

Common borders. Common solutions.



## The project in brief:

The Culture Exchange Platform is now drawing to a close. The final project event was held in Kavala, on 19th June 2015. It is time to assess the achievements of this two-year project. All the partners can reflect on how the project evolved from the concept phase through to implementation and to final completion. CULTUR-EXP is a cross border project with partners from: Armenia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece and Moldova. The project has been funded by the European Union's Black Sea Basin Joint Operational Programme <http://www.blacksea-cbc.net>. It began on 1st July 2013. You can read about the project's overall objective in the first, second and third newsletters. In the fourth newsletter you can find how the project achieved its objects, specifically how the project created a platform with specific functionalities for the benefit of the culture sector.

It is now time to ask partners their views regarding the project achievements.

- **Ramaz Kvatadze, Georgian Research and Educational Networking Association (GRENA)**

The CULTUR-EXP project has accomplished its mission. For today all activities foreseen in the project are implemented, namely CULTUR-EXP platform requirements definition, analyses and selection of appropriate open source platform, its adaptation and implementation. The URL of the platform is: <http://cultur-exp.eu/> and it is in stable operation. An online tutorial for the platform users and promotional video were developed. Another very important activity was creation of database of cultural organisations and artists in all participating countries and establishment close contacts with them. Special attention was made to promote platform at international conferences and events related to culture.



Today the platform provides rich photo and video content about culture in the region, as well as an events calendar:

Events - 2026  
Videos - 630  
Groups - 80  
Members - 216  
Photos - 3568  
Albums - 352

From the beginning of this year more than 5000 visits to the platform have taken place which is good progress. I should mention fruitful cooperation between all partners of the project. This was challenging task taking into account that partners from Armenia, Bulgaria and Greece are mainly culture oriented and partner organizations from Georgia and Moldova are working in information technologies. It was interesting to see how the art and culture in the region is starting to use Internet for the promotion of their work.

For the future sustainability of the CULTUR-EXP platform it is important to widen geographic coverage and attract users from Romania, Turkey, Ukraine and beyond the Black Sea region.



Taking into account that this activity was not included and financed in the project, we were using synergies with other projects to perform this work. Natural continuation of the project will be implementation of mobile applications and increase the coverage of all the countries involved.

- **Borislava Jordanova, District Government of Burgas**

The project is coming to its end and we are so proud to state that we have reached the overall objective and the specific objectives and have fulfilled the obligations to the EC. Now we have an innovative, multi-lingual IT platform adapted for culture producers, culture operators and other actors of the culture market. All users can advertise, discuss and organize cultural assets and events in the region. The platform has become an important source of information about the culture and related cultural events for the culture consumers. In the first months of the implementation of the project the project team from Burgas gathered information about the culture content of the platform and contacts of libraries, community centers, publishing houses, book stores, press and media, theatre, cinemas, museums, galleries, clubs, NGOs and associations in the fields of culture, writers' and artists' unions from the region of Burgas. With the progress of the project we contacted also many national organizations. Burgas performed an active campaign for attracting cultural producers and operators in the region in providing their presence and content to the platform - press conference; Signing of Memorandum for cooperation in the fields of culture and art, culture and art industries, preservation of the cultural heritage; content preparation workshop; meetings with individual artists, organizations, representatives of the municipalities from district Burgas; presentation of the project and its values during different international events. At this point in time there are 65 users from Bulgaria (individuals and organizations) that are registered and use the platform.

Do we have any future plans for this platform? Of course we have! We plan to continue using the platform for presentation of the interesting cultural events and activities in Burgas, for gathering new followers and supporting the culture sector. The platform itself will greatly animate culture producers who were until now limited to their regions and could not reach cross-border partners. It will result with multiplied number of cross-border collaborations. The platform itself could expand including other countries and regions.

One and easy way of expanding or continuing the project would be through a new funding for a new project. The project definitely requires continuation in order to expand and reach new users. It will be great if we have an option to finance workshops, cultural events, master classes, joint exhibitions, all sorts of other interesting opportunities.

For us one of most enjoyable part of our work was the contact with the artists. We have so many interesting meetings with different artists, we organize ourselves many events for popularization of the platform and took part in many other cultural events in Burgas. Of course, for all was really interesting to explore the art and culture of other regions and countries and to work with our partners. Also, for us the most difficult part of the work was engaging the culture sector, especially in the beginning of the project when the platform was still not active. The possible users could not imagine what will be the platform exactly and what will be its functionalities. This is the reason why we conducted so many events in order to explain in details the platform and later - to popularize it. Of course the financial part of every project is crucial. For us, as a governmental organization is very important to receive the proposed financing in the specified deadline in order to perform all planned activities.

District government Burgas has worked on many projects, but this one is the first project that we implement in the frames of the JOP Black Sea Basin 2007-2013 (in the moment we are working on our second JOP BSB project - "Tourism paths in the Black Sea Region"). We have established excellent relations with our project partners and I would like to pay a special attention to our Lead partner, which supports us through the whole progress of the project and work so dedicated for the successful implementation of the project.

