



Reforms for the external legitimacy in the post Rose Revolution Georgia. Case of university autonomy

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Abstract

This article investigates higher education system-change in a region undergoing post-Soviet transition, specifically – in post-Rose Revolution Georgia. It considers the Bologna Process-inspired reforms that represent instances of transnational policy and institutional transfer into national contexts. On the example of university autonomy, the article argues that in Georgia, Bologna-inspired reforms were introduced in order to gain legitimacy in the global higher education arena. However, these reforms have produced a symbolic system-change and have created decoupled institutions. The findings of the article bare policy relevance to those post-Soviet transition countries that have embarked or plan to embark on transformative changes in their national (higher) education systems.

Keywords: university autonomy, post-Soviet transition, Bologna Process, transnational policy transfer, decoupled institutions

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Introduction

Higher education (HE) reforms that were launched by the Government of Georgia (GoG) after the Rose Revolution were largely framed by the Bologna Process. The country joined the Bologna Process in 2005 and the reforms that followed this affiliation were perceived as successful by both domestic and international actors (Crosier et al, 2007; MES, 2006). This analysis contests positive assessment of the reforms and suggests that while the reforms dramatically altered the institutional framework of HE in the country, they hardly contributed to the overall improvement of the HE climate in the country.

The main question that has been usually posed with regards to lack of development in the HE systems in general and vis-à-vis the Bologna-guided reforms in this region, is about seeking proximity of the local HE systems to the Western European educational models and explaining the challenges that hinder this approximation. The explanations that are provided in this regard, analyze internal factors that could hamper the progress in the HE system. The authors usually appeal to two factors: omnipresent corruption (Osipian, 2007, 2008, 2014; Heyneman, Anderson & Nuraliyeva, 2008) and strong Soviet legacy (Dobbins & Khachatryan, 2014; Heyneman, 2007; Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008).

However, neither of these arguments are revealing when exploring the Georgian case since corruption was addressed during the state reforms and was considered as one of the uncontested successful reforms of the post-revolution government (Kupatadze, 2012; Mitchell, 2013). The preservationist arguments also run thin, given that the post-revolution government had made a conscious political choice to disregard, discredit and fight the Soviet legacies. This research suggests that the spectrum of the analytical tools should be refined by considering different internal factors to allow more accurate understanding of the challenges in the HE systems of the post-Soviet transition.

It should be highlighted that this research aims to understand the reasons for the discrepancy between the successful institutional transformation of the HE system and its poor results. The analyses explores the rationale behind the adoption of the reforms that were primarily concerned with the alteration of the institutional framework of the HE system and poses the following research question: *why did the post-revolution government adopt Bologna-inspired reforms to transform the Georgian HE system?* To answer this question, the case of HE reforms is situated within the globalization processes that diffuses neoliberal agenda across the countries and interprets the behavior of post-revolution government from the point of view of the state at the Europe's periphery.

Literature that is dedicated to the HE system development in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) offers useful insights in this regard. The most common theme in the literature is Europeanization of the HE systems in this part of Europe and the role of the Bologna Process in this endeavor. The majority of works stem from the common aim to address dual agenda of the CEE states' post-communist reconstruction and their EU accession. Here, authors largely assess the impact of the Bologna Process and its specific goals on

the national HE systems (see Deca, 2015; Kwiek, 2012; Leisyte, Zelvyys and Zenkiene, 2015; Oprean, 2007; Pabian, 2010; Zgaga and Miklavič, 2011 for selected country cases). On the one hand, the authors treat the Process as an opportunity for the HE systems to modernize and contribute to the CEE states' European integration (e.g. Zgaga, 2003; Pabian, 2010). On the other hand, there are Bologna-skeptics, who argue with disappointment, that the Process had a potential to act as a HE system transformer in this region, but the authors of the Process did not fully explore this opportunity (e.g. Kwiek, 2004). On a more critical note, the authors recognize the coercive economic agenda behind the Bologna Process that is in line with the global neoliberal agenda (See Kwiek, 2004; Neave, 2004, 2012; Tomusk, 2007).

While this body of literature is informative in revealing the complexities of the HE system change in the countries of post-communist transition and critically assess the role of the Bologna Process in the formation of the HE system, authors largely emphasize the coercive nature of the Process, but neglect the voluntary institutional transfer. However, the distinguishing feature of the Georgian case is that the post-revolution government deliberately embarked on the neoliberal reforms. The GoG enthusiastically shared the neoliberal idea of knowledge economy and viewed education as a root of Georgia's economic development.

Moving beyond the argument of the coercive nature of the globalized neoliberal script, this research anchors its argument in the Sociological Neo-institutionalism, specifically world society theories. The argument of institutional emulation is well elaborated here and suggests that the states and policy makers are enculturated in the neoliberal discourse and voluntarily opt for the neoliberal reforms (Meyer, 2015). The primary motivation of the states (especially at the periphery) to adopt transnational policy models (Bologna Process-inspired educational models in this case) is to gain legitimacy at the global political and economic arena (Meyer, 2000). However, new institutions that serve as transnationally created models neglect the national context. Therefore, institutional reforms only symbolically change the systems and in reality create decoupled institutions.

