The Bologna process and problems in higher education system of Kazakhstan

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Abstract

Nation states, nowadays, have to integrate with the world due to impositions and propositions of globalization to every aspects of life. Education systems, one of the domains of globalization, have experienced this obligation deeply. Therefore, states and governments have prepared their education systems with a national point of view in order to meet this demand of the era. On the other hand, at both national and international level, it is expected that standards in higher education should be determined, systems should be complied with these standards and integrate themselves. However, this integration process becomes rather slow and painful for countries whose education system, e.g. Kazakhstan, stuck in first Soviet then post-Soviet and now international standards. Kazakhstan's effort to become a part of globalizing education area like Bologna is an obvious example. In 2010, Kazakhstan joined the European Higher Education Area which was formed as part of the integration process on education first including EU Member States then other countries with some territory in Continental Europe. With 47 member countries, Bologna Process has become the largest cooperative education area of the world. Kazakhstan’s inclusion to this Process creates hope about fundamental changes in education system of Kazakhstan. However, integration studies go ahead very slowly due to many incomplete obstacles. With this study, it is expected, in general, to emphasize the effect of globalization on higher education systems of countries newly establishing their nation states as Kazakhstan and, in particular, to research why Kazakhstan could not become a part of the process despite included Bologna Process of higher education. In other words, the aim is to review critically whether globalization is effective in Kazakhstan – one of the neighboring countries that globalization creates specific activity – and as an example of this whether Bologna Process is effective in higher education area, and to examine the reasons of Kazakhstan’s inclusion to Bologna Process in spite of not implementing crucial principles of the Process. The research method is based on comparative analysis examining 10 action lines of the Bologna Process and how effective the basic principles are in higher education system of Kazakhstan.

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1. Introduction

The concept of globalization which makes itself felt today in every area from economics to politics, arts to media and education has become a point of interest in nearly all sciences. The effect of globalization to the nation-state has especially become the focus of works carried out in the fields of social and pedagogical sciences. The views which claim that the international economic system has become a transnational system as a result of the globalization of the world markets with the end of the Cold War, forcing the internal and external commercial

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frontiers formerly determined by the state; that the national sovereignty being the legitimate base for the nation-state is threatened as a result of the former view and therefore has begun to lose its authority; that transnational or multinational platforms are affecting not only the internal politics of each nation-state but are also globalizing the media, the communications, the culture and even the educational systems of countries (Habermas, 2002: 26; Strange, 2002: 128; Kejanhoğlu, 2004: 20–28); and that the current nation-states are thus beginning to dissolve, are permanently discussed in intellectual circles.

The fact that the nation-state and other related concepts are being problematized points to the current state of capitalism: transnational economy. However, as Karl Marx foresees it, capitalism only moves on ambiguous grounds and eventually owes its expansion to these ambiguities it has to overcome (Hill, 2001: 50). In other words, capitalism that has once caused the birth of first modern state, and then the form of organization that is the nation-state, currently tries to corrode the latter. On the other hand, it is still connected to the nation-states, helping them when necessary and supporting national interaction networks. As Michael Mann puts it (2002: 136), an economy can be global, but that is made possible through the assistance of national and international interaction networks. In reality this situation excludes the theory according to which globalization will annihilate nation-state structures or at least, it shows that this is not possible in the short term. Hence, put aside the fact that nation-state authority and power still are not (cannot be) extinguished, the presence of societies wanting to own their own states or newly beginning to build their nation-states still elaborates, this way or that, the ideal and structure of the nation-state and proves that ethnically is getting stronger (Smith, 2002: 105–106; Strange, 2002: 128–129). The international recognition of new nation-states emerging after the dissolution of the Former USSR and Yugoslavia in the 1990s, at least eighteen nation-states have been recognized as successor states, which especially demonstrates that the organizational structural form of the nation-state continues to dominate today's world (Smith, 2002: 104; Hobsbawm, 2000: 163). Furthermore, while these newly-forming nation-states build their states with a national "idea", they "resist" the pressures of the global world. In this work Kazakhstan will be studied as an example of this process.

What we are trying to demonstrate in this paper is the level of functioning of the Bologna Process -a fact that has become a symbol of globalization in the educational area- in countries that are newly building their nation-states such as Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, the assertion that we will put forward will be based on a series of observations comprehending the experiences we have had during our teachings at the educational institutions in Kazakhstan and our daily teaching practices, rather than comprehending the whole practice of the Bologna Process in Kazakhstan or largely treating the qualities of that practice. Therefore, it is possible to say that this work is grounded on a different methodology and that the following subjects that will be discussed and analyzed will be based on those generalizations.

