

Experiences of Veliko Tarnovo University in Academic Exchange and Cooperation with Japan

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要旨：ブルガリアでは、日本語教育と日本研究が盛んに行われている。ほぼ 30 年間、ソフィア市郊外にあるブルガリア最大の大学、ヴェリコ・タルノヴォ大学は、ブルガリアでの日本語教育・文化交流研究の促進、経験の蓄積、より良い学術的および文化的交流の目標のためのアプローチの多様化に多大な努力を払ってきた。コロナ禍の中、ヴェリコ・タルノヴォ大学と徳島大学の間で交流活動が行われた。この潜在的なパートナーシップは、ブルガリアでの日本語教育・日本文化交流の促進への貢献を促進する可能性がある。

キーワード：日本語教育、日本文化交流、ブルガリア、ヴェリコ・タルノヴォ

1. Introduction

Bulgaria is a country located in the Eastern Europe, surrounded by Romania, Serbia, North Macedonia, Greece, and Turkey, having about one-third of Japan's land area, and a population of roughly 7 million, of which 80% are Bulgarian, 10% Turkish, and 10% Roma, with Bulgarian as the official language. Turkish, Romani is used among ethnic groups, while the young generations speak English and other foreign languages. The main religion is Orthodox Christianity. The Balkan Peninsula has been called the crossroads of culture since ancient times, and it can be said that Bulgaria is a developed by the intersection of various ethnic groups and diverse cultures. The country has a history of more than 1300 turbulent years. It was the largest power of the Balkans during the Bulgarian Empire, and later was being dominated by the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires. After the World War II, it became a member of the Eastern Bloc. After 1989, Bulgaria transitioned into a democracy with market economy and officially joined EU in 2007.

Active relations and exchanges between Japan and Bulgaria have been recorded since more than one hundred years ago. The first diplomatic relations were established in 1939. The 1970 Osaka World Exposition became a turning point in bilateral relations. Despite the Cold War and ensuing political differences, Bulgaria and Japan began interacting regularly in various spheres such as technology, trade, and art; knowledge transfer and skills exchange that began in the 1970s are still flourishing today. Some survey shows that image of Bulgaria in Japan is a most positive one and one our country can boast of, compared to the

attitude towards Bulgaria in other developed countries around the world. On the other hand, for over 50 years already in the minds of Bulgarian people Japan has been synonymous with advanced technology, rich culture, perfect organization, and desirable harmony.

University of Veliko Tarnovo "St. Cyril and St. Methodius" (VTU) is the first and largest university outside the Bulgarian capital, is a highly respected center for the Fine Arts and the Humanities in Bulgaria. Founded in 1963, VTU has 9 faculties: Economics, Education, Fine Arts, History, Law, Modern Languages, Orthodox Theology, Philosophy, Math and Informatics. VTU offers BA, MA and PhD programs taught in Bulgarian, English or Russian. VTU has academic exchange agreement with over 100 universities and institutions from 32 countries, including 5 Japanese universities. VTU has over 18.000 students enrolled including 131 international students from 25 countries: Austria, Albania, Belarus, Afghanistan, Cyprus, Great Britain, Germany, Greece, Yemen, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Nigeria, Latvia, Libya, Netherlands, France, Russia, Croatia, Ukraine New Zealand, Macedonia, Poland, Spain, Turkey, Romania (as of Jan. 2020). This number is less than previous years due to Covid-19 outbreak. Current international students are enrolled in BA, MA degree programs, privately funded or supported by scholarships such as Erasmus program, intergovernmental agreements, or bilateral academic agreements.

Tokushima University (TU) has academic exchange agreement with 98 universities worldwide, including 16 universities in Europe, but none from Bulgaria (figure of May 2020). However, the actual exchange of students and scholars, as well as academic cooperation

activities is mainly conducted with universities in Asia. Expanding and strengthening academic cooperation with universities in Europe could be a potential direction for academic internationalization of TU. In 2020, influenced by the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, educational activities at TU were shifted to online platforms. In an effort to set up new possibilities for international exchange, some initial interactions between students of TU and VTU by online platforms have been successfully carried out, opening a potential academic exchange and cooperation in the future.

