

# Promoting European Studies in Vietnam as an Approach to Enhance Vietnam - EU Relations

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**Abstract:** The relationship between Vietnam and Europe can be traced back to four centuries ago as the first European missionaries set their feet in the country. However, the bilateral relationship does not match and does not satisfy both sides. The main objective of the paper is to analyze the development of European Studies in Vietnam from historical perspective by using the first hand information collected in Vietnam. To this end, the paper consists of three parts. The first part provides an overview of Vietnam - EU relations as the basis to understand its current situation. The second part describes how European Studies in Vietnam have developed during last two decades. The third part analyses some challenges for European Studies. The paper concludes that the EU Studies program must be the number one priority in the bilateral relationship and must play the role as an efficient instrument to boost better understanding of the EU.

**Keywords:** International Studies, Area Studies, European Studies, European Union (EU) - Vietnam Relations, EU - ASEAN Cooperation.

## 1. An overview of Vietnam - EU Relations

The relationship between Vietnam and Europe can be traced back to as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Initially, this relationship was characterized by the interaction between two very different cultures and influenced significantly by European colonial practices. The first Europeans to contact Vietnam were the British, Portuguese, Italian and French missionaries. The British came into formal contact with Vietnam in 1613 [1]. However, they left the country after a few years. In January 1615, the Portuguese Jesuits Carvel and Goa

Buzoni landed in Tourane (Da Nang) and set up a missionaries station in Faifo (Hoi An). In 1618, another Italian Jesuit, Cristoforo Borri arrived in Vietnam and published the very first report on the country in a European language [2]. Yet another mission was established in 1629 in Tonkin (North Vietnam) and hosted a French Jesuit Alexandre de Rhodes who was credited with the conversion of 7,000 people to Christianity [2] and the transcription of the Vietnamese language into the Latin alphabet [3]. The invention of the *Quoc ngu* (National Script) [4] was documented by de Rhodes in his works *Dictionary* and *Catechismus* (1651).

However, the fear by local rulers of losing power to Europeans led to the aggravation of the relationship with the missionaries. Many

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European missionaries were persecuted and Catholic books were burnt. Between 1848 and 1851, Kaiser Tu Duc (1848-1883) proclaimed the end of all missionary activities in Vietnam, and even offered a reward for any murdered European. This hostile attitude triggered a violent reaction from French Emperor Napoleon III and in 1858 French military forces landed in Tourane (Da Nang) and began the conquest of Cochinchina (South Vietnam) which fell under total French control in 1867. However, it took another two decades until the French completed their conquest of Annam (Central Vietnam) and Tonkin (North Vietnam) at which point Vietnam became a part of the French empire until its independence in 1945.

The two Indochina wars (1946 – 1954 and 1965-1975) and the ‘bipolarity’ of the world order induced by the ‘Cold War’ had a significant impact on the relationship between Vietnam and the European Community. In fact, the ideological confrontation became a decisive factor in this relationship between the two, since most of the Community’s Member States were close to the USA’s position at a time (including foreign policy stances). As a result, there was no official connection between Vietnam and the European Community before 1990 (although Vietnam did have diplomatic ties with individual EC member states).<sup>1</sup>

The Vietnam’s reform policy (*Doi moi*) launched in 1986 and the end of the ‘Cold War’ in 1989 provided a chance for both sides to improve relations. On October 22, 1990 - a turning point in the relations between Vietnam and Europe - the European Community established official diplomatic relations with Vietnam. Five years later, on July 17, 1995 the two sides signed a Cooperation Agreement which came into force on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1996 [5] and

provided a legal basis for the bilateral ties. Since then, Vietnam - EU relations have enjoyed stability and on-going diversification. Based on the Cooperation Agreement, a new mechanism for regular contact was created to promote open dialogue, introduce initiatives and plan cooperation. Impressive results have been achieved in a relatively short period of time, not least due to the success of the *Doi moi* policy in the Vietnamese society and the “combined efforts of the European Commission and EU Member States” [6].

In the political field, the EU and Vietnam have increased the frequency of high-level meetings. One of the ‘milestones’ was the first-ever Vietnam-EU Summit held in Hanoi before the 5<sup>th</sup> Asia - Europe Meeting (ASEM5) in October 2004. The President of the European Commission and the heads of the EU Members States participated. The two sides have also maintained cooperation within the frameworks of multilateral dialogues, such as ASEM and ASEAN-EU. Reciprocally, Vietnam’s leaders have paid official visits to EU Member States. The frequent visits and meetings have helped both sides to develop a better understanding of each other, come closer together and find consensus on differing issues in both bilateral and multilateral relations. The EU highly valued Vietnam’s achievement in economic development, reduction of poverty and its determination to continue the *Doi moi* process. However, the views between the two sides still diverge on issues such as human rights, democracy promotion and freedom of religion.