Based on these considerations, the author argues that Georgia as a state at Europe's periphery chose to join the Bologna Process to ensure institutional proximity with the educational models that were promoted by the Process and in this way gain legitimacy in the common European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Consequently, the Georgian HE system has indeed gained high institutional proximity to its Western prototypes, however it has failed to address the reality of its own, thus creating *decoupled* institutions in the system (Jibladze, 2016). Using the example of the *university autonomy* reform, the research establishes that the policy makers have introduced the legislative changes to accommodate the rhetoric employed by the Bologna Process on promoting 'impartiality with accountability'. Furthermore, it was analyzed whether the university autonomy, as an institution is decoupled, as it is suggested by the world society theory in the context of policy change aiming at external legitimacy.

University Autonomy - Analytical considerations

The authors who write about the neoliberal pressures and influences of market logic in HE, treat university autonomy as an amalgam of the Western idea of the University, which is an impartial knowledge generator and transmitter (Neave, 2012) and ever so increasingly popularized idea of the HEIs as autonomous, self-sustained actors on the competitive market (Lynch, 2004; Naidoo, 2008). As mentioned earlier, the institutions that are carriers of the neoliberal norms present the main interest to this research. From the point of view of policy transfer, university autonomy represents a transnational construct that was introduced in the Georgian HE system through the Bologna Process. University autonomy reforms are discussed through the lenses of the world society theory.

The World Society theory argues that states decide to transfer the transnationally promoted models of education domestically, seeking legitimacy in the global educational arena. While doing so, the states overlook whether these transnational educational models match the local context (Drori et al., 2006; Meyer et al., 1997). The quest for legitimacy does not necessarily aim to address the issues that exist in higher education, but it intends to create a framework that is easily recognizable to, and acknowledged by Western European actors. Thus, creating locally decoupled institutions, which only symbolically meet the external expectations (often manifested in the structural similarities), but serve a different purpose domestically (Meyer et al., 1997). The authors assert that during the globalized policy adoption the context is neglected in favor of the universally acknowledged institutions, therefore, the reformed systems end up being locally decoupled. One of the main manifestations of decoupling is symbolic change, which is when institutional frames are aligned with the globally promoted prototypes, but the purpose of the institution does not match the purpose of its global prototype (Meyer, 2000). In order to assess whether the university autonomy reforms produced decoupled institutions, brief conceptual clarification needs to be made regarding the purpose and intuitional frame of the university autonomy. Below, the conceptual toolkit is put together mainly based on the definitions of the *university autonomy tool* devised by the European University Association (EUA).

There is no one precise definition or understanding of university autonomy. However, scholars unanimously treat university autonomy as an ultimate principle of HE governance and acknowledge that university autonomy is multidimensional. This is maintained by all of its interpretations (see Bladh, 2007; Henkel, 2007; Neave, 2006). Moreover, the EUA shies away from providing a definition, but describes university autonomy as the relation between the state and the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the degree of control that the state exercises towards the HEIs (Estermann & Nokkala, 2009; Estermann et al., 2011). With the rise of importance of the Bologna Process, the attention toward university autonomy grew at the policy level within the signatory countries. The association has developed the *university autonomy tool* that identifies four main dimensions of autonomy. The tool considers the multiple voices that discuss

university autonomy and reconciles them in the main elements of each dimension in a coherent manner. These four dimensions are: organizational autonomy, financial autonomy, staffing autonomy, academic autonomy (Estermann & Nokkala, 2009, Estermann et al., 2011). Therefore, the combination of these dimensions comprehensively describes the relation between the state and the HEIs and the degree of control that the state exercises towards the HEIs.

This analysis is guided by the four dimensions of the University Autonomy Tool of the EUA. However, all four dimensions could not be accounted for separately, such as those that were not reflected in the legal framework that governs HE. More specifically, in Georgian Higher Education Law, while *organizational autonomy* is substantially presented as the main state priority (Law on Higher Education 2004, Article 2, Section b), less attention is paid to *academic and financial autonomy*, and *staffing autonomy* is hardly captured. As a result, this analysis is based on three dimensions of the university that are defined in accordance to the University Autonomy Tool. The *organizational autonomy* refers to the ability and the authority of a HEI to determine its own goals, appoint its governing body, and choose and employ its faculty and staff (Estermann et al., 2011). For the purposes of the analysis, elements of the staffing autonomy were integrated with the organizational autonomy, treating the prior as an important, but a composite part of the latter. The *financial autonomy* refers to the capacity of the HEI to acquire and allocate funding, to set tuition fees, and to own and manage buildings/infrastructure (Estermann et al., 2011). *Academic autonomy* is the “capacity to define the academic profile, to introduce degree programmes, to define the structure and content of degree programmes, (...) and the extent of control over student admissions” (Estermann & Nokkala, 2009, p. 32).

The analysis that follows is presented according to three dimensions of the university autonomy presented above. First, the analysis compares the main purpose of university autonomy in Georgia with that promoted by the Bologna Process. At the instances when purpose of the university autonomy diverges from that promoted by the Bologna Process, the rationale behind the policy makers’ choice of not following the original purpose of the institution is analyzed. In the same manner, the structure of university autonomy is also discussed in juxtaposition to the three-dimensional autonomy model and the reasons of divergence are explained.

Data collection and research methods

This is a qualitative study, which covers the first six years of the HE reforms in the country (2004- 2010). Two methods were used to collect the data: document analysis and in-depth interviews.