By analyzing the relevant literature, this paper is aiming to explore: (1) Situation and challenges of Japanese language education and Japanese studies in Bulgaria and (2) Japanese education and exchange activities of the VTU and its *Center for Japanese Language and Culture* and possibilities for cultural exchange and academic collaboration with VTU as a representative university of Bulgaria.

2. Method

A literature review was conducted for collecting relevant data from research papers, reports, publications, and internet articles related to Japanese studies in Bulgaria, bilateral relation, and cultural exchange. Moreover, reports of activities from the home page of VTU and reports of online exchange activities in 2020 between VTU and TU is also being reviewed.

3. Results

3.1. Japanese study in Bulgaria

According to the Japanese Language Education Institution Survey conducted by the Japan Foundation from May 2018 to March 2019, there are 1,347 learners in Bulgaria, including 400 at elementary schools, 539 at high school and 142 at college level. Table 1 shows the number of institutions where Japanese language is being taught, number of teachers, number of learners and its breakdown.

Table 1. Transition of Japanese language education in Bulgaria (Source: Japan Foundation homepage)

	2012	2015	2018
Number of institutions	9	7	8
Number of teachers	36	33	40
Number of learners	1,570	1,245	1,347
Primary school	473	467	400
Secondary school	902	504	539
Higher education	145	207	142
Other	50	67	266

At present, Japanese studies as a degree-specialty subject is provided only by Sofia University and Veliko

Tarnovo University.

Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” is the oldest and the largest university in Bulgaria. It is also the only university in Bulgaria having B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. courses with major in Japanese studies. The first Japanese language course offered to the public was held in 1967, while in 1990 the M.A. program in Japanese studies was established. The Department of Japanese Studies as an academic unit was established in March 2018. In Bulgaria, the Program is the only university level educational unit, which offers Japanese Studies (BA, MA, and PhD degrees) as one of the fundamental fields of studies of the East. The Program includes compulsory, elective and optional courses in the theory and practice of Japanese language and literature, history of Japan from antiquity to the 21st century, Japanese art, religion, philosophy, traditional and contemporary culture. So far, the Japanese Studies Program produced over 300 graduates who formed an active Japanese studies community in Bulgaria. Besides academic programs, Sofia University also hosts cultural exchange events such as *Balkan International Summer Camp in Japanese language*, which is held every year since 2015.

Currently, Japanese studies as a non-specialty subject is provided by several higher institutions, including Varna Marine College, Varna Free University, Bragoevgrad Southwest University. Besides, Japanese language courses are also provided by private schools and organizations such as Cyril and Metodi International Fund, Agora Sofia, Kizuna Varna Association.

Sofia William Gladstone 18th School is the first primary and secondary education institution that officially adopted Japanese language education in Bulgaria. Japanese language education started in 1992 only for secondary level (8th ~ 12th grade) of the Japanese language department, then later had been introduced in primary education from 2005. At present, Japanese language is being taught from 1st grade to 12th grade. Students from other departments can also study Japanese as an elective course, and the total number of learners is about 600, including students from 8th to 11th grades in other departments. At present, Japanese language education is provided by several primary/ secondary schools in Sofia and Russe.

The Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) has been conducted since 1998, only for the 2nd test in December. The total number of examinees has been steadily increasing, with the level N3~N5 have the highest proportions of examinees (Table 2.).

Table 2. Number of JLPT examinees in Bulgaria (Source: JLPT homepage)

	N1	N2	N3	N4	N5	Total
2009*	9	31	100	78		218
2010	13	18	29	76	67	203
2011	14	25	53	77	85	254
2012	10	18	53	74	70	225
2013	23	24	46	64	103	260
2014	10	23	61	81	117	292
2015	21	17	64	94	105	301
2016	18	37	67	88	124	334
2017	14	45	65	94	113	331
2018	23	41	58	95	89	306
2019	24	39	89	79	125	356

* Old system 1kyu- 4kyu.

