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The Europeanization of the Polish Higher Education (HE) system results from the inter-play of several factors: post-communist legacies, liberal transformations and the EU accession conditionality, which coincided with the launch of the Bologna Process (BP). While the systemic transformations implied a vast privatisation of the HE system, the BP defined the role of the sector as supporting a 'knowledge-based economy', an agenda promoted by the Lisbon strategy and international institutions in the field. Taking into account these variables is important to understand the institutional context and the perceptions and priorities of the political, administrative and scientific elites, whose representatives were involved in HE reforms.

The relative weight of the European factor is still a matter of debate in the academic scholarship on the topic. While the growing competition between universities, research centres and researchers themselves has been shown to be a significant component of recent HE reforms, the mechanisms and actors behind these processes have been under-investigated. This contribution analyses the implementation of the European educational agenda in Poland and the factors that shaped its translation into national policies. My purpose here is to address the perception of the European agenda in the domestic debates and the ways in which it interfered in power relations between different stakeholders. I also assess the influence of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) on the design and the outcome of the HE reforms. While it is generally acknowledged that national governments use the European Commission's discourse on education to justify their policies (Keeling, 2006), I propose a more in-depth analysis of the domestic construction of the Europe of Knowledge.

In this paper, I consider the Europeanization of the HE system in Poland through an actor-centred analysis, focusing on the individuals and groups involved in explaining European policy frameworks to the academic community and also, occasionally, to civil servants. This analysis is based on different types of documents related to the reforms (legal acts, published and unpublished reports as well as articles from both general and specialised press) as well as on 14 semi-structured interviews with educational experts, higher civil servants, MEPs and representatives of the academic community in Poland, which I have conducted in 2010-2011. Adopting a sociological-constructivist approach, the paper focuses on the experts involved in the debate on HE and the reform design. Different reasons explain this choice. First, as expertise has become a vital component of European policy-making (Robert, 2010; Gornitzka, Sverdrup, 2008), the analysis of interactions between the national and the European level has to take into account the mediators between these levels. Secondly, it has been stressed that being an expert is not an intrinsic characteristic but a mandate conferred by a public authority and that this activity is linked to a specific 'expertise situation' (Hassenteufel, 2008: 201). Turning to the domestic level, we should ask who the individuals entrusted with the diffusion of European instruments to the academic community are, in what conditions they are defined as experts and what kind of resources they accumulate. I argue that in order to analyse the way European education policies have been translated on the national level, the group of the so-called 'Bologna experts' has played a major role in diffusing European provisions to the academic publics. One of my key concerns lies in investigating whether and how involvement in European networks contributes to their legitimacy. Analysing the experts and their involvement in professional groups both on the national and on the European level, I follow Rhodes (2003: 399) who called for an empirically-grounded, qualitative approach to networks, liable to 'put people back' in. Later, he proposed a 'decentred, actor-focused analysis of the games people play in the network' (Rhodes 2007: 1249).

In the first part of this contribution I consider a number of general analytical questions relating to Higher Education policy analysis in the European context. While pledging for an actor-centred analysis I make some propositions on the heuristic interest of taking into account the way in which European-level processes are translated into public policies of a new EU member state (NMS). In the second part, I will develop this framework, with an emphasis on the initial context of the launch of the main transformations of the HE and Research system. This part addresses the creeping internationalisation of the Polish HE sector,

both preceding the EU accession and in its aftermath. The third part focuses on the way the BP was translated into the national reform design. I investigate the interplay between the liberal economic discourse and the references to the European recommendations. The fourth part deals with educational entrepreneurs, based on the case of the Bologna experts. In conclusion, I ponder some ambiguities of the BP.

I. Analysing Higher Education reforms in the context of EU accession

The bulk of the academic literature on the Europeanization of HE policies engages in the debate about the relative weight of EU institutions such as the European Commission in shaping the HE agenda at the national level. For some authors, this role should not be overestimated, as initially national processes prevailed and the coordination of national systems developed as a ‘resistance to the EU’ (Muller, Ravinet, 2008). Others insist on the importance of international incentives, coming from the Council of Europe and other international institutions or from the Commission (Croché, 2009). The growing power of the Commission in steering and shaping educational policies has recently been re-evaluated (Croché, 2010; Batory, Lindstrom, 2011). For Walkenhorst, there is no doubt that the ‘Community activities in the area of education constitute an ‘EU policy’’, even if this is transnationally framed. Without taking part in this debate directly, my aim here is to analyse how the Bologna Process and, more generally, European HE policies were perceived, translated and used by Polish experts and decision-makers. I also set out to study the extent to which the European agenda contributed to the reconfigurations of power relations between actors involved in the construction of public policies at the national level.

