

EUROPEANIZATION AND REFORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR IN THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES THROUGH BOLOGNA PROCESS IN PURSUIT OF THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

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Abstract. *This article examines the critical role of higher education reforms in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries since their independence as they endeavor to align their systems with European standards and norms, ultimately seeking closer integration with the European Union (EU). The EaP countries, comprising Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, have embarked on ambitious journeys of transformation in their higher education sectors to foster economic development, enhance academic excellence, and strengthen regional cooperation. The article employs a comprehensive approach, encompassing both policy analysis and empirical insights to shed light on the multifaceted nature of higher education reforms across the region. It delves into the various challenges and opportunities faced by the EaP countries in their pursuit of European integration through higher education reforms. The key themes explored include the alignment of the national higher education reforms with the Bologna Declaration guidelines including the promotion of internationalization and quality assurance mechanisms emphasizing the importance of cross-border collaboration and knowledge exchange. It critically assesses the progress made so far, highlighting successes and identifying persistent obstacles. Moreover, it examines the role of international organizations and the EU programs in supporting these reforms. The analysis highlights the importance of higher education reforms in the EaP region not only as an instrument for achieving European integration but also as a catalyst for broader societal and economic transformations. The research data collected refer to the period of 1991-2020.*

Keywords: *EaP countries, higher education, national reform, Europeanization of higher education, internationalization process*

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Introduction

In 1991, after collapse of the USSR the former Soviet Republics had to adjust to new reality and to overcome the soviet legacies in all sectors of economic and social life including higher education sector. The system transformation which took place in the countries of Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) brought many revolutionary political, economic, social and cultural changes in all areas of life in the region. This also applied to the sphere of higher education (HE) which was clearly manifested through the reformation policies and modernization initiatives. The HE

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reformation was marked by the European vector and recognized by scholarship and policymakers as ‘Europeanization of higher education’ (Dakowska 2015, Gornitzka 2006, Maassen and Musselin, 2009, Scott 2012, Vukasovic, 2013). In this research I employ the definition of ‘Europeanization of higher education, proposed by Klemencic (2013, p. 120) who defines Europeanisation as a policy adaptation and examines ‘to what extent national policy developments reflect the European recommendations on institutional diversification’.

The EaP countries’ HE reforms have been well presented in the reports of the Education Agency of the European Commission, the EaP countries’ national education policies, reports of the Erasmus+ programme and numerous national and international researches. However, a better understanding of the Europeanization of HE in the EaP countries and its impact on societies remains vital.

The focus of this research is to study the HE reformation in the EaP countries within the period of 1991-2020 with a particular attention towards a national policy genealogy that allows to track the process of the Europeanization of the HE systems in national context of each of the EaP country, as well as to explore the role the EU policy in creating a more democratic societies and eliminating post-colonial legacies and promoting European values in the region.

Methodologically research is guided by empirical analysis using the methods of qualitative content analysis. Data were collected from a wide range of secondary sources, media coverage, relevant academic literature, as well as of the European Commission resources related to Erasmus+ reports on the EaP countries.

1. Overcoming soviet legacy in HE

At the very outset the EaP countries have struggled to integrate higher education institutions (HEIs) into EHEA since receiving their independence status in 1990s. Firstly, to a certain extent the Europeanization of HE was considered as a process that was closely linked to the countries’ attempt to break through the Soviet past and legacy in various fields including the field of education. Silova et al. (2007) argued that the former Soviet Republics the period since independence in 1991 has been characterized by an acute sense of drift or crisis in educational policy, as various internal actors and external or multilateral institutions struggled to create ‘new’ and autonomous educational systems out of what had been a tightly integrated and highly standardized system in the Soviet Period” (ibid, 2007 p. 164-165). The trajectory that is both similar and different to developments shared by all post-Soviet states (Huisman et al. 2007), facing a shared communist past, bringing back to life pre-Soviet institutions and achievements and looking for the ways forward. Thus, the EaP countries inherited the HE systems which were characterized by a rigid administrative vertical. Excessive centralization did not allow universities to determine independently the administrative and financial policies. Under such conditions to implement the HE reforms was quite difficult. Besides, initially there was no clear state policy on the HE reforms, though the EaP governments tried to retain its managerial function, relying on a number of

superstitions and restrictions. As a result of such a pseudo-state approach, HEIs could not respond to the demands of labor market, local communities, and did not have the opportunity to be involved as partners in solving the problems of the societal development. In many cases they were deprived of the opportunity to change curricula in accordance with the requirements of the competitive environment due to inefficiency, or simply the absence of mechanisms for self-governance, autonomy, and planning of their own development.