Since 1970s, Bulgarian students could study in Japan under the MEXT scholarship program. Between 1970 and 1990, most of Bulgarian students in Japan were studying engineering, economics, and medicine. After 1990 until now, this situation is slightly changed, with more slots granted to Japanese culture students. In 2019, the MEXT scholarship was awarded to 8 research students, 6 Japanese culture research students, and 2 undergraduate students.

3.2. Japanese study in VTU

In 1993, VTU accepted its first students majoring in Applied Linguistics with Japanese Language. In the Faculty of Modern Languages, Department of Classical and Eastern Languages and Cultures, students with specialty in Applied Linguistics can choose Japanese as one of the second foreign languages. In addition to Japanese language classes, classes such as Japanese literature, history/ culture, translation/ interpretation, and syntax/ morphology are also offered for the purpose of training interpreters/ translators.

In 2019, Japanese was integrated into the Foreign Language Module so that any student of VTU regardless of specialty can study Japanese language, Japanese history/ culture, syntax/ morphology, and literature. Today, VTU students majoring in "Applied Linguistics" and "Pedagogy" can choose the following specialties with Japanese language as one of two foreign languages options: (1) applied linguistics in two foreign languages (translator); (2) applied linguistics in English and a second foreign language and ITC; (3) applied linguistics in two foreign languages and business communications; (4) applied linguistics in two foreign languages and international tourism; (5) applied linguistics in two foreign languages and international relations; (6) pedagogy in Bulgarian and foreign language education.

Today, these specialties are among the favorites at the VTU with a highly qualified faculty staff - specialists

in Japanese culture, history, literature, translation, methodology of teaching Japanese as a foreign language, Japanese linguistics. Currently, more than 60 students enrolled in specialties with Japanese language. The faculty staff includes four Bulgarian lecturers and two guest lecturers from Japan. Every year the students of these specialties take the JLPT, take exams for one-year study programs at Japanese universities, participate in the Japanese Speech Contest, and organize Japanese Culture Festival. Every year, under the agreements for bilateral cooperation with Japanese universities, VTU students go to study in Japan, and Japanese students study the history and culture of Bulgaria at the VTU.

3.3. Cultural Exchange activities at the Center for Japanese Language and Culture of VTU

In 1993, Center for Japanese Language and Culture (CJLC) was established within VTU along with the new specialty "Applied Linguistics with Japanese Language" through the programs for intellectual and technical assistance of JICA. CJLC works in three areas: Japanese language and culture education, popularization of Japanese culture and popularization of Bulgarian culture in Japan. Besides academic activities, CJLC work on open courses and exchange activities for citizens of Veliko Tarnovo such as calligraphy, origami, kirie, and making Japanese dolls.

CJLC-VTU is active in receiving *delegations, visiting professors and students* from universities in Japan and abroad. *Lectures on Japanese culture* to the VTU students are frequently being delivered by visiting professors from Japan and abroad on the themes such as "Japanese culture and modern Japan", "Jomon period - a society of hunters and gatherers", "Japan geographical conditions", "Daily life and economy", "Garbage sorting", "Food culture – bento", "Cool Japanese goods from 100-yen shop", "Japan social problems", "Kansai dialect - part of the culture and history of Japan".

CJLC-VTU also host events of academic associations such as the *Meeting of Japanese language teachers in Bulgaria*. In 2017 and 2018, *Seminar on Methods of Teaching Japanese Language and Culture in Bulgaria* was held with support of the Japanese Foundation. This seminar aims at reviewing the current state of teaching Japanese language and culture in individual educational institutions in Bulgaria and the opportunities for building a strong collaboration network. Lectures were delivered on the topic: "Reading instruction with understanding of the Japanese language via the Internet", "Image of Japanese Culture", "Events related to Japanese language and culture and stimulating language learners" by the guest speakers from Japan's

universities and Japan Foundation, and a discussion on the topic: "Events related to the Japanese language and culture, which are organized in Bulgaria, and how they stimulate language learners."