In the economic field, the EU is Vietnam’s leading trade partner, a main source of foreign direct investment and, significantly, a major aid donor. The most important outcomes of economic relations between Vietnam and the EU were the granting of ‘most favored nation’ status and providing Vietnam with tariff preferences under the EU’s Generalized System of Preferences mechanism. Vietnam-EU economic relations have also profited from region-to-region cooperation, especially under

<sup>1</sup> The first EU member to establish diplomatic relations with Vietnam was the Kingdom of Sweden on January 11, 1969. France was the second EU member which established its relations with Vietnam on April 12, 1973.

the ‘Trans-Regional EU - ASEAN Trade Initiative’ (TREATI) and the ‘Regional EU - ASEAN Dialogue Instrument’ (READI). Both programs were launched in 2003 to promote economic and trade cooperation as well as dialogue and regulatory cooperation between the two organizations. Consequently, trade between the EU and Vietnam has sharply increased. In 2012, EU - Vietnam trade in goods was estimated over €23, 8 billion, with €18, 5 billion in imports from Vietnam into EU, and €5, 3 billions in exports from the EU to Vietnam. The EU is also one of the most important investors in Vietnam, accounting for an amount of €1.061 billion of FDI [7]. Supported by the EU, Vietnam became the 150<sup>th</sup> member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in January 2007. Responding to the rapid economic development of Vietnam and in accordance with the New Southeast Asia Strategy (2004), the European Commission (EC) issued a Country Strategy Paper for Vietnam between 2007-2013 foreshadowing long-term cooperation on the bilateral level. According to this Paper, the EU will focus its attention on selected sectors of cooperation, including providing direct assistance to Vietnam. Importantly, according to Ambassador Marcus Cornaro, Head of the European Commission Delegation to Vietnam, “Vietnam enjoys an exceptionally good level of government-led donor coordination; also, harmonization within the EU and with other major donors have progressed a lot.” [8].

Entering the new millennium, Vietnam - EU relations have reached a new level. In 2007, with 27 members and population of 500 million, the EU accounts for 30% of global GDP and 41% of the total value of world trade [9]. This extensive enlargement of the EU offered new opportunities, as well as challenges, for the Union’s external partners. Like other less developed countries, Vietnam has been concerned that the commitment of the EU to help its new members might influence its commitment to cooperate with developing

countries around the world. Despite these fears, it seems that EU enlargement has not ‘diluted’ EU presence in and involvement with Vietnam. On March 29, 2007, the EC’s Country Strategy Paper (CSP) for Vietnam was adopted by the European Commission. For implementation of this CSP, the EU allocated €160 million for the period of 2007 - 2010 and 144 million for the period 2011 - 2013. In general, it is believed that EU enlargement has created more opportunities for Vietnam - EU relations because the majority of the new EU members used to have long-standing relations with Vietnam during the Cold War. In a way, these past links present Vietnam with a chance to capitalize on the existing partnerships and to expand cooperation. In addition, there is a big Vietnamese Diaspora residing in Europe (there are about 200,000 Vietnamese living in Eastern Europe, with 100,000 in Germany, 20,000 in Poland, 25,000 in Czech Republic and 5,000 in Hungary) [11]. This “human link” serves as yet another bridge between Vietnam and the expanded EU.

One of Vietnam’s concerns is the reluctance of EU investors to invest in Vietnamese high-tech, heavy industries which are the key to the country’s industrialization strategy. On this issue, both sides consented that Vietnam should focus on improving regulatory frameworks, fight corruption, reform public administration, restructure the state-owned sector and improve the competitiveness of Vietnamese economy in the financial sector. Improvements in these areas will lead to an increase in EU investment,

The future for Vietnam - EU relations looks promising. Relations have been built on a long-lasting history which started four centuries ago. They were critically tested during the ‘Cold War’, but have persevered and survived as both sides entered a new world order. Though this new partnership has emerged just two decades ago, it has blossomed in many fields of cooperation. Hopefully, the next decade of Vietnam - EU relations will witness a continuation of this positive development. Yet

despite the fact that official Vietnam - EU relations are flourishing, there is little research on Europe and the understanding of people on EU is limited [12].

