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Europeanisation and Beyond.

Polish Higher Education between Local and Global Dynamics

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– DRAFT –

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The transformations of higher education (HE) systems in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have come about as a result of the new liberal economic and political agenda that has prevailed since the fall of communism, combined with the impact of EU accession conditions. On the eve of accession, the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy made policy makers from candidate states increasingly receptive to European recommendations. This said, the paper challenges existing explanations of Europeanisation as a linear process. It points out that the transformations of HE institutions have a global dimension, because they have been promoted by international organisations active in the field of education. They have been shaped by global trends such as the growing influence of international rankings. The paper focuses on the domestic uses of external recommendations. It sheds light on domestic actor configurations and games. It shows how policy entrepreneurs make strategic uses of European or other external models according to their priorities. This process may generate tensions and lead to a reconfiguration of power relations. In an attempt to refine the Europeanisation perspective, my paper will examine alternative explanations of the dynamics of change, such as the inspiration drawn from models from outside the EU or references to the narratives of international competition promoted by international organisations.

The transformations of higher education (HE) systems in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have come about as a result of the new liberal economic and political agenda that has prevailed since the fall of communism, combined with the impact of the EU accession conditions. The pre-accession funds combined with Western assistance programmes as well as the accession negotiation process opened in 1998 have made policy makers from the candidate states increasingly receptive to European recommendations. The fact that the Bologna Process was launched in this context, in 1999, explains why CEE decision-makers tended to consider its successive recommendations as part of a more general EU package¹.

On the academic level, the Bologna Process and its recasting by the European Commission (Commission) in the light of the Lisbon Strategy (Keeling, 2006) have strengthened scholarly interest in HE structural transformations. While the sector had for a long time remained a rather marginal research topic, reserved mainly for specialists of education studies and educational sociologists, it has recently been the subject of a number of political science publications (Jakobi & al., 2013). Particular emphasis has been put on HE Europeanisation with aspects such as policy transfer, policy convergence, privatisation, new public management (NPM) and even globalisation dynamics.

Though numerous and stimulating, providing a sound theoretical perspective and varied empirical case studies, the above-mentioned analysis coexist without necessarily opening up a systematic debate. Although specialists of the emerging European Higher Education Area (EHEA) may recognise the global dimension of the observed transformations, they usually focus on the institutional aspects of this regional process. Sometimes they investigate the domestic implementation of European recommendations using national case studies. Many of these analyses implicitly suffer from a Bologna bias. While the structuring character of the Bologna Process and the growing role played by the Commission in coordinating HE reform have to be acknowledged, these are not the only causes of HE internationalisation.

Focusing on the Bologna Declaration as a kind of *Stunde Null* may result in overlooking a whole decade of HE transformations, which have deeply restructured central and eastern European HE systems in the aftermath of 1989. The 1990s were the heyday of international ‘assistance’ to the region. Hence, in the first reform stage, external references and sources of inspiration interfered and varied depending on national situations. International organisations

¹ The Bologna Process, initially based on intergovernmental negotiation but now increasingly monitored by the European Commission, was officially launched in June 1999 in the namesake city by the education secretaries of 27 European countries (there are now 46 signatories). The goal of the Process is the harmonisation of HE systems around three main elements: the adoption of a three-cycle degree system, the generalisation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the promotion of ‘quality assurance’.

such as the World Bank and the OECD were active in the field, providing funds, loans and neo-liberal expertise to the educational sector. The domestic reform strategies have fuelled an encompassing internationalisation process of HE institutions, which could also be called Westernisation, as the outside references lay usually within the Western and especially Anglo-American space. However, the early 1990s was also a peak period for the European Commission, at the end of the Delors presidency. When the CEE communist regimes collapsed, the Commission emerged as a leader in the coordination of Western assistance to the transition countries, in particular through its PHARE programme (Robert, 2001). Thus this first transformation period also entailed an early Europeanisation, as CEE policy makers looked consciously towards Brussels.