- **Petru Bogatencov, Research and Educational Networking Association of Moldova (RENAM)**

We have now a platform, with arts and culture professionals and organisations in the Black Sea region that can be used for professional communication, extending contacts' networks, announcing their events and develop cultural projects. Platform functionality is fully corresponding to requirements stipulated in the project description and specifications elaborated by the project team during initial stage of the project implementation. Thus, all project obligations are fulfilled and the platform is having perspective for sustainable operation and development.



During the project realization, we had the opportunity to establish cooperation with many cultural organizations, events' organizers and promoters. It allowed us to get new useful experiences, to understand needs of cultural communities, examine and understand approaches and procedures for promotion of cultural activities in the region. All these allowing the project elaboration team continue developing the existing outcomes of the project in future. The project created new promotional instrument that is the basis for creating new communication environment for regional and even wider culture professionals and organisations that is fully in line the EU's goals and values of mutual co-operation.

Currently, we in REMAN are planning to use the platform for cultural events and other cultural activities promotion at the national level. The platform operation will be continued for agreed period after the project end. There are new ideas how to develop created platform taking in account the feedbacks receiving from users. Very important to find new approaches, sources of funding to support the platform operation and development. During the project realization was formed the qualified and proactively working team that has wide range of experience and could realize variety of activities needed for the project aims achieving. Partners are complementing each other and this is resulting in new working potential value. Working contacts with cultural world helped the project team to understand specific attitude of this community to new on-line instruments, to new promotional abilities provided by social networks. However, the world of art and culture is changing - very often we could see that professionals from cultural community quickly adsorbed new opportunities offered by the created in the project platform.

Initially art and culture representative that we contacted were cautious, they didn't understand benefits of the platform and perspectives of new on-line technologies in general. Step by step were identified approaches how to persuade specialists from culture to use the platform, to get new opportunities for their professional activities from social networking and created by the project communication environment. In the starting period of the project, the team was only forming and it took some time and additional discussions before jointly accepted solutions were elaborated and had begun implementing. Nevertheless, the main goal of the project - to launch the operational platform that having all specified functionality was achieved according the stipulated timeline.

Although operational procedures of Black Sea CBC Programme are rather complicated, all budget modifications, timing, events organization and reporting issues were resolved in appropriate manner; the project management was effectively organized due to significant contribution of the beneficiary and all partners involved.

Regards what lessons we have learnt from the project and what we could recommend, of course, better to have more partners in the project that would allow covering all countries from Black Sea region. Nevertheless, working contacts with cultural organizations from neighbor countries like Romania and the Ukraine were established and joint activities were promoted with support of the created platform.

If new similar initiative supported by any EC Programme will be launched aimed to develop of the accumulated experience of the CULTUR-EXP platform deployment and operation then of course, this new initiative should involve more Black Sea countries.

As the important success indicator of the project is considering promotion the platform and its visibility to cultural communities. Obviously, it can't be achieved without already working and with rich content platform. That is why this type of projects have to consist of several stages with longer duration and have to have perspective of prolongation. Logically the project needs prolongation and its next stage should be focused on content development, promotion and visibility issues.

- **Pyrrhus Mercuris, European Regional Framework for Co-operation (ERFC)**

We in ERFC are very pleased with the outcome of the project. So far we have received a favourable response from stakeholders as can be seen from (a) the number of entries, especially groups on the platform and (b) the response we get when we present the work of the project to diverse staholders and the numerous public events we have attended. The project has exceeded the original scope and now we envisage a new beginning for the cultural and arts sector in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean region. A last point, though the project's focus has been the Black Sea region, interest in more widespread as this is a platform that focuses on the arts and culture and interest outside the Black Sea region is noticeable, especially in other parts of Greece. Another important achievement is that the project has enhanced European values like peace and democracy in a region that is well used to violent conflicts.



In this way the project has brought people together and found common solution to common problems.

We plan to use the platform for the organization of other events and projects. For example the island of Samos is seriously considering making a bid to be the cultural capital of Europe in 2021 and we plan using the platform to enhance the chances of the island in its bid. If Samos's bid is successful the platform would become a tool in developing projects for the cultural capital event.

Working on the platform was a pleasure. Friendships and close cross border contacts have been made with the partners. Very interesting has been working with the culture sector and understanding its needs. In particular the way it sees the Internet. Many business out there in the online ether view the internet as some kind of e-commerce opportunity while others view it as an advertising and social networking platform. The culture and arts sector also views it as a tool for networking and for exchanges with a broader aim of creating new contacts and projects. This is interesting because the competitive nature of cultural professionals complements a strong desire to exchange and cooperate with each other. Putting it another way, screenwriters need to pitch their screen plays and in a sense they are in perfect competition between each other, but at the same time to create new works you need to be operating in an environment to exchange and to discuss and cooperate in creating new ventures and to knock on as many doors as possible in order to pitch these new artistic ideas. The platform facilitates this. There were difficulties in promoting the platform and getting it used is still a challenge. It is the 'chicken and egg' syndrome. How do you promote something that is not yet in existence and how can you promote something that is in existence by not being used. The answer to this quandary is create a process of promotion and to exploit any event and any chance happening that brings you in contact with stakeholders. As for lessons learnt, probably if we could have started the project from scratch it would have been much better to have many more partners from as all the Black Sea countries. Each country would then have been in the position of have a dedicated organization promoting the project. A bit more time would have been useful, for example an extra year to get specific events using the platform in a material way.