Soviet traditions were deeply ingrained in the academic culture of these countries over decades. This long history made it difficult to simply abandon these practices and replace them with new ones. Universities and academic institutions tend to be conservative and resistant to change. Reforming the HE system required financial resources for curriculum development, faculty training, infrastructure upgrades, and other necessary changes. These resources were often limited, hindering rapid reform efforts. The use of the Russian language in academic and scientific discourse was widespread in the Soviet era. Changing the language of instruction and publication in the peer-reviewed journals was a complex and contentious process, that could interrupt establishing research networks and international collaborations. Political instability and changes in government leadership can disrupt reform efforts and result in inconsistent policies. Despite these challenges, the EaP states have made significant efforts to modernize their HE systems, adapt to European standards, and reduce the influence of Soviet traditions.

According to the documents and researches, almost all the new nations adopted a similar package of reforms, many of them neo-liberal in nature (Giroux, 2006, Huisman 2012, Margison, 2006) that aimed to bring new agenda to their HE systems. This would be achieved through the establishment of a non-state sector, the introduction of tuition fees in the public sector, national standardized tests for admission exams to higher education, decentralization of the governance and-although not in all countries-loans for students and performance-based funding. (Smolentseva, 2012). Henceforth, the reforms would have an impact on the economic, political and cultural structures of the countries by increasing the importance of the strategy of HE and the importance of human capital for the competitiveness of the countries.

These transformations caused principal changes and innovations in legislation in the education systems reflected in the new laws approved at the beginning of the 21st century. The EaP countries' governments had to revise and renew their legislative system that resulted in adapting new laws. For instance, in Armenia, the Law "On Education" was adopted in 1999 followed by the "Strategy of the HE Reforms" (2003) and the Law "On Higher and Postgraduate Professional Education" was adopted in 2004. In Belarus the Law "On Education" was adopted in 1991. In Georgia the Law "On Higher Education" was approved in 2004. In 2002 the Law "On Higher Education" was adopted in Ukraine. The newly adopted laws on HE in EaP countries turned out to be pivotal for their integration into European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and were to play a crucial role in these nations' aspirations for European integration.

2. Europeanization of HE through local approaches

Since the beginning of the 21st century onwards the EaP countries' national governments began to promote broad and purposeful Europeanization agenda of the reforms of HE systems for they could approach and smoothly join the BP. Some of them eagerly adopted European policy prescriptions, while others preferred a more selective approach. In any case, the BP and integration to the EHEA were noticed, debated, or even integrated in domestic political games (Dakowska and Harmsen, 2015).

Firstly, to a certain extent the Europeanization of HE was considered as a process that was closely linked to the countries' attempt to break through the Soviet past and legacy in various fields including the field of education. Secondly, it was an attraction for the population of the post-Soviet countries that looked at Europe as a proper, much better way of constructing and managing different spheres, and particularly that of education.

Research on the Europeanization of HE systems in the EaP countries indicates that HE in the EaP has shown definite successful attempts of reforming, and advancing the quality of education, and internationalization of teaching and research. So far, quite a lot is known about the content of the HE reforms in an analysis of the political will of reforms and its actors, an explanation for specific patterns of reforms, a strong and convincing assessment of outputs and outcomes of reforms considered economic, political and social conditions, the impact of the process of values, norms and values of citizen of EaP countries.