In an attempt to discuss these converging tendencies, this paper challenges existing explanations of Europeanisation as a linear process. It points out that the transformations of HE systems have a global dimension, because they have been promoted by international organisations active in the field of education. More recently they have been shaped by transnational trends such as the growing influence of international rankings. These broader dynamics go beyond the harmonisation of HE policies associated with the Bologna Process. This is not to say that Europeanisation is not a prevailing, externally-inspired process of policy change. However, its mechanisms have to be explained and contextualised.

Instead of reducing complex HE reforms to a unilateral ‘adaptation’ to an external constraint, I propose to apprehend the relations between the international organisations in the broad sense and the national academic spaces in their reciprocity. Thus I will examine the use of references to solutions elaborated outside the national administrative space in domestic political games. My hypothesis is that this search for external models provides some domestic actors with new resources and opportunities and accordingly reshapes the power relations within the field. Consequently, I will use a sociological constructivist approach to investigate how the definitions of the university objectives promoted by international and more particularly European organisations are perceived, translated and used in a domestic context. According to the critical education policy analysis, education policies are increasingly framed globally albeit articulated nationally; they ‘represent a particular configuration of values whose authority is allocated at the intersection of global, national and local processes’ (Rizvi, Lingard, 2009: 3).

In the first part, I discuss the relationship between internationalisation and Europeanisation from a theoretical perspective. I propose an analytical framework, which pays careful attention to the temporalities of HE reform and their domestic context, to try and determine

which factors have prevailed in different phases. In the second part, I apply this framework to the Polish case and focus on the domestic uses of external recommendations. In the third part, I shed light on domestic actor configurations and games. I show how policy entrepreneurs make strategic uses of European or other external models according to their priorities.

I. Higher Education Internationalisation and Europeanisation Revisited

Most of the studies on current HE reforms agree on the fact that the EU has been an important factor affecting public education and research systems of its members states. This has been the case particularly since the launch of the Bologna Process and subsequently of the Lisbon Strategy, which steer reforms in this sector toward the goal of a ‘knowledge economy’. However, the impact of European and international influences on domestic public policies has been a matter of scholarly debate.

The European factor under debate

Some authors argue that strictly EU dynamics play a secondary role and emphasise the intergovernmental character of European HE reforms (Muller, Ravinet, 2008). Critical scholars have for their part drawn attention to the structuring role played by EU institutions in the imposition of a market-based logic in all public sectors including education (Bruno, Clément, Laval, 2010; Garcia, 2007). A growing number of authors agree that European educational initiatives, increasingly dominated by the Commission (Croché, 2010), constitute an ‘EU policy’ (Walkenhorst, 2008), structured by the ‘open method of coordination’ (OMC) and supported by considerable investments (Batory, Lindstrom, 2011). Without entering this debate I would like to stress the international dimension of the European HE reform agenda.

The international component of the Bologna Process is manifold. Policies coordinated at the European level – either through intergovernmental meetings and expert networks or with a growing involvement of the European Commission – have deeply influenced HE systems on the European continent and elsewhere. A growing body of literature confronts the Bologna Process with the HE system in the United States or places it within a larger geopolitical perspective. The process is based on the idea of tertiary education harmonisation and thus on a transnational comparison of HE systems, which entails, indirectly, the idea of competition. At first, the Sorbonne declaration of 1998 was perceived as a coordinated answer of the four signatory governments to the academic and scientific attractiveness of the US and Japan. Secondly, the Bologna signatories were not breaking entirely new ground, as the process

builds on initiatives developed over the years by several international organisations. Most elements of the process were inspired by trends and instruments promoted by international and supranational organisations such as the Council of Europe, UNESCO and the European Commission, including diploma recognition, student and staff mobility facilitated by a credit system, and quality assurance, to name just a few.

Even so, this interrelationship between European and international factors of change is not systematically dealt with by studies focusing on the Europeanisation of HE policymaking. Manja Klemencic (2013) defines Europeanisation as a policy adaptation and examines ‘to what extent national policy developments reflect the European recommendations on institutional diversification’ (p. 120). However, beyond the correlation between the European principles and their national policy translation, the matter of other possible sources of inspiration remains. The challenge is to seize both the international dimension of observed transformations and the causal mechanisms of policy transfer.

