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External Review

Sharing History, Cultural Dialogues

Crossroads of Culture. The countries of the Black-Sea region and socio-political developments in the 19th and 20th centuries

Based on the Sept. 2015 editions of the Teachers' Guide and the Textbook for Students

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Sharing History, Cultural Dialogues

Review Report

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Executive Summary

- The project “Sharing History, Cultural Dialogues” brought together educators from five countries around the Black Sea: Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.
- The common atmosphere of the project has been one of problem solving and respect for certain national or personal sensitivities rather than a top-down implementation of a preordained blueprint.
- Three project objectives:
 - to produce a set of (thirty) high-quality modules on cultural and historical topics, complementary to the standard national textbook of courses in politics, history etc.;
 - to facilitate reflection on and training in state-of-the-art educational approaches among the educators and textbook authors of each country;
 - to initiate and facilitate transnational networks of like-minded educators and textbook authors in the Black Sea region.
- Strategic choices:
 - each team of authors was given a free and creative hand in defining the topic and the form of their lesson as well as the categories of sources used.
 - the lessons offer the generation born in the 2000s a connection between the present and a relatively distant historical past as well as a historical sensation caused by cultural or time distance.
 - The textbook project moves beyond a reckoning with the past and decided that the time has come to make the Soviet era part of the historical past and collective memory rather than the living past. The focus on the political regime has disappeared and so has the moral or accusatory tone.
- The lessons that work best are those with a generic topic applicable to most if not all of the five countries and created around one particular type of sources. Many modules demonstrated particular qualities, when compared to standard school textbooks on history and culture:
 - Focus on topics that transgress national borders and cultural divides by default.
 - No premeditated and outspoken message of multicultural tolerance and post-conflict mediation.
 - The overall impression of the modules and their sources is one of realism without accusations or incitement.
 - The textual and especially the visual sources have a purposive function in the modules.
 - The connections to private surroundings and experiences make it easier for students to feel connected to the sources and the modules in class.
 - No anachronistic judgement on habits in other cultures or times.
- In sum, the project has convincingly achieved its most readily demonstrable objective, the production of a multilingual set of textbook modules on culture and history for the Black Sea region of high quality. Each of the modules fulfils the relevant quality standards in terms of didactical form and scholarly content. None fail to meet the standards and some authors and their modules excel on either or both accounts or in terms of originality.

Introduction

The project “Sharing History, Cultural Dialogues” brought together educators from five countries around the Black Sea: Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Recently, both academics (historians and political scientists) and policy-makers have come to appreciate the communalities and connections around the Black Sea. Previously, the Caucasus and the so-called ‘Soviet West’ were treated as distinct and unconnected historical-cultural regions. The ambitious goal of the project was to provide teachers and students in these five countries with a diverse set of high-quality modules on cultural and historical topics, complementary to the standard national textbook of courses in politics, history etc. The project's ambitiousness was partly political and partly logistical. Obviously, many cultural topics touch upon tabooed or at least controversial issues pertaining to the national historical narrative and cultural identity as well as to some inter-ethnic and inter-national issues. Logistically, moreover, the project required translating eventually thirty modules into five foreign languages as well as multilingual editing and proofreading (using Russian as a *lingua franca*).

The objectives of the project were threefold:

1. to produce innovative modules for teachers and students in these five states with a total population of 65 million free of charge;
2. to facilitate reflection on and training in state-of-the-art educational approaches among the educators and textbook authors of each country;
3. to initiate and facilitate transnational networks of like-minded educators and textbook authors in the Black Sea region.

The present external review report focuses on the work packages nrs. 3-5 (national, regional and international capacity-building) and most of all on work package nr. 6 (the textbook with the thirty modules and the teachers' guides, version Sept. 2015). The review addresses four aspects:

1. the didactical quality of the final product;
2. the historical accuracy of the information and sources;
3. the handling of the politically controversial issues in these modules and;
4. to a lesser extent, the process of drafting, discussing, rewriting and editing the modules.

One caveat is due: the three objectives and the three review criteria are, to some extent, bound to get in each other's way. In particular, the assumption that the process is a result in and by itself implies that the ultimate litmus test for the project as a whole is not the perfect textbook. The real challenge is balancing the quality of the process and the quality of the final product. On a similar note, the review reflects on common denominators of the project and its thirty modules without assessing individual modules with their specific qualities and drawbacks.

The review report first reflects on the concept of the project, its innovative qualities compared to existing educational and textbook projects (for former communist countries and Soviet republics) and general pros and cons of the thirty completed modules of the teaching materials. Next, some observations on the process are listed. In conclusion, the report offers some recommendations and an overall assessment, weighing the four criteria and the three objectives together.