CJLC-VTU is playing an active part on promoting *international cooperation with Japanese universities*. Since 2012, after exchange visits from both sides, VTU is signed a cooperation agreement with *Bunkyo Gakuin University* in Tokyo, followed by exchange scientific meetings held at VTU with professors from Bunkyo Gakuin University. In 2014 a delegation from *Tokyo University of Social Welfare* visited VTU to introduce students to study opportunities in Bulgaria.

On May 2013, an academic exchange agreement was signed between VTU and *Kyoai Gakuen University Maebashi (KGUM)*. Every year since 2015, a group of 5-13 students from KGUM go to short term study at VTU. The one-week program includes lectures on Bulgarian history and culture, discussions between students from the two universities on selected topics, and a cultural program, which included visits to cultural and historical sites in Veliko Tarnovo and Arbanassi, guided by Japanese language students from VTU.

Table 3. Topics of discussion between students of VTU and KGUM

Year	Topics
2015	"Bulgaria in Japan, Japan in Bulgaria". "Do Bulgarians really eat yogurt every day, and the Japanese - soy soup?". "Is the Japanese collective society, and the Bulgarian - a society of individualists? What do the Japanese and the Bulgarians understand by "meeting for a drink"?"
2016	Cultural differences in saying goodbye and inviting treats.
2017	Preparation of traditional Bulgarian bread. Dialects and slang. Children's games. Greetings, gestures.
2018	Relationship between languages and the two countries. Role of each of us in globalization and in a multicultural society. Whether knowledge of a foreign language is sufficient for successful communication with native speakers of another culture.
2019	Experiences in the first encounter with a foreign culture. What does it mean for everyone "natural, self-evidence"; how they would convey their feelings when they like someone; whether they agree with the phrase "When you are in Rome, act like the Romans."

Besides academic exchange activities, CJLC-VTU is

active in cultural activities such as *Japanese Culture Festival, Japanese Cinema Week, Japanese literature evening, concerts, performances, events for children etc.* CJLC-VTU is active in receiving *delegations and visitors* from Japan and abroad. For example, CJLC received a delegation from the Osaka Ethnographic Museum in May 2011. Their visit included discussions and presentations, preparation of traditional Bulgarian and Japanese cuisine, as well as a walk in the city and the village of Arbanassi.

In May 1997, CJLC held the first *Japanese Culture Festival* at the initiative of Japanese language teachers with involvement of Japanese volunteers from JICA. The celebration was also held in the same occasion of the Day of the Faculty of Modern Languages, has become a large-scale national event that welcomes more than 400 people from all over the country every year. The celebration is possible thanks to the Japanese language students who keep this tradition alive, with the help of Japanese volunteers and the Japanese Embassy. Every year this event is held in presence of the Rector of VTU, the Ambassador of Japan to Bulgaria, the cultural attaché to the Japanese Embassy in Bulgaria along with other Japanese guests. Activities during the festival including presentations made VTU students on topics such as Japanese gardens, Japanese festivals, music, old literature, theater, poetry, as well as demonstrations and workshops of Japanese cuisine, making sushi, martial arts, kimono, calligraphy, kirie, Yosakoi dance, performing art Kodan.

Since the beginning of 2020, under impact of Covid-19 outbreak, in an effort to explore new opportunities, some initial exchange activities between TU and VTU have been started. In July 2020, an online exchange session between students of two universities was conducted with students from each university making introduction. TU students also introduced about the Coming-of-age ceremony and Anime. In addition, lectures on Japan cultures such as Shikoku pilgrimage, Awa dance, are also planned. In October 2020, an online lecture on Japanese communication was delivered to VTU students by TU academic staff. The participants were students majoring in Applied Linguistics or Pedagogy and study Japanese as a second foreign language and could speak Japanese at intermediate level. They had shown interests to learn more about Japanese communication (100%), Japanese traditional culture (67%), manga & anime (67%), martial arts (50%). Regarding career plan, 67% of them expected to find a work related to Japan, 50% expected to do more research about Japan. Regarding intention to study in Japan, some expected to get a MEXT scholarship, while none stated intention to study in Japan as a self-funded student.

4. Discussion

In Bulgaria, Japanese is treated as one of the second foreign languages, and the number of learners is the second highest after English. Interest in Japanese language and culture is high not only among students but also among the general public. There are some factors influencing the motivation for studying Japanese among learners in Bulgaria.

