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Academic isolation: Higher education in Europe's de facto states

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Engagement with the higher education sector in de facto states such as Abkhazia, Transdnistria, and northern Cyprus benefits societies, but can also help conflict-resolution efforts. A new ZOiS Report examines challenges and opportunities.

Universities in Abkhazia, Transdnistria, and northern Cyprus have fallen victim to the conflicts associated with these territories and been cut off from international academic exchange. A new ZOiS Report describes higher education in its political context in these three de facto states and analyses opportunities for positive intervention.

In Abkhazia and Transdnistria, 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', the authors of the report, Thomas de Waal and Sabine von Löwis say.

While higher education has been internationalised over the last thirty years, 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. 'International actors should make higher education and contact between higher education institutions a greater priority in official conflict-resolution initiatives of the EU, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the UN,' the authors argue. In particular, international actors should begin a dialogue with conflict parties on how institutions of higher education in de facto states can take part in the Erasmus+ scheme.

The full length report can be found online: [Thomas de Waal, Sabine von Löwis: "Higher education in Europe's unrecognised territories: Challenges and opportunities", ZOiS Report 2 / 2020.](#)

Thomas de Waal is a senior fellow with Carnegie Europe, specializing in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus region.

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