## **2. The development of European Studies in Vietnam**

The bipolarity system and the Cold War have influenced much on development of social sciences in Vietnam as well as of European studies. During this period the classical philological approach to teaching and researching in area studies was focused on language, history, literature, and culture of a country or a culturally defined region for example Western, Oriental, Latin America... However, by the end of the Cold War, area studies adapted to dramatic changes of the world, taking into account elements of globalization such as international flows of goods, capital, services, people... Therefore, area studies need an interdisciplinary approach. However, the classical approach continued its dominance in Vietnamese universities and research institutes. In term of area studies, there was a big gap between Vietnam and other countries. The main reasons why Vietnamese universities and research institutes did not follow the trend of area studies in the world were, among the other things, the isolation of the country as a whole and community of social sciences especially which resulted in failing to catch-up on innovations of methodologies and methods. Second, the universities had to fulfill the task of political education by indoctrinating the party's ideology. Third, there was also a fear of teaching "western" ideas and values, models and policies that could lead to erosion of the leadership of the Communist party. These factors reflected in the establishment of the Research Center for Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Eastern Europe on 13 September 1993 according to the decision No 466/TG of Primer Minister. However, five

years later, the CIS was renamed in Center for European Studies. This decision put an end to the ideological division of Europe and reflected the integration of Eastern part of Europe in the European common house. With the growth of European Union and the interest of European studies in Vietnam, in 2004, the Center was promoted and enlarged in the Institute of European Studies (IES). Since then, IES has played an important role as a single research institute on European studies in Vietnam.

According to the decision of Vietnamese government, IES has the functions of studying fundamental issues on social sciences of the countries and regional organizations of Europe, providing scientific foundations for leading agencies of the Party and the State to plan guidelines, domestic and foreign policies; organizing consultation and post-graduate training in social sciences related to Europe. In short, the IES plays the role of a think-tank to provide with ideas and suggestions for policy makers. In order to fulfill this function the IES carries out a wide range of tasks from researching to training and consulting. They include organizing fundamental studies on social sciences in countries and regional organizations of Europe; studying theoretical and practical issues related to the development of European countries as well as the formation and development of regional linkages in Europe; providing post-graduate training in pursuant to the law, and participate in the development of highly qualified human resources; organizing and participating in the scientific evaluation of socio-economic programs, projects of ministries, sectors, localities; carrying out scientific consultations; managing international cooperation in research and training; exchanging scientific information; managing library - documentation system; publishing scientific products, disseminating scientific results, and diffusing scientific knowledge to the masses; carrying out scientific research contracts with research organizations

and agencies, companies and researchers in the country and abroad.

During the last decades the IES has carried out 36 research projects. Among these there were 11 research projects on Russia, 5 projects on EU - Vietnam relations and 3 projects on EU member states.

The market for graduates trained in international/area studies has expanded since Vietnam launched the reform program and integrated in regional and world systems. Not only public sector but also private one needs more and more qualified employees trained in international/area studies. It is understanding because the more country opened up the bigger demand for the skills taught in international/area studies program is. Realizing the need in the management of Vietnam's various sector, in 1993 Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) decided to establish the first ever Faculty of International Studies (FIS) in Vietnam as a new field of study within the Faculty of History at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH), Vietnam National University - Hanoi (VNU). It took two

years long until 1995 when the International Studies Program was separated from the Faculty of History as an independent faculty of the USSH. In the first ten years of its existence, the International Studies Program was characterized by its general education program for all students equal through four years long without any specialties. However, realizing the need of the countries in having graduates who will be able to work in one or another region, in 2002 the International Studies Program was reconstructed into two majors, namely International Relations and Area Studies. After three years of implementation, in 2005 the Area Studies Program was again divided into two small units: European and Americas Studies. Nowadays the European Studies Unit of University of Social Sciences and Humanities serves as a single program offering a higher education of European Studies.

Since its introduction in 2002 up today, the numbers of students who specialized in European Studies is stable and occupies the second place among students studying at the Faculty of International Studies.

Table 1: The number of students specialized in European studies in comparison with IR and America studies from class 2002 - 2006 to class 2008 - 2013

Class	International Relations	European Studies	Americas Studies	Total
2002-2006	48	17 (13,09%)	12	77
2003-2007	46	19 (10,27%)	14	79
2004-2008	40	24 (18,96%)	15	79
2005-2009	44	31 (27,9%)	15	90
2006-2010	45	24 (19,92%)	14	83
2007-2011	49	22 (18,48%)	13	84
2008-2012	56	21 (18,48%)	11	88
2009-2013	43	29 (28,42%)	24	96

So far the Faculty of International Studies has graduated about 2,000 students including those who studied in in-serving program. They are working in a wide range of public and private sector jobs. A survey in 2002 - 2003 by

the Faculty of International Studies of its alumni revealed that, of the 185 respondents from the group of 699 surveyed, graduates are finding jobs in a wide variety of fields, with a high percentage (40.54%) working in the

business sector. The other graduates are to be found in the fields of education and research (16.21%), mass media (11.99%), positions in external affairs departments of central or provincial-level (7.56%), security or national defense (7%), or working for airline (4.86%) or bank (2.16%). The others are working or studying abroad (9.73%) [13].

Every year the Faculty of International Studies admits between 80 and 100 undergraduate students, among whom one third

chooses the European studies program as their major. In their fourth year BA study program, students can choose, after three years of common education, one of three majors to focus upon, namely International Relations, European Studies or Americas Studies. Each concentration was designed to lead to an equal MA or Ph.D. at VNU - Hanoi. The European Studies Program of the Faculty of International Studies at USSH - VNU combines of 14 compulsory credits and 4 elective credits.

