

Institutional Isomorphism in Higher Education Reform in Post-Soviet Countries: reasons, results and implications

Introduction

Present paper analyzes an institutional makeup of the higher education systems in the post-Soviet countries. In this paper I argue that higher education systems are ineffective in most of these countries. Most of the institutions, introduced in the process of educational reforms malfunction. I emphasize the homogenous nature of the introduced institutions across the countries and view this factor (of homogeneity) as a central one to explain institutional malfunctions in the higher education system.

The argument is supported with the brief analyses of higher education reform in Georgia.

In order to explain occurring malfunction and the reasons, as well as results of homogenization I present a theoretical framework of the Institutional Isomorphism, the strand of Sociological Institutionalism. This theory emphasizes the deliberate nature of the homogenization processes across the countries. The reason for this deliberate change is the nation-states' desire to legitimize themselves in the globalised world. But as this desire does not fully coincide with the local needs, demands or capacities, the changes mostly carry ceremonial nature and create decoupled system of education; i.e. the institutions that are created in the process of the educational reforms demonstrate high structural proximity to the 'Western' institutions but tend to be irrelevant to the local needs and demands. This increases the possibility for these institutions to malfunction.

Lastly, I argue that the theoretical framework of Institutional Isomorphism has a strong explanatory value, but has shortcomings as a predictive theory. In the paper I try to identify these shortcomings and present the way to overcome it.

Context

Georgia is one of the 15 post-Soviet republics that broke away from the USSR in 1991 and declared its independence. The events presented below cover the recent developments in the country and main dynamics of higher education reform covering the time-frame of 2003-2008 years. This time frame is characterized by radical changes in the whole education system, which raises questions, and calls for assessment and future recommendations.

Soviet Legacy

Georgian higher education system, as of other republics of the former USSR, is a carrier of Soviet legacies of centralization and state control. Higher education system was based on a common set of principles such as: the eradication of illiteracy, massification of educational opportunities and the incorporation of state ideology into the curriculum. Higher education intuitions had no autonomy to manage the institutions or substantively influence learning processes; the curriculum was centrally controlled, based on the state standards; rectors of the universities were state appointees; and higher education institutions were state subsidized.

In the late 1980s, in the light of reforms of 'perestroika' individual republics were allowed some degree of freedom in managing higher education system, but this change was minor. Only after collapse of the Soviet Union the individual republics acquired higher degree of freedom from the central control. Although waves of higher education reforms have been introduced since the independence of the country, institutional inertia and centralized authority in relations between the higher education institution (HEI) and the state are still present (based on World Education View and Reviews, N18:6, 2005).

Ongoing higher education reforms in those post-Soviet republics that attempted to move away from the Soviet centralized system have different pace and pursue different trajectories. Nevertheless, institutional homogeneity in the new higher education make-up across these countries can be still observed¹. Below, an example of Georgia will be more thoroughly analyzed².

Georgia: current status

In November, 2003 Georgia went through severe political clashes that were concluded with the 'bloodless' overthrow of the government, labeled "The Rose Revolution". Quickly followed by presidential and parliamentary elections, the country dove into large scale reforms that envisioned change of the whole government system. This would coincide with a vision of building new democratic nation-state. All-encompassing reforms included education system change as a priority. The rhetoric for

¹ based on Bologna Process National Report: 2005-2007, http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/links/National-reports-2007/National_Report_Georgia2007.pdf, and Ukraine's National Report on the Implementation of Bologna Process, 2006, http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/links/National-reports-2007/National_Report_Ukraine2007.pdf

² The project is envisioned as a comparative study; therefore an example of Georgia presents only a start-off case, which will be compared with the Ukraine (as planned for now).

the institutional design and re-design voiced two main principles: 1. decentralization, and 2. transparency.

The reforms were pursued with a strong political will aiming to gain high proximity to the West³ and demonstrate the willingness and readiness to change. Involvement of international organizations (IO), such as World Bank, and USAID⁴ were welcomed; their advice and expertise accepted and followed through. Hence, new institutions that were introduced as carriers of change reflected mutual preferences of international community (represented by IOs) and the state government.

