**Portfolio Review: Evaluating Partnerships with Educational Advising Centers, May 16, 2016**

“**Within the overall mission of OSF, Scholarship Programs** take on the challenge of direct assistance to current and future change leaders in closed or closing societies, helping them explore the knowledge, ideas, and capacities essential to building a healthy civil society. Scholarships staff design and implement programs that help selected individuals earn internationally recognized credentials and absorb instructive experiences generated by cross-cultural immersion, propelling these individuals towards productive participation in positive social change.

One of the standard mechanisms for repression in many countries is the withholding of information. Our grants to Education Advising Centers (EACs) combat this constraint in concert with performing essential local administrative tasks on our behalf. EACs publicize study abroad opportunities and recruit applicants from a variety of sectors and socio-economic status, advise students on possible educational paths, offer guidance on how to use the latest reference books on universities, standardized tests, and cross-cultural preparations—all of the seemingly mundane functions that are the heart and soul of transparency in environments distorted by economic imbalances and politicized access to opportunity”.

Introduction

This excerpt from the most recent Scholarships Strategy points to the very important relationships we have built with Educational Advising Centers (EACs) both to assist in administering our own programs locally and to support higher education more generally in the countries where we operate. We employ the term EAC broadly to signify a range of organizations or operations: some are proper spin-offs from the Soros Foundations network, other centers remain hosted in the national foundations, while still others originated as independent NGOs sharing values of open access to educational information and opportunities.

Our engagement with these trusted partners is at a crossroads. Facing a dramatic reorientation to new geographies and a 50% budget cut in 2013, we significantly altered our support for and engagement with EACs.   In countries where we would no longer recruit for scholarships, we decided to wind down core support over a two-year period. And in countries where we continue offering scholarships, as of 2015 we partner mainly through service contracts which allow for modest administrative support. In 2014 we held our last EAC scholarship coordinators conference and have ceased supporting this annual convening. Former partners no longer eligible for core support are still eligible to apply for project grants intended to encourage alumni engagement. .

In our shift to new geographies we did not pause to identify and cultivate local partners who might provide similar services. Here, Scholarship staff absorbed a significant volume of work formerly conducted locally and more efficiently by EAC partners.

With this review, we wish to take stock of our changing engagement with EAC partners and evaluate our decisions and choices within the context of our evolving strategy. Recognizing the potential benefit of identifying and cultivating partners in new geographies, as well as the value our existing network offers to our longer term work with alumni and refugee populations, we are considering increasing EAC-type support going forward and wish to evaluate what form that support might best take.

Defining the Portfolio

Within a department that focuses primarily on making grants to individuals, this slice of our portfolio captures our main efforts at organizational grant making. As an operational program, much of our relationship with EACs is defined by our processes and the assistance they provide us for our operations within the larger context of their own work.

We assigned support for their independent operations (core support) in the Category of Work ”Fealty to Higher Education.” This COW formerly included a subtheme, *Fealty to Liberal Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences*, where we assigned funding for our major international mobility scheme, the Civil Society Scholar Awards (CSSA) for doctoral students and university faculty. These two streams were recently conflated by the Strategy Unit to a single one (Fealty to Higher Education); nevertheless, in this review we examine our EAC support and will leave CSSA for a later portfolio review, possibly to be discussed in July with the Scholarships Advisory Board.

Grants awarded to EACs for projects involving (and often initiated by) our alumni are included in the list of elements for reference. They are assigned to a different COW (Concept: Alumni Networks), since we consider them of primary benefit to alumni. Still, we wish to draw attention to this effort, as illustrating the changing role of EACs and potential for engagement in countries where we no longer offer scholarships. Likewise, the list of elements includes the last convening of EAC program coordinators, held in 2014. These convenings were intended to build a network of advising centers, provide a venue for exchanging ideas on best practices and sustainability, and offer in-person updates on Scholarship program developments.

We focus on the two last years of funding (2014 and 2015) in order to ponder on the following questions:

1) Were we correct to disengage from EACs over the course of 2014-15 based on our new geographic parameters? Were we correct in waiting to develop in-country partnerships in new geographies?

2) Was the manner of our disengagement effective and well planned? What risks do we see in not maintaining the network (via conferences)? Did our attempt to remain engaged via alumni project support prove effective?

3) What have we learned about the optimal financial arrangements (service agreements or grants) for the range of work that we collaborate on with EACs?