Table 2: The list of the courses of European Studies

Introduction to European Studies	2
Political and Legal Systems of Europe	2
European History and Culture	2
The EU's Economic System	2
The European Union's Foreign Policies	2
The European Major Powers	4
Electives	4/8
Cultural Interaction between the West and the East	2
Trade and Investment Cooperation between the EU and Vietnam	2
Northern European Region	2
Eastern European Region	2

From the table it is clear that the European Studies Program provides a comprehensive knowledge on Europe including an introduction, history and culture, political and legal system, the major powers, and last but not least the EU's economic system and foreign policy of a regional organization. From 8 elective credits students can choose 4 ones depends their interest including cultural interaction between the West and the East, trade and investment cooperation between the EU and Vietnam, Northern European and Eastern European Region.

### 3. Challenges for European studies in Vietnam

During the past ten years the European Studies Program of USSH has produced some

187 BA graduates. The number of enrolled students has shown an increasing trend. However, there are problems and constraints as well.

First of all, European studies needs an institutional support from both inside Vietnam and outside the country. Keeping status may be no problem but to be a competitive and attractive program there must be more incentives for both researching and teaching in the form of financial support, scholarship and internship.

Given the fact that the EU image was very low in Vietnam and in other Asian countries [14], Europe should involve more in supporting European studies program in Vietnam. The Vietnam - EU negotiation on a bilateral FTA, upgrading of the EU - ASEAN cooperation, and the increasing calls for regional cooperation in

East Asia could serve a catalyst for promotion of European deficit.

In teaching program, there is a big lack of real experts and scholars on European studies. Most Vietnamese scholars are trained as disciplinarians, discipline-based or had a country-specific major rather than a regional European concentration. Therefore they have big problems in dealing with the EU as an institution and as a regional area. As an institution they have to understand such kind of mechanism and functions like the Council, the Commission, European Parliament, the European central Bank, European integration, Common foreign and security policy etc. As a geographical region, the EU is still not a legal and political entity, but as one of several international organizations. The emphasis is given to country-specific themes. There is still wide accept of concepts of Western Europe, Southern Europe, Northern Europe, Eastern Europe... If we look at the graduation thesis of students the majority of them write on the member state issues.

The job market, the academic programs and the number students are interrelated. In Vietnamese context, students tend to proceed to the MA level either to be a researcher or to be a professional specialist. The table 2 shows that the curriculum is oriented towards academic rather than to professional purposes.

The quality of students is another big issue. Although the courses are given in Vietnamese, but it is required that students have a good command of English in order to read sources and materials that are not available in Vietnamese. English, interdisciplinary and professional knowledge are big challenges for majority of students.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Although the Vietnam - Europe relationship has been taken place around four hundreds year

ago, it has been rapidly improving just during the last decade thanks to the development of European studies in Vietnam along with political, economic and other aspects. In fact, European studies including both research and training serve as an efficient measure to attract more and more students, and through which to promote image and understanding between people. In order to promote European studies it is necessary to approach in multidirectional way including promoting the political, economical and socio-cultural linkage between the EU and Vietnam. With long tradition, and with fundamental education, there will be no doubt about the future of the EU - Vietnam relationship.

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## Thúc đẩy nghiên cứu châu Âu như là một cách tiếp cận tăng cường quan hệ Việt Nam - EU

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**Tóm tắt:** Quan hệ Việt Nam - châu Âu đã có lịch sử từ bốn thế kỷ trước khi những phái đoàn truyền giáo đầu tiên đặt chân đến đây. Tuy nhiên, quan hệ song phương lại không tương xứng và không làm hài lòng cả hai bên. Mục đích chính của bài viết này là phân tích sự phát triển của ngành Châu Âu học ở Việt Nam từ góc độ lịch sử thông qua những thông tin được thu thập trực tiếp ở Việt Nam. Để hoàn thành mục tiêu này, bài viết được chia làm ba phần. Phần một trình bày khái quát về quan hệ Việt Nam - EU làm cơ sở để hiểu tình hình hiện nay. Phần hai trình bày sự phát triển của ngành châu Âu học ở Việt Nam trong hai thập kỷ qua. Phần ba phân tích một số thách thức đối với ngành Châu Âu học. Bài viết kết luận, chương trình nghiên cứu châu Âu phải là ưu tiên số một trong quan hệ hai bên và phải đóng vai trò là một công cụ hữu hiệu để tăng cường hiểu biết về EU.

*Từ khóa:* Nghiên cứu quốc tế, Khu vực học, Nghiên cứu châu Âu, Quan hệ EU - Việt Nam, Hợp tác EU - ASEAN.