In 2005 five EaP countries Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine signed the Bologna Declaration (BD) at the Bergen Conference defining the direction and contours of the reformation process of the HE systems. This event started the new era in the HE sector and also had a major impact on the HE internal and external stakeholders. In accordance with the BD guidelines the major changes were to be connected within the structural reform, i.e. organizing the tertiary education in three cycles, introducing the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), establishing an internal quality management system at institutional level, and encouraging academic mobility, the international recognition of universities diplomas, competitiveness and integration into EHEA.

In general, joining the BP and implementing the BD was inspiring for the EaP governments as it was foreseen as an instrument for closer integration with the EU when conducting and developing consistent policies and practices. Reformation of the HE sector was also undertaken with the framework of relevant the EU policies and practices.

New era in HE started followed by the necessity to tackle plenty of new tasks, setting up new objectives and agendas, elaborating new strategies and policies aimed at widening access to tertiary education, creation of a national qualifications framework, enhancement of quality assurance, revision of the HE funding mechanisms, recognition and comparability of degrees, student mobility, strengthening the ties between HE sector and the labour market and ensuring effective governance and financial management of HEIs.

It would be fair to say that during the last decades, each of the six EaP countries has gone through the HE reformation process with certain success and failures. Out of the six EaP

countries Belarus's way to joining the Bologna process was featured with many hindrances and drawbacks. In 2005 Belarus only announced the intention to make its HE system similar to the ideas proclaimed in the BD Declaration. In 2012 the first attempt of Belarus to join BP was declined due to the evident drawbacks in academic freedom, institutional autonomy and integration of student community into HEI governance (Karpenko, 2012). In 2013 by the decision of the European Parliament Belarus was exempted from the cohort of the countries forming EHEA, because "the principles and values of the BP, such as academic freedom, institutional autonomy were not sufficient (Pogorelskaya, 2017).

Later on, the Belarusian government undertook certain measures to improve the situation and in 2015 Belarus signed the BD during the Yerevan Ministerial Conference. However, as Gille-Belova (2015) stated the Belarusian officials perceived Bologna process as an opportunity to improve their relations with the EU by cooperating on a politically neutral issue, while other domestic actors such as the Public Bologna Committee saw EHEA accession as an instrument for radically reforming the existing HE system. The analysis of the national reforms in Belarus conducted by local and international researchers demonstrate the governmental attempt to preserve the soviet legacy in HE sector and to correspond to European standards (ibid, 2015). This approach failed, and in 2019 Belarus was exempted from the EHEA.

In other five EaP countries numerous initiatives and actions were undertaken in the HE sector to introduce and facilitate the implementation of the BD guidelines by HEIs. For instance, in Ukraine, during 2005–2007 the important steps in realization of the BP regulations were implemented, like setting up the ministerial Bologna Follow Up working group that was formed in order to enable the recognition and acceptance of the BP by academia and students (Nikolaeva, 2015). In 2008, the amendments to the Law "On Higher Education" in accordance with the Bologna guideline were introduced. The "Action Plan on Quality Assurance for Higher Education" was elaborated. Ukraine became a member of the European Quality Assurance Register. The Diploma Supplement was developed in accordance with the EU HEIs' format.

In Armenia, in 2011 the Law "On Education Development Strategy" was adopted followed by the "State Program for Education Development" (2011–2015). Additionally, the "Armenian Development Strategy for 2014-2025" was adopted. The Strategy identified four priorities for HE development: growth of university graduates' employment, development of human capital, improvement of the social protection system, and institutional modernization of the public administration and governance systems.

In Moldova the national education sector is regulated by the Education Code adopted in 2014, which set the legal framework of legal relations concerning planning, organization, functioning and development of the education system. That very year, the Moldovan government approved the "Education Development Strategy for 2014-2020" or "Education 2020" which set the medium-term tasks and objectives for education development and defined the priority development directions of the education system.

In Azerbaijan, in 2013 the “National Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Azerbaijan” was approved followed by the “State Program on reforms in the higher education system in the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2009-2013” aimed at the integration of the HE of the country to the EHEA, and adjustment of its content to the principles of BD. “Strategy for Education Development in Azerbaijan until 2025”, adopted in 2013 is also an important document seeking to identify purposes, goals, directions, instruments and mechanisms for the development of the education system in the Republic of Azerbaijan (Murshudova, 2011).