The complex impact of international incentives

Regarding the international dimension of HE reforms, several authors have pointed out that it is necessary to consider the education system within a broader international context (Marginson, 2008; Dale, Robertson, 2009; Rizvi, Lingard, 2009). Scholars have heralded the emergence of a ‘global educational policy field’, in which the extent of autonomy of public policies implemented at domestic level depends on the ‘strength of specific national capitals’ (Lingard, 2006: 288). While many researchers agree that international organisations have been playing an increasingly important role in the narrative framing of education policies, their work generally analyses a specific institution without making systematic connections between the policies they promote.

While international organisations have been extensively studied by international relations scholars (Iriye, 2002; Barnett, Finnemore, 2004; Rittberger & al, 2012), emphasis is generally placed on internal evolutions within these organisations or their relative influence. There have been fewer in-depth studies on their daily relationships with other policy-makers. Additionally, higher education has been little studied in this light. Several researchers have looked into the role played by the OECD (Henry & al, 2001; Martens, Jakobi, 2010), whose PISA studies are extensively commented upon in the media (Martens, Wolf, 2009; Grek, 2009). Still, the weight of these different institutions in the transformations of HE in Central Europe merits further research, especially as the countries of the region have served as a kind of laboratory for international and European assistance. Multiple transfers and mutual

influences are indeed to be found in the policies and instruments promoted by these organisations, including credit transfers (ECTS) and ‘diploma supplements’. The concept of ‘quality assurance’ – initially borrowed from the business community – and the approach focused on ‘learning outcomes’ are cases in point of the way in which such diverse institutions as the Council of Europe, the OECD and the European Commission propose actions that complement and feed off each other. We need to analyse these intertwined transnational transfers with a focus on the enrolment of the various stakeholders involved in the development of these new academic standards.

While internationalisation seems to be an all-encompassing term, its academic definitions and considerations vary. Altbach (2007) carefully points out that scholarly research is by definition international and that universities in the Middle Ages ‘were international institutions’. In view of the ‘resurgence of internationalisation’, the author describes the ‘international imperative’ as ‘growing international forces that are influencing higher education’. However, the question remains open as to how and by whom this ‘imperative’ is voiced, and in which conditions it materialises and leads to direct consequences. The author qualifies the Bologna HE harmonisation approach as a regional version of the globalisation process (re)discovered in the 1990s. He acknowledges the power of the Western model as the American university ‘so influential worldwide, constitutes an amalgam of international influences’ (Altbach, 2007, 25). Finally, influential global players in the field such as the World Bank and the World Trade Organization fuel the economic dimension of HE transformation. Thus HE internationalisation mirrors the inequalities linked to the economic globalisation process, such as the domination of dependent peripheries by Northern academic production centres (Altbach, 2007). Critical analysis of the globalisation of education policy provides a stimulating approach as it places emphasis on both the external and the domestic aspects. According to Rizvi and Lingard (2009, p. x), ‘globalization cannot be viewed as a generalised phenomenon, but rather needs to be seen as a dynamic phenomenon expressed in particular histories and political configurations’. This approach is useful to avoid reifying globalisation and to analyse the mechanisms and agency of this process, which may be understood through its practice, ideology and social imaginary (Rizvi, Lingard, 2009).

Bridging the European / international divide

A way to bridge the gap between explanations in terms of globalisation or Europeanisation is the fact that there is no obvious limit between both notions, as Europeanisation builds on policies promoted and diffused internationally. For some authors, the European Union is just

one among other international organisations implicated in the ‘educational multilateralism’ (Leuze & al., 2007; Mundy, 2007). However, a certain autonomisation of policies promoted at the European level has to be acknowledged. On the one hand, EU decision-makers re-appropriate pre-existing references and provide them with a specific, regional meaning, such as the European Qualification Framework. On the other hand, EU policies have a scope and binding power that other international organisations do not enjoy. Thus a distinction can be made between European and other international policy inspirations.