2. The Bologna Process in Kazakhstan

As mentioned above, the Republic of Kazakhstan which is one of the newly founded states has started its nation-state and nation building process since its independence and all of the reforms made as well as methods used have been accelerating this process. On the other hand, the country has tried to add a global dimension to its economy. The abundance of its energy sources and the leniency showed by global capitalism regarding the political complications arising in the country are the main factors why Kazakhstan, seemingly more willing to integrate to the global economic system in comparison to other Central Asian countries, is becoming a major market and regional actor. Nonetheless, it is very difficult to state that such a desire exists in other areas as well, democratization being first. What is in question here are the "novelties" brought on by global obligations and the transformation of these novelties into formalities which are not implemented. For instance, although Kazakhstan has ratified a number of international treaties regarding human rights, freedom of thought and expression, women rights, patients' rights, children rights, animal rights, workers' rights, strikers' rights and others, it is being very slow in implementing them.²
The Bologna Process is also another area which has turned to be nothing but a dysfunctional formality in Kazakhstan. However, Kazakhstan makes international agreements in order to ensure that its higher education system becomes internationally valid, and it becomes a member of practices that have a global dimension. One of these is the Bologna Process. In 2010, Kazakhstan has been registered as the 47th member of the Bologna Process, manifested as an educative integration process firstly comprehending European Union Member States, then other territories and countries which have a part of their territory in the European continent.

2.1. The Ten Action Lines and the Main Principles of the Bologna Process

The Bologna Process requires from its members that they focus on 10 Action Lines, and that they take into account the Process' fundamental principles. These are: (Established in the Bologna Declaration of 1999)

1. Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees
2. Adoption of a system essentially based on two cycles
3. Establishment of a system of credits
4. Promotion of mobility
5. Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance
6. Promotion of the European dimension in higher education (Added action lines after the Prague Ministerial summit of 2001)
7. Lifelong learning
8. Higher education institutions and students
9. Promoting the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area (Added action lines after the Berlin Ministerial summit of 2003)
10. Doctoral studies and the synergy between the EHEA (European Higher Education Area) and ERA (European Research Area)

The fundamental principles of the Bologna Process that have equal importance with the above-mentioned 10 Action Lines are as follows:

- International mobility of students and personnel
- Independent universities
- Participation of students to higher education administration
- Public responsibility for higher education
- Social dimension of the Bologna Process

2.2. The Implications of the Bologna Process on the Kazakhstanian Higher Education System
When we look at the extent to which these 10 action lines and fundamental principles are implemented in Kazakhstan's higher education system, it is possible to see that most of the articles cannot be fully put into practice because of hindrances.

The leading hindrance is the fact that Kazakhstan's higher education system is still in continuity with the Soviet frame of mind. For example in the USSR, a researcher working at the university would rather work as a teacher than a scientist. In this framework, the university’s academic body would generally be preoccupied with teaching. On the other hand, scientists who would want to carry on scientific-academic researches would be employed in various research institutes affiliated to the National Science Academy. The primary task of academics working within these institutions would be to carry on scientific researches. This has caused to the formation of an employment type where university’s teaching staff would work on hourly-basis. So as to say, in order to work full-time at the university, one would have to give an amount of lessons adding up to the yearly amount of hours determined by the university. This requires working yearly at least 600-700 hours in average. Namely, one would be required to give at least 20-30 hours of lessons a week. This system has been the legacy of the Soviet Union continued by the Kazakh higher education system.

Regarding the implementation of the 10 Bologna Process Action Lines in Kazakhstan, Kazakh universities are trying to harmonize the titles and the contents of the lessons they give with the lessons in Bologna System universities. Since 2010, a shift has been made to the 3-cycle higher education system. Nonetheless, there are some problems encountered in the implementation of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). The fact that the calculation procedure of the ECTS has not yet been clarified adds up to the problems. In reality, the ECTS which is defined as a unit for determining the entire work to be carried out by the student to be successful in a particular lesson (theoretical lesson, practice, seminar, individual study, exams, home works, etc.) has become a formality in Kazakh universities: According to the procedure foreseen by the Republic of Kazakhstan Ministry of Education, course credits are calculated with the following formula: Taking into account the total of theoretical and practice/seminar course hours and of the student's individual study hours, 1 credit equals 45 hours of study at undergraduate level, 60 hours of study at graduate level without thesis, 75 hours of study at graduate level with thesis and 105 hours of study at doctorate level (Egemen Kazakstan). Nevertheless this procedure contradicts the principle of the Bologna Process according to which: "An intervention to the marking system of higher education institutions is not in question; higher education institutions decide on their own how they will make use of the ECTS marking scheme." (See ECTS User’s Guide, 2009: 41-43). Notwithstanding, this practice as well stays most of the time a mere formality. The reason for this is the hourly-based form of work described above. That is to say, a department where every teacher is obliged to give yearly at least 600-700 hours of courses inevitably has to increase its course number. This, in turn, causes the course credits to be decreased and shown as such. Therefore in many universities course credits equal in average to 1.5 credits. All the same, the ECTS, elaborated with the aim to raise the quality of education, holds the philosophy that it will ensure that each student freely chooses a lessons he/she wishes to attend and his/her teachers. Since in Kazakhstan the courses and the amount of hours a teacher will give throughout the year are determined at the beginning of each academic year –another legacy of the Soviet Union– the students do not have the possibility to choose neither the course, nor the teacher. That is why optional courses have become "mandatory optional courses". We can state that the same goes for other Post-Soviet countries which take part in the Bologna Process.