Concept of the Project and Innovation

The bottom-up concept of the project gave the teams authoring the modules substantial freedom in choosing their topics, sources and didactical forms within a broad pre-defined framework. Thus, the coherence of the outcome was made dependent on the feedback from the other authors, the editors and the various working sessions. As a consequence, team building and ownership of the project by all team members were crucial for the success of the project. The best proof of the shared belief in the project and the solidarity of the team is the fact that the implementation of the project survived the political crisis in Ukraine since late 2013, although the controversies over nationality and territory were intimately connected to the subjects of the lessons, e.g. cultural heritage, national grand narratives of history, interethnic relations or multicultural cities.

A key strategic decision of the project was the choice to give each team of authors a free and creative hand in defining the topic and the form of their lesson as well as the categories of sources used. Thus, the organisers of the project have chosen not to strive for a systematic, representative or symmetric order of the thirty lessons. The three sections of the textbook – cultural heritage, culture and politics, family and everyday life – are little more than a loose structure. In retrospect this has been a wise and productive decision. The lessons nevertheless cover most of the rise of national cultures and politics of culture (i.e., the 19th and 20th centuries) and all five countries are almost equally represented. Numerically, there is a certain preference for the Soviet period, but the decades preceding and following the Soviet period are integrated well enough.

A second key choice concerns the balancing of historical sensation and personal experience (or, in cultural terms; alien traditions and everyday personal experiences). Quite a number of modules focus on cultural practices and historical heritage that students encounter on the street and in their family on a daily basis. Following these practices or legacies to other contexts (states, regions, ethnic or religious groups) ensures that they can be used and understood by others too. Indeed, offering students a connection to their personal experience and environment has recently become a common didactical instrument to generate attentiveness and understanding. Similarly, following them to their historical roots three to five generations back produces the same double effect: a connection between the present and a relatively distant historical past as well as a historical sensation caused by cultural or time distance. And that, it seems, is the very essence of an effective education in understanding culture, history and identity, including one's own.

Maybe not an intentional choice, but a noteworthy characteristic of basically all modules and definitely an innovation compared to many of the well-known international textbook projects for former communist states and Soviet republics is its relation to the Soviet past. Over the past decades, textbook projects typically were intended to promote either interethnic tolerance and peace or, on a related note, to come to terms with the imperial past of the Soviet Union and its (foreign) communist dictatorship. Again, the present textbook project intentionally or unintentionally moves beyond a reckoning with the past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). Designing and editing these modules for a generation born around the year 2000, even their parents were young adults at the time of the end of communism. Hence, the need to cope with the Soviet regime as part of one's personal or immediate family story has obviously passed. The time has come to make the Soviet era part of the historical past and collective memory rather than the

living past. Knowledge of the Soviet era is important for the generations of the 2000s to understand the life story of their parents and grandparents as well as to understand part of the current social and political situation. Yet, the handling of this era in the modules of this project clearly has a different feel to it. The focus on the political regime has disappeared and so has the moral or accusatory tone. In a way this era has been incorporated as an accepted and somehow "normalised" period of recent history. The focus on daily life and everyday traditions certainly helps here.

Teaching Materials

The teaching materials as such produced by the project consist of some thirty lessons (although some more were never completed), available in the state languages of the **six** participating states as well as in Russian.

Reviewing the draft lessons over the past two years – at least one, but often twice – has demonstrated the added value of the second objective. Comments from the project organisers, the editors, the meetings and the written reviews together have, in my opinion, stimulated (rather than compelled) the authors to rethink certain aspects of the draft lesson. Again, in line with the overall philosophy of the project, the guidance was based on expected problems with the lesson in its current form; be it didactical, historical or political. Thus, the authors were again given a free hand to restructure or modify their lesson instead of prescribed corrections. Overall, the common atmosphere of the project has been one of problem solving and respect for certain national or personal sensitivities rather than a top-down implementation of a preordained blueprint.

The issues discussed below are those that typically recurred in several lessons. From my experience in textbook projects, however, it is noteworthy that largely the same issues emerge in similar projects in countries with a longer tradition of cultural topics in education and multiperspectivity. In other words, a West European project with the same multicultural and multilingual dimensions would have been challenged too by issues such as national sensitivities and academic ambitions.