4) Did we miss an opportunity to develop EACs in Africa, given what we refer to above as ideal partners that can help us with programming?

Our Work and Ambitions

Looking strictly at the two most recent years of engagement sheds light on a critical juncture and allows us to evaluate certain essential decision points. However, in order to evaluate the “fit” of our support to the COW Fealty to Higher Education, we must look a bit more broadly—though briefly- at the historical context of our engagement and support.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**As Service Providers to Scholarship Programming**

Scholarships’ primary objective in first engaging EAC-type organizations was to provide much-needed local service and expertise during all stages of the scholarship cycle. The partners knew the best means to advertise and mobilize potential applicants, had capacity to reach marginalized communities to ensure that non-traditional profiles had fair access to the opportunities, provided insight into specificities of academic and professional credentials of applicants, and offered organizational support for interview gatherings. Very importantly, most of them served as official venues for the standardized tests required for admission at western universities. Center staff provided fair and impartial guidance to individuals through the application process, which also increased access to less privileged or experienced contenders, a unique feature of our operations. EACs were likewise well-positioned in the local academic and civil society environment and could ease the reintegration process for our returning alumni.

For locations like Uzbekistan, our partners in neighboring Kazakhstan remained almost our only link with the extremely closed country, as EAC staff could enter the country, while Scholarship staff were barred. Bilim-Central Asia maintains a regional center in Shymkent close to the Uzbek border. In fact, regional centers significantly multiply access for those outside capital cities[[2]](#footnote-2).

Our support to local partners for many years took the form of an annual grant[[3]](#footnote-3). Centers submitted annual proposals[[4]](#footnote-4) for both administrative and programmatic support. We intended our core support to allow the organizations to develop their own agendas and operations beyond our administrative needs. Fundraising opportunities proved rather limited in the region, so our grant was intended to help EACs maintain their independent activities. Funds intended to support our own programmatic needs were captured in the combined budget, and were allocated to the centers as reimbursement for program expenses.

Nurturing these relationships over the years served to bolster the professional expertise of EAC staff and familiarize them with the legal and procedural requirements of working with non-profit organizations. It took Scholarships and EACs a number of years in the ‘traditional region’ to break the cycle of nepotism and favoritism eroding post-Soviet societies, and cultivate the values of inclusion and access. Eventually we could trust that information provided about scholarship opportunities would be un-biased, accurate, and distributed openly and widely at no cost.

**Other Significant Players and Relevance in Age of Internet**

Other players providing similar services in the region--such as IREX,ACCELS/American Councils (centers supported by the US Department of State), DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), British Councils, and culture centers linked to foreign embassies- provide less-comprehensive information about study opportunities, often with an agenda mandated by the funding agency to focus on one country. Recently in many countries for-profit companies mushroomed in the field of educational exchange, but these organizations, while financially more secure than EACs, generally lack the value of promoting equal opportunities based on merit and of supporting transparent selection procedures.

With Internet access spreading even in constrained countries, one might suppose that EACs would be rendered superfluous by the vast amount of free information available online. In more technologically advanced regions where the general public has reliable Internet, access to information about academic opportunities is accessible but can be overwhelming. Guidance from a professional expert is necessary for individuals to make an informed choice. In closed societies, where Scholarships is primarily operating, repressive regimes hinder access to information; therefore, personalized counseling in a well-resourced center makes an enormous difference to applicants particularly in remote areas.

Bumairam Ismailova, a devoted colleague at the Osh center in Southern Kyrgyzstan works tirelessly to identify opportunities that might open doors for young, capable individuals. Southern Kyrgyzstan is agrarian and less developed economically, and access to technology is limited. Without an additional push, many young people would remain locked within the limited circumstances of their environment and would not aspire for more. The center plays a mobilizing role in the community.

While not being replaced by the Internet, EACs have harnessed technology to broaden their own reach. They run virtual outreach sessions through webinars and other online links. Using new tools at the disposal, advisors have become more analytical and technologically savvy, and are able to work with larger amount of information to offer services tailored to a particular individual.

