

Common borders. Common solutions.



## The project in brief:

The Culture Exchange Platform (CULTUR-EXP) project is in its twentieth month, that is three quarters of the way through its duration. This is now a mature project with defined and measurable deliverables. Project is funded by the European Union's Black Sea Basin Joint Operational Programme <http://www.blacksea-cbc.net> and 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.

A cursory visit at the CULTUR-EXP platform (<http://cultur-exp.eu/>) will show the viewer all kinds of entries from diverse artists and cultural backgrounds. The strategic value of CULTUR-EXP is obvious, but nonetheless needs to be stated. This is a project creating a vital electronic infrastructure that will permit the culture sector in the Black Sea region engage and communicate across borders to develop new projects. Festivals, play, exhibitions, indeed, all kinds of exciting possibilities are open to cultural operators and events managers as they can use the CULTUR-EXP to find partners, develop ideas, promote new projects and develop an on-going interface with the public and other arts professionals.

CULTUR-EXP is a cross border project with partners from: Armenia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece and Moldova. It is now time to ask these partners their views regarding the project's progress and what has so far been achieved.

Views of the partners



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

We started implementation of the project on 1st July 2013. During this period we accomplished work on CULTUR-EXP platform requirements definition, analyses and selection of appropriate open source platform, on its adaptation and implementation at the data centre of project partner from Moldova. The URL of the platform is: <http://cultur-exp.eu/> and it is in stable operation. An online tutorial was developed for the platform users. Another important activity was creation of data base of cultural organisations and artists in all participating countries and establishment close contacts with them. Special attention was made to promote platform among international organisations and in countries not involved in the project. For this purpose, representatives of project are actively participating in different conferences and events. Today more than 160 users are registered at the platform and partners are working to attract more users. Platform provides rich photo and video content about culture events in the region, as well as event calendar.



The current challenge of project team is to attract critical mass of users and information that will make platform sustainable. This is mainly done by disseminating information about platform in participating countries. Another possibility is expansion of CULTUR-EXP to include more countries like Romania, Turkey, Ukraine and even beyond the Black Sea region. However, this needs additional finances not included in the project budget. We are using synergies with other projects to perform this work and discussing possibility to prepare new project with wider objectives and coverage.

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

Hundreds of cultural organisations and individual artists from Greece and from the partner countries of the Black Sea and even beyond have inserted entries on to the platform. ERFC has also informed thousands of artists and cultural organisations in all Black Sea countries about the platform. There is now a comprehensive list of data and entries giving users relevant information about cultural events that are being planned and are to take place, plus, data about the artist and his or her work. A host of photographic, video and textual information. Indeed, an achievement that is hard to quantify is that this platform is now the portal to the culture sector of the partner countries in the Black Sea region. A student of art or culture now has to refer to this portal, and any arts or culture organisation in the Black Sea region has to start considering the use of this online tool, especially if it wants to create cross border projects. At this point it is important to state the fact that this project is not yet complete. There is still work to do, for example promoting the platform. However, in a few years time one can easily envisage this project spanning across all Black Sea countries, including Turkey, Ukraine, Romania and Russia. At the moment it is focused on the culture sector of the partner countries.

In order to get as wide as possible use of the platform, certain challenges need to be met. The key challenge is promoting the project in Ukraine and Russia, two nations at the moment in conflict. However, it is possible and it will be achieved. All the countries in the Black Sea region at some point have experienced conflicts but culture and art is a healer and project like CULTUR-EXP bring people together on peace and create environment of further cultural and artistic creativity. These leads one to a further point which is that one has to remember that the Black Sea region is the centre of tremendously creative civilisations.

Already we have seen other projects making use of the tremendous creativity. Specifically the Black Sea Silk Road Corridor (BSSRC) project which uses the cultural heritage and natural parks in a innovative way towards enhancing the tourist sector generating economic development in a sustainable way. It should be possible to improve this project by developing linkages with projects like BSSRC. In actual fact, festival and cultural operators in Greece are mentioned in both projects. Another way to improve CULTUR-EXP is by technically finding a way to eliminate spam. Spam is the curse of all online platforms and e-mail servers and when an efficient anti-spam service appears, we should consider using it.

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

So far AMAP has identified more than 200 cultural artists and agents of all kinds. More than 50 have joined which is a lot more than what the project had demanded. Plus artists are now talking to producers and that is an indication of success. It indicates a platform is operating, it is starting to induce more cultural creation, more inter-action between artists and more cognition between artists and cultural professionals of the opportunities and what they can achieve by communicating together. In the long term is when artists from different countries start collaborating. At the moment we do not see this happening in a big way at all. However, in Armenia the desire to work at cross border level is very real. AMAP has spoken to artists, actors and directors who want to do theatrical performance at home and abroad, and musicians who want to develop festivals. The EU needs to consider supporting small scale projects that have a populist effect. In other words supporting festivals and exhibitions that people desire. In this way, the EU is visibly seen to be patronizing the arts.

The culture sector is experiencing a certain amount of practical application. Artists need to organise festivals, exhibitions and tours between the countries, but at the moment the Armenian culture sector is not making the most of CULTUR-EXP and making it work. Today there is nothing particularly wrong with the Armenian cultural sector, but it is not yet working at a cross border level. So we need to show a practical benefit of CULTUR-EXP to the arts sector. Otherwise, the project has so far accomplished everything demanded of it by the EU. However, we need to see the EU supporting a follow up projects like cross border festival and to use the platform.