The objective of ensuring and expanding students' and teachers' mobility cannot be fully realized especially because most of students and teachers do not speak any other language than Russian. Also, the teachers' form of work based on extreme amounts of hours to be filled is the biggest block to the academics' scientific research and it prevents their mobility on the international arena.

The development and extension of quality assurance system networks in higher education has practically started in Kazakhstan. Each year at the end of the Spring Term, second cycle students are put under examination by
the Kazakh Ministry of National Education. The relevant universities are inspected each 3 years by the Ministry and obtain their state license. However, during their preparation period for the inspections, schools purposely recruit scientific personnel who have titles such as doctor, associate professor, professor and thus artificially raise the number of their senior teachers. Whereas in many of Kazakhstan's higher education institutions undergraduate courses are given by students who are doing their Masters' in the university and working there as teaching personnel, this harms the validity and the credibility of the inspections in question.

There are also serious challenges as to the insurance of students' and higher education institutions' active participation, for universities still do not discuss the subject of autonomy and do not give up their role as the state's ideological device. The inclusion of students to higher education administration is not yet relevant either and it is not going further than the symbolic voting of the student council presidency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is not yet possible to state that Kazakhstan's higher education practices fully match the Bologna Process' requirements. One of the major challenges here is that rather than understanding the philosophy of the integration process' action lines and principles, higher education institutions behave in a way that aims at pleasing international accreditation authorities by basing themselves on control. Consequently, the "novelties" included in Kazakhstan's higher education system thanks to the Process in question have become mere formalities without practical functions.

Footnotes

1. Moldiyar Yergebekov has worked at Süleyman Demirel University during the 2010-2011 academic year, and is working at the Temirbek Jurgenov State Academy of Fine Arts in Almaty since 2010-2011 academic year. Zhanar Temirbekova has been teaching at Süleyman Demirel University since 2011 and at the Kazakh-British Technical University during the first term of the 2011-2012 academic year. The findings of this paper should not be considered solely on the basis of these universities, the work treats a general trend existing in all universities in Kazakhstan.

2. It is impossible to agree with the so-called scientific approaches which legitimize the dictatorial, autocratic political powers in countries that are building their states and that are in the middle of an ideological and economic transitional period such as Kazakhstan, by naming them "transitional countries", thus marginalizing them and presenting an orientalistic approach, despite all corruptions and right infringements taking place in those countries. We believe that these approaches and the ones alike find natural resources more attractive and precious than human rights.

3. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the gaining of its independence, Kazakhstan is one of the countries that has been striving to develop its higher education system all along. For example, as soon as it has gained its independence, Kazakhstan has started sending students abroad. "Muslim" countries with Turkey on head of list have started giving Kazakh students scholarships as well as free education as a form of help. In 1993, under President Nursultan Nazarbayev's initiative, the international Bolashak (Future) scholarship programme has been created in order to allow the young generation to receive education in the leading educative institutions abroad. At first, the programme that was sending students abroad to receive education at undergraduate level, since 2005 it included graduate, doctoral, medical proficiency and post-doctoral scientists, university teachers and government officials to the process. See Statistical Data of the International Bolashak Programme.

4. In some universities with foreign resources in Kazakhstan the question of amount of course hours is approached with more subtlety and teachers are charged with fewer hours. Süleyman Demirel University and the Kazakh-British Technical University are examples of that. In these universities, professors give 10 hours of lessons, and associate professors give 12-14 hours of lessons per week. However, optional courses being "mandatory optional" are also valid in Süleyman Demirel University. On the other hand, by lowering the amount of course hours of its teaching staff starting from the 2011-2012 academic year, Al-Farabi Kazakh State University has started its infrastructural works aiming at motivating its personnel to make scientific research.

5. Apart from the Bologna Process, Kazakhstan does also take part in the Eurasian Economic Community founded on 10 October 2010 by Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. The Community has an educational aspect too and accordingly from 2010 on all member countries have to accredit and evaluate (qualification support) their higher education institutions.
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