

fallen behind. This has become a very serious threat to our competitiveness.”

Only time will tell whether this statement was just a rhetoric manoeuvre or will lead to real changes.

About the Author

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ANALYSIS

Higher Education Reforms and Global Geopolitics: Shifting Cores and Peripheries in Russia, the Baltics, and Central Asia

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Abstract

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Russia and the newly independent republics of the Baltics, Central Asia, and the Caucasus engaged in redefining their political, economic, and social relationships vis-a-vis each other and the world. In the Baltics, the main impetus for reforms was “a return to Europe,” which was reflected in the efforts to replace Soviet education policies and practices with European ones. In other parts of the former Soviet Union (for example, some countries of Central Asia), the intent was to hold on to the educational structures and practices introduced by Russian authorities during the Soviet period, while restoring some of the pre-Soviet traditions. And yet in other parts of the former Soviet Union (for example, the Caucasus), the desire was to explore alternatives by pursuing new educational alliances (for example, partnerships between Turkey and Azerbaijan). In most cases, education reforms became a part of the broader reconfiguration of the post-Soviet education space, including the re-definition of power relationships between the newly independent states, Russia, the European Union, and the world.

Different Visions, Similar Reforms

Despite vastly different visions of post-Soviet transformation trajectories, education reforms assumed striking similarities across the region. As Heyneman (2011) points out, higher education reforms included a move toward standardized testing as a criterion for admissions, a restructuring away from sector ministerial control, a diversification of provision, as well as a decentralization of governance, salary, and tuition structures. Taken together, these reforms constituted a part of the “post-socialist education reform package” that was transferred to the newly independent countries after the Soviet Union collapsed (Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008, p. 1).

In some cases, this “package” was imposed through the structural adjustment policies introduced by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. In other cases, however, it was voluntarily borrowed out of fear of “falling behind” internationally. Generally, the changes were perceived as necessary to “correct” the inefficiencies of the Soviet higher education system, while modernizing the system to meet the needs of market economies. Given the contextual diversity of the post-Soviet education space and the wide variety of geopolitical visions, why were post-Soviet education reforms so strikingly similar? More importantly, how and to what extent did these higher education reforms affect geopolitical re-

configurations of the newly independent countries vis-à-vis Russia, Europe, and the world?

To examine these questions, I will focus on higher education reforms in two distinctly different cases—the Baltics and Central Asia. In the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, higher education reforms were driven by a clear determination to distance universities from Russia's influence and instead embrace European Union (EU) standards, policies, and practices. In contrast, for some Central Asian republics (for example, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), the historical relationships with Russia remained intertwined, yet increasingly more complicated in the post-Soviet context. In both cases, the Russian government attempted to maintain its influence through the implementation of different policies, although with various degrees of intensity and success. Increasingly, however, the EU (especially the Bologna process) played an important role in determining the direction of higher education reforms in the Baltics and Central Asia. It is in the context of these multiple, conflicting, and overlapping international influences that we will examine the complex reconfiguration of the post-Soviet higher education space.

The Baltics: “Returning to Europe”

The leitmotif of post-Soviet higher education reforms in the Baltics was a “return to Europe” (Silova, 2002). Neither the vast majority of society nor political elites questioned the desire to break ties with Russia and become a part of Europe. In fact, Europe often appeared as the only alternative for post-Soviet transformations in the Baltics. Not surprisingly, the integration of the three Baltic states into the EU in 2004 clearly signaled a desire to adhere to the shared European values of liberal democracy and free market economics. From this perspective, educational policies in the Baltic states have been naturally pro-Western, either in the European or Transatlantic sense.

