica to teach students, staff, and teachers and inform them about international exchange programmes.

TSU's Faculty of Philology hosts several language centres. The Centre for French Culture, founded in 2008, is one of four centres of the Alliance Française in Moldova.⁵² It was the first foreign-language centre at the university. It has a library with books, films, and computers and is a centre of language and cultural exchange with France.⁵³

The Centre for English Language and American Culture was founded in 2013 after an agreement between the United States (US) embassy in Chişinău, the Moldovan government, and the Transdniestrian authorities.⁵⁴ The centre runs a library with books, films, and rooms with a number of computers for teaching.⁵⁵ Every year, the centre hosts a mother-tongue scholar who teaches English.

50 See 'Near East University Faculty of Medicine', World Directory of Medical Schools, accessed 14 April 2020, <https://search.wdoms.org/home/SchoolDetail/F0002935>.

51 See, for example, 'The de-isolation of Abkhazia', International Alert, April 2011, <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/de-isolation-abkhazia>.

52 'Centr francuzskoj kultury', Transdniestrian State University, Accessed 9 April 2020, <http://litera.spsu.ru/rukovodstvo-2/463-tsentr-frantsuzskoj-kultury>.

53 Centre de ressources et d'information sur la France contemporaine, Facebook page, Accessed 9 April 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/CRIFCtiras/>.

54 'Centr anglijskogo jazyka i amerikanskoj kultury', Transdniestrian State University, Accessed 9 April 2020, <http://litera.spsu.ru/rukovodstvo-2/464-tsentr-anglijskogo-yazyka-i-amerikanskoj-kultury>.

55 For 2019, see 'Studenty PGU poluchili informatsiyu ob uchebe za rubezhom', Transdniestrian State University, Accessed 9 April 2020, <http://spsu.ru/news/3681-studenty-pgu-poluchili-informatsiyu-ob-uchebe-za-rubezhom>.

Despite the hard work of these centres, the numbers of students attending them are low, although they are rising. Capacity is limited because there is little publicity about the centres in Transdniestria and because language tests and preparatory courses for English, French, and German can only be taken in Chişinău and must be paid for.

In Abkhazia, there is high demand for learning English, but the territory's inaccessibility for international visitors poses many problems. Another complication is that Abkhaz students wishing to study abroad must take English-language tests in an internationally recognised centre, such as Istanbul, Moscow, or Yerevan, which limits opportunities.

The situation was better before the Georgia-Russia War of 2008 and Russia's subsequent recognition of Abkhazia. The US Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) programme used to operate there, sending two to three students from Abkhazia each year to attend high schools in the US for one academic year. A US citizen used to run a private English-language school called the American Express College, but it later closed.

The United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, supports a scheme that trains more than 100 English teachers in Abkhazia. Some of the teachers have been funded to receive training in the UK. This scheme is directed mainly at secondary schools, so it is too early to say whether it is having an impact on knowledge of English in universities.

Student scholarships

The language centres at ASU and TSU aim to prepare students for exchange schemes abroad. In Abkhazia, students have benefited from UK Chevening Scholarships since 2014.⁵⁶ To accommodate students from Abkhazia, Chevening introduced a status-neutral 'South Caucasus' category, to which Tbilisi agreed.

The scheme is a success. Abkhaz students in the UK get to meet their Georgian counterparts, as well as those from other countries, while studying many different disciplines. People involved in the scheme admit, however, that it would be difficult to expand it and bring more Abkhaz students to the UK because ASU in Abkhazia produces few applicants with both a high academic standard and a good knowledge of English.

In Transdniestria, students can take advantage of study schemes such as the US Hubert Humphrey Fellowship or Fulbright Scholarships and other exchange schemes run by the DAAD and the Alliance Française. The US embassy in Chişinău states that 'permanent residents of the Transnistrian region may be considered regardless of citizenship'.⁵⁷ It is thanks to the Centre for English Language and American Culture at TSU that students can take part in Fulbright and other fellowship programmes for studying in the US. Unlike in Abkhazia, problems with travel documents rarely arise in

56 'Chevening in South Caucasus', Chevening, Accessed 16 April 2020, <https://www.chevening.org/scholarship/south-caucasus/>.

57 'Study or Research in the USA!', US Embassy in Moldova, 2 April 2018, <https://md.usembassy.gov/study-research-usa-5/>.

