

Book Review:

25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries: Reform and Continuity

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25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries: Reform and Continuity, by Jeroen Huisman, Anna Smolentseva and Isak Froumin (Eds.), 2018, Palgrave Studies in Global Higher Education.

During the last decades, the transformation of post-Soviet countries has been at the center of scholarly interest. Studies on the post-Soviet higher education space have mostly tended to focus on particular aspects (e.g. internationalization of higher education or changes in academic careers on the example of specific post-Soviet countries). This book provides an extensive comparative review of post-Soviet transformations and institutional landscape changes in 15 former member states of the Soviet Union (USSR). It explores how despite similar circumstances and trends after the collapse of the Soviet Union, each of the 15 countries have undergone their own unique development paths. This context forms an overarching principle and allows to better understand how present developments in higher education are connected to the academic culture or institutional set-up of the pre-Soviet periods.

The book consists of 17 chapters. In the opening chapter, the editors provide a summative overview of the main challenges former Soviet countries faced after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the main reforms these countries have undergone over the last 25 years. The roles of different actors, including national governments, but also international and supranational agencies (e.g., World Bank, European Union Structural Funds) in shaping the reform processes are also discussed. In the following chapter, Isak Froumin and Yaroslav Kouzminov discuss the institutional landscape in the USSR and the specialization of its regions, including diverse orientations of specialised higher education institutions and their role in training manpower for the Soviet industrial economy. Chapters 3–17 present case studies of higher education transformations in the former member states of the Soviet Union: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

These case studies analyze the changes in institutional landscapes, an umbrella framework throughout the book, by covering the pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet periods and presenting the drivers of change and reforms since (regaining) independence. The focus is on how different dimensions of institutional diversity have played out in national higher education systems. The impressive team of 31 researchers who worked on the case studies utilized the same methodology for each chapter, a synthesis of different policy analyses, secondary data, and interviews to respond to the shortage of reliable datasets, especially from the Soviet period.

The chapters demonstrate a certain congruence that allows for some generalization. During the Soviet period, all 15 republics followed a similar Soviet approach to higher education: a centrally planned and financed higher education sector, vocational orientation and narrow specialization, hierarchy between different types of higher education institutions, free education, separation between education and training and research, state-guaranteed employment, mandatory job placement after graduation, etc. However, despite the commonalities, the chapters also reveal strong regional disparities via differing socio-economic situations and industrial orientations, demographic trends and ethnic diversity, and higher education participation rates, not to mention previous academic traditions.

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The collapse of the Soviet Union was accompanied by decentralization and a shift from an industrial economy to a rising service sector. In most of the countries, this was accompanied by economic decline and political instability, while others also experienced armed conflicts (e.g. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Kyrgyz Republic, Russia, etc.). The first transition period, as described in many of the country cases, was led by nation-building aims, and reforms in higher education were mainly oriented towards responding to the rapidly changing circumstances, without a clear top-down vision or higher education strategy. The liberal market economy was taken as a role model, accompanied by the rise of private higher education institutions, the introduction of tuition fees and the decentralization of governance in higher education. In some countries (e.g. Estonia), the first private higher education institutions were established even before regaining independence.

The liberalization process involved massive expansion in higher education (except in Turkmenia and Uzbekistan, where enrolment in higher education decreased instead). Since the 2000s, the quality of higher education became a major concern leading to the closure or merger of many private institutions established during the 1990s. While most of the countries joined the Bologna Process, adopted the two-cycle degree system and introduced quality assurance bodies, the case studies show how this process unfolded at a varying pace and involved each country's own peculiarities.

This book is a unique collection of country studies providing a comprehensive comparative review of the transition period developments in higher education in countries of the former USSR. However, while attempting to provide an all-encompassing analysis of the changes in the respective institutional landscapes, at the same time it cannot provide in-depth analysis of different elements of the higher education system. For example, as we know, in the Soviet model research, education, and training remained separate domains and the professionalism of the teaching staff tended to vary across different post-Soviet countries and higher education institutions. This collection of case studies does not divulge the dynamics of the transformation of the academic profession or the development of academic career models, rather focusing on the institutional aspects.

It usually takes years before the impact of reforms can be assessed. When reading this book today, published in 2018, many of the circumstances have further shaped the institutional higher education landscapes. For example, in Estonia, we can say that the results of the transition to free higher education in 2013 have proved to be incomplete compared to its initial goals. The opportunities for higher education institutions to earn extra income have become scarce and the funding model for higher education has lagged. During the last year and a half, we all have been in a Covid-19 situation that has changed considerably how higher education institutions operate and how we imagine teaching and learning in higher education should be. The next decades will demonstrate the effects of the pandemic and how other global processes and local circumstances will play out in the former countries of the USSR.

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