Another way to refine the Europeanisation perspective is to examine alternative explanations of change, such as the inspiration drawn from models outside the European Union or references to narratives of global competition promoted by international organisations. While some authors date the increased activity of international organisations in education policy making to the beginning of the 1990s and consider them as ‘new arenas of education governance’ (Leuze & al., 2007), others suggest a more refined historical perspective. According to Karen Mundy (2007), educational multilateralism developed in the aftermath of the Second World War, in several phases: firstly, ‘embedded liberalism’ marked by Keynesian policies and the promotion of the right to education by UNESCO in the Cold War context; secondly, starting in the 1960s, the growing role of the OECD, its Development Assistance Committee, but also its Annual Review of member countries’ educational performance; thirdly, neoliberal policies calling for privatisation and the limitation of state intervention in which the World Bank has taken the lead, followed by the OECD, the EU and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) with its GATS negotiations (Mundy, 2007).

Finally, although the external dimension of policy transformations is difficult to contest, it should not be taken for granted, for several reasons. First, Europeanisation is not a given nor self-explaining and homogeneously spread across the wider European countries. Secondly, the production by experts of periodic country reports for international organisations cannot per se be considered as a material proof of an organisation’s influence. Thirdly, we need to take account of bilateral policy transfers, which are not necessarily clearly related with the activity of a supranational or other international organisation.

Consequently, I suggest considering different external factors jointly and analysing how they are perceived, translated and disseminated by actors from national spaces. This requires looking at how the European and international policy agendas are used in HE policies and in the reconfiguration of the relationships between various actors involved in the construction of public problems. The changes engendered by the post-1989 neoliberal transformations and the

preparation of EU accession can be considered as main frames of reference for the elites involved in the reform processes.

II. Unpacking the External Dimension: the Polish Case

As far as the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) are concerned, we still lack a systematic investigation of how reforms developed at the international and European level have been designed and implemented, and how endogenous and exogenous dynamics combine. It requires careful empirical studies to determine which logic has prevailed in which context. Before the growing focus on the EU level, Central European countries had been exposed to the influence of international institutions active in the education sector. The interest of these organisations in the region did not start in 1989, as is shown, for instance, by UNESCO's 1972 initiative to create a European Centre for Higher Education (CEPES) in Bucharest, which went on to become an 'agent of international cooperation between the Eastern and Western European countries' (Croché, 2010: 35). Both UNESCO-CEPES and the World Bank have been actively involved in the transformations of Romanian HE system after 1989 (Cîrstocea, 2014).

CEECs are an interesting case for this analysis at a heuristic level, for two main reasons. First, they underwent a double process of systemic transformation with the fall of the communist regimes followed by the EU accession process. Secondly, these countries have been exposed – in a relatively brief timespan, compared to other industrialised countries – to the assistance programmes of different international organisations, including statutory ones for monitoring educational policies (UNESCO) and others that have progressively gained authority in this area (Council of Europe, OECD, World Bank). The EU accession process – with its conditionality, the financial resources allocated and the power relations engendered – has had a noticeable impact on HE policies. The transformations of public policy are underpinned by the need to bring national systems closer to European standards, using EU funds and the emergence of new agencies in charge of evaluating and funding research and teaching.

As far as the now new EU member states (NMS) are concerned, three phases are generally identified after 1989. The first was the decade of liberalisation/westernisation, where we could expect a potential exposure to different foreign models. A second phase began with the EU accession negotiations followed by the launch of the Bologna Process, suggesting broad openness to solutions developed at the European level. Finally, the third, post-accession phase is marked by further cooperation within the EHEA as well as the publication of international

rankings and the increasing use of international comparisons. However, beyond this global scheme, the intensity of reforms and the relative influence of international organisations varies according to the domestic political context.

After the fall of the Communist regime, the Polish HE system underwent transformations that were comparable to those observed in other countries in the region. The main goal was to give a degree of autonomy back to the universities – as they had during the inter-war period – and to open them up to the market (Dobbins, 2011; Dakowska, 2014). As a result, the country saw similar developments to those that had occurred in Western countries in recent decades, regarding for example the opening up of higher education to the masses, an increase in the number of private schools and a growing perception of research as a market service and not (only) as a public good (Jabłeczka, 1994). On the one hand, the far-reaching privatisation of the HE system could be considered as a result of neo-liberal narrative promoted by international institutions such as the World Bank and the OECD, to which the new democratic elites extensively adhered. On the other hand, the massive expansion of tertiary education attendance appears as a rather unintended consequence of the 1990 Higher Education Act, whose main objective was to restore HEI autonomy. The reasons why the main stakeholders supported these reforms was the wider social approval of political liberalisation, the introduction of the free market and a more general ‘catching up with Europe’.