The criticism of ‘methodological nationalism’ (Stone, 2004 cited by Batory and Lindstrom, 2011) points out a frequent bias of studies dealing with the Europeanization of public policies or the OMC applied to HE: its focus on national governments. It is thus vital to take into account the ‘meso’ or even ‘micro’ level, i.e. the organised interest groups, expert teams as well as individual experts or any other players involved in public policy debates.¹ In the case of HE and research policy the design and implementation of reforms require at least a basic

¹ On the micro-level, the perception of the BP by representatives of the academic community, teachers and ‘users’ deserves further investigation. Their understanding of the process may lead to active or passive conformation, inertia or, in some cases, protest. These reactions may compel governmental actors or meso-players (academic interest groups, professional or disciplinary associations) to act. Some players such as student representative bodies may benefit from the re-evaluation of their position by the European frameworks.

participation of the academic community representatives. However, the debate should not be about the predominance of a specific level of analysis but about the way we operationalize the interplay between the European, the national and the sub-national level.

The Polish case confirms the findings recently published by Agnes Batory and Nicole Lindstrom: according to them, the Commission's pressure on national HE systems should be re-evaluated in the light of the 'power of [its] purse'. The authors demonstrate convincingly how the formally 'soft' Open Method of Coordination (OMC) mechanisms contribute to a process which is perceived as 'fundamentally non negotiable' by its participants (Batory, Lindstrom 2011: 311). They point out the balance of power created by the Commission, in which the grant recipients, i.e. HEI, 'lobby their governments from below to pass legislation' (Batory, Lindstrom 2011: 313). While these findings concerning the bypassing of the national level in order to conform to the Commission's requirements are important and the study of its mechanisms requires additional investigation, I argue that the hypothesis positing that 'the Commission turns universities into agents for its policies' should be further refined. It is not clear indeed whether, according to the authors, universities, as such, become the Commission's 'fifth column' by supporting its agenda. If this was the case, how could the noticeable resistance to some of the EU educational policies in countries such as Austria, Germany or France be explained? While no organised and public movements against the BP have been observed in Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC), the process was not accepted uncritically by the whole academic community. On the contrary, a significant degree of inertia or passive resistance can be observed at different levels (faculties, universities or even ministries). The thesis suggesting that universities were the main lobbyists to their governments and catalysts for change should be carefully tested. It would accordingly be useful to study more precisely which HEI, faculties and individuals promoted Bologna-inspired changes. This requires analysing the channels through which the impulses from international and especially European forums are transmitted and translated to decision-makers on the national level and to a larger academic community.

Beyond this, I would like to stress the importance of taking into account the political and administrative elites' perception of their country's position in the European framework. My hypothesis is that in the case of NMS or of candidate states, the narratives on the necessity to catch up with the West play an important role. The Polish case seems representative of this logic, pointed out by other authors (Dobbins, Knill, 2009). I argue that in this country the BP

has been largely entangled with the EU accession negotiations. This factor contributes to the perception of the Bologna provisions as a ‘non negotiable package’, which should be implemented as soon as possible and transposed in the national legislation.

It seems thus important for decision-makers to anticipate this European constraint in order both to avoid being singled out as laggards in European forums and to make sure that the European proposals are understood and implemented by the academic community. The weight of the European factor is all the more striking in the case of the NMS, as since the accession, many reform schemes, new curricula and infrastructure have been financed by the EU structural funds. However, these observations require more systematic confrontation with other cases of peripheral or neighbouring regions. In spite of the different national attitudes to the EHEA, there seems to be a common concern expressed by representatives of CEEC participating in European working groups about the growing gap between their region and the Western countries whose universities are powerful and attract the most students. The perceptions and responses to this aspect of the EHEA also deserve further analysis.