The launching point of this analysis is the Law on Higher Education of Georgia that was adopted in 2004. Findings in the Law are supplemented with the secondary literature on the university autonomy reforms in Georgia. These mainly represent the governmental

reports, as well as analytical accounts of the international and transnational organizations, such as United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), World Bank and United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

While the base of documents revealed the structural determinants of university autonomy, the interviews aimed at investigating the role of local actors in the reform. Forty in-person interviews were collected mainly during three visits in Georgia in 2010-2011 years. Representatives of top and middle management of the Ministry of Education and Science (MES), top and middle management representatives of the National Education Accreditation Centre (NEAC) and of the five² state universities included in the analyses were interviewed; third party representatives – NGOs and HE experts – were also approached.

The interview guide had two kinds of questions: descriptive questions and explanatory questions. The first aimed to collect accurate information to bridge the gaps in the six-years of HE reforms that were not reflected in the analyzed documents. The second type of questions was seeking for interviewees' interpretation of the reform processes. All the interviews were conducted in the Georgian language. Collected material was analyzed by the ATLASTi. The interviews were coded in two steps. First, by topical coding, where main themes that the interviewees deemed important were identified and an extensive list with the corresponding quotes was created. Later on, these themes were submerged into larger topics. Analytical clusters were identified in the second phase of analysis.

University Autonomy as part of the HE system decentralization

In order to understand whether an institution is decoupled, this section discusses the main purpose of university autonomy in the Georgian HE system. Moreover, the structural elements of university autonomy are identified, and the policy makers' reasons to introduce the concept and policies with regard to the university autonomy are explored. This is done in order to establish whether university autonomy was introduced to institutionalize the principles of 'impartiality with accountability' or to gain legitimacy at the European Higher Education Area.

During the field work, the purpose of university autonomy as of a generic principle of HE governance was explored first. Secondly, the policy makers' perceptions concerning the separate dimensions of university autonomy were collected and analyzed to see how much they were aligned with the articulated purpose of university autonomy. Furthermore, the main elements of the structure of each dimension were assessed. Lastly, the set of variables for each dimension of the autonomy developed by the EUA in the University Autonomy Tool was used to guide the analysis of the collected material.

² Five out of 15 state accredited universities (according to the 2010 NEAC data). Three in the capital and two in eastern and western centers of the country.

However, these indicators were not strictly applied to the analysis, for measuring the level of university autonomy falls beyond the scope of this article.

Organizational Autonomy: decentralization under supervision

The Law on Higher Education provided legal bases for the HEIs to carry out administrative, financial and academic activities independently, without state intrusion. In the law, autonomy is defined as “freedom of the HEI and its main units to independently decide and implement its academic, financial and economic, and administrative activities” (Law on Higher Education 2004, Article 2, Section b). Furthermore, the law introduced principles of HEI governance by separating academic and administrative functions, and establishing separate decision making bodies - the Academic Council and the Senate. The law established that a Rector is an elected figure, and sought to ensure student involvement in university governance (Law on Higher Education, 2004). The law’s content thus fully corresponds to the building elements of organizational autonomy proposed by the Bologna Process and reinforced by the EUA reports.

However, in the Georgian HE system the structural elements of organizational autonomy were not necessarily linked to the declared purpose of organizational autonomy. Although the law established the HEIs as autonomous governing actors, at the same time, it created a rigid legal framework to guide the autonomous action. The elements such as organizational set up, division of functions between decision making bodies, quota for the student representation in the decision-making bodies, the election rules of decision making bodies and an executive head (rector) were defined in the law to the point of procedural nuances. Hence, the statement about the organizational autonomy of the HEI and the level of detail to which the granted autonomy was regulated clashed.

This contradiction is well observed in the example of the rector’s elections. For instance, sub-section 2 of Section 22 reads: “the academic council elects the rector with a secret ballot, with the majority of the vote. Duration of the rector’s term in service is defined by the statute of the HEI. The term should not exceed the duration of the council’s term of operation.” (Law on Higher Education, 2004, Chapter 4, Section 22, sub-section 2). Sub-section 3 goes into greater detail: “the academic council announces the call for applications no later than 1 month before the registration and no later than 3 months before the elections ... carried out in accordance to the principles of transparency, impartiality and competition” (Law on Higher Education, 2004, Chapter 4, Section 22, sub-section 3). Sub-section 4 defines that a candidate can serve only for two terms and sub-section 5 defines the circumstances under which the head of administration can be elected as a rector. The list continues. A university faculty member expressed concern that the detailed provisions in the law only changed the organizational makeover of the HEIs, however the ministry took away the leverage of the autonomous action from the HEIs and maintained the centralized command:

Adoption of a very detailed higher education law, which defines how the dean should be elected, what should be the framework of the faculty [academic department], etc. ... this is a major issue! First, it constrains the autonomy of the university. But secondly, it constrains the capacity of participation in the decision making [in the HEI]. Even if these are centralized [at the HEI level] decisions (R3-HEI1).

Therefore, these detailed provisions in the law took away the possibility for the HEIs to exercise self-governance. I term this state of affairs as *decentralization under supervision*.

