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Studying Crises: methodological and pedagogical solutions from the BAMSE Tartu intensive course

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1. Introduction

The internationalisation of Higher Education and transnational teaching collaborations relying on student and staff mobility carry special significance in times of crisis. In the increasingly polarized information landscape, the exchange of ideas as well as sharing newly published scholarly interpretations and pedagogical methods go beyond the ‘normal’ experience that students, teachers, and administrators gain through intercultural encounters. This type of cooperation allows for different themes to be observed from new angles through collaboration. It not only widens one’s perspective and understanding, but can also produce new practices and ways to relate to already ‘familiar’ knowledge. International interaction improves communication skills and flexibility, resulting in an increased likelihood of accepting divergent perceptions. The Nordplus-funded Baltic-Nordic Network for the Advancement of Methodology in Area Studies (BAMSE) was established with a special mission to circulate theoretical and methodological perspectives useful for rethinking Eastern European area studies. The BAMSE community agrees that international collaboration is now more important than ever - in times of multiple crises.

The BAMSE project organized an intensive course “Implications of Crises on the State of Democracy: theoretical and methodological tools for studying the East of Europe” in Tartu (11-17 September 2022) with an aim to discuss how crises, such as the societal consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the current war in Ukraine, affect the state of democracy. The purpose was to offer an overview of a wide multidisciplinary toolkit with which students could improve their methodological knowledge and deepen their analytical skills. The course was designed to implement innovative pedagogy to achieve these aims, including various interactive lecture formats, an NGO learning café, and a field trip. With this reflection, we want to share our experiences of this versatile multilateral collaboration from the points of view of cooperating institutions’ teachers and students.

2. Course Design

The course included themes such as the rule of law, electoral behaviour, biopolitics, economic populism, global trends of the erosion of democracy, and memory politics. Students received reading materials prior to the beginning of in-class teaching. These materials combined theoretical approaches to the above-mentioned main subjects and some empirical research. For the preliminary communication between the students, teachers, and organisers, a Microsoft Teams learning environment was established where all course material was stored. The students were divided into multinational and multidisciplinary groups beforehand and they were required to work together during the whole course. They were also asked to



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establish their own arenas for communication (Whatsapp, email, Zoom, etc.), preferably already before the course.

The groups had to choose a final presentation topic related to the subjects discussed during the course and elaborate on the selected issue the daily group work sessions that were allocated in the schedule of the course program. The groups were encouraged to have an equal division of labour, reflect on the different disciplinary approaches of their members, and take advantage of the various personal experiences as well as previous knowledge of the group participants. It was also highly recommended that in group work, students reflect on the pre-course materials. The group projects aim was to create a final presentation to be presented at a mini conference at the end of the course week. The presentations were assessed by fellow student groups and teachers. In addition to the group work effort, the students were required to write an individual blog post (500 words) based on any topic discussed during the course. The blog texts were reviewed by a teacher and the students could improve their texts, after which and with the students' approval, the blogs were language-checked and published on the course free-access website. The pedagogical purpose here was to encourage process writing and to give insights into the academic publishing process. Students also participated in a field trip and after the excursion had to produce a two-page learning diary according to the guidelines of the organizing partner, Vilnius University.

3. Interactive Lectures

Course content was structured around thematical lectures where the partner universities offered their specific expertise, complementing each other in the overall concept. This allowed all lectures to be based on principles of research-based teaching. The lectures were intended to help the students to understand how the various disciplinary or interdisciplinary methodological approaches open new perspectives to analysing the consequences of crises. Therefore, the implemented pedagogy supported problem-based learning and interactivity. While all lecturers used visual aid (PowerPoints) to crystallize their core concepts and data, as each team came from different partner universities and applied slightly different methods, this was a great learning experience for the teachers as well.



The Helsinki team offered two interlinked themes, the evolution of the rule of law and electoral behaviour. The first lecture discussed the relevance of temporal and spatial contexts in relation to crises and democracy. The content was structured around conceptual questions and the presentation was consciously built on polemic variant statements to inspire the students to react, challenge, and question the teacher's interpretations. The other lecture, discussing electoral behaviour, used extensively digital voting tools (e.g. Flinga and Menti) and demanded students to take a stand and share their opinion regarding various questions regarding the topic. Since the Helsinki team's lectures were organized on the first day of the course, which was the first time students met each other, the module's purpose was to encourage interaction between the students as well as between students and teachers.



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The Tartu team's contribution consisted of two lectures addressing the illiberal development of Putin's regime seen from a wider biopolitical perspective. The two lectures offered a consistent whole where the first class discussed a general framework for biopolitical studies in comparative politics and international relations, while the second lecture opened discussion on a variety of regional experiences and practices. The module was particularly problem-oriented: both classes started with a puzzle or academic controversy they intended to discuss and emphasised professional debate and interactive Q&A sessions. The interdisciplinary objective of the course was also furthered by dividing the class into several disciplinary segments (i.e. political analysis, sociology, cultural studies, etc.) to give students a comparative perspective of study.