Notwithstanding the clearly articulated desire to “return to Europe,” Russia used higher education as a foreign policy tool in an attempt to maintain its influence in the region. One such foreign policy strategy was its “compatriot” policy,” which included scholarships for Russian-speaking residents of the Baltic states to pursue higher education or teacher training in Russia. In 1999, for example, the Moscow City Council established “Luzhkov scholarships” for Russian-speaking students from Latvia, awarding 40–50 scholarships annually to study in Russian universities (Muiznieks, 2006). Similarly, the Russian Embassy in Riga has supported study visits to Russia for school children and teachers. The 2004 evaluation of Russia's “compatriot” policy in

the Baltic states, which was conducted by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, did not produce flattering results. The report noted that there was a widespread belief that Russia's policy to support “compatriots” was to a certain degree declarative and that “with regard to education, youth are to a large extent oriented to Europe, and not Russia” (quoted in Muiznieks, 2006, p. 129).

In a way, the more Russia sought to preserve its influence over the Baltics, the more the Baltic republics expressed their commitment to westernization (particularly Europeanization), thus ensuring the irreversibility not only of their independence, but also of integration into the West. In higher education, it would be fair to say that Russia has lost its influence in the Baltic states, and it is the EU that now dictates the direction of higher education reforms in the region. While most of the EU measures do not explicitly aim at the regulation of national systems and policies, they impact them more indirectly through European educational cooperation. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the Baltics states have joined other EU accession countries in a wide range of EU-funded educational programs, which were specifically designed to help these countries prepare for accession to the EU (e.g., SOCRATES, LEONARDO da VINCI, TEMPUS, etc). The basic logic and most objectives of the EU educational initiatives—promoting international cooperation, enhancing the quality of education, encouraging social integration, and increasing the employability of graduates—have generally corresponded to national development goals, forming the cornerstone of education policies in the new accession countries.

Undoubtedly, joining the Bologna process brought a “windfall of benefits” to the new members, including the expectation of bringing funding and talent into their stagnating higher education systems (Tomusk, 2011). However, this has not necessarily resulted in leveling the playing field of European higher education, with the newly independent republics of the former Soviet Union assuming equal positions in the European higher education space. Although some countries may seem to have gained a stronger voice in European politics (including higher education policymaking), the majority appear to have remained on the periphery of the emerging European federal structure. For example, student mobility within Europe remains a difficult issue, with top-ranking universities (such as Oxford and Cambridge) reluctant to host students from low-ranking universities, and risking their own reputation. Universities in the peripheral countries, however, remain highly interested in becoming providers on the emerging European markets of higher education. In other words, joining the European education space has not

necessarily moved the Baltic states towards the center of Western Europe; rather, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have remained on the periphery of Europe. As Tomusk (2008) poignantly described,

“Instead of a new brotherhood of European nations coming together for mutual richness of cultures, and languages, and identity formation on that basis, Europe is assuming the path of transforming its higher education into an English-language-operated knowledge shop with its high street in Cambridge and Oxford and night bazaars in Tallinn, Riga, Sofia, and so on, where the periphery is not adding its cultural value to the common European pool but rather, having internalized the imposed view on its own inferiority, imitates the center in the language that often sounds like broken English.” (p. 24)

Central Asia: Colliding Ideas and Ideologies

While most of the Central/Southeastern European countries were enthusiastic in their efforts to distance themselves from the socialist past and join the European education space, most of the Central Asian Republics insisted on keeping many of the Soviet educational traditions and practices, while creating their own unique models of educational development. In Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, for example, education reforms have been primarily based on internal references to Soviet educational practices. Frequently, Soviet education is still explicitly described as the “good old” system, offering hope to overcome the current educational crisis. In fact, there is an increasing tendency for romanticizing the Soviet past as a strategy for not undertaking substantive reforms in higher education (Tomusk, 2008).

In this context, Russia continues to serve as a “model” for particular higher education reform trajectories in Central Asia. In particular, Russia remains the first-choice destination for many Central Asian students, although an increasing number of students (especially those with English language abilities) choose to study in Western Europe or North America. Furthermore, Russia has set up branches of its universities in the Central Asian states to respond to the demand for education in the Russian language. For example, Moscow State University opened a branch in Dushanbe in 2009 and the Russian Oil and Gas University opened a branch in Ashgabat in 2008, to mention just a few examples. These universities undoubtedly influence higher education in the region by diversifying the available study options and increasing academic competition. However, they are increasingly competing with newly established local universities (e.g., KIMEP in Kazakhstan) and with the higher education institutions affiliated with other inter-

national agencies and supported by various international governments (e.g., the University of Central Asia supported by the Aga Khan Foundation).