Drastic systemic changes were introduced at the levels of general and tertiary education. The reform was launched in 2004. By 2007 the first phase of the reforms, the introduction of the changes, was announced to be completed and the intermediary results were assessed as successful⁵.

Throughout the reform Georgia became a member of different educational processes and associations. One of the major processes was Bologna Process⁶ in 2005 that has been mostly determining the direction of higher education reform since. Consequently, new institutions⁷ were introduced to comply with the requirements of the Bologna; e.g. establishing the system of credits, launching of three-level higher education system and introducing quality assurance practices (Bologna Declaration, 1999). In parallel, the processes of curriculum re-design and adoption of national qualifications framework was launched. The process of change was highly expedited. Over the course of four years HEIs were restructured, their mission and functions re-defined. Also, new types of organizations were created in order to steer and support re-defined idea of higher education and HEIs. Among these organizations are: National Education Accreditation Center, Curriculum Development Center, National Examination and Assessment Center, Teacher Professional Development Center.

These processes and institutions are typologically different than what Georgia's higher education was familiar and operating with before. A basic framework of higher education system, major processes and specific institutions were borrowed from the western experiences to help to abandon Soviet legacies and create a new one, which would be more successful.

Defining the Problem

The intermediary assessment of the reform claimed that this processes of change were successful⁸. Nevertheless, most of the newly introduced institutions proved ill-

³ *West* – the term usually used in the political circles of Georgia referring to the countries of Western Europe and the USA.

⁴ *USAID* – United States Agency for International Development.

⁵ “The Reform of Education and Science in Georgia - 2004-2007”, 2007, www.mes.gov.ge

⁶ The *Bologna Process* is a European reform process aiming at establishing a European Higher Education Area by 2010. It is an initiative of nation-states, at this moment counting 46 member countries together with a number of international organisations, including the Council of Europe (based on http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/EHEA2010/BolognaPedestrians_en.asp#P64_6564).

⁷ *Institution* is used in its broader definition (following the Sociological Intuitionism). Institution is “a system of behavior that is directed by means of a set of rules, i.e. it is organized activity” (Lane and Ersson, 2000).

⁸ According to the 2007 report of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia “The Reform of Education and Science in Georgia - 2004-2007”, 2007, www.mes.gov.ge

suited to the overall educational context in the country⁹. The purposes of the institutions were vaguely defined, or represented empty signifiers for the actors involved. Therefore, produced outcomes tend to be mediocre/low quality, or irrelevant to the official purpose of the institution.

Some Evidence

In Georgia, following the Bologna Declaration requirements National Education Accreditation Center – a quality assurance agency was introduced. Main requirements of the quality assurance systems are :

- *Preserve institutional autonomy of higher education institutions*
- *Support improvement of higher education institutions based on agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance (B. Michalk, 2007)*
- *Have independent quality assurance body/agency, and operation on common three-step principles of quality assurance, such as:*
 - o *a self-assessment of HEI,*
 - o *external peer-review, and*
 - o *the follow-up – an official decision on the status of the HEI against the quality assurance standards. (ENQA, 2009)*

Most importantly, the accreditation is voluntary for the higher education institutions, Public or private.

If we look at the law on higher education of Georgia, it is easily observable that these main characteristics pointed out above are missing. E.g. National Education Accreditation Center is a quasi-governmental agency: its statute is approved by the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) (Law on higher education, Chapter 2, Clause 7, g:); the head of the Center as well as the accreditation board are appointed by the Premier Minister of Georgia (Law on higher education, Chapter 2, Clause 6.2). Accreditation is made mandatory for the public HEIs (Law on higher education, Chapet 10.)

Overall, in the Western Europe, setting up a quality assurance system was envisioned to be one of the steering mechanisms of the government in the context of increased autonomy of HIEs (B. Michalk, 2007, pp. 34). But in Georgia, because of the centralized character of quality assurance, the steering role transformed in the state control mechanism.