The overarching European frame of reference

Already during this first phase, EU programmes played an overarching structuring role. The EU programme TEMPUS (*Trans European Mobility Programme for University Studies*) financed from PHARE funds helped to bring about closer links and knowledge transfers between the universities from Eastern and from Western Europe (especially through teaching staff and partly through student mobility).² The Joint European Projects, the main strand of the TEMPUS Programme, involved partners from three countries for a period of 1 to 3 years. They aimed to accompany HE restructuring and ‘modernisation’. TEMPUS triggered significant changes in the HE landscape as it has helped to restructure existing institutions, launch new curricula and study programmes (including European integration studies), and promote cooperation with industry and the notion of lifelong learning. Aside from providing structural support, TEMPUS encouraged socialisation and the dissemination of expert

² Adopted by the Council on 7th May 1990, TEMPUS was extended, in 1993, to the former Soviet Republics financed by the TACIS programme. It was closed in 2000 for the countries associated with the EU but extended to other ex-Yugoslavia and Neighbourhood countries.

knowledge. The training courses and conferences financed by the programme facilitated the emergence and consolidation of a group of HE experts who instigated reforms within their home universities and later contributed to the domestic dissemination of the Bologna Process. Thus the international reorientation of universities from CEECs towards the West owes much to the TEMPUS scheme.

The international and especially European references became more visible in the context of EU accession. While some HE institutions implemented measures aiming to facilitate students' mobility (such as the European Credit Transfer System or the two-tier degree structure) on a bottom-up basis as early as in the 1990s, the perspective of accession provided an opportunity for more directive interpretations of the formally non-binding Bologna principles (Dakowska, 2013). The 2005 Higher Education Act translated the proposals of the Bologna ministerial meetings into a legal framework. However, this reform was deemed insufficient by the liberal government led by the Civic Platform that came to power in 2007. The new HE Minister, Barbara Kudrycka, was eager to launch more comprehensive reforms of the academic system. In this context, the government has adopted a series of legal acts reforming the research system in 2010 followed by a Higher Education Act, which has entered into force in October 2011.³ This new Act introduces evaluation and competition mechanisms, which may lead to the dismissal of less productive academics and to the closing of their research centres. The race to the title of best faculty, 'national research leading centre' (KNOW) 'diamond grant' and so on was opened. The vocabulary of competition has dominated the announcements of these measures, in tune with the narratives diffused by international organisations active in the field.

While the Bologna Process is sometimes presented as a set of consensual proposals whose application is left entirely to the appreciation of the States, several factors have reinforced its impact in the new EU Member States. First, the emphasis on benchmarking, a concept drawn from the private sector and applied at EU level through the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). Constant comparison of the progress made in various areas – with results presented as colour codes and maps that distinguish the 'good pupils' from the 'laggards' – increases pressure to adapt (Lange, Alexiadou 2010). Secondly it appears that the EU NMS, which were for a long time marginalised in international academic exchanges, are eager to play the game of the HE harmonisation and to be perceived as 'good pupils' in the comparative tables.

³ The legal package of six Acts reforming Polish Science has been adopted by the Parliament, published on 4 June 2010 and entered into force on 1 October 2010. The HE Act has been revised several times till 2014.

This does not mean, though, that the process as a whole has been accepted, understood and implemented by the academic community.

The interviews with experts specialised in the translation of the European and international recommendations show that the Bologna Process – and the international incentives as a whole – are considered not only as a non-negotiable package that has to be implemented faithfully. These instruments are associated with modernity and progress and considered as overlapping tools to transform the society. The overarching belief according to which a country in transition cannot afford opting out from the process was similar to the attitudes observed in other new member states such as Romania (Deca, forthcoming). The domestic framing of the Bologna Process explains why the different provisions of the process have systematically been transformed into consecutive legal acts.