Furthermore, other than enhancing the project through practical applications, like organising festivals, a further activity is to consider developing a software tailored to the needs of the artists in our region.

Indeed, CULTUR-EXP has a lot of potential to contribute to other projects in order to develop the culture sector in Armenia and in the Black Sea region in general. For example future developments and synergies, include working with the Black Sea Silk Road Corridor (BSSRC) which is a project with a lot of synergies with CULTUR-EXP. In the future, we would like to add more countries to the platform. Both CULTUR-EXP and BSSRC enhance culture and creativity and these projects could develop further together and realize practical applications.

Lastly, culture brings people together in the region, the EU should triple its money to cultural project so that people starting talking and working together and create a dynamic culture of creativity and peace.

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

The project started on 1st July 2013, so now it is more than one and half year old. Now the platform is ready and operational. Burgas has a leading role in the implementation of Group of Activities GA1 and GA4. GA1 included detailed analysis of the functional and non-functional requirements of the platform, which were taken into account for the upcoming activities. The team from Burgas together with the partners from AMAP extracted and formalized the relevant requirements. For GA4 BURGAS and AMAP, with the support of external IT consultants and with assistance of the Lead partner, worked on selection, process and upload of the relevant content to the platform. To date, the main achievements of the project from Burgas' point of view, are:

- creation of a platform with specific functionalities for user presentation, an event scheduler, a culture browser, collaborative tools, opportunities to make announcement boards and thematic discussions and reflection spaces and reviews;
- mobilizing the art sector in Burgas region - the team from District government Burgas has prepared a large database with culture individuals and organizations. We began to contact them and explain to them how the platform works and what its main possibilities are. Now more than 40 individuals and organizations from Burgas are registered in the platform.

An official Memorandum for cooperation in the fields of culture and art, culture and art industries, preservation of cultural heritage was signed between the Governor of district Burgas and the mayors of all 13 municipalities from the region. The purpose of this Memorandum is to establish long-lasting cooperation in the fields of culture and art between the Governor of district Burgas and state and municipal culture institutions, municipalities, creative organizations and non-governmental organizations. The Memorandum is open for adherence for all state institutions and non-governmental organizations that share its purposes. Furthermore, in order to popularize the platform the team from Burgas organized 2 press conferences, a content workshop (in order to educate and be able to support the culture producers and operators in the delivery of culture content) and a lot of meetings with the culture sector from the region. All individual artists that wanted to support the platform and become an active part in the project signed official letter of support.

The main challenge for us is getting the culture sector to believe in the platform. Although we organized and held a lot of information activities we see that the individuals and organizations in the culture are not as active as we thought in the platform.

Regarding future developments and synergies' the main result deriving from the implementation of the culture platform will be the improvement of the relations between the different operators on the culture market, leading to added value to the culture sector itself. Culture producers, culture operators and other actors on the culture market will be able to advertise, discuss and organize cultural assets and events in the Black Sea region. It is a good chance to cooperate with different organizations from different countries.

The database that we gathered and the contacts that we made for the project are very important for us and for the work of the administration. Actually we have started new project - "Tourism paths in the Black sea region" (BSB-TOUR) in the frames of JOP BSB 2007-2013. The aim of the project is establishing co-operation relations for promoting the tourism, using traditional tastes and products, as key asset. The goal is to make the tastes of the region, a success ticket for a new Tourist Product. Both projects are implemented in the same time and will have a synergetic effect and will lead to popularisation of the traditional values and culture of the Black Sea region.



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

At this stage in its life, this project has some tangible achievements. The platform was set up, operating, developing, the number of registered users increasing. Cultural organizations and arts sector positively evaluating the platform scope, realization approach, its utility. The consortia proved its capability to work productively to reach the project goal. There is perspective to continue cooperation in future joint initiatives by generating new ideas and launching new project. As for sustainability of the CULTUR-EXP project and of its resulting product, the platform is very important expansion of CULTUR-EXP area to include more Black Sea countries like Romania, Turkey, Ukraine, Russia and as a longer time perspective to attract new art communities beyond the Black Sea region. The project does have certain challenges, the arts sector is expressing interest in using the platform and online tools in general, but at present mainly they rely on other promotional and communication channels. We all as a consortia have to assist art community members at initial stage, to persuade potential users in potential benefits in near future from the on-line promoting tools and especially from registering and announcing their activities via CULTUR-EXP platform.

As for future developments and synergies, a possible development that can create added value for platform users and for promoting the platform to the community, we consider integration, interrelation and information exchange with other similar on-line resources. In Moldova that can be popular web resource fest.md (festival, music, drama), in other countries and I expect there are other web resources that can participate in information exchange. We negotiated possible cooperation of our project with existing regional web resources supported by other European initiatives. These activities can be important for funding organizations that obviously want to find synergies between different projects/initiatives (and potentially supported by funding organizations). In order to improve the platform, it could create a section for funding organizations, map the existing cultural infrastructure, provide list of cultural operators per country, publish support letters by prominent artists, provide video and text guidance on how to use the platform, other pertinent tools needed by cultural professionals. Indeed, I think that all mentioned above have to be in our development plan and add to the platform in perspective.

For RENAM, as project partner from Moldova it is clear that the importance of widening cultural relations with neighbor countries like Romania and Ukraine is necessary. Extending cultural cooperation with new partners from these two countries we consider as priority perspective for future joint initiative of our project consortia. Of course intensification of cultural exchange, promoting regional cooperation (and via regional on-line platforms like CULTUR-EXP ) can have influence on regional stability as general outcome of such kind of joint projects.





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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 Caucuses 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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