The key ideas of HE reforms and further development of education and science in Georgia were clearly underlined in two strategic documents: “Strategic Development of Higher Education and Science in Georgia” and “Unified Strategy for Education and Science for 2017-2021” of the Ministry of Education and Science.

The newly adopted laws and other legislative documents demonstrated the EaP countries’ governments political will to address definite domestic problems in the field of education in general, diminishing the Soviet legacy in the HE sector and to approach to the EHEA.

These legal reforms reflected a commitment to improving the quality and effectiveness of education systems across the EaP countries. The governments in these countries recognized that a strong and well-functioning educational infrastructure is vital for the development of their societies, economies, and overall well-being.

The specific nature of these legislative changes can vary across the countries, but they often addressed a range of fundamental concerns in HE, like reforming curriculum and teaching methods to meet the demands of the labour market and enhancing the quality of education. Additionally, the new laws signified a willingness to align educational systems with European standards and best practices, thereby improving the recognition of qualifications and facilitating the mobility of students, researchers, and professionals on the global stage. Such internationalization efforts often signal a commitment to fostering cross-border collaborations and partnerships in the field of education.

3. Internationalization dimension

The analysis of the national policies across the region demonstrates that Europeanization of HE in the EaP countries has been deeply embedded in internationalization of higher education (IHE) including its conceptualization, dimensions, strategy of implementation, advantages and limits, etc. Murshudova (2011) points out that internationalization of academic environment and education process has gradually become a key question at the agenda of the HEIs. International outreach creates a foundation for up-to-date research and development in the transitional post-Soviet economies and builds regional multi-level collaborations. It was foreseen that integration of the HE systems of the EaP counties into EHEA would strengthen the positions of the HEIs at the national and international labor market ensuring the quality of HE according to the European

standards. The EaP countries have gradually become aware of the imperative to internationalize their education and research processes since the increasing pressure on behalf of the local governments and urgent necessity to modernize the HE systems according to the European standards.

Despite of the adoption of the common ideology of the IHE, the approaches to the internationalization of education and research in each of the six EaP countries are rather distinct. According to Maringe and Foskett (2010) regional variation in approaches to internationalization is not surprising, given the many variations across regions in historical, political, economic, cultural, and other contextual characteristics.

In Armenia, for instance there is an exceptional development of transnational HE. There are several kinds of transnational education providers in Armenia like in no other country of the region: interstate institutions, franchises, joint/ double degree providers, branch campuses, independent institutions, and virtual education programs (Marinosyan, 2015).

In Azerbaijan there has been ‘State Youth Student Programme’ launched which has financed the education of about 5,000 young people abroad (mainly in the UK, France and Germany). The President of the Republic of Azerbaijan signed decrees on the “State Program for the Education of Azerbaijani Youth in Foreign Countries” dated October 19, 2006. The ‘Presidential Program’ provides a unique opportunity for the most talented students from Azerbaijan to get HE (bachelor, master and PhD) in the leading universities all over the world. The objective of the State Program is to facilitate establishment a competitive economic system in the country and a supply of qualified specialists across the various fields. Over the years, thousands scholarships have been awarded to Azerbaijani students to study abroad. These countries - UK, Turkey, Germany, Canada and the Netherlands were among top destination countries for study (Mammadova and Valiyev, 2020).

In Georgia, the legal framework addresses problems of quality assurance and internationalization. The internationalization indicators became a part of accreditation procedures and the promotion of student mobility (Lezhava, 2016). In Moldova, the reform of the governance of higher education institutions paused the advance of the Bologna process implementation (Curia et al, 2012). In Belarus, the compliance of the Bologna principles with the priorities of the state, the increase in the international ratings of national universities, the growth of the competitiveness of HEIs in the international arena was always important (Mozheyko, 2017).