**The Broader Higher Education Ecosystem**

Beyond the assistance they provided us, the centers shared broader goals and missions relating to higher education support and access to higher education opportunities, such as:

* Dissemination of information on study opportunities abroad;
* Help with university application process, workshops on effective applications and CVs, training applicants on how to present themselves at interviews;
* Helping students find scholarships, explaining the process of applying for funding;
* Offering standardized tests as licensed administrators of TOEFL, GRE, etc. ;
* Providing test preparation materials and offering practice tests;
* Free access to Internet (In places where Internet us unavailable or unreliable, students can browse for information, take practice tests, complete online applications);
* Serving as an English language club for language practice and cultural fora;
* Some EACs channel academic information internationally and domestically- helping local individuals find study abroad opportunities and advising incoming foreign students and universities about local academic landscape;
* Representation at educational fairs.

More recently, many centers participate in projects, write proposals for various causes not only in order to get funding, but also to engage youth in a meaningful activity. The more advanced centers act as intermediaries between governmental programs and local NGOs, develop policy in matters relating to youth and higher education, propose and advocate for education reforms, and create synergies between agencies, educational institutions and NGOs. This makes it possible for EACs to even initiate projects and scholarships for local communities.

A key example here is the Education Advising Center in Chisinau. Operating since 1994, it has become a significant mobilising player in Moldovan higher education and has initiated scholarships for the local student population (see text box at right).

Over the last year (2104), in order to achieve its objectives, our EAC organized or co-sponsored a considerable range of events. We successfully continued administering two national scholarships programs – 1. “Scholarships for Your Future (a continuation of the Supplementary Scholarships for Students from Socially-Vulnerable Families, but in a new format exclusively financed by Commercial Bank “MAIB”) and 2. “ORANGE Foundation Scholarships for Youth from Boarding Schools” which attracts a large number of applicants and offers merit-based scholarships to students from socially-vulnerable families and to youth studying in boarding schools, in order to help them start their higher education. Our EAC also continues to administer the “Merit Scholarships” for the top students in Moldova, a program open to senior undergraduate students and first-year master’s students across Moldova. The official awarding ceremony has become a great media event both for the students and the universities. By means of this project EAC continues to stimulate and increase the students’ interest for studies, as well as promote local higher education opportunities in Moldova.

(Extract from the grant application for 2015, language slightly edited)

These are unique efforts, achieved through successful partnership with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour, Social Protection and Family.

By providing core grants to EACs we not only supported access to alternative educational opportunities to individuals, but contributed indirectly to a broader field of higher education, namely, internationalisation of higher education. We helped EACs advance broader goals and activities, at the same time anchoring our scholarships to beneficial environments, at organizations with a broader social mission. Evaluating the precise degree to which our support led to this broadening of mission is difficult since we did not identify benchmarks or evaluation tools to measure our own impact. But we believe that close cooperation with Scholarships did influence many of the ideas and successful projects that the EACs implemented, as we understand from discussions during the coordinators conferences and through direct communication with EAC leadership.

**Scholarships 2013 Pivot to new Programs in New Geographies**

In **2013** Scholarships underwent a major budget cut and shift in geographic focus, necessitating a complete restructuring of our programming. We discontinued a number of programs targeting specific countries or thematic areas and instead launched two new “flagship” programs, the Civil Society Leadership Award (for full MA degrees) and Civil Society Scholar Award (short-term research mobility awards) and make them available across all countries with a split of 16 *priority* and 19 *opportunity* countries[[5]](#footnote-5). CSLA would be offered only in priority countries, and CSSA in all. Several countries of long-standing focus and with established EACs were taken off our active country list, including Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine. We would launch operations in over 10 countries where we had neither prior experience nor local partnerships.

In the context of this major shift, we recognized that our relationship with long-standing partners would need to change significantly, as our programming would either shift completely out of their jurisdiction or (in the case of CSSA) require significantly less local administrative assistance than previously. We understood their possible disappointment and confusion and addressed those questions (and others) at the 2014 annual Coordinators gathering in Palanga, Lithuania.

Even in discontinued countries, we felt it would be ill-advised to discontinue support completely, given our hopes for tracking alumni and designing initiatives to integrate them into the OSF network. And we felt it would be unfair to discontinue support immediately in those places, given the suddenness of our shifts in geography. We decided to cushion the disconnect by awarding grants to EACs for one more year during our transition. The call for proposals read in part:

“The purpose of this grant is to support the core administrative and in some cases programmatic expenses associated with the Centers’ scholarship activities. Support will be in the form of one year grant due to the fact that the Open Society Scholarship Programs is in the process of redesigning its current programs, which might change the distribution of scholarship programs in the countries or the involvement of the Educational Advising Centers in scholarship administration.”