Organizational autonomy reforms fell under the government's rhetoric of creating a small and efficient government through de-regulation and decentralization. Reorganization of the state HEIs was a product of decentralization of the HE system and, as it is discussed below, the policy makers' decision to *decentralize under supervision* was purposeful. Policy makers were mainly driven by two reasons in their approach. The head of the law department at the MES (in 2004) was well aware that the HE system that they had put together in 2004 did not leave much room for independent action. Thus, she very clearly explained the aspirations and the rationale of the policy makers' decision to decentralize under supervision:

The system that was designed was quite rigid and applied to all universities. ... We had to create a system that had never existed before. Professors did not have enough information on how universities were governed abroad. ... In absence of previous experience of [and awareness about] the civic responsibility, there was a fear, that [HEIs] would not be able to bear this responsibility, unless the law regulated the process of the reform implementation in detail. (R42 - PA11)

Effectively, during the phase of policy design, policy makers faced the problem that the democratic institutions as well as the experience of democratic action were absent in the HEIs. Consequently, they decided to introduce the democratic institutions but accompany those with the authoritative means to 'educate' the HE community to an appropriate action. The new government was well aware that the window of opportunity for the system's transformation was only open for a limited amount of time. Therefore, many of the principles that the policy makers found necessary for the system to develop in a healthy manner were overshadowed by the practical circumstances of the short-time frame. This is the reason, why the former Minister of Education (in the office in February-December, 2009) did not find it surprising that the principle of university autonomy was compromised during the reforms:

Autonomy was not a priority in the first years of the reform. On the contrary, it was suspended, because the priority was to transform the system in a short time. (R37-PA6)

This reason was coupled with a mistrust of the policy makers toward the HEI community's capacity for positive change. It was manifested in the 'problem of rectors', as a majority of the interviewed policy makers labeled it. As one of the main figures at the MES explained, before the revolution the ministry faced an unresolved problem of the state university rectors. The rectors had privileged position in the HE system and governed the

universities according to their private interests. They were under the personal patronage of the President Shevardnadze (in the office from 1995 to 2003). Thus, over the course of the following years the state HEIs became closed systems that did not practice any accountability measures towards the state (or wider public for that matter). It was believed that they were involved in various corruption schemes even going beyond the practiced favors in admission. The common example was the use of university-owned premises to operate business enterprises that were owned by the rector's families. This situation lingered until the 2003 revolution, when the power flux created a window of opportunity to confront the rectors.

The problem of corrupt rectors was framed as a political threat to the legitimacy of the new government and thus, to the political stability of the country. In the interviews, some of the policy makers were of the opinion that the rectors had created political hubs in their universities, hence they could manipulate the students against the government. Therefore, it was important to remove the political undercurrent from the HEIs. According to the second Minister of Education and Science, the HEIs needed to be free from ideology and this was accomplished by the new government (R7-HEI2). In other words, at the system-level the awareness of what was happening within the universities did not exist before the revolution. For this reason, the number one problem identified by the policy makers was to shake the 'feudal dominions' of the rectors and subsequently, turn the HEIs into manageable organizations (R7-HEI2).

Overall, decentralization with supervision was justified because of the time brevity and institutional fragility of the newly built system. At the same time, the mistrust for the HEI community not to abuse the decentralized system convinced the policy makers to maintain the rigid legal framework. However, it is more important to note that regardless of the legal framework's peculiarities, in practice both ministry as well as the HEIs compromised the principles of organizational autonomy. Local expert, involved in the reorganization of one of the state universities pointed out that legal framework and the reality in the HEIs were decoupled.

De Jure you have everything (in order). Councils hold meetings. They raise hands (to vote). Someone's for and someone's against. You have all documented in minutes... but [...] on paper everything is fine, while the reality is different. (R44-LExpert 2)

The election process had been repeatedly contested by the involvement of the MES. In 2005, the state HEIs had to start the reorganization process according to the provisions in the new Law, which stipulated that by 2007 all the state HEIs had to create representative decision-making bodies and elect the rector (Law on Higher Education 2004, Chapter 14). In the process, those rectors that had held the positions before the revolution, were dismissed and the Minister of Education and Science appointed interim rectors.

Within one month after the appointments, the first elections took place. In all five state universities included in this analysis interim rectors were the only candidates to the position of an executive head of the HEI. Subsequently, they were elected by the academic council. Therefore, in contrast to the former deputy minister's statement that the rector's elections increased the autonomy of the universities (R38-PA7), HEI representatives thought otherwise. One of the policy makers and currently, a faculty member of a state university shared his observations that what was provided by the law, was overridden by the government itself.

The rectors of the universities are (meant to be) elective bodies. In reality, the state still partakes in it. For instance at Georgian Technical University (as well in others). Therefore, (HEIs) are not actually independent. They depend on 1. funding, 2. political weather, 3. rectors that are (at first) appointed (by the ministry) – later get elected (by the academic council). [...] the process is not political but is influenced by the politicians. For instance, last year, firing of one rector (provides the name) met high resistance, because he had a strong lobby (from the politicians). (R10-HEI2)

The same perception is confirmed in different ways by the representatives of other HEIs. The expectation that the state would informally intervene and override the formal rules that the government instituted itself, was confirmed for many. It was believed that these dismissals, or new appointments were not initiated from within the universities, but from the outside. Consequently, this created mistrust among the faculty as well as within the representatives of the non-governmental sector towards the ministry's genuine intentions to decentralize the HE system and 'set the universities free' (R7-HEI 2, R43-LExpert 1, R44-LExpert2).