Rumyantseva and Logvynenko (2018) argue that in Ukraine the key drivers of the transformations were fascination with developments in the neighbouring EU and the need to overcome or incorporate Soviet legacies, as suggest. The authors claim that reform was guided by three rationales: nation and state building, comparison and critique, and catch-up Europeanization. But despite the local differences and approaches, all countries pay considerable attention to improving quality assurance of education and mobility (Huisman and Westerheijden, 2010).

Unfortunately, the normative base for the IHE development lagged behind the initiatives and activities of HEIs across the region. They HEIs across the region were

engaged in international activities despite the lack of the formal strategies at national and institutional levels as they wanted to internationalize curricula, open international degree programs, to encourage students to study abroad and attract foreign students to their campuses. Along with that there was a strong need to define what was meant by internationalization in the national contexts, which would allow to get past the rhetoric and to figure out how to develop proper action plan. The analysis conducted in each of the countries showed quite similar problems related to the development of the IHE:

- lack of a comprehensive development strategy promoting internationalization
- insufficient commitment of behalf of the HEIs leadership
- lack of the qualified staff for operational tasks of the IHE
- lack of financial resources to implement efficient internationalization process.

Quality assurance turned out to be one of the most challenging issues for the HE systems in all the EaP countries. The principal trend of the HE systems reform was to make align with European Standards for Quality Assurance which required establishing external independent agencies on quality assurance as a new governmental and public tool to hold all HEIs accountable for their operations and outcomes. Hence, there were established the external agencies on quality assurance in accordance with the existing model of such organization in the European countries.

For instance, in Armenia establishment of National Center for Professional Education Quality Assurance (NCQA) happened in 2009 with the financial support of the World Bank (Dobbins and Khachatryan, 2015). In Georgia the National Center for Education Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) initiated a HE quality assurance reform in 2017 to upgrade the quality assurance and accreditation standards and procedures. All the Georgian universities have quality assurance units complied of several specialists mainly responsible for meeting the accreditation standards set by the National Center (Javakhishvili, et. al 2010). In Azerbaijan the Education Quality Assurance Agency was established in December 2019 by reorganizing the former Accreditation and Nostrification Department of the Ministry of Education into the newly public legal entity. In Moldova, the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Professional Education (ANACIP) was founded in 2014, and its activity is regulated by the Education Code. In 2015, ANACIP became an associate member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The same year, the Republic of Moldova became a governmental member of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) (Cojocari, 2011). The created agencies have provided an external and independent evaluation of HEIs' functioning which enhances their credibility and reputation both domestically and internationally. They help protect the interests of students and their families by ensuring that HEIs meet certain quality standards. The initiative to create the National Agencies for Quality Assurance was quite innovative for all the EaP countries and requires a lot of efforts on behalf of all the stakeholders to sustain.

Another hallmark of the concurrence with the European standards in HE was introduction of the national qualification framework as a systematic way to organize and describe qualifications within an education and training system, providing a common framework for understanding and comparing qualifications. In each EaP country the establishing process was not easy, it took long time and was to some extent politicized. For instance, the Decree on a National Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning of the Republic of Azerbaijan (AzQF) was adopted in July 2018 and was aligned with the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning. In Ukraine National Qualification Framework was adopted in 2011 thanks to the support and cooperation with European institutions. It was aimed to promote progress towards recognition of qualifications and competences, ensuring transparency of qualifications, lifelong learning and encouraging coordination and transparency at all levels of education and training.

The created NQF allows EaP countries to align their qualifications with international standards, making it easier for their graduates to have their qualifications recognized domestically and abroad. It can contribute to the development of a more transparent, flexible, and responsive education and training system in EaP countries. However, the successful implementation of an NQF requires careful planning, stakeholder engagement, and coordination among relevant institutions and agencies.

Ten years (2005-2015) of the intense HE reforms in the EaP countries resulted in enormous, mostly positive changes in the HE sector, however there still remained areas for improvement which were outlined at the Ministerial Conference in Yerevan in 2015 and specified to enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching; fostering the employability of graduates throughout their working lives; making the systems more inclusive; further implementing the agreed structural reforms.