Our overall approach for 2014 funding followed across the requisite three budget scenarios: we would reduce support by 5% from 2013 levels in the “high” budget; in both “low” and ‘medium” budgets, we would further reduce funding by 10% for countries where scholarships would continue and by 20% where our programs were discontinued. We planned to extend these tie-off core grants for two years to help centers restructure or build stronger fund-raising teams through 2015. Again the distinction was to be where we would work and where we would not: EAC in countries with continued scholarships would receive the lower/medium budget level set in 2014; countries to be discontinued would receive a 50% reduction compared to the 2014 level. There would be significantly fewer core grants to EACs in 2016. Each year we will go down roughly by $100K across the countries.

As we look at the funding charts for **2014**, the size of the grants in various locations ranges from just above 10,000 USD for Serbia to 60,000 USD for Azerbaijan. This variation is determined by the size of the organizations, the range of activities they conduct, whether they support regional branches, and living costs in the country. While previously we tied the grant amount to the number of scholarship programs on offer in the country (assuming a proportional link to workload), in 2014 we already had reduced to only CSLA and CSSA, the latter of which requires minimal local involvement. This meant that only three centers in the Eurasia (Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Bilim-Central Asia for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) were engaged to support both programs; the majority only supported CSSA. We still gave final grants to EACs in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, where scholarships were discontinued. We were torn in our decision: on the one hand there was no straightforward justification in funding those EACs; with a greatly reduced budget and a priority for supporting individuals, we struggled with what level of support we could maintain. On the other hand we recognized the value in the existing network and their ongoing efforts to advance larger goals for social good and wanted to help them move on in the time of transition.

Funding for year **2015** saw further cuts to EAC funding and a change in the type of support. The total level of support was reduced to approximately 300,000 USD for 12 centers. We terminated funding of centers where scholarships were no longer on offer (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan[[6]](#footnote-6), Georgia, and the Ukraine) and shifted the remaining partnerships from general grants to service agreements.

1. **Were we correct to disengage from EACs over the course of 2014-15 based on our new geographic parameters?**

Our decision to disengage was based on was an attempt to responsibly address our new geographic mandate within a severely constrained budget. This decision also comes in a context of years of struggle to encourage **sustainability** and independence of EAC partners.

We have had mixed success in efforts to encourage partner EACs to achieve sustainability. As a program directly linked with the original development of many EACs, we felt responsible for maintaining support. We explicitly suggested that ongoing core support should be thought of as giving them time and space to seek other funders and we offered training and discussions on fundraising techniques, sustainability, strategic budgeting, leadership, and communications during the annual coordinators’ conferences. In addition, we provided funds for professional development of staff, with the aim that their reliance on us would diminish. Our approach, though applied consistently and to all, led to decidedly mixed results, linked in some cases to leadership personalities, the political environment, or other variables. Moldova and Georgia are clear success stories. Although our support ceased after we discontinued operations, the Center for International Education (CIE) in Tbilisi, led by Nino Chinchaladze, remains a robust operation and enjoys a reputation for integrity and effectiveness in the arena of Georgian higher education. In 2013-2014 the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia created a project “Knowledge Gate” to provide information and scholarships abroad for the Georgians. CIE’s is cooperating on the project and the director sits on the board of the governmental commission that selects awardees. CIE is an influential player in higher education policy and participates in the “Creating Academic Mobility Strategy,” a part of Higher Education Reform Platform; it partners with government ministries to create special scholarships for the remote region of Ajara; it advises Georgian educational institutions on internationalization of education; it works on a special scholarship project for national minorities and advises the government on educational aspects of integration of internally-displaced persons and minorities; and it promotes opportunities offered by Georgian universities, academic institutions and think tanks in an effort to attract foreign students and professionals.

CIE’s attention to effective strategy, its diversified portfolio of activities, and close links with a large pool of scholarships alumni have allowed the organization to attract additional sources of funding and guarantee a sustainable future.

In contrast, a different example is provided by *Bilim - Central Asia*, our partner from the early 1990’s for activities in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and later Turkmenistan. It was initially a large and diverse corporate foundation founded by OSI for reform in education and research in Central Asia. One of the divisions, the EAC, was based in Almaty and had two regional centers in Karaganda and Shymkent. Although staff of the EAC has always been extremely dedicated to scholarships advising, they lacked business acumen and failed to address this deficiency. When our support declined in 2014 and 2015, they simply let staff go and reduced services[[7]](#footnote-7). Currently, there are only three full-time staff left in Almaty and one in Shymkent.