Another local characteristic, which seems to be shared by other CEEC is that the competitive logic pushed forward by the Commission is accepted as long as it fits with the dominant neo-liberal narrative, which paved the way for a far-reaching privatisation of the HE sector during the transition period. This argument requires some caution, however, as there may be a gap between the liberal justification of the reforms, the legal frameworks and their eventual implementation. My hypothesis is that while liberal economic processes seem to be the general rationale of the reforms, and while the EU accession has modified power relations in the HE field, traditional players – such as the University Rectors’ Conference – manage to maintain a relatively strong position.

II. Polish HE after 1989: liberalisation, internationalisation, Europeanization

The political and scientific justification of HE reforms leads policy makers – and those who participate in the debate about the reform design – to refer to foreign models and to European recommendations. As a rule, these policy discourses are based on the observation of a persisting gap between the Polish university system and the most attractive Western HEI. Following their logic, the accumulated lag can only be overcome by in-depth reform, allowing the HE system to become more competitive. While this kind of argumentation is not specific to CEEC, as we find similar examples in Western European countries, we may still

want to find out the extent to which the systemic transformations of the 1990s followed by the EU accession process have reinforced this argumentative structure.

The post-communist transformations of the HE: fitting with the liberal paradigm?

After the fall of the communist regime, the Polish HE system underwent transformations that were in many respects similar to those of other countries from the region. These changes consisted in giving back a certain degree of autonomy to the universities – referring to the interwar period – while opening them up to the market economy (Dobbins, Knill, 2009). As a result, the Central European HE field joined trends that had already been under way for decades in Western Europe, such as the massification of HE, the growing number of private schools and the increasing popularity of the view of teaching and research as a commodity and not (only) as a public good (Jablecka, 1994).

The liberalisation and marketisation of the HE system in Poland resulted in the creation of one of the largest private HE sectors in the world. According to some reports, a higher proportion of students study nowadays in private HEI in Poland than in the USA (Szkolnictwo wyższe, 2010).² At the same time, student numbers and proportions increased tremendously. Contrary to what is sometimes said about the egalitarian orientation of the communist system, higher education tended to be reserved to an elite in this period as only 7-10% of the population had a HE degree (of 5 years). During the 1990s, several post-communist countries offered broader access to HE (Rozsnyai, 2003). As a result, more than a third of the age group 20-29 studies in HEI (some experts mention even 40% of this age group) (Diagnoza, 2009). Although constitutionally HE is free of charge, most of the students pay tuition fees. This situation is due not only to the number of private, often small schools but also to the fact that, since the 1990 HE law, there has been a distinction between intra-mural or full-time students and extra-mural or part-time/week-end students. The latter are a major source of revenue, also for public universities who recruit a *numerus clausus* of students allowed to study free of charge, and an additional number of students who have to pay for their studies.

This relative democratisation of the access to HE has produced paradoxical social effects. The students who have the best chances of passing the entrance exams or other qualification procedures to study free of charge are mainly those who have accumulated the most cultural

² There are more than 450 HE institutions in Poland, of which 131 are public and 325 private (*ibid*).

capital, who have attended the best schools and who live in a big city. The mass of the less privileged students have to work during the week in order to pay their part-time studies during the weekend. This situation has also strongly affected academic teachers, as many of them accept a second full-time job in private schools to earn a better wage than in the badly paid public sector. Although this system has been criticised widely, it has not been reformed yet. Private students are all the more vital as a source of revenue for HEI as, until now, no government has accepted to bear the cost of HE massification.

International inspirations culminating with the EU accession

While the economic liberalisation was the first factor of change, the launching of the pre-accession process and the accession negotiations reinforced the discourse revolving around the necessity to catch up with the West and to modernise national institutions and procedures. It is worth mentioning, however, that before the 'EU-isation' as such, CEEC HE systems underwent an internationalisation due to the exposure to institutions active in the field of education such as the OECD, UNESCO or the Council of Europe (Białecki, 2008) but also of the World Bank and of private organisations such as the Soros Foundation (Seddon, 2005). The first Polish democratic governments after 1989 adopted HE and research reforms, whose international inspirations did not necessarily come from Europe. For instance, the State Committee for Scientific Research (KBN), created in 1991, which institutionalised the principle of competition between researchers applying for grants, was inspired by the American National Science Foundation (NSF) (Jabłeczka, 2009).³