As it was mentioned earlier Europeanization of HE in the EaP countries is strongly imbedded into internationalization strategy and is connected with the BP. The latter boosted the incorporation of the Bologna guidelines into the national agendas according to their own national specificities. That is why implementation of the main provisions of the BP inevitably involved national approaches to the organization of education, the content of education, traditions in the training of future specialists. Still, it could be taken into account, that the policy instruments used to steer the Bologna implementation are soft law mechanisms that foster the introduction of reforms at national level, although they also create coordination frailties that are difficult to overcome (Veiga and Amaral, 2007).

Since 2005, the mechanisms of IHE were crystalized by BD which five countries signed. The introduction of the BP was a certain shift towards integration into EHEA and to the European HE standards. In HEIs academic mobility was enlarged, double degree programs appeared, more international students considered obtaining university diploma in the HEIs in the region, international academic cooperation intensified through signed agreement of cooperation. It is critical to mention that implementing the BP guidelines were accompanied by the intention of the EaP governments and academic communities to

preserve their own traditions, heritage and experience in the HE sector. This call was strongly articulated not only by academia but policy makers and wider public.

However, numerous research on implementation of BP in the HE across the region indicate numerous difficulties on its way. For instance, according to Gharibyan (2017) in Armenia there was weak national regulatory framework and the lack of quality assurance standards and criteria to monitor partnerships appropriately. In Moldova, the inefficient reform of universities' governance paused the advance of the Bologna process implementation (Bischof and Tofan, (2012). In Georgia, the legal framework addresses problems of quality assurance and internationalization (Javahishvili et al, 2010). The implementation in Azerbaijan of the Bologna process was, from the beginning, a long and controversial process (Baghirov and Gurbanova, 2017).

Implementation of BD in Belarus is a particular case. Titarenko (2019) indicates that in Belarusian HEIs Bachelor's degrees do not exist: graduates from the 4-year education are called specialists – similar to the previous stage of the 5-year education.

In each country academic communities were divided into advocates and opponents of the BP. The opponents of implementing BP stressed upon the following:

- it was a top-down structural reform, without initial discussion in the HE sector;
- the introduction of the institutional autonomy was underestimated and reluctantly valued by the academia;
- teaching staff reluctantly engaged in the process of the reform due to their enormous teaching load;
- the Bologna reform required innovative teaching methods which required training of the teaching staff and extra working load;
- the key BP instruments were difficult to incorporate into HE system. It required immense training of teaching staff and personnel;
- though the academic mobility immediately became popular among the academia and students, the recognition of the study abroad results was a big issue;
- students were not accustomed to such amount of individual work, instead they used to work collectively. They had no skills for independent work. The main objective of teaching was to provide students with as much information as possible which they in turn were expected to reproduce.

Lots of resistance to implementation ECTS was observed in each country especially due to the lack of uniform requirements for the implementation of the European system for assessing students' knowledge in EaP countries.

There were also challenges related to the increased opportunities of study abroad programs connected to the intellectual emigration, the so called "brain drain". The EaP countries for years experienced the brain drain, where skilled academics and professionals leave for better opportunities abroad. This drain of human capital can impact the quality of HE and slow down the pace of Europeanization efforts (Sikorska, 2017).

Several editions of the so-called "Black Book of the Bologna Process" (2005, 2012, 2018) created by students from the BP participating countries eloquently emphasized the problems and shortcomings of the changes and challenges they had to tackle with during the education process transformation.