We can seethat continuous support over the years bred dependency on OSF, which is a problem shared by several spin-off EACs that were accustomed to the security of funds from the national foundations. We may have fed this dependency and did not find the right means of encouraging independence. We were perhaps not rigorous enough in examining their means of governance or board composition. We were so keen to have them in the network and needed their services, that we may have sometimes overlooked weaknesses in applications for our fundingthat might not have been competitive had we chosen to make an open call for a partnership. We faced recurrent frustration with late or inaccurate reporting from several centers. Support for the EAC in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) was discontinued in 2014 because we could not secure the financial report of our funds, despite numerous requests. Similar problems with communication led us to stop support for the center in Montenegro. In neither country did we search for a replacement organization to provide a focal point for our alumni. We asked Serbia to help with our work in the neighboring country, but this may not be the best solution.

In conclusion, we may say that certain EACs carried on through our transition, effectively re-calibrating their services and fundraising strategies. They continue keeping in touch and respond to our calls for proposals related to alumni. Others were affected much more adversely and without our support, their future is unclear.

**2) Was the manner of our disengagement effective and well planned? What risks or disadvantages do we see in not maintaining the network (via conferences or other engagement)? Did our attempt to remain engaged via alumni project support prove effective?**

Our exit strategy could rightfully be criticized as a “one size fits all” approach: all EACs were given two years of funding to refocus activities and secure other funds. We did not conduct a more nuanced assessment simply because we were compelled to prioritize the enormous effort involved in recasting our programs in new geographies. With more time and attention, we could likely have calibrated levels and duration of core support for a range of organizations better while the portfolio was in transition. Why were some EACs more successful than others in this transition? Would a different approach on our part have made a difference in the less successful cases? We also could have better anticipated services they might still assist with, such as coordinating regional interviews and alumni activities.[[8]](#footnote-8) In Ukraine we are concerned that we “lost” the five centers altogether. The centers have not closed, but they do not seek contact with us, obviously searching for means to survive. We left an open gap in alumni work, which is essential in Ukraine particular now in the times of unrest. Given very small amounts that we invested, it may not have been the best decision.

Maintaining an EAC network

As much as we encouraged the EACs towards independence and sustainability, we simultaneously tried to build **a network,** primarily through annual coordinators conferences[[9]](#footnote-9) and trainings. The conferences were regular since 1996 and provided a platform to discuss the scholarship programs, build the network spirit, and raise questions. In 2005-2007 and 2007-2009, all staff our EAC partners in Eurasia and the Balkans participated in two training projects initiated by Scholarships and co-funded jointly with European Commission within the framework of Erasmus Mundus Action 4: *PEHE EACN: Promoting European Higher Education through Educational Advising Centers Network* and *TEA TEAM: Training Educational Advisors to Enhance Academic Mobility*. Those efforts in particular strengthened the sense of a network of professional colleagues sharing similar goals and values.

2014 was the last convening devoted to an EAC scholarship coordinators conference. In the future, they will be invited to alumni conferences held in their region. However, any one event is likely to include only a few EAC colleagues, and there no longer is a forum for all of them to gather to learn about larger OSF issues and the Scholarships’ evolving strategy or share good practices of center management and strategies for diversification of portfolios[[10]](#footnote-10). Given that we will likely organize two regional conferences per year, the network of EAC representatives will become more fragmented.

The case of recent funding Azerbaijan Baku Education Information Center (BEIC) proves the value of maintaining partners in a network. In 2014 when the Azeri government started a major crack-down on NGOs and foreign funding, it blocked the accounts of the Baku center and although we tried numerous ways of circumventing the ad-hoc restrictions, we were unable to send money to BEIC. We finally managed to support BEIC with the help of our former partner, the Vilnius Education Advising Center, which signed a service agreement with BEIC to support academic mobility between the countries and conduct research comparing Scholarships alumni data in the two countries.

Another excellent example of the network spirit and efficiency is the project for on-line advising for refugees, suggested by OSF-CEU Liaison office and adopted in 2015. We were able to link the consultant working from Greece with our network so that in less than three months, she connected the refugees with the EACs in Vilnius, Macedonia, and Serbia. More efforts are in the pipeline.

Alumni engagement.

