



“Perhaps I use too many superlatives when I talk about SEELS – but I think it’s absolutely marvellous. I’ve been able to get to know all the professors whose texts I’ve been reading for years. I’m now in contact with young academics and other colleagues in the region and can exchange ideas with them very easily. And I can even apply the lessons learned immediately, in an EU project run by our Ministry of Justice here in Macedonia. I think that SEELS has set something in motion that all the lawyers in South-East Europe had been keenly awaiting.”

Boban Misoski, Skopje



Success story – Open Regional Fund for Legal Reform

Developing laws together

Boban Misoski is an assistant professor in Skopje University’s Faculty of Law. He sums up many members’ experience with the South East European Law School Network (SEELS).

The SEELS Network currently comprises 13 universities from six countries, which are developing joint projects to identify ways of modernising the national legal frameworks and aligning them with the EU regulatory framework (*acquis*). The Network receives advice and financial support from the Open Regional

Fund for South-East Europe – Legal Reform, implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), and has opened the door to intensified regional cooperation on legal issues.

'Very sound, modern legislation'

The SEELS Network connects legal academics from 13 universities and makes a substantial contribution to regional integration in South-East Europe.

Goran Koevski and his colleagues at the Centre for SEELS in Skopje University's Faculty of Law plan to open a bottle of champagne and celebrate this week. 'The first issue of the SEE Law Journal is finally in print!' says the law professor and Manager of the Centre for SEELS delightedly. South-East Europe now has its first regional law journal, containing six papers on EU accession. It costs 12 euros and will be distributed via universities in the region. It will also be available internationally. 'Our goal is to connect young and more experienced academics in the region and help them to present their work to an international readership,' says Goran Koevski. 'We also want to raise awareness of South-East Europe in the international community of legal academics.' That's why the SEE Law Journal – like all SEELS publications and events – is produced in English.

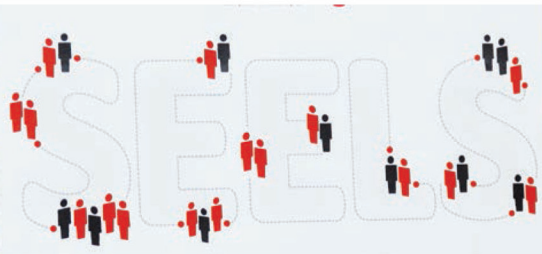
Founded in April 2011, the network of law faculties has become a milestone in regional cooperation in South-East Europe. Regional cooperation in the economic and political arenas is often still limited and is sometimes hampered by an atmosphere of mistrust. 'But for academics, regional exchange in their field of intellectual expertise is crucial to their work,' says Veronika Efremova from GIZ, who manages the SEELS project.

Karolina Ristova-Asterud is a good example. 'Thanks to my involvement with SEELS, I now know that Croatia has switched to gender-neutral language in its official documents,' says the Macedonian political scientist and lawyer. On behalf of SEELS, the 43-year-old and her colleagues from neighbouring countries have been investigating the current

status of gender equality in the legislation and legal professions in the region. And this has not only enhanced her professional expertise. 'I've also learned a lot about our neighbouring countries,' she says. 'We all have the same heritage and yet we have developed in very different ways.'

Helping the South-East European countries to pursue shared pathways of development again, especially towards the EU, is one of SEELS' key goals. 'That's why we began by organising conferences together with the EU – we wanted to get the national education ministries and the embassies in Brussels on board,' says Veronika Efremova from GIZ. This was very successful – and a clever move by the Network in advancing regional cooperation politically as well.





The 13 universities in the SEELS Network operate in three main areas: teaching, research and publications. SEELS has organised various regional law conferences, summer schools, training courses and post-doctoral colloquia, focusing primarily on EU law. 'SEELS is having a tremendous learning effect among lawyers in the region,' says Christa Jessel-Holst from the Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law in Germany, which is also part of the



SEELS Network. 'This learning effect has greatly improved the quality and speed with which new legislation is now being developed in the region.' As an example, she draws attention to the new legislation in the field of international private law in Montenegro and in former adversaries Serbia and Croatia. 'All three countries asked SEELS for support and have cooperated with each other. This has produced very sound modern laws and draft legislation in line with the *acquis*.'



"The transition from socialist to democratic law is a very difficult path. There's no doubt about it: without SEELS, the regional momentum to create bold, sound, modern laws would not exist."

Christa Jessel-Holst, Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Hamburg

Open Regional Fund for South-East Europe – Legal Reform

The Open Regional Fund for Legal Reform supports the South-East European countries' efforts to introduce reforms and align their legal frameworks with the EU legislation (*acquis communautaire*). It focuses primarily on law and justice, civil and business law as key areas of reform within the framework of the EU pre-accession process. The Open Regional Fund for Legal Reform also supports the effective implementation of new legislation and institutional safeguarding of rule-of-law procedures, separation of powers and an independent judiciary.



"In the former Yugoslavia, we had a network of law academics from the constituent republics. But by the time the wars ended, it no longer existed. When we launched SEELS, our colleagues began to visit each other again and rebuild the network. Today, we are receiving enquiries from Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria, which are also keen to join SEELS."

Goran Koevski, Manager of the Centre for SEELS, Faculty of Law, University of Skopje

INTERVIEW

‘We’ve got to know each other now and are working together’

Neda Zdraveva is Secretary General of the Centre for SEELS. The 37-year-old is an assistant professor and researcher at the University of Skopje in Macedonia. At the Centre for SEELS, she is responsible for coordinating the Network’s activities.

How did SEELS come into being?

In 2008, we developed the region’s first Master’s programme in EU Business Law. We realised that regional cooperation is good for legal education, so we decided to continue and expand the cooperation. We found a good partner in GIZ and the ORF – Legal Reform. We have been working together since 2011 and have done much to promote regional cooperation among legal academics in South-East Europe, particularly in the context of our countries’ pre-accession process.

Why is SEELS important for EU accession?

EU accession is a goal that all the countries in the region are currently pursuing, and harmonisation of the national legal systems with EU law is fundamental to that process. Thus the countries all face similar challenges in terms of developing their systems of law and legal education. SEELS is a forum for exchanging knowledge and experience, but also for developing individual

EU-related skills, especially among young academics. This builds our countries’ capacities and facilitates progress towards the EU.

How has SEELS changed the relationship among legal academics in South-East Europe?

SEELS has been very effective in rebuilding our contacts. At first, access to financial resources meant that it was easier for young academics to obtain grants to spend a whole year outside South-East Europe than to spend a few months researching at a university in a neighbouring country! This has now changed, I’m glad to say, thanks to SEELS’ activities. The various colloquia, conferences and training events that we have organised have done much to raise our awareness of our fellow academics’ work. We have got to know each other and are engaged in transnational cooperation in our specialist areas.

What does SEELS mean to you personally?

SEELS is a platform that facilitates the exchange of knowledge and ideas, fosters communication among the region’s law faculties, and brings them closer to each other and to other partners in Europe. But SEELS is more than a structure. For me, it is a network of people who are committed to advancing legal education and research within the region and thus to developing the legal systems in its countries.

More information: www.seelawschool.org



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