Transdnestria, because most people have a Moldovan passport and can travel abroad easily.

Erasmus+ and other exchange programmes

The European Commission and the Council of Europe, with national education ministries, have established the Bologna Process and created the European Higher Education Area. These initiatives aim to modernise and streamline education and establish a dominant model for higher education in Europe.

The commission also leads the Erasmus+ scheme, which was launched in 2014 to support education, training, youth, and sport in Europe. HEIs which want to participate in Erasmus+ must have a valid Erasmus Charter for Higher Education. Eligibility for this charter is derived from national governments and mostly aligns with the EU's recognition policies. This means that HEIs in Abkhazia, Transdnestria, and northern Cyprus are currently excluded from the Erasmus+ scheme at the discretion of their respective parent state governments.

HEIs in Abkhazia, Transdnestria, and northern Cyprus are currently excluded from Erasmus+.

A small number of students from TSU have had the opportunity to study abroad on an individual level, based on the flexibility of participating institutions. In 2018, an exchange based on Erasmus+ took place with the Universidad Pública de Navarra in Pamplona, Spain.⁵⁸ An Erasmus+ exchange between the Charles University Prague and TSU's geography department is currently taking place and will be continued.⁵⁹ This is possible only because of strong personal ties between local scholars and institutions in Moldova, including the Erasmus+ contact point in Chişinău, and despite long, bureaucratic procedures.⁶⁰

The most difficult task for Transdnestrian universities is to find universities and professors who want to establish exchange programmes with TSU. According to academics, there are individual contacts with Poland, Italy, Germany, and France, especially via the university's language centres. These centres could be a base on which to build up permanent relations for cultural and language exchange, teaching, and research cooperation.

Many Turkish Cypriot students are eligible for Republic of Cyprus passports, making them EU citizens. In theory, they can therefore benefit from Erasmus+ as individuals; but in practice few do, because to do so, they must attend HEIs in the south of the island. Partly to compensate for this problem, the EU runs a scholarship programme for the Turkish Cypriot community.

58 'Navarra i pridnestrove nauchnyy opyt', Novosti PMR, 20 June 2018, <https://novostipmr.com/ru/news/18-06-20/navarra-i-pridnestrove-nauchnyy-opyt>; 'Mezhdunarodnoe sotrudnichestvo rasshiraetsya', Transdnestrian State University, Accessed 9 April 2020, <http://spsu.ru/news/2118-mezhdunarodnoe-sotrudnichestvo-rasshiraetsya>.

59 'Cheshskiy ekspert rasskazal studentam TSU o vosproizvodstve', Novosti PMR, 13 November 2016, <https://novostipmr.com/ru/news/16-11-13/cheshskiy-ekspert-rasskazal-studentam-TSU-o-vosproizvodstve>.

60 'Innovacionnaya dejatel'nost kak osnova jeffektivnogo razvitija universiteta intervju', Transdnestrian State University, 9 April 2020, <http://spsu.ru/interview/440-mezhdunarodnaya-deyatelnost-kak-strategiya-innovatsionnogo-razvitiya-vuza-intervyu-s-prorektorom-po-mezhdunarodnomu-sotrudnichestvu-vladlenoj-vladimirovnoj-lysenko>.

The programme has handed out more than 1,000 scholarships for Turkish Cypriot students to study in the EU, at a cost of just over €1 million a year.⁶¹

The criteria for admission to the EU scholarship programme do not require applicants to hold Republic of Cyprus passports — only that they ‘must belong to the Turkish Cypriot community’, thus excluding settlers from Turkey. There is also an implicit understanding that the students are studying at Turkish Cypriot universities: applicants are expected to be ‘undergraduate students studying at a university or equivalent higher education institution located in northern part of Cyprus’. Applicants are responsible for being accepted by EU universities, which moves the burden of assessing their qualifications onto those institutions.⁶²

Research and other cooperative projects

A few departments at Abkhazia’s ASU, notably international relations, have been open to international contacts. One member of staff, however, expressed frustration that academics were constantly asked to work on conflict-related topics and not other international issues.

The most ambitious project with ASU was the Abkhaz University Project run by the Free University of Brussels (VUB) in 2013/24–14 and funded by the EU. It delivered some tangible results. ASU’s library received around 1,000 books in English and Russian. Four European academics visited ASU and taught courses, and four academics from ASU visited European universities in Belgium, the Czech Republic, and Italy.