The changing grants management processes at OSF, coupled with fewer scholarship programs and fewer total awards under the new strategy, freed some time for our remaining partners to reflect on our relationship and put more focus on recruitment for our new scholarships, creating institutional links with university departments for CSSA, and building stronger alumni networks. Many centers in 2014-2015 stressed the importance of alumni activities and asked us to include funding in the service agreements to support alumni data management, small alumni gatherings or larger forums with important stake holders in the country in order to highlight the valuable resource (OSF alumni) available to local academia and civil society organizations, among other things.

Responding to this shifting priority of our partners, and intending to stimulate the sense of a network, we reworked the idea of our previous Alumni Grants Program (discontinued in 2013 due to diminished budget) and in 2015 introduced a call for the **EAC-Alumni Project Proposals**, bringing back the successful idea with a different twist: all alumni proposals had to be jointly initiated and carried out with the EACs. Since this activity falls under a different Category of Work (within the Concept: Alumni Networks), we will only draw brief attention to the five successful projects (Annex F) for information on the shifting dynamics of our partnerships. EACs can certainly reach out to alumni more effectively and efficiently than Scholarships staff in regional offices in London and New York. Supporting projects proposed by OSF scholarship alumni through our local partners not only strengthens the link between the two, but also suggests new and meaningful potential in the role that the EACs are willing to assume.

The question of what happens when we step away with scholarships and funding core support needs further analysis. We may need to re-engage with some EACs or work through limited projects. Some of the centers lost contact and we may need to analyze the reasons and what this implies.

1. **What have we learned about the optimal financial arrangements (service agreements or grants) for the range of work that we collaborate on with EACs?**

As indicated in the list of elements for this portfolio review (Annex D) we shifted from annual grants to service agreements in 2015. We thought service agreements would better reflect the changing relationship between Scholarships and our local partners and would be easier to process technically through the Contracts On-Line system. We have issued 7 service agreements out of 12[[11]](#footnote-11). However, since the two systems Foundation Connect and Contracts-On-Line do not meet, we cannot run comprehensive reports on the spending for EACs in the grants management system (FC).

It is worth mentioning that from 2014, when the London office of Scholarships (the unit which primarily dealt with EAC grants/agreements) shifted to processing individual grants directly rather than funding individuals via grants to partner universities, the changes in the financial arrangements had an impact on EAC operations. It was no longer possible to pass funds to the EACs so that they could purchase tickets for individual grantees, or issue stipends for summer school participants on our behalf, which previously had been enormously helpful. Those expenses are now captured in the individual grant accrual and must be processed by the Scholarships staff via the designated OSF travel agents and the existing payment systems, rather than be part of the programmatic budget to the EAC. The arrangement of service agreements, however, did not work perfectly well for every center due to local circumstances. For example, the Macedonian center needed to operate via a grant due to inability to issue invoices for services, which would risk the EAC being lifted into a different tax category. But in the majority of cases, it worked better and slightly more quickly.

By doing so we also avoided one complexity and frustration which we had to deal with while funding EACs via grants, the 1/3 rule. Centers which were parts of larger entities, such as an EAC in Belgrade Open School, or the EAC in Vilnius for Belarus which is part of the international network of American Councils centers, have always had a strong financial basis and significant cost-share from the “parent” organization. We struggled to write successful eligibility assessments and to meet the 1/3 rule requirement in several countries with stand-alone or smaller organizations. In 2014 a successful and well-supported center in Baku lost the majority of its co-funders due to increasingly adverse circumstances in Azerbaijan vis-a-vis non-governmental organizations. It was problematic to comply with the 1/3 rule as the current core budget was mostly our grant. But it was important to keep the center going since Azerbaijan remained one of the few closed countries on our scholarship list where both of our major scholarship programs are offered. It is a meaningful effort to keep this non-politicized island of open access and information exchange available for public at large and to withstand the repressive regime. In the EAC world, the healthiness of the grantee organization, which the 1/3 rule was supposed to assess, was probably not the most efficient indicator. Several EACs have shrunk due to closing spaces for NGOs; others lost regional representations due to fund-raising difficulties. What seems to be more important in this context is that the organizations be willing to carry on the work and remain true to the chosen path of development and societal change through supporting access, skills and opportunities to individuals. We argued that they were worth supporting and deserve special scrutiny.

In conclusion, service agreements seem to better reflect the changing character of EAC- Scholarships interaction and are technically slightly easier. But we need to be open to the needs of the partners and be flexible should this path prove not feasible for each of them.

