

Area Studies in Lithuania

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Professor Janhunen's impressions on the prospects of area studies in Lithuania introduce general issues and challenges that are shared by area studies programs worldwide. I will avoid repeating his ideas, and will try to add a few complementary observations.

My impressions of area studies in Lithuania are closely related to my thoughts about the purpose of area studies at my home university, and more broadly in the United States, where, I must add, area studies programs have been under siege after the world financial crisis. Two years ago, the American government halved its grants to National Resource Centers at about fifty American universities, and it is not likely that federal support for area studies will return to earlier levels. Universities are now scrambling to maintain the programs that we believe are critical to our students' education.

Lithuanian and American area studies programs serve two purposes, both of which are related to national security: (1) they prepare students for careers related to regions of the world, and (2) instructors do research that helps not only students, but also scholars, policy makers, businessmen and the general public understand people in foreign countries. It makes sense to group together scholars who represent various disciplinary backgrounds, because the truest picture of a complex society comes from a variety of perspectives. A regional, comparative approach to groups of countries is most efficient, because it is not possible to hire two hundred professors, one for each of the world's countries (or one for each of the 94 countries in which Lithuania has diplomatic missions). Regional topics courses are also practical from the administrative point of view, because student enrollment would be too low to maintain separate courses for each of those many countries' history, politics, films, literature, culture, etc.

Foreign language education in Lithuania is excellent. An American university can only look with envy at the Lithuanian students who typically graduate with at least three, and often four or more languages. These Lithuanian students have high potential to gather knowledge and contribute new ideas to their country and to their employers. Area studies programs give these students flexibility in their careers: While specializing in one or two languages and countries of a region, each student also has a solid understanding of that country's neighbors. My impression, based on site visits at Vilnius University and Vytautas Magnus University, is that Lithuanian area studies students receive solid professional training, particularly at the bachelor's degree level. They will have high job prospects precisely because they have broad knowledge about a region, and are flexible in their disciplinary approaches to that region.

Area studies instructors, like their students, are more versatile than single-country specialists. If an institution can hire only one instructor for international studies, for example, it is most efficient to hire an instructor who knows a region well, and can then advise a variety of students studying different topics and countries in that region. My general impression is that Lithuanian university instructors are open in principle to the notion of area studies for students, but not always eager to themselves become regional specialists; the courses they teach have often focused on a single country or subregion of the program's general area, but rarely attempted to engage the region as a whole. I intentionally write in past tense, because this is likely to change soon: Vilnius University's Oriental Studies Centre, for example, plans to expand regional research projects, and teachers at Vytautas Magnus University said that they plan to fill regional gaps in the curriculum by adding some Nordic content to their methods and theories courses.

In the globalizing world, it is essential that a country maintain a current and deep understanding of many countries and people with whom it is connected through business, politics, and culture. Area studies programs at universities are a critical national resource. The Lithuanian programs I visited this month are responding to this national need. In summary, the prospects for area studies in Lithuania look bright.

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