The Abkhaz University Project ran into a capacity problem at the university, however, as few of the staff or students had the language skills and academic standards to be qualified to pursue studies abroad. There were also political problems. In February 2013, then Abkhaz president Alexander Ankvab publicly objected to the visit by Belgian academic Bruno Coppieters, saying he had not been informed of it, freezing the project for a while. Georgian authorities opposed formalising the relationship between VUB and ASU with a memorandum of understanding between the two universities. This created a difficult context in which the project could not continue.

Transdnistria’s TSU lists 150 international partners, most of which are Russian universities. Formerly there were many institutional relationships with Ukrainian HEIs, but these have fallen away since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Russia’s support of separatists in the ongoing war in eastern Ukraine.⁶³

Beyond Erasmus+, some members of TSU took part in a research project funded by the International Organisation for Migration, the UN’s migration

61 ‘The European Union Scholarship Programme for the Turkish Cypriot Community,’ 9 April 2020, <http://www.abburs.eu/en/contact-us.html>. The scheme is currently administered by the British Council, but the council is set to lose its tender following the UK’s exit from the EU in January 2020.

62 See guidelines for Turkish Cypriot students at <https://www.abburs.eu/en/>.

63 Interview with an academic at TSU, 2019.

agency.⁶⁴ Another project, financed by the EU and the United Nations Development Programme, focused on the development of small towns in the Dniester valley.⁶⁵

These projects take place with the help of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Many university teachers participate in international projects, which can be scientific, educational, or social. In recent years, there have been dozens — probably hundreds — of such projects. But very often, Transdnestrian teachers act as independent researchers, experts, or NGO representatives, not as representatives of their universities. This is due to Moldovan restrictions on the Transdnestrian authorities and the difficulty of obtaining permission from the TSU leadership to participate in these international projects.

Many university teachers participate in international projects, which can be scientific, educational, or social.

Local and international NGOs also organise workshops, summer schools, and smaller exchange projects for Abkhazia and Transdnestria. These initiatives aim to provide opportunities for dialogue, strengthen education capacities, and bring together partners from different regions and disciplines.⁶⁶

Potential for international academic cooperation exists in language centres in Abkhazia and Transdnestria. Other aspects of cooperation are much less developed. Scholarship exchanges exist and could be expanded. Participation in Erasmus+ is currently very restricted because of EU non-recognition policies. Widening the scheme's scope would be a great opportunity for students, staff, and joint research initiatives. International cooperation can be developed on the basis of existing language and cultural exchange programmes.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

This report has outlined how three de facto states in Europe, which are the subject of ongoing sovereignty disputes, have higher education sectors that struggle to deliver good-quality education as a result of the unresolved conflicts around them.

In Abkhazia and Transdnestria, this is due to the territories' isolation and lack of innovation and exchange — although the Transdnestrian situation is better as there exist a number of contacts with Moldova and individual international academic partners. Northern Cyprus has taken a different route, with mostly unregulated commercialisation of its universities. This has produced a few good-quality HEIs, which nonetheless are excluded from exchange programmes such as Erasmus+, and many diploma mills, which are a grave source of concern.

64 Alla Ostavnaia, 'Mapping migration from Transnistria', International Organisation for Migration, 2017, <https://www.iom.md/sites/default/files/publications/docs/Mapping%20Migration%20from%20Transnistria.pdf>.

65 Evropejskij Sojuz, Programma razvitija Organizacii Obedinennyh Nacij v Respublike Moldova, 'Ocenka potenciala ustojchivogo razvitija malyh gorodov doliny r. Dnestr', Chisinau 2017.

66 Examples include Open Corridors (www.opencorridors.de), the Agency for Innovation and Development (www.innovation.md), and the Institute for European Policies and Reform (www.ipre.md).

Hopes for a greater engagement in higher education, within a framework of non-recognition and engagement, have mostly remained unrealised.

The HEIs in these regions need capacity building as institutions.