The inclination toward increased regulation of the HEIs was apparent in the interviews. The former Deputy Minister explained that if there were certain deviations in the newly created HE system, those were usually addressed by issuing additional decrees (R42-PA11). The former Head of the national QA agency justified the central government's close supervision of the HEIs with a sentiment that without their guidance, the universities acted as 'abandoned children' (R33-PA2).

In turn, the HEIs practiced compliance, which reinforced the government's conviction that the HEIs were still too fragile to assume autonomous action. As discussed earlier (pp.13-14) governing bodies never actually became decision-making units at the universities. The division of power hardly materialized and the university remained an oligarchy where the authority of the rector was supreme. With constant intrusion of the MES in the election processes of rectors in the state universities, the illusion among the HEI representatives that the state intended to withdraw vanished, and HEIs adhered to the centralized rule of the MES.

In essence, the HE system was established with the formally decentralized HEI structure that lacked organizational autonomy. Policy makers formulated the legislative framework in a preventative manner to avoid errors in the fragile system at the expense of actual organizational autonomy.

To summarize, organizational autonomy is locally decoupled, as its main purpose was to breach the oligarchy of the rectors in the state HEIs. This was accomplished with the decentralization of the HEI's organizational structure. Effectively, the purpose of the organizational autonomy did not match the Bologna Process prototype. However, the main structural elements of the organizational autonomy were present in the system and in the case of university autonomy, the decentralization mechanisms were labeled as (organizational) autonomy. For the policy makers, decentralization was a measure to minimize the risk of accumulating the power in the rector's hands. Therefore, it was not the autonomy, but the closely supervised decentralization of university life.

Academic Autonomy

In this section attention is paid to the ability of the HEI to manage its own academic content and its capacity to decide on the number of students and the admission criteria (Estermann & Nokkala, 2009; Estermann et al., 2011). According to the law, the state ensured "freedom of an HEI to determine independently its strategy, methodology and contents of teaching and research" (Law on Higher Education 2004, Section 1). This statement did not include the elements such as student admission, introduction of academic programs, nor the language of instruction as part of the academic autonomy. One of the policy makers considered that since the HEIs could manage their own teaching plans, it already provided considerable 'academic autonomy' to the institution.

If we look into the law of Soviet times, it will become clear that the academic [teaching] plan was developed by the ministry. Now this is no longer the case. The ministry set the universities free (R7-HEI2).

The interviewee views the matter of the academic autonomy as part of the overall decentralization policy. The decision that the ministry was no longer in control of the academic plans of HEIs was a step forward in the decentralization process and not particularly, towards ensuring academic autonomy, however this was sufficient for the decision makers. The discussion with the policy makers did not go further than this regarding the academic autonomy, as they considered it premature to be concerned with the academic autonomy before the institutional transformation of the HE system.

Policy makers were disproportionately concerned with and focused on the institutional problems of the HE system. As discussed in the previous section, problems such as corrupt rectors were considered of the highest priority thus the need to build a transparent, efficient and accountable HE system was also emphasized. This was complimented by the poor education quality in the HEIs. The academic programs lacked structure, the courses were redundant, program offerings were outdated, and many of the programs simply had no counterpart in the international education space. As respondents explained, the academic offerings were catered to the individual professors, their availability and expertise which, at very least, compromised the coherence of the academic programs (R44-LExpert 2; R1-HEI1; R5-HEI1). Faced with this challenge, policy makers considered

it most important to bring coherence to the academic life. One of the policy makers shared his assessment of the situation in the Georgian HEIs by 2004:

It was not important for the universities how teaching or research was developing within the institution. In fact, state did not demand much either. Thus, no one asked for, for instance, course content. Secondly, it was vague, how learning was recognized. There was no measure for it. While I think that the number of credits is a superficial measure to grant a degree, it is still better than nothing. One department claimed one thing and the other one claimed [something] completely different. (R10-HEI2)

A policy solution to address the issues of poor education-quality was creation of the quality assurance (QA) system. In Georgia, QA system was set up according to the basic recommendations of European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). External QA was provided by the independent body – the National Education Accreditation Centre (NEAC). The QA process was guided by the QA criteria; HEIs' self-assessment as well as the peer-review was based on these very criteria; HEIs developed internal QA processes. Ideally, independent QA system would be one of the guarantors of the academic autonomy (Estermann et al., 2011). Except, in the Georgian HE context, independent NEAC maintained subordinate relations with the MES and assumed the role of a state regulator. As the collected evidence shows, policy makers continued to introduce system-wide policies that would standardize and closely regulate HEI life. The QA system became a tool to create a level playing field among the HEIs. One of the former deputy ministers explained that through QA it became possible to move from the outdated teaching practices toward student-centered learning.

The primary aim (of the QA) is to reorganize teaching planning process. So that the student's work load and the professor's work load were somehow balanced in the course. Creation of internal QA units improved teaching processes in the HEIs. i.e. what should be the number of credits for a course? How should the (course) components be distributed? – these all are controlled by the QA (R38 - PA 7).

Through the criteria of the institutional accreditation, the policy makers aimed to create a situation where academic programs would be comparable within the country, as well as outside. In order to ensure coherence, the policy makers used the standardization tools of the Bologna Process. Thus, the academic life was reorganized according to the three-cycles, program offerings were calculated in credit/hours, in accordance to the European Credit Transfer System, and in terms of curriculum development the focus was made on the learning outcomes. These tools were articulated in the accreditation criteria and the HEIs were assessed according to their conformance to those. In this manner, QA system as a state standardization tool, suspended academic autonomy.