- **Richard Ney, "AMAP" Human Development NGO**

The Project has achieved its main objective: we now have an operational platform which is being used by some artists and cultural unions. While there is still considerable effort to be made to make the platform more attractive for the beneficiaries, and the project should have started by working with the beneficiaries in shaping the final product, we already can be proud with the work we did.

As any other social platform, CULTUR-EXP is yet to be developed and made better with richer content and more users. In particular, any future development should begin by gaining active feedback from the beneficiaries, while this project began with a solution before understanding the unique needs of the artistic community. Our main aim is to keep the platform active so it reaches its objectives.

Cooperation with new partners and learning more about their culture through the platform created as the deliverable of the project has been very exciting and enjoyable. At the same time, the pre-project desktop research has shown that there are no such platforms for Armenian artists and bringing to them this innovative idea and participating in the creation of opportunities for them was very rewarding.

As in case of any other project, we have met difficulties and challenges during the implementation of CULTUR-EXP project. In particular the project faced some rigidity in the process and unwillingness to adapt to changing circumstances or specific needs of partners. This should be addressed in future programs like this and a more democratic process in decision making needs to be implemented.

The project once again showed that when it comes to creating a platform targeting specific group of beneficiaries, and even when all the partners are on the same page about the platform's goals and objectives, you are still going to face obstacles. Projects like this should be longer in terms of the implementation period and should involve many more face to face meetings among the partners. It is also important to NOT present a solution before the problems are apparent and especially when working with cultural entities.



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**The Georgian Research and Educational Networking Association - GRENA** was founded for the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in education and research field. The founders of GRENA are five major state universities, Georgian National Academy of Sciences and Open Society - Georgia Foundation. GRENA's activities focus on:

1. Providing Information and Communication Technology services to users and implementation of new, innovative services.
2. ICT education (Cisco Networking Academy, Linux Professional Institute Learning Center, Juniper Academy, Distance Learning Center and Pearson VUE Authorized Certification Center).
3. Preparation and implementation of international and local R&D projects; promoting and supporting ICT development in Georgia.

**ERFC** is a civilian routed NGO aiming at European integration to benefit citizens and to develop inter regional competitiveness. It was established towards the end of 2009. It has a strong presence in Aegion, Corfu and Brussels. To accomplish its mission, ever since its inception, ERFC has been involved in a number of cross-border projects. These projects relate to culture, agriculture, social and integrated regional development. However, all of them share a common goal which is to enhance cross-border co-operation for mutual economic benefit, peace and understanding and to exchange and promote better practices that are sustainable and environmentally friendly.

**The Armenian Monuments Awareness Project (AMAP)** was founded in February 2008. It employs 10 people. It is a non-profit organization with the aim of raising awareness at an international level Armenia's historic sites and monuments. To fulfill this mission, AMAP started to work with like-minded organizations in Armenia and also from other countries in the Caucasus and Black Sea region, specifically to enhance and promote Armenia's cultural heritage in a sustainable way, and this includes developing sustainable tourist strategies. Not just promoting conservation and restoration.

**The Governor of District Burgas** provides the state policy on regional level in all aspects of management, as well as the coordination of the national and regional interests. 13 municipalities are included in the territory of district Burgas. The Governor organizes the elaboration and implementation of strategy for regional development and of the regional development plan; coordinates the plans and investment projects of the technical infrastructure with regional importance; coordinates his work with the local authorities and performs the international contacts of the region - conducting of different official meetings, exchange of business delegations and business forums, and other diverse activities and European funded projects.

**The Research and Educational Networking Association of Moldova (RENAM)**, is a non-governmental, non-commercial and non-profit organisation, established to promote and support the development of communication and information infrastructure for the scientific and educational community (especially higher and secondary education, research institutions, libraries and public collections, medical establishments), as well as to governmental organisations in Moldova. The RENAM network offers connectivity to about 5000 scientists and professors (75% of all researchers), over 1000 Ph.D. students and more than 80,000 university and college students (85% of all students). All Institutes of Academy of Sciences, leading universities of Moldova, colleges, some hospitals and governmental establishments are connected to RENAM network access nodes. RENAM provides with wide range of services such as optical, leased line and wireless connectivity; websites and databases creation and hosting; issuing digital certificates; access to specialized computational resources; certificated education and community members training.



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