The policies of the EU and other international actors towards Europe's de facto states generally fall within a framework of non-recognition and engagement. Higher education is one sector where there were hopes for greater engagement that have mostly remained unrealised. In 2010, a paper by the EU Institute for Security Studies fleshing out concrete ideas for the EU's non-recognition and engagement policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia proposed: 'In a society as small as Abkhazia, 80 or 100 scholarships could make a significant difference. More could be done in the fields of language and tuition, internships, [and] cultural exchanges.'⁶⁷ Yet, fewer than ten scholarships a year are currently taken up by European students in Abkhazia.⁶⁸

In Transdniestria, there are committed and active language and cultural centres, which are good starting points for integrating HEIs into an international landscape of higher education. This can be categorised as internationalisation in a home context that provides intercultural encounters and raises competence. These are stable projects that may gain more support from Germany, France, the US, and the UK to make it easier to take courses and exams in the de facto states. This mainly requires diplomacy and political will — for Abkhazia more than for Transdniestria — and money to invest in language centres. Exchange schemes and international funding schemes already exist and just need to be made accessible for interested students and researchers.

Yet, even if the number of scholarships for individual students were substantially increased, this would fail to tackle a bigger structural issue. The HEIs in these regions need capacity building as institutions, otherwise students will continue to receive an education that lags behind international standards. Ambitious students will pursue other options, such as study in the patron states or elsewhere.

Additionally, there is a need for funding from the de facto states' authorities to increase the quality of universities and for exchanges of academic staff and students between universities. Ad hoc projects with individuals deliver some results but are generally not sustainable. Language and cultural centres are examples of sustainable institutions that can be focal points for further exchange schemes.

In northern Cyprus arguably, one or two HEIs, notably the Eastern Mediterranean University, have managed to overcome the obstacles posed by the status of their territory to build a good-quality university. They have done so thanks to an entrepreneurial approach from academic staff and financial support from Turkey. Yet non-recognition policies also penalize many northern Cypriot students, who lose out because of their HEI's lack of access to Erasmus+ and other international exchange schemes.

67 Sabine Fischer, 'The EU's non-recognition and engagement policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia', European Union Institute for Security Studies, European Seminar Reports, 2010.

68 Interview with ASU lecturer, Abkhazia, 2017.

Policy recommendations

Institutional support for HEIs in Abkhazia, Transdniestria, and northern Cyprus is a much more sensitive political issue. Tackling this issue requires a more creative approach from all actors involved. The policy recommendations below are formulated in this light.

International actors should:

- make higher education and contact between HEIs a greater priority in official conflict-resolution initiatives of the EU, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the UN;
- fund foreign-language teaching and cultural exchange in the de facto states and make it easier for students to take language tests for study abroad;
- ensure the sustainability of existing centres and build up new ones, based on local initiatives at the universities, such as a German Language Centre at Tiraspol University;
- begin dialogue with conflict parties on how HEIs in de facto states can take part in the Erasmus+ scheme;
- promote the inclusion of status-neutral categories to make it easier for students to apply for European scholarship schemes;
- offer knowledge transfer for academic staff at universities in de facto states on how to participate in international research programmes, in close cooperation with parent states;
- attract international academics to collaborate with local researchers and develop joint research projects; and
- be aware of brain drain caused by engagement policies in higher education.

Parent states should:

- encourage academic and student exchanges across conflict divides;
- approve bilateral contacts between international universities and HEIs in de facto states; and
- develop double degrees, where possible, between universities across conflict lines, using existing contacts.

De facto states should:

- encourage the management of HEIs such as ASU, EMU, and TSU to become more independent from de facto state governments;
- issue diplomas from individual universities, rather than from territories, without stating the universities' national affiliation;

- de-register HEIs that do not meet international standards;
- in northern Cyprus, encourage HEIs to settle property issues with former Greek Cypriot owners;
- in Abkhazia and Transnistria, support tuition in the Georgian and Moldovan languages, respectively;
- use online teaching for exchange with international partners; and
- attract international staff and students for teaching, research, and cultural exchange.

Imprint

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Published by

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International Studies (ZOiS) gGmbH

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Citation

Thomas de Waal and Sabine von Löwis: “Higher education in Europe’s unrecognised territories: Challenges and opportunities”, ZOiS Report 2/2020, (https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/ZOiS_Reports/ZOiS_Report_2_2020.pdf)

ISSN 2512-7233

Layout

Yuko Stier

Cover image

Denis Karpenkov / Alamy Stock Foto