Following the changes in Eastern Europe after 1989, there was a new wave of interest in Japanese culture, traditional arts, and pop culture such as manga, anime, J-pop especially among young people. In academic settings, the relatively new fields of Japanese language education and Japanese studies attracted interest and gained some popularity. Total number of learners and teachers had reached a peak then declined at some time during 2015 and then increased again as shown in Table 1. This transition could be explained through the fact that after the withdrawal of volunteers through the culture dissemination program, some institutions have canceled lectures on Japanese language and culture, but many people are visiting the cultural events of the embassy and the Japanese cultural festivals by each educational institution. Japanese language and culture seemed to remain popular after that period.

In Bulgaria, the image of Japan is very positive, an image of high-technology, rich culture, prestige companies and social harmony (Petkova, 2012). According to several surveys, many learners cited pure intellectual curiosity about Japanese culture, Japanese politics and economics, and Japanese as motivations for learning in higher education institutions and public lectures. There were cases the learners want to get a job as a tourist guide or a job that uses Japanese on a daily basis, but many people had started learning Japanese as a result of anime and manga. Learners had the purpose of understanding Japanese culture, including pop culture, rather than connecting them to employment. In these cases, motivation for studying Japanese was triggered by a desire to become more open-minded, more intellectually well-rounded with better understanding of culture and communication with Japanese people. Many of students enrolled in BA program did not know for sure what they would do after graduation. More of them expected themselves to work in the fields of international relations, arts, culture, language education, and in translation, while those envisaging themselves in the fields of science and research, economy, tourism, as interpreters, or politics, are fewer, despite the fact that the latter are generally considered career opportunities for philologists from Asian Studies majors (Petkova, 2015).

One of the goals for studying Japanese language is seen as to get a chance for one-year exchange study in Japan,

or to compete for a MEXT scholarship. The open courses are full of undergraduate and graduate students from other specialties such as medical sciences, engineering sciences etc. However, the number of slots for MEXT could be limited. Another factor that could stir up Japanese study is that after 1990, many Bulgarian immigrated to US, Western Europe, and other developed countries. Some people believe that additional Japanese language qualification could be an advantage (Holodovich, 2000).

Nevertheless, the efforts of the Japanese authorities such as Japan Foundation, Japan Embassy in Sofia, MEXT, JICA and other foundations in supporting facilities and sending teachers are very important for promoting Japanese education in Bulgaria.

Japanese studies in Bulgaria continues to face certain challenges. There are not enough workplaces for specialists in Japanese studies. Students who majored in Japanese studies often advance their education with another field such as Business Administration, Management, Economics etc. as Japanese studies alone is not enough for future career. On the other hand, increasing popularity of other Asian cultures also pose challenges to Japanese studies community in Bulgaria. For Bulgarian students, it is still difficult to go to study in Japan because of the difference in standard of living.

There is also a shortage of Japanese teachers. Furthermore, there is a shortage of funding for the cultural exchange activities. The university fund is very limited, and the private sector does not much interest in investing in academic activities. In this situation the university must seek for outside funding and volunteer work.

So far, for almost 30 years, VTU has invested a great effort in promoting Japanese studies in Bulgaria, accumulating experiences, and diversifying the approaches for better academic and cultural exchange goals. Expanding academic collaboration partnership with Japan's universities and finding new models for cultural exchanges could benefit both VTU and its partners, promote contribute to level up learning Japanese studies in Bulgaria.

In 2020, with the outbreak of Covid-19, academic institutions must undergo changes as many of the activities had to go online or had to be cancelled. A potential academic cooperation with VTU could be developed based on the current experiences mixed with online form of seminar, workshop, conference, exchange of scholars, exchange of students for research and study purposes. For implementing cultural exchange activities and events, it is essential to look for technical and financial assistance from agencies such as MEXT, JASSO, Japan Foundations, and other

associations and companies. The short-term study trip model of cooperation of VTU/KGUM could serve as a reference for designing a program for sending Japanese students.

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