The implementation of the National Qualification Framework (NQF) in the context of the 2011 HE Act pushes this logic even further. First the introduction of the NQF has been considered as a logical consequence of the Bologna Process but also a way to try and avoid the ‘mistakes’ committed during the initial stage of the process.⁴ Criticism from the academic community aimed at the Bologna provisions – concerning for example the introduction of the Bachelor degree – has been considered as a result of the fact that the process has not been sufficiently explained. Secondly, the NQF has been presented as an element of economic development and of democracy building: ‘Given the legacy of the recent past (...), the whole Polish society is a stakeholder of the National Qualifications Framework (Polish Qualifications Framework and the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education, NQF), as it successfully transforms into a society organised according to the principles of a developed democracy crated on the basis of civil society’ (Marciniak, 2014, 8). Thus, the NQF, which in some Western EU countries is considered as a mere technical tool for educational comparison becomes, in the eyes of its Polish promoters, a major instrument of social change.

Looking for the international organisations’ impact

While international organisations active in the educational field have implemented several projects in the country, their impact is difficult to pinpoint. These projects have led to the publication of several reports, which have been cited by decision-makers on different occasions and fuelled public debate as a legitimate point of reference. However, these reports

⁴ Interviews with officials at the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, 2012, 2014.

did not directly serve as a basis for reform. While international organisations called for the introduction of tuition fees for all students (World Bank, 2004; Canning & al., 2007), this proposal has not been explicitly implemented as HE is constitutionally free and no government has dared to implement this politically-sensitive reform. In practice, however, nearly half of all students in reality pay some kind of tuition fee. While the 2011 HE Act introduced compulsory fees for students who attend a second major, the Constitutional Court ruled against this procedure in June 2014. This shows that domestic priorities make it possible to bypass the recommendations of international organisations, which have repeatedly called for the diversification of HE revenues.

However, another set of policy trends prioritised by international organisations have been reflected in the various reforms, especially as they converged with the recommendations of the Commission. This concerns mechanisms enabling closer ties with the economic environment as well as quality assurance measures. The 2011 HE Act focused the whole system on the imperative of ‘quality’, whose measurement was first developed in industry and heavily promoted by the World Bank in relation to ‘educational services’ (World Bank, 2010).⁵ The Act also provides answers to the recommendations of the Commission, the World Bank and the OECD as far as the labour market orientation of HE is concerned. It provides for the inclusion of representatives of employers in HE consultative bodies and obliges HE institutions to monitor the professional careers of their former students. Conferences organised by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (Ministry) with the World Bank helped disseminate a new narrative about how HE should best function, at the same time legitimising the on-going reform process. They disseminated expert views, which called for practically-oriented HE and presented the ‘traditional, academic higher education’ as being unable to meet current challenges.⁶

The government followed these external recommendations rather zealously. It invested in applied, market-oriented courses such as environment protection (though the latter has recently shown difficulties with recruiting a sufficient number of students). In 2014 it has introduced an ambitious data collection system to obtain information about the income of former students from the national social security office (which has triggered some concern

⁵ The Polish government benefited from a Technical Assistance Activity of the World Bank to support the reforms under way in the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

⁶ Cf. ‘Professionally-oriented Higher Education – European Examples and Options for Poland’ Conference organised jointly by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education and The World Bank. Warsaw, Poland June 12, 2013, Background materials. <http://www.worldbank.org/pl/events/2013/05/15/professionally-oriented-higher-education-conference.print>

about the data protection). Despite this, a major element of HE organisation has remained unchanged, as no radical reform of university governance has been imposed upon the universities. The latter have thus preserved their collegial decision-making, which provides a strong argument in favour of a path-dependent and limited scope of reform (Dobbins, forthcoming).

Analyses of European strategies in HE matters have mostly focused on public policy instruments, without being always able to show how these are constructed, translated and used at the domestic level. In order to better understand and explain these internal reassessments of external requirements, I suggest this gap be filled by taking a look at the actors involved in this process at various levels, in government departments or at universities.