In the beginning of the 1990s, the EEC/EU was one of several actors which contributed to the opening up of Polish universities and researchers to international exchanges and organisational standards. The European Commission contributed to this internationalisation through its Tempus programme, which allowed university teachers and managers to familiarise themselves with Western European university systems during exchanges and site visits. The launching of the pre-accession process, followed by the opening of the accession negotiations, made political elites largely receptive to external incentives/models (Grabbe,

³ Although with the accession process the EU clearly became the agenda-setting body, many influential contributors to the debate on HE still consider the American model as being the ultimate and authoritative reference (Thieme, 2009).

2001). After the accession, the EU funds have contributed to the restructuring of the HE sector.⁴

Financial leverage: the impact of EU funds

The implementation of the BP in Poland cannot be considered separately from the available funds. The management of EU programmes implies the creation of specialised agencies which contribute to the transfer of European terms, expectancies and instruments. These agencies are designed to manage organisationally, logistically and, to some extent, intellectually, the implementation of the Bologna Process and of specific EU programmes. In charge of maintaining formal links between the EU level and the national administration, they contribute, indirectly, to the framing and diffusion of European norms. Financed by EU funds and offering competitive salaries, they attract young and multilingual professionals. They may be considered as the European Commission's organisational avant-garde. Although they cooperate with public authorities, their activities are directly supervised by the Commission (or its agencies).

The 'Bologna Experts' team is logistically supported by the Foundation for the Development of the Education System (FRSE), which is the national Agency for the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), Youth in Action and several other initiatives. The team's activities are covered by EU funds, channelled through the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA).⁵ The contribution of the agency's staff is more than purely technical. In charge of elaborating applications for new projects, the staff remains constantly in touch with the Commission and its agencies. They are as a result able to inform the national stakeholders on their expectancies.

The importance of EU funds invested in the educational sector is an argument in favour of those who emphasise the Commissions' influence in national policies (cf. Batory, Lindstrom, 2011). The exchange programmes and activities promoting the BP or the LLP involve large numbers of direct beneficiaries and an even larger audience. Not only due to the orientation of the process, but also owing to the amount of funds invested, it seems difficult to envision the BP without the Commission. These extra funds were welcomed by Polish officials as they completed other public investments in a visible way and thus diminished the financial burden

⁴ Thus, the European Social Fund and the operational programme 'Developing Human Capital' finance numerous initiatives aiming at adapting Polish HE to European requirements under the slogan 'Adapting the educational offer of European High Schools to the needs of the job market'.

⁵ The Bologna Experts are more thoroughly analysed in part IV.

of public expenditure. At the same time, they create direct linkages between the intermediaries, the beneficiaries and the European Commission, which makes the national steering of HE policies more complex.

III. Playing Europe and the market: domestic translations of the EHEA

Having recognised EU membership and the creation of the EHEA as powerful forces for change, we must take into account the ‘co-construction’ (Lange, Alexiadou, 2010) of the European issues by domestic actors (cf. Neumayer, 2006). The recent reforms of Polish HE and research are based on the observation of an insufficient competitiveness and visibility of Polish HEI.

‘Here is why these reforms come about, in general: the low quality of research, low quality of teaching, weak competitiveness of Polish science abroad, which explains our low position in international rankings – these are the principal factors’⁶

This diagnosis, formulated in several ways in strategic documents and public debates, led to a stronger incorporation of the Bologna provisions into the new legal framework. The recent reforms of the Science (2010) and HE system (2011) have tried to reorient the existing system around the terms of ‘competitiveness’, ‘efficiency’ and other economic logics such as the opening up of universities to the employers. These reforms refer, directly or indirectly, to different development strategies advocated by the Commission, elaborated at the national or regional levels and also to the provisions of the Lisbon strategy on HE and research. This illustrates the global shift of EU educational policies towards a pro-market orientation, which has been called a ‘functional-economic turn’⁷ (Walkenhorst, 2008: 569) and characterised by an increasing stress on purposeful, productive education and applied research, along with the measurement of ‘performance’ (Keeling, 2006: 209). For some authors