Moreover, Russia’s influence has been increasingly overshadowed by the Bologna process, which has become a major consideration for those Central Asian governments that are interested in joining the European education space (for example, Kazakhstan). More intensive cooperation between the EU and Central Asia began in 2007, when the European Education Initiative was launched as part of the EU-Central Asia Strategy (Jones, 2011). By 2009, the initiative had prioritized higher and vocational education and emphasized links with the Bologna process. Countries in Central Asia, notably Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and to some degree even Tajikistan, are interested in membership in the Bologna Process in order to increase the visibility of, and financial flows to, their higher education systems. Economically, membership in the Bologna process is seen as a powerful marketing tool that could attract fee-paying students, particularly from Asian countries, to former Soviet Union republics in Central Asia. Politically, it is seen as a vehicle that could shift Central Asian countries from the global periphery towards Europe. In particular, President Nursultan Nazarbaev has publicly announced the goal of placing Kazakhstan among the top 50 countries of the world, while the Tajik government proclaimed the challenging task of lifting its education system to the top six most competitive systems worldwide (cited in Tomusk, 2011).

In practice, however, higher education reforms remain painstakingly slow. Central Asian universities continue to face major problems including low salaries, lack of funding, stagnating curricula, and increasing corruption. In turn, this has slowed down implementation of any major reforms. As Brunner and Tillet (2003) summarize, there have been no significant changes in how higher education institutions are managed, or how teaching, learning and research are conducted. Within this context, public universities are at risk of losing relevance, while the newly established private institutions do not always ensure the necessary quality (Brunner and Tillet, 2003). In other words, higher education reforms have been largely unsuccessful. As a result, Central Asia has not only remained on the periphery, but has in fact moved from the Soviet to the global periphery (Tomusk, 2011).

Shifting Cores and Peripheries

What is common to these distinctly different case-studies of higher education reforms in the Baltic states and Central Asia is the attempt to radically reconfigure the post-Soviet education space. The Baltic states and Cen-

tral Asian republics have attempted to re-position themselves along the imaginary axis of East/West or core/periphery. Indeed, since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a degree of geopolitical reconfiguration among its former republics has taken place. The three Baltic States—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—have undoubtedly moved from East to West through their membership in the European Union and NATO; yet the movement has only brought them to the European periphery. The Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan continue to grapple with increasingly colliding higher education

trajectories, stemming from the multiple influences of Russian, EU, and other international policies. From the Central Asian standpoint, Russia continues to be seen as a more advanced (western) country, which inevitably places Central Asia at the global periphery. It is exactly this shift from the imperial periphery of the Soviet Union to the global periphery that connects Russia, the Baltic states, and Central Asia in the broader context of post-Soviet higher education reforms. It is not necessarily a shift that these nations have been actively seeking, but it is something that they now have to deal with.

About the Author

Iveta Silova, Dr. phil., is associate professor of comparative and international education at Lehigh University, Pennsylvania, USA. Her research and publications cover a range of issues critical to understanding globalization and post-socialist education transformation processes. Her recent publications include: *Globalization on the Margins: Education and Post-Socialist Transformations in Central Asia* (Information Age Publishing, 2011), *Post-socialism is not Dead: (Re)reading the Global in Comparative Education* (Emerald, 2010), *How NGOs React: Globalization and Education Reform in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Mongolia* (Kumarian Press, 2008; with Gita Steiner-Khamsi) and *From Sites of Occupation to Symbols of Multiculturalism: Re-conceptualizing Minority Education in Post-Soviet Latvia* (Information Age Publishing, 2006). Additionally, she is co-editor (with Noah W. Sobe) of *European Education: Issues and Studies* (a quarterly peer-reviewed journal published by M.E. Sharpe).

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