The argument developed in this paper proposes that the main factor of the institutional malfunctioning is due to process of institutional isomorphism. Borrowed institutional patterns are poorly aligned with the local, national needs and demands on the one hand, and have high structural proximity to the 'Western' institutions, on the other. Politicized nature of the reform, lack of skills and knowledge of the implementers, lack of readiness to proposed changes, lack of funds, ill-defined priorities, time-constraints, and alike could be identified as separate reasons for the institutional malfunctions. But they rather present the attributes/symptoms of the institutional isomorphism. Presence of these symptoms indicates a misfit of new, borrowed institutional structures in the overall educational system. Therefore, the reasons of the

⁹ My own observation, based on the 18 month work at the USAID funded General Education Decentralization and Accreditation Project as a leader of Accreditation team.

miss-match are not of an internal – indigenous character, but of an external – exogenous character.

In the light of abovementioned, in this paper the reasons of copying ‘Western’ institutions are analyzed.

Why Higher education?

There are two main reasons for choosing higher education as a research area:

Firstly, it is the increasing importance of higher education in globalization processes. In the 21st century higher education has moved from peripheral to a central position in the responses of governments to globalization. In individual countries it has pursued the role of the implementer of public policy (Smith and Webster, 1997; H. Eggins, 2003). In this century the idea and the purpose of education has been re-defined moving from the traditional, historical one of the nurturer of creative thinking towards “conservation and standardization of existing knowledge primarily for dissemination” (A. Smith and F. Webster, 1997: 73). The universities are partly objects and partly subjects – key agents of globalization (Scott, 1998b:122, cited in H. Eggins, 2003: 3) Therefore, higher education is perceived as an agent of dispersing the ideas, creating leaders, members of the world society. Consequently, governments turn to steer higher education in order to increase effectiveness and efficiency of their own (governmental) operation. For the countries in transition the role of higher education carries even higher importance, as it perfectly combines two tasks of state-building and national cohesion, and dispersing the patterns and the values of the globalised world at the same time.

Secondly, despite the growing importance of higher education, there is a gap in researching it as a policy area. The research in this area is developed in three main directions – policy and management, teaching and learning, and comparative education. However, scholarship that examines higher educational reform through the prism of international institutional change is lacking. It should also be mentioned that scholarship on post-Soviet higher education system is also scarce. Therefore, this research project aims to contribute to closing the gap in these two directions.

Why Georgia?

Indicators of the institutional isomorphism and its consequences are perfectly aligned with the processes observed in the process of higher education reform in the country. Superficial conformity of the government resulted in introduction of ritualistic institutions like: National Education Accreditation Center – a quality assurance agency (in order to strive for *progress* through high quality education), or laws on inclusive education (in order to demonstrate the willingness to build a just society with equal opportunities for all).

Why are those ritualistic institutions not actual?

- Quality assurance agency fails to establish itself as a peer-review organization that supports universities in reaching certain quality in education, and represents a controlling device of the Ministry of Education and Science. The Center has rather principal-agent relationship with the universities, and not peer-to-peer interaction (Law on Higher Education of Georgia, Chapter 10).
- Law on inclusive education provides guiding principles against discrimination of any kind. But in reality, e.g. in order to provide an access

for physically disabled to the university wheelchair pathways were paved in several campuses. But a disabled person cannot do much with it as those lead to the large hallway at the ground floor with the stairways leading to the next floor. Neither stairways, nor elevators are tailored to the needs of disabled (Law on Higher Education of Georgia, 2007).

The list of these types of miss-matches grows, resulting in a large distorted picture of reality under the symbolically cohesive higher education system.

Present analysis of higher education reform of Georgia serves as a starting point to study the processes in other post-Soviet countries. Other post-Soviet countries are undergoing similar changes and have been exposed to similar institutional frameworks as Georgia.

The research question

Based on the problem overview presenting above, the main question of the current research project can be formulated as following:

Why, in the process higher education reform, the institutions borrowed from the developed countries fail to operate in some post-soviet countries but succeed in the others?

The Hypothesis

My main argument to explain institutional failure/malfunction in newly introduced higher education systems in post-Soviet countries is that there is a gap between declared, largely symbolic changes and an actual change that occurs in the process of higher education reforms; and some of the countries will experience the institutional failure more than the others depending on how far are they from the model that they are pursuing.

Choosing Theoretical framework

In order to identify suitable theoretical framework for the chosen inquiry I specifically look into the literature that covers occurred change that results in homogenous institutional make-up across the countries.