1. **Did we miss an opportunity to develop EACs in Africa, given what we refer to above as ideal partners that can help us with programming? How specifically did we suffer without such help?**

Scholarships moved to new geographies rather abruptly, and we did not cultivate local partners as we shifted to Africa. The challenge for now is what format and what pattern of partnership can we design in the new geographies where we are asked to work? The environment in those countries is often much more controlling and less conducive for work on advancing civil society institutions or social change. It is unlikely, the OSIEA assessment showed, that we will easily find independent NGOs or that OSF will be warmly received in Ethiopia for example, from which we have the largest number of applicants. We cooperate very closely with the relevant OSF program, but have not yet built enough links within Sudan or South Sudan, not to mention other African countries. The starting point in Africa is not exactly the same as it was in the post-Soviet region. We may say we “inherited” the scholarship coordinators when the EACs were spun off in the Eurasia region and the Balkans with all the ground work carried out by the national foundations, so we did not have to canvas the region to look for suitable organizations. In Africa we still grapple with the environment and acquisition of expertise is taking longer.

The advancement of technologies allows us to reach candidates via list-serves, and through connections that regional managers build. We received rather compelling applicant profiles, and hope for better as the first alumni in Africa emerge. But mentoring throughout the competition is badly missing: many times our process were misinterpreted, university choices and fields on offer were misunderstood and there was no local organization to guide applicants and explain the differences in education systems in their home countries and western universities. Managing logistics and travel for 300 semi-finalists to the interviews in Nairobi would be much more efficient with local administrative support. The practice of the last two competitions in Africa shows that we badly need a local dedicated representative, either regionally or in individual countries, due to enormous interest in scholarships and the volume of applicants.

**Conclusion**

Overall, it was a success for Scholarships to work with the EACs in the region. We managed to run our scholarship programs very efficiently, overcoming administrative difficulties and providing individualized support and coaching to the applicants throughout the application and scholarship cycle. More importantly, we were able to instill the open and transparent processes of a competition, and to some extent contributed to the internationalization and free academic mobility of the higher education area in the region. We created a strong network of reliable partners, who do keep in touch and feel like a network, that was extremely cost effective.

Going forward, we face the big task of re-evaluating our relationship with the EACs, especially when reviewing the consequences of discontinuing our relationships in certain countries and the effect on the network and alumni engagement. As we try to reflectively replicate our success in new regions, we need to be more analytical and build a better strategic vision when we enter a partnership not only for the duration of scholarships, but also mindful of the legacy.

1. Please see Annex A, a short history of EACs. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Georgia CIE has a representative in Kutaisi, Mongolia EAC works with remote regions. In Azerbaijan BEIC just recently had to close a regional center in Ganja due to unsustainable environment and political pressure. In Ukraine, apart from Kiev, there is a very vibrant network of independent regional centers in Dnepropetrovsk, Lviv, Charkiv, and Odessa. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Please see Annex B for a complete timeline of support. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The only period when we experimented with a 3 year grant was in 2009-2011, but it did not bring about the expected result. The anticipation was that the centers would have an approved bigger budget to present as a cost-share to attract other donors over a longer period of time and would make more aggressive and successful fundraising efforts. However, the analysis of the reports showed that this did not happen- the levels of alternative sources did not significantly increase. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Please see the Annex C on new distribution of countries. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. With an exception of a small grant to the Osh Center in southern Kyrgyzstan. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For comparison: Bilim- Central Asia budgets:

   In 2013 organizational budget was $338,905- $251,893 of which was provided by OSF;

   In 2014 organizational budget was $201, 327- $135,878 of which was provided by OSF;

   in 2015 organizational budget was $68,970- $35,364 of which was provided by OSF. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Although the Georgian center seems least affected by our disengagement, discontinuing our support was likely premature—we have needed to turn to them for major assistance: in 2015 they coordinated CSLA interviews for the Eurasia region, and this year, due to security reasons we are transferring the CSLA summer school from Istanbul to Tbilisi, both for the location’s relative safety and for the reliable and trusted partnership the EAC provides. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Please see sample Agenda under Annex E. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For example, there were only 2 such moments of interaction in 2015: the Regional conference *Challenges and Opportunities for Civil Society in Central Asia* in June in Bishkek, which brought together colleagues from Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan (also representing Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Mongolia. The regional conference for Western Balkans organized by the EAC of Serbia in Belgrade in November was a logical venue for colleagues from Macedonia and Kosovo. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Three centers continue to receive budget allocations through the national foundations: Albania, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)