The Riga team analysed the impact of populism and radicalization on the economy, as well as triggering effects on the erosion of democracy in a global context. This module relied on a comparative methodology. Each topic was analysed spatially with a transdisciplinary approach, which was a combination of political and economic sciences. Both lectures of this module implemented a consistent structure. After introducing the conceptual framework, lecturers generated in-group discussions. Students had to identify challenges to the current state of democracy and populism in their own countries and compare their examples with those of other students to find similarities and differences. Then, students were asked to reflect on regional and national characteristics and how these compared to the global context. At the end of these lectures, the groups presented summaries of their discussions.

The Vilnius team discussed the role of memory politics in times of crises, with special reference to the changes and continuities from the Soviet era. The content was constructed with the aim of helping students to recognize the link and the interactive dynamics between theory and the everyday practice of the political use of memory. Hence, this module was divided between a lecture, where the key concepts and the methodological approach were introduced, and a following field trip. The lecture painted a coherent picture that would serve as an analytical lens during the workshop and the field trip that deepened the practical understanding of the previous theoretical and thematical analysis.

4. A Field Trip to Memory

The field trip to Raadi Park and the Estonian National Museum (ENM) in Tartu was closely integrated with previous activities. Prior to the course, students were required to read two articles and a chapter from a



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book discussing memory of the Second World War and the Soviet Era with a special focus on the Baltic States and the history of the city of Tartu in particular. As a good example of the potential volatility of memory politics, fast recalibration was necessary when organizing the field trip. The initial plan was to visit the Soviet War Memorial in Raadi Park. However, the decision to remove the monument from Raadi Park was already well underway, with the actual removal being carried out on the first day of the course. This example, however, was exploited in the class discussion prior to the field trip.

After the visit to the Raadi Park, the field trip included a guided tour to the permanent exhibition “Encounters” at the Estonian National Museum. The exhibition stretched from the present day to the Ice Age in Estonia. Visiting other exhibitions at the museum was left as an optional step. However, all the students willingly visited the “Echo of the Urals” exhibition, which looks at people speaking Finno-Ugric languages.





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The students were required to compose a learning diary that was facilitated by a list of questions. Yet, instructions of structuring the narrative were not too strict with a purpose to leave room for creativity, reflection, and juxtaposition of different concepts introduced in the lecture.

5. Speed-Dating with NGOs: learning from civil society

One of the central ideas of the intensive course was to bring the non-academic world, and especially civil society, closer to university activities. This part of the BAMSE project had a threefold aim. First, we wanted to raise the students' awareness of the enormous amount of information that social actors possess. Secondly, the goal was to point out to students that theoretical knowledge, often characteristic of tertiary education, has wider relevance for society and is applicable in practice. Thirdly, the course discussed the impact of crises on the state of democracy, hence, civil society and civic actors were in this respect highly important objects of study. Thus, keeping this content in mind, we approached five NGOs to share their reflections on the impact of crises in their work.

We chose NGOs that represented various fields of civic action. One was the Domus Dorpatensis Foundation, which provides non-formal civic education in Estonia and Latvia and designs strategy processes for the Estonian public sector. A second was the Opinion Festival (Arvamusfestival), which takes place in Paide yearly in early August and intends to accelerate public discussions amongst others about politics, security, elections, and education. The third NGO was the Tartu Women's Shelter, which is the first domestic violence shelter in the Baltics, recently rebranded as a Women's Support and Information Center. Fourthly, the Institute of Baltic Studies is an independent, non-profit policy research and development think tank in Estonia that aims at assisting the development of public policy in the Baltic Sea region by providing high-quality socio-economic analysis. Finally, an independent journalist, Justin Petrone was also invited to share his views on the freedom of the media.

The NGOs provided students with important field knowledge and students had to integrate what they learned into their group assignments to formulate their own research agenda. We invented a 'speed-dating' learning format where representatives of the NGOs sat at different tables organized into a big circle, each table having a 'host NGO'. The task was for the groups of students to go around the circle and interview one by one each NGO for 20 minutes and – according to the speed-dating choreography – switch to another table and interview another NGO when time expired. This meant that every NGO was

interviewed by every group. The interviews were totally in the hands of the groups: they had to structure their questions and construct an interviewing strategy to obtain the information they needed the NGOs to reveal from the perspective of the groups' own research project for the week. Students had an opportunity to become familiar with the work of Estonian NGOs present at the meeting in advance, as information about the activists and their organizations was accessible in the course's common learning Teams-environment. In addition, a panel discussion was organized before the speed-dating format in order to introduce the NGOs to the students. The panel was moderated by a teacher with a predefined list of questions, but students also had opportunities to ask the NGO representatives questions as well.



The NGO-speed dating session was organised in the middle of the course week by the host institution, at the University of Tartu premises. An important aspect was that students coming from different societies



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(Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Finland) maintained diverse attitudes toward civil society. The NGO speed-dating format was unusual for both students and NGOs participating in the meeting. Both parties found it interesting and entertaining at the same time. In conclusion, the NGO meeting raised considerable interest and motivation on both sides.