In its turn, internal QA units at the HEIs acted as enforcement units of the NEAC's regulations. The law on higher education obliged public HEIs to create QA units. According to the law, QA units aimed to regularly assess the quality of teaching, research, and to foster professional development of the academic personnel. QA units had to also increase

transparency of the HEI's operations. In addition, they were to assist the HEI in self-assessment process and prepare it for the external review (Law on Higher Education, 2004). As many describe in their interviews, QA units started to organize university life and brought in elements of accountability to the HEIs where the authority of professors was never questioned. A local expert shared insights from her experience as a head of the QA, where she considered the interventions of the QA unit to leave a positive mark on the university life:

When the QA units (in the HEIs) were created, professors realized that someone actually reviews whatever they write. Previously, when we were writing annual reports, we had cases, that they (professors) were submitting the same document repeatedly. They were only changing the cover page. That's because there was no one to read it. QA units brought certain level of accountability (R44-LExpert 2).

On the downside, together with a certain level of organization and certainty, QA units encouraged conformance. The institutional accreditation was a mandatory procedure for the state HEIs to gain degree awarding power and to be eligible for the state grant. Most of the state HEIs, in order to minimize the level of deviation from the state requirements, standardized their academic life. For instance, in most of the state HEIs, the outlines of the syllabus were standardized across the HEI, so were the assessment methods. For instance, in one of the HEIs all midterm evaluations were carried out through centralized mid-term tests (R43-LExpert 1). Standardization of academic life became perverse. Firstly, the ministry was prone to overregulated academic life and secondly, the HEIs were then prone to apply more rigid requirements internally.

The growing centralization and constant intrusion of the government, particularly of the MES in the HEI's life aggravated the few but vocal members of the academic community, who took these actions of the government as an offence on academic freedom. For instance, a local expert and long-term faculty of one of the state universities considered it unacceptable that state had stripped HEIs from their autonomous rights, and viewed it as the main offence on the ultimate mission of the university as a knowledge generator:

(The system) is being centralized not because there are no (human) recourses that (would take responsibility for autonomous action), but for the university as a space for critical thinking to seize to exist! [...] The government should stop intervening in the university! It should not think that if the university has a critical perspective towards the government then these universities are the spaces that compromise their political rule (R45 – LExpert 3).

Although other respondents did not express themselves so dramatically, the majority viewed the standardization of the academic life negatively and considered it often irrelevant (R2-HEI1; R12-HEI2; R31-HEI5).

Furthermore, another component of academic autonomy is the HEI's ability to decide upon the number of students and on the selection criteria of students. The first has important implications for the HEI's profile and finances. The second contributes to

ensuring quality and matching student interest with the programs offered (Estermann et al., 2011). In both instances, an HEIs' decision making power is close to nonexistent.

Previously, the decision over a student's admission resided with the HEIs. However, in 2004 it was taken away from the HEIs as the main source of corruption and was substituted by a unified national entrance examination. The admissions process was managed by the National Examination Centre. Based on three exams, the center determined the level of success of the prospective students and granted student vouchers according to the 100%, 70% and 50% success scale. Students that had succeeded in the national entrance exams could choose from a number of preferable educational institutions, where they would allocate their state-provided vouchers (MES, Decree N 19/N, 2011). In the first years of the reform, HEIs were not allowed to introduce additional admission criteria either. Moreover, the number of students was also decided according to a formula that was developed by the NEAC. The same center, as a part of the institutional accreditation process would determine the maximum number of students that the particular HEI could admit (NEAC, 2006). These restrictions greatly affected the academic autonomy of the HEIs. One of the faculty members of a newly established university complained that the university had no mechanisms to select students. On the contrary, the students were choosing the HEI.

The university cannot select a student, hence the university cannot control the quality, because the (quality is defined) through money-follows-student scheme (R10 - HEI2).

The unified exams were designed to abolish corruption at the admission phase. The exams were also designed to create equal opportunity for the students of different social and economic backgrounds (Chakhaia, 2013). Thus, accommodation of the HEIs' concerns regarding the quality was not prioritized.³

To conclude, the evidence provided in this section shows that, for policy makers, academic autonomy was part of their decentralization effort. Policy makers viewed decentralization as a main tool of institutional transformation of the HEIs, thus they left academic autonomy outside of the sphere of their interest. Ever increasing standardization, which caused the discontent of the academic community was also justified according to the ministry's conviction that the institutional framework of the HE system was so fragile that the provision of a considerable degree of autonomy would compromise the development of the system.

Financial Autonomy

³ Only in 2011, the HEIs' plea for the state to relax the strict student admission mechanism was accommodated by introducing a fourth elective examination in the scheme. According to this scheme, the examination center provided a list of possible disciplines, in which it would hold an exam and the HEIs could assign one of them to the degree program that they wanted (MES, Decree N19/N; 4. 2011).