However, despite of all the difficulties of reformation of HE systems during the last decades of BP in five EaP countries the HE systems has demonstrated adaptivity to the external environment and internal changes and a certain progress in achieving the BD goals. Just to name a few:

1. Adaptation of curricula to the Bologna model requirements in accordance with national and international references.
2. The improvement of education programs was explicit in regard to the:
 - 2.1. Development of different types of competencies (generic and specific)
 - 2.2. Better articulation between study course units
 - 2.3. Increase of interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary
 - 2.4. Student workload adjustment (contact and independent work hours).
3. Promoting the change in students' habits and work strategies, towards more proactive, autonomous and competency-oriented methods.
4. Implementation of a set of diverse initiatives to implement, coordinate and monitor the Bologna process.
5. Improvement of the pedagogic monitoring activities, including the introduction of a new middle-semester evaluation, and the adjustment and application of an existent final evaluation to both 1st and 2nd cycle programs.
6. Reinforcement of responsibility for both students and teachers in the new learning process focused on the competencies development.
7. Effort to improve the student-teacher proximity, by promoting the practice of lab and tutorial classes, weekly-assigned accompaniment sessions, and pedagogical meetings.
8. A change in students' habits and work strategies, towards more proactive, autonomous and competency-oriented methods was promoted.
9. Improve and increase institutional services and resources that support teaching and learning process (Yuryeva, 2011).

In general, through years the implementation of BD principles in each of the EaP countries has been accompanied with different success. For instance, Jabbarzade (2020) in her comparative research of the results of BP in Azerbaijan and Georgia argues that: "...participation in the Bologna process, cooperation with the international organizations and western countries helped them to develop the HE system. However, the integration to the EHEA did not bring dramatic changes to the existing HE system of these two countries and students were not provided with enough information regarding the implementation of the Bologna principles". The HE transformations and, more broadly, economic, and social ones, appeared as laboratories of reformist innovations and experiments in the context of democratization processes in the EaP countries. Dobbins and Knill, (2009) mention that these transformations were facilitated by their considerable openness towards international

assistance and advice during the period of transition and afterwards. It would be fair to mention about international assistance to the EaP countries in their HE reforms. In general the post-Soviet countries transformations were largely supported by the international funds and programs, like the World Bank, OECD, HE reforms also have been immensely sponsored by the pan European agencies and multilateral organizations like Council of Europe, European Commission also private foundations and national agencies like DAAD.

The international assistance has been organized through the European Commission Programmes like Erasmus+ through the defined and approved by each country national priorities and could include: curriculum development, reform institutional governance, university management, knowledge transfer, to support infrastructure development and academic staff. The national priorities varied through years and countries.

According to the numerous reviews, the programmes demonstrate the enormous positive impacts on the beneficiary organizations and countries in general. The budget for Eastern Partnership makes up over 15% of the entire international mobility budget and so far has enabled the establishment of 3 393 projects for bilateral partnerships that plan to organize mobility for over 43 000 students, researchers, and staff (EU-Eastern Partnership cooperation through Erasmus+, 2021).

However, there were critical reviews that the International Aid Programmes should have more differentiated approach to each country. For instance, Smolentseva et al (2018) argue that international assistance agents underestimated the power of traditional institutional structures and inherited professional practices from the Soviet system, and the need to work with them, instead of trying to “develop” the systems as they did in educational programmes in other regions. That said, specific regional issues have given a particular label on the regional initiatives, which explains why different countries treat differently the Bologna key instruments.

Even though there has been a huge support of the EU programs to support the EaP countries academic and student mobility, the use of the EU mobility budgets and schemes varies enormously across the region. It depends on the number of the places available for each beneficiary country and consequently for each HEI. The barriers for participation in academic mobility have remain the same for decades – poor level of knowledge of English, financial restrains and psychological barriers. A significant obstacle for the region’s HEIs to participate in the Erasmus mobility schemes is also the limited number of foreign language programs and courses on academic offer which prevents to receive incoming students from abroad.

Speaking about the Erasmus mobility there is still unbalance between the incoming and outgoing number of students in all the EaP countries. The countries still remain unprepared for hosting Erasmus students neither in legislation (visa procedures for instance) nor in accommodation conditions. The HEIs in most cases underestimate the importance of changing the academic culture to host the international students, the teaching staff is reported to have lack of professional skills to teach international students.