1. Too much source material: The enthusiasm of the authors often resulted in an overload of source material in the draft versions of the lessons. The final versions of the modules clearly demonstrate that next to all authors have moved from quantity to quality. The visual sources in particular no longer *illustrate* but have become as valuable sources as the textual sources. The modules also demonstrate a more adequate assessment of the capacities of the students, especially in combination with questions aimed at reflection and debate rather than knowledge reproduction.
2. Leading questions: Several modules initially contained a number of questions that left little room for open discussion and free thinking. These questions rather steered the students in the direction of the "correct" answers and the cultural message of the authors. Despite all good intentions, the later, more open versions are expected to be more challenging and engaging for students. Conversely, reviewing the modules showed that a concluding "wrap-up questions" restating the main issue of module in a broader perspective was always helpful.
3. National perspective: A fair share of the modules deals with ethnic aspects of historical developments or culture. Discussions and reviews contributed to an

adequate framing of these aspects as weighty and relevant in historical and present situations. At the same time, the authors took great care not to essentialize nationality or ethnicity as the one and pivotal aspect of identity. Conversely, no multicultural ideals were championed as an explicit counter-narrative to counterbalance the existence of nationalism past and present.

4. Ironically, often the shared past in the politics, modernisation and culture of the Russian Empire and in particular the Soviet Union opened a window of opportunity for shared habits, experiences and problems.
5. Finding the proper level of sophistication in the presentation and analysis (sources) of the Soviet period proved challenging for the whole team. Some authors originally tended to oversimplify the Soviet period to a dictatorship of fixed characteristics. Others made too much of an effort to do justice to the complexities of the communist era. The resulting twists and turns of historical sources and political and/or societal developments over seventy years clearly were too demanding for young students. In many cases a bit more background information and more focus (and to some extent simplification) in the sources were enough to resolve these didactical issues.
6. Originally, some of the topics chosen and the messages of the modules were overly politically correct. As much as reiterating an exclusivist national culture and history is not inductive to the purposes of the project and its European funders, neither is an explicit predetermined message to come out of the 90 minutes of in-class work with the sources. Students are not likely to accept the idea of multiculturalism or multiperspectivity if it is not an insight from their own work but an "imposed" message.
7. The constructed nature of historical narratives and cultural identities is an important insight to be learned from many lessons. In abstract terms most of these lessons in their early stages risked being overly academic, multi-layered and way beyond the grasp of young students. As the insights were nevertheless deemed important, the authors often found that a much stricter focus on one person, habit, event, person or building allowed them to get the message across in a didactically adequate manner.

Overall, the lessons that work best are those with a generic topic applicable to most if not all of the five countries and created around one particular type of sources.

Many modules demonstrated particular qualities, when compared to standard school textbooks on history and culture:

- Focus on topics that transgress national borders and cultural divides by default. At least as important is the setting and presentation of this transnational dimension. In these modules it does not have the look and feel, easily detected by students, of a premeditated and outspoken message of multicultural tolerance and post-conflict mediation. Typically, the modules address commonalities as well as alien-ness without taking a moral stance.
- Similarly, the modules and their sources not only address positive aspects and the bright side of current developments. Again, the overall impression is one of realism without accusations or incitement.
- The textual and especially the visual sources have a purposive function in the modules and are much more than mere illustrations of factual information.
- The connections to private surroundings and experiences in the form of cultural habits, existing monuments, cityscapes and rituals make it easier for students to feel connected to the sources and the modules in class.

- The authors intentionally refrain from passing well-meaning but anachronistic judgement on habits in other cultures or times.

Conclusions: Reflections and Recommendations

In sum, the project has convincingly achieved its most readily demonstrable objective, the production of a multilingual set of textbook modules on culture and history for the Black Sea region of high quality. Each of the modules fulfils the relevant quality standards in terms of didactical form and scholarly content. Some authors and their modules excel on either or both accounts or in terms of originality, and none fail to meet the standards.

The other two objectives, multiplier and training effects as well as international networking are not as easily quantifiable. However, the fact that the original team soldiered on and completed the project despite the unexpected adversities of exacerbated political tensions and conflicts in the region as of recent is telling. Constructive working sessions and the pragmatic solutions suggested and accepted for contentious issues are proof to the shared ownership of the project concept and its successful completion. Obviously, the project had generated new transnational networks in the process. Moreover, the textbook produced offers numerous venues for additional networks on a national, regional and international level. Comparing the final versions of some modules to earlier drafts, moreover, clearly demonstrates a steep learning curve and active learning (rather than deference to a prefabricated blueprint).

The lessons learned of the project deserve to be presented to a wider audience of textbook authors and initiators of similar projects for other regions. With regard to the quality of the process management (cross-national modules for five nations) it would be advisable to make the lessons learned available on the Euroclio website in a condensed reflective report. As far as the original choices in terms of content (side-stepping the classical political conflicts and focussing on culture, memory and daily life) are concerned, two types of follow-up are recommended. Firstly, a didactical article on the advantages of the specific topics chosen by the authors. Secondly, with some modifications, an English version of the entire textbook would be a valuable source of inspiration for textbook authors and practitioners within the wider regions of Southeastern Europe and the former Soviet republics. Some of the modules could be used either as inspiration for new modules or even directly as an excursion to another region for teachers and students in Eastern or Western Europe.