Financial autonomy is certainly the area where the links to the other dimensions of autonomy are the most obvious. The ability or inability of universities to decide on tuition fees has implications for student admissions, state regulations on salaries for academic staff of the public institutions impinge on staffing autonomy, and the capacity to independently disperse university funds directly impacts the ability to implement a defined strategy (Estermann et al, 2009). In the University Autonomy Tool, financial autonomy is defined as *capacity of the HEI to acquire and allocate funding, to set tuition fees, and to own and manage buildings/infrastructure* (EUA, 2011). Put differently, the purpose of financial autonomy is to provide the mechanism of financial stability and independence to the HEI in order to pursue academic freedom.

The perspective of preserving or granting academic freedom to the HEIs through financial stability and independence was not apparent in the discussions with the Georgian policy makers. Nevertheless, financial autonomy, as a term, is part of the definition of the HEI autonomy in the Law (Law on Higher Education, 2004, Chapter 2) and provisions to decentralize previously centralized financial control were also developed (Law on Higher Education 2004, Chapter 26).

In further analysis, several system level factors need to be considered. For the policy makers, financial decentralization together with financial transparency were part of the decentralization reforms that were both supported domestically and recommended by the international community. Domestically, it was driven by practical considerations of efficiency. Over the course of the years of post-Soviet transition, the country suffered significant resource erosion thus, maintaining higher education institutions under the state-subsidy was a tremendous burden, especially under the budget constraints that the ministry was facing. One of the former deputy ministers explained that the state was moving towards minimizing its financial responsibilities with the HEIs and at the same time, aimed at boosting competitive environment among them (R39 -PA8). Externally, the MES was fulfilling the commitment that the country had made in 2004 to the UN, articulated in the Millennium Development Goals Georgia (MDG Georgia). According to the MDG Georgia “[t]he main objectives of tertiary education reform should include the *full autonomy*⁴ of tertiary institutions, the establishment of a competitive climate for public and private institutions, the eradication of the state order tradition...” (UNDP, 2004, p. 31-32). These considerations implied changes in the funding scheme of higher education that in turn had implications for the commitment of the government to the financial autonomy of the HEIs.

In brief, to overcome scarcity of state funds, policy makers introduced the concept of revenue diversification, pressuring HEIs to diversify their funding portfolios through introducing tuition fees, attracting grants, donations and other nonpublic revenues. To support the transition from the state-subsidized operation to the self-sustained mode, the

⁴ my emphasis.

state made several revenue sources available to the HEIs. In order to support research in the HEIs, the state made funds available for the research and created the new semi-governmental agencies of the Georgian National Science Foundation and the Foundation of Kartvelian Studies, Humanities and Social Sciences.⁵ Most importantly, instead of the state subsidized higher education, the funding scheme was changed into per capita funding, known as the “money-follows-student” scheme. Those students, with the high scores at the national unified entrance exams were eligible for the state grant, which they could allocate at the HEI and the academic program of their choice. Both research grants and student voucher grants were available for public as well as private institutions (Law on Higher Education, 2004). Apart from the per capita funding, the state financed state HEIs through direct budgetary lump sum allocations and through earmarked allocations for infrastructure development and research (Machabeli et al., 2011; UNDP, 2008).

For the state HEIs, tuition fees accounted for 75% of the total income. Only about a fifth was offset by state-funded merit and needs-based grants. By the year 2009, about 25% of state HEI income came from direct state allocations (18% in the form of lump sum funding and 7% from other forms of state support). Including the student merit based vouchers and other funding schemes, the state funded 42% of the costs of state HEIs (Machabeli et al., 2011).⁶ Overall, the Georgian HE system went from the state-funded to the private funding scheme, where only 25 % of the HEI’s budget comprised of direct state allocations. For the remainder, they were in competition with other public as well as private HEIs. It is true that the state was a major funding source thus increasing state HEIs’ dependency on the state and hindering its financial autonomy.

With the efforts of financial decentralization, the HEIs’ budgets were no longer subject to the approval of the ministry. According to the law, HEIs could create and approve their budgets. HEIs were free to manage their finances, but had to make their budgets publicly available (Law on Higher Education, 2004, Chapter 26, NEAC, 2007). According to the Law, another component of financial autonomy was to decentralize the budgeting process to the departments within the universities.⁷ While the Law formally gave greater autonomy to the academic departments, financial decentralization was not practiced by the universities. The departments remained dependent on the central university budget allocations (R20-HEI4; R4-HEI1; R28-HEI5). During the interviews, the deans and rectors of the HEIs did voice concerns regarding the level of decentralization within the HEIs as

⁵ In 2010 the two organizations were merged into Georgian National Science Foundation (GNSF).

⁶ In a comparative perspective, taking the university system as a whole, in 2009, the state funded 35% of the costs of the HE system, which is about half of the average OECD public expenditure (67% in 2008) on tertiary education institutions (Machabeli et al, 2011)

⁷ The distribution of budgetary funds within the HEI is a controversial issue since it involved the governance relationships between central administration representing the HEI as a whole and individual units within the HEI (See Geiger, 2004).

they thought that departments were not yet ready to accept the responsibility of budgeting themselves (R1 - HEI1).

However, the constraints were higher than the benefits of the decentralized system. Once the tuition fees were institutionalized, it was also decided that the state was to calculate the cost of the academic programs across the state HEIs. The decision was made because of the time and financial efficiency. As an interviewee explained, there was no time to calculate the real costs of programs which is why the ministry set the standard ceiling for all academic programs under which the HEIs could maneuver. The ceiling of 2250 GEL (840 Euro) was set for every program. The student grant of 100% comprised the same amount. Many HEIs disagreed with this policy choice.