Summarizing the stated above, it can be stated that the EaP countries have been contributed aspired for closer integration with the EU in the field of HE despite of the international relations of each EaP country with the EU. The amplitude of the changes largely depended on the political context of each EaP country and the incentives offered by the EU or international donors. In the EaP area, the motivation for joining BP was used either to accelerate European integration or for the benefit from the advantages of intergovernmental cooperation in the field of HE (maximizing opportunities for mobility, participating in EU initiatives etc.) without attempting to join the EU. After the EaP countries became part of the BP, there was no direct and explicit pressure from the EU regarding reforms implementation. In consequence, there was no approach based on global progress indicators but only on interventions financed through EU funds.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that, the EaP countries have undergone significant changes and reforms in their HE systems from 1991 to 2020. This period witnessed the transition from a legacy of centralized, Soviet-style education systems to more diversified, modern, and internationally oriented HEIs. The reforms have been driven by a combination of internal and external factors, including political shifts, economic challenges, and the aspiration to align with the European HE standards. In general, the reforms were marked by the European vector and recognized by scholarship and policymakers as ‘Europeanization of higher education’.

Throughout the reformation process, that was certain common themes and challenges in HE systems emerged across the region. These include the HEIs’ efforts to enhance the quality of education, promote academic mobility, and ensure the relevance of the HE to the national labor markets. The introduction of the BD principles, the growth of internationalization, and the development of quality assurance mechanisms have been key pillars of reform in these countries.

The EaP countries’ governments sought to bridge the gap between the post-soviet and European HE systems, making degrees more comparable and increasing the mobility of students and scholars. Obviously, they used references to the EHEA to boost domestic changes that should occur.

The HE reforms were reflected in the updated legislation and normative base. The new laws and sub-laws were approved in each EaP country. These laws were elaborated in accordance with the new political situation, societal demands and in accordance with the needs of structural reform and modernization of HE. The newly adopted laws and other legislative documents in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries represent a significant milestone in the political landscape of these nations. These legal measures showcase the determination and political will of their respective governments to tackle specific and pressing domestic challenges within the realm of education.

The EaP countries established national quality assurance systems and accreditation agencies in line with the European standards. These agencies ensured that HEIs and their educational programs could meet the defined quality criteria and are the subject to external evaluation.

It is clear that the EaP countries have made remarkable progress in reforming their HE systems, despite the complex and diverse contexts in which they operate. The commitment to harmonize with the European standards and the recognition of the crucial role HE plays in fostering economic and social development have been driving forces in these reforms. These reforms are a manifestation of the governments' commitment to addressing domestic challenges and creating a more promising educational landscape for their citizens, ultimately contributing to the socio-economic development and cultural richness of the EaP region.

However, the reform process has not been without obstacles, as the EaP countries faced their unique hurdles, shaped by historical legacies, socio-economic conditions, and national contexts. Issues such as limited financial resources, brain drain, and the need for greater autonomy for universities have posed challenges to these nations in varying degrees. Public participation in the reformation process of HE has been limited across the region. Adoption of the education policies in HE within the defined time period and its structural reformation created many uncertainties among the academic communities in the HEIs who recovered the Soviet legacies in HE. It also caused tension between HE and employers' communities, as the value and status of the degrees, especially at bachelor level, have been unclear. On the other hand, the idea of joining European academic community and build up partnership with European institutions and benefiting from these partnerships became appealing for the academia in all the EaP countries.

In general, the HE transformations and, more broadly, economic, and social ones, appeared as laboratories of reformist innovations and experiments in the context of democratization processes in the EaP countries. The experience of these nations in reforming their HE systems during the period 1991-2020 stands as a testament to the transformative power of education in shaping societies, economies, and the aspirations of individuals. It could be fairly noted, that the EaP countries have demonstrated their determination to adapt to the demands of a changing world while preserving their unique cultural and historical legacies.

As these countries continue their journeys toward more competitive, innovative, and inclusive HE systems, it is crucial to build on the successes of the past decades while addressing the remaining and new challenges. Sustained investments in education, the nurturing of research and innovation, and the promotion of academic freedom are vital elements for the continued transformation of EaP countries HE systems. For further research it will be crucial to keep tracing the evolution of the HE policies in each of the EaP countries as well as monitoring if they are advantageous to tackle the local and global challenges.

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