III. Bringing Internationally-Connected Educational Entrepreneurs Back In

The agency of HE reform remains an under-investigated research field. Usually the European Commission or international organisations as a whole are presented as actors. However, a sociological constructivist approach would consider different groups of actors (politicians, top civil servants and experts, for example) who contribute to translating the frames and narratives developed abroad into domestic spaces. The political uses of expert knowledge have been the subject of numerous studies (Boswell, 2009; Saurugger, 2002; Gornitzka, Sverdrup, 2008). In this context, expertise may be analysed both as a means of administration and legitimisation allowing the Commission to forge alliances in order to better shape its environment (Robert, 2003). Concerning the transformations of HE in Europe, a few studies have looked into the functioning of national expert groups at European level, such as the Bologna Follow Up Group (Lažetić, 2010) and groups set up as part of the OMC, such as those in charge of ‘peer learning activities’ (Lange, Alexiadou, 2010). However, there has been little systematic research into the trajectories of the experts who move between the domestic and European levels.

In order to explain how proposals formulated at EU level are perceived as incentives and entail political effects, I suggest focusing on the activities of experts and academic entrepreneurs coming from the national spaces. A first hypothesis to be made is that those of them who manage to occupy power positions are individuals who cumulate several resources and functions. The trajectories of a number of Polish experts and decision-makers involved in different reform stages illustrate this. The first Polish democratic governments after 1989 adopted HE and research sector reforms that were not necessarily inspired by examples from

Europe. Several of the authors of the first reform acts had held academic positions in the United States and thus drew inspiration from them. For instance, the State Committee for Scientific Research (KBN), created in 1991, which institutionalised the principle of competition between researchers applying for grants, was inspired by the American National Science Foundation (NSF) (Jablecka, 2009).⁷ The main architect of the KBN was Stefan Amsterdamski (1929-2005), a professor of philosophy and sociology of knowledge who had accumulated exceptional academic, international and political resources. Amsterdamski had been both an intellectual public figure and a politically-engaged member of the democratic opposition movement. He had been a visiting fellow in prestigious academic centres such as Stanford, the Collège de France, Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, Institute of Human Science in Vienna, but also at Yale, Boston College and Pittsburgh.⁸ After his involvement in what were known as the ‘Round Table’ negotiations between the opposition and Communist government representatives (January – April 1989), he entered the first democratic government of Tadeusz Mazowiecki as secretary of state. In 1992 he founded and directed, until 2004, the School of Social Science, which later became the Graduate School for Social Research linked with the Central European University.

As far as the domestic implementation of policies elaborated at EU level is concerned, one way of perceiving the dissemination of European recommendations is to identify the individuals in charge of explaining and re-translating European proposals to both representatives of the academic community and government officials. These individuals include the members of the ‘Bologna Experts’ group, who are mostly academics and participate in working groups at the department or at the European level. They are crucial intermediaries between the European level, the public authorities and the universities. Participating in discussion forums and working groups at the European level works offers a source of legitimacy for these experts. Being able to refer to practices from other European countries and to international recommendations also contributes to their position of authority. During the preparation of the 2011 HE Act, a wide-ranging public debate began on the desired shape of HE reform, after a strategic document was drawn up by a consortium of experts financed by EU structural funds. This strategy referred to the recommendations of the Commission, calling for a ‘new model of HE, based on leadership, management and entrepreneurship and not only on academic freedom and internal democracy’ (Ernst & Young,

⁷ Before the creation of the KBN, the principle of competition for grants had been established, also based on the US example. The American Embassy financed several study trips of Polish researchers and governmental advisors. These exchanges have inspired, among others, the creation of accreditation bodies.

⁸ http://www.css.edu.pl/sns/amsterdamski_en.php

2009: 17). The reference to reforms conducted in different European countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Netherlands) was used to call for ‘the reduction of the role of the state and an increased university autonomy; the diversification of HEI; the concentration of research expenditure in the strongest universities; the professionalisation of the management system’ etc. (ibid). Thus the report clearly took a stance in favour of management methods inspired by the private sector. Although alternative voices were expressed and taken into account by the Ministry, the adopted reform package nevertheless introduced competition mechanisms to support the highest-ranking academic centres.

Looking into the profile of the experts involved in the HE development strategy commissioned by the ministry, it seems that several of them have already taken a clear stance in the debate on HE. They have called for a far-reaching reform inspired by the US model. One of the most visible members of the team, an engineer and full professor, has managed to build up some considerable resources. Born in 1952, and specialised in telecommunications, this expert has accumulated international experience, having lived in Australia, Canada and France and taught in other regions of the world. He has an academic profile, having won several prestigious academic distinctions in Poland and participated in various international scientific journals and associations. As a candidate for the liberal Civic Platform during the Parliamentary elections of 2005, he also has a number of political connections. These combined resources were instrumental in his nomination, in March 2011, as Director of the National Science Centre (NCN), a newly-created governmental agency responsible for competitively-distributed public funds for fundamental research.

While the international academic experience – gained frequently in Anglo-American countries – was an important resource for the new education entrepreneurs, access to an international organisation was another asset. For example, the secretary of state for HE who coordinated the work on the 2011 HE Act within the Ministry and supervised the implementation of the NQF was appointed not only due to his experience as former director of the Polish Accreditation Commission (PKA) but especially because of his familiarity with the OECD. As an expert involved in the PISA test design he was considered as an unquestionable authority in the matter of learning outcomes.

All in all, domestic policy-makers perceive the recommendations of different transnational organisations in a cumulative way. They take into account the broad directions drawn by the World Bank and the OECD and believe it is important to show that national policies are in line with their recommendations concerning above all the ‘job market relevance’ of academic

curricula.⁹ However, the European Union – with the Bologna Process – seems to provide the most relevant toolbox for HE reform. On the one hand, the main benchmarks foreseen for the HE sector in the Europe 2020 strategy seem to be general and not necessarily adapted to the specific domestic context. On the other hand, Country-Specific Reports and the direct dialogue with Commission representatives provide more precise policy indications.¹⁰ However, there is no contradiction perceived between the European and other international recommendations. Both have insisted, throughout the past few years, on quality in HE and the perceived need for closer cooperation with employers.

While EU recommendations are still considered as ‘soft’, the successive domestic legal acts harden them by defining their interpretation and setting deadlines for implementation. The final hardening comes from the governing bodies of HE institutions themselves, which have elaborated complicated definitions of learning outcomes to make sure that they follow the right direction and avoid sanctions from the accreditation agency.

As far as the international rankings are concerned, their perception in EU NMS such as Poland is ambiguous. On the one hand, league tables are criticised for their methodology and considered critically both by academics and many ministry officials. On the other hand, they are largely cited in public debates and also used by political decision-makers to legitimate reforms aiming to enhance the quality of teaching and research through the reinforcement of competition mechanisms (Dakowska, 2013).

Conclusion

This contribution confirms the importance of external incentives for HE reform in the context of post-communist transformation and EU accession. However, it shows that these external factors do not exercise influence per se. They depend on domestic priorities and narratives and can take different forms. In CEE countries, it is difficult to disentangle the impact of European from that of other international factors. However, their respective influences may be observed through the way in which domestic policy-makers interpret external recommendations. In the Polish case, recommendations made by international organisations have fuelled the debate on reform and provided a point of reference for policy-makers by setting the general direction of reform. However, they are of a fairly general nature and provide few direct incentives. Nevertheless, they have been useful to policy-makers and experts, who have used existing reports as legitimising references to show that their reform

⁹ Interviews with Ministry officials, June and July 2014.

¹⁰ Interview with a Ministry official, July 2014.

projects are merely a local version of more global rules. By contrast, European schemes and recommendations appear to be both more detailed and more structuring. Moreover, the programmes and expert groups supported by the Tempus Programme in the early transition phase had a socialisation function, which has not been equalled by any other transnational organisation.

Even if domestic decision-makers claim to implement policies without referring explicitly to external models, a closer look provides evidence of indirect international inspirations. In some cases, the international socialisation of experts helps shed light on the national model they prefer. In many cases, the results of the implemented reforms show a striking convergence with solutions promoted internationally and implemented in other countries (even though this relationship is not directly claimed, as in the case of French HE and research policy under Nicolas Sarkozy). While the correlation between these models and the final outcome is difficult to establish, a purely endogenously-driven reform process would seem to be an unlikely perspective in contemporary European states.

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