In addition, state HEIs were subject to the legal provisions of the public law under the supervision of the MES. This means that certain restrictions applied. For instance, the salary ceilings for the HEI's staff could not exceed the salary of the ministry's employees, which obviously, made it difficult to attract qualified staff to the HEIs. One of the HEI representatives perceived this as a disadvantage of the state HEIs in comparison to the private HEIs:

These organizations (HEIs) have no right to pay their staff higher salary than to the staff at the ministry. It is also difficult to attract professors, this is also restricted by a certain rule about hiring and firing of the academic personnel. (R10-HEI2)

In addition, HEIs were subject to the inflexible state procurement policies and were also not able to keep the surplus, but had to return it to the state budget.

The third component that needs attention is the level of financial transparency. Financial transparency was a main state priority falling under the anti-corruption reforms. After the revolution, in the country, a separate entity of financial police was created to address the gaps in the financial operations for both public and private organizations. State HEIs were subjects of the same scrutiny. They were reporting on a quarterly basis to the State Revenue Office and were submitting annual financial reports to the ministry of education as well. However, HEIs were rarely providing internal transparency. This is how one of the faculty members describes the situation:

I have been a member of a faculty board for three years. It has been three years that I am requesting a financial report from the faculty. [...] I have not seen that report. ... and I receive a ridiculous response from one of the administrators that this information will be made available [internally] only after the financial declaration has been submitted to the revenue office. My answer to this is: 'The declaration is submitted [to the Revenue Office] by 15th of each month, and if the date of today is 20th, then it [the declaration] has been submitted already. Let me see the report'. The response is: 'We don't have it'. (R45 - LExpert 3).

To summarize, the purpose of financial autonomy as of a guarantor for the HEI to maintain academic freedom was absent among the policy makers. The main consideration for financial autonomy was efficiency; the state meant to elevate financial burden from the

state budget and relocate it to the HEIs. Financial decentralization and financial transparency were part of the decentralization reforms that overwhelmed the transition phase of the reforms from 2004 to 2007. In essence, the purpose of financial autonomy did not resemble its original purpose proposed by the EUA (2001, 2003, 2011). Despite this, some structural elements were created in the system although the scarcity of recourses keeps HEIs dependent on state funding. This allows for the finding that financial autonomy is also decoupled.

Conclusion

The analysis of university autonomy reforms in Georgia shows that policy makers introduced the reforms to gain external legitimacy at the EHEA. University autonomy reforms created a decoupled institution that only symbolically bears resemblance to its Bologna-promoted prototype. The structural elements of the university autonomy framework were aligned with the Bologna-promoted model of autonomy. However, the purpose of the autonomy in the HE system of Georgia did not fit with the original purpose of 'impartiality with accountability' promoted by the Bologna Process. University autonomy as a principle of the university's governance was never part of the policy discussions. Instead, it was a part of the government's overall decentralization efforts.

In more specific terms, while legally ensuring university autonomy as the main principle of HE governance, university autonomy has been compromised with the standardization and overregulation efforts of the government. In order to have a system-wide effect, the ministry of education set up a detailed regulatory framework to guide the universities into autonomous action. With the aim of creating a level playing field for all HEIs in the system, policy makers standardized university life through the quality assurance requirements, hence suspending academic autonomy of the HEIs.

In its turn, the decentralization was a measure for minimizing the risk of accumulating power in the rector's hands. Therefore, it was not autonomy, but a closely supervised decentralization of university life. With the rhetoric of autonomy, the post-revolution government curbed the independence of the state universities. By instituting rigid regulations to autonomous action, the MES indirectly gained authority over the state HEIs. Authority which it did not have before the revolution. In other words, while emulating the principles of autonomous actor-hood, the policy makers became reluctant to give up the control over the HEIs, which they had gained during the institutional flux brought by the revolution.

Finally, this analysis of university autonomy provides a distinct example of the tensions between a transnationally pursued purpose of the institutions and the considerations of the local policy makers. The local conditions and policy makers' perceptions regarding the challenges of the Georgian HE system come in almost complete contradiction with the principles of university autonomy, as proposed by the Bologna Process. Yet, they are

symbolically reconciled at the institutional level. Essentially, university autonomy “speaks” of autonomy, but demands compliance.

As the results of the research show, Georgia as a state at Europe’s periphery consciously adopted the Bologna-guided reforms for the primary purpose of gaining legitimacy at the European level. As a result, I argue that the Georgian HE system gained high institutional proximity to its Western prototypes, however failed to imbed those in the national context thus creating a decoupled institution in the system.

The examples of decoupled institutions can also be found in other policy areas. Hence, I suggest that the findings of this study are relevant not only for the developments in higher education but in other policy areas as well. The findings discussed in the article are not unique to the Georgian context and are relevant for the countries that underwent the post-Soviet transition. The article suggests that the countries in a post-soviet transition are subject to the transnational policy transfer and are prone to creating decoupled institutions. On this front, findings provided in this article shed light on the policy making processes that are at play in transitioning societies. Moreover, by mobilizing the theoretical toolbox of the world society theory, this study helps to address the gap in the literature on policy transfer explaining the cases of decoupled institutional constellations.

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