Developing countries, in the process of shaping new governmental systems, are prone to adopt new types of institutions that were assumed to serve as requisites of particular statehood (Democracy). These newly emerged institutions usually represent the mirrors of the intuitions present in the developed countries, be it Western Europe or the USA. Regardless the mechanisms of their introduction (whether it's deliberate mimicking or external pressure, or the combination of these two), the basic argument for this growing homogeneity is the belief that these institutions have brought success to the developed countries and therefore, will assure success elsewhere.

The research of past decade has been attentive to the growing homogeneity of introduced policies, practices, organizations, or laws across the countries. The body of literature in public policy on policy transfer, policy diffusion and convergence tries to

address the questions of how, why, and when does policy borrowing occur? And explain what the reasons of policy failure or termination are¹⁰.

There are other explanations to growing institutional homogeneity. One of the noteworthy arguments is made by J. Spring (1998) presenting 'white love' as a reason why and how educational practices, similar to those in the West, were introduced throughout the world at the different periods of time by hegemonies, conquerors, colonialist, and later on – globalization agents/neo-colonialists. Here globalization agents (be it international organizations or funds) are representing interests of certain countries (e.g. the USA) or regions (e.g. the EU) and will pursue them in a rational manner. However, this and similar accounts are overlooking the complexity of the occurring processes and base their arguments on economic interests, power relations or functional rationality that determines the influence and, consequently, the adoption of certain models and institutions by developing countries.

The multidimensionality is somewhat restored by Sociological Intuitionism¹¹/Intuitionism Isomorphism by taking into account that nation-states are culturally constructed and embedded (Meyer 1997 in Meyer, Boli, Thomas and Ramirez 1997). This theoretical framework moves away from the neo-liberal explanations and bases its argument on transfer through culture, where nation-states are being influenced and also influence their environment.

The New Institutional framework that is presented here links institutional homogeneity to the perspective of the world society¹². Through the mechanisms of standardization certain institutional models become universalistic and are replicated all over the world, thus creating homogenous institutional make-up around the globe. This perspective argues that education plays a central role in creating standardized patterns of the global conduct, and is simultaneously effected by the global society. Following this perspective, it is necessary to account for the globalization forces and processes in which (higher) education change occurs.

Focusing on education the theory argues that during the institutional building, the patterns of the institutions are *deliberately* borrowed by the countries from the outside, based on the assumption that these institutions have proved to be successful elsewhere, therefore they will successfully resolve the problems occurring in the education system locally. The nation-states rationalize education as an instrument for *progress-with development* and *justice-with equality*, two driving values, constructed by the world culture. The whole idea of cultural embeddedness of nation-state puts the external pressures at the secondary importance and emphasizes the idea of deliberate change. Nevertheless, deliberate change proves to have a ritualistic character. Introduced institutions fail to function in the education system and create layers of new problems to be solved.

¹⁰ Extensive review of the literature on policy transfer, policy diffusion and convergence will be included in the updated version of the draft research project.

¹¹ Sociological institutionalism – one of the schools of new institutionalism that views an individual as a social actor whose rational actions are influenced by the socio-cultural context. Individuals are imbedded in the context and derive from it. They live in and influence institutions (“a system of behavior that is directed by means of a set of rules, i.e. it is organized activity” Lane and Ersson, 2000, pp.23). Individuals act based on the logic of appropriateness and not on preferences as in Rational Choice.

¹² *World Society* – Stanford school of new institutionalism argues that the globalization pressures advocate for stateless world, where universalistic models of what a person, organization or a state should be are promoted through standardized patterns. This creates the world society where cultural or state affiliations become irrelevant, or are just non-existent (J. Meyer, 2002).

Below, main ideas and components of the Institutional Isomorphism are presented.

Dominance of the World Society

Actors and Processes

The idea of the world society was cultivated from the observations of existence of common educational outcomes (such as massification of educational opportunities after World War II) in the countries with large cultural variations in historical legacies and societal characteristics (Ramirez, 2006). The idea was that there is something external common source of influence that yields these results. This idea first was unitized to explain the expansion of school enrollment around the globe after WWII. Later on, it was also applied to explain mass schooling in Europe as a tool of the states to politically incorporate large masses of the society. This area of study has been developing since and was linked to the globalization agenda. Unlike neo-liberal or neo-colonial explanations that base their argument on global economic development, new institutionalism moves away from the arguments based on power relations or functional rationality and considers culture to be a main carrier of the models of change.

The concept of the World Society rests on the perspective of sociological institutionalism that actors and activities are constructed by their environment. I.e. nation-state is culturally constructed and embedded in its environment (Meyer 1997 in Meyer, Boli, Thomas and Ramirez 1997) Contemporary states, organizations or individuals are being influenced or constructed by the models that the world society creates and advocates. In this process education holds a crucial role, as a producer of standardized models on the one hand, and the agent behind the spread of homogenous intuitions, on the other. Thus, education is an agent of change, an instrument to pursue world values¹³, as well as the product of change as isomorphism is clearly evident in this sphere.

Nation-states are claimed to be the central actors in the isomorphism processes. World society does not have strong non-state payers to pursue global values. Paradoxically enough, nation-states are the main figures to assure future stateless life. It is the state that decides upon the policy rout (influenced by the world society), and it is the state that prioritizes educational reforms (infused by the global culture and values).the important distinction to make is, that state's action in the process of isomorphism is rather deliberate; the whole idea is that the global values that causes homogeneity is present in the context and culture in which the states are imbedded. Therefore, these external ideas are first internalized and then implemented.

World values: Progress and justice

The theory provides two main doctrines around which the countries homogenize. The argument holds that in the post-modern world the doctrines of *Progress and Justice* represent cornerstones of the proper nation-state. These goals are a main drive of massification of education all around the world; promotion of women's schooling; emphasis on certain disciplines (like management, social sciences) and decline of the others (like history, philology).

Isomorphism argues that the homogeneity is inevitable at the structural level as all these institutions of higher education or other areas represent the operationalization

¹³ *Progress-with development and justice-with equality* – two broad modern doctrines advocated by a world society (J. Meyer, F. Ramirez 2002).

of these two values. These goals/values are fixed in the world culture and are carried through the international institutions. Nation-states don't actually resist the homogeneity, but rather justify the adoption of certain institutions as a necessity to become legitimized members of the global society.

Mechanisms

First and foremost, higher education is a mechanism itself to promote universal patterns around the globe. In the modern world the university no longer holds a value in itself, like it was advocated in Humboldtian university model, but represents means to an end – be it a 'proper nation-state' suiting the concept of world society (Meyer, 2001), or a device to ensure economic development and stability in the country (Spring, 1998).

Secondly, intergovernmental associations and non-governmental organizations are the carriers of the globalized patterns. International organizations like World Bank, USAID¹⁴, UNESCO¹⁵, OECD¹⁶ are the actors that operationalize *progress and justice* and bring it to the nation-states to absorb.

Thirdly, these patterns are produced by scientific and professional communities and only then promoted by the intergovernmental organizations.

Fourthly, there are local agents, local carriers of change. Local professionals, "certified by a global society" (Meyer, 2001) i.e. educated abroad, that legitimize changing patterns at the local level. They minimize the resistance of nation-states towards the standardized models and advocate for a deliberate adoption.

And lastly, as mentioned previously, new institutionalism dismisses rationally determined economic account, and brings in the dimension of culture as one of the determinants and carriers of change. Nation-states are influenced by the global culture, and not the national one.

Decoupling

Another distinction of Institutional Isomorphism¹⁷ to other accounts – neo-liberal economic expansion, or else – is that it emphasizes non-educational nature of the isomorphic institutions introduced in the (higher) education systems. Nation-states rationalize education as instrument for *progress-with development* and *justice-with equality* – two broad modern doctrines advocated by a world society (J. Meyer, F. Ramirez 2002). E.g. in Georgia, in 2005 quality assurance agency – National Education Accreditation Center was established primarily to meet the requirement of the Bologna Process and only remotely having a purpose to assure certain level of quality at the universities. Up until now the Center represents a controlling device for the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, rather than the quality measurement and supporting mechanism.

This example goes along with the isomorphism argument. This and similar institutions are not created to better educational practices, but because they hold an ideational value, i.e. education is a human capital and a universal human right. Having these institutions brings nation-states legitimacy on the world arena. Therefore, in this institutional setting plans and actions, or policies and action, or structures and action are not related to each other but rather present alternatives to each other under strong exogenous pressures (Meyer, 2001). This results into decoupled systems.

¹⁴ USAID – United States Agency for International Development.

¹⁵ UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Science and Cultural Organization.

¹⁶ OECD – Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

¹⁷ *Institutional Isomorphism* – a stream in sociological institutionalism that studies homogenous structures of the institutions, its occurrence and consequences. In this particular case, the framework links institutional homogeneity to globalization forces, like the world society.

The last point brings me to the main explanation of what are the causes of malfunctioning of the institutions. In the globalization processes symbolic and actual changes depart. Structural isomorphism does not translate into actual one. Changes become of a ritualistic nature when institutions superficially represent two main doctrines of the future world: progress and justice. The need of pursuing these two is not communicated well and hence, not internalized at the grass-root level of higher education system. As an answer to this deficiency a purpose and understating of these institutions are distorted and fit to the habitual operation patterns.

Shortcoming of the Institutional Isomorphism and the contribution of the research project

Isomorphism argues that the decoupling is inevitable; certain countries will suffer from it more than the others. Malfunctioning systems will only increase in time up until the local cultures do not develop high proximity to the global one.

In contrast to the prediction that in time national cultures will develop higher proximity to the global one, many authors devote attention to the distinctions among national educational cultures, and their significance in creating national culture and social cohesion (based on C. Hughes, 2004), therefore favoring the argument on resistance to globalization processes. Building on this argument, it could be noted that regardless the power and mechanisms of the world society, this resistance exists, and the scheme of deliberate isomorphism is not as smooth and straightforward, as the Institutional Isomorphism argues.

This existing dichotomy needs to be taken into account. Through analysis of fracture between symbolic and actual change that occurs in the higher education reform the importance/weight of cultural distinctness of individual countries will be assessed. Based on the results the predictive value of the Institutional Isomorphism will be reviewed and refined.

Methodology

As mentioned previously, the research project is envisioned to be a comparative study although the empirical part of the current paper is solely based on the example of higher education reform of Georgia. Presented analysis serves as a starting point to study the processes in other post-Soviet countries as they have undergone similar changes and have been exposed to similar institutional frameworks as Georgia.

Preliminary choice of dependent (DV) and independent (IV) variables are:

DV: Malfunction of introduced (borrowed) institution;

IV1: Influence of the World Society;

IV2: Influence of the national culture;

IV3: Pressure from the IOs.¹⁸

The institutions operating in the higher education system present the **units of analysis**. Such as: higher education institutions (university, intuition, college),

¹⁸ The DV and IVs are not yet operationalized. The ways of their measurement will be elaborated on the next step of the project development.

accreditation/quality assurance agencies, curriculum development centers, examination and/or assessment centers, teacher professional development agencies.

Taking the above into account, the project will employ two levels of analysis:

At a system level

Higher educational systems of two post-Soviet countries (preliminary decision is to compare Georgia and Ukraine) will be compared. More specifically, the patterns of higher education system development will be observed in a cross country comparison (Georgia and Ukraine). Also, a longitudinal analysis of the systems' development will be conducted from independence to the present focusing on time-periods of major changes, when reforms were introduced.

This type of analysis will allow drawing different comparisons and observing variance of the dependent variable on independent variables.

The institutional/organizational level

At this level of analysis I will study the National Education Accreditation Center (NEAC) of Georgia. This organization is a good example of a government's (the Ministry of Education and Science) choice to aim one of the doctrines of the world society – *Progress*. The organizational structure, its functions, operations, mandate, overall purpose of NEAC will be juxtaposed to the similar organization from one of the Western European countries, that had served as an ideal type for mimicking. The differences between these two organizational set-ups will be identified. Therefore the fracture between the symbolic meaning of this particular organization and its actual purpose in Georgia will be defined¹⁹.

¹⁹ Organizational level of analysis will need different sets of IVs and a DV, which will be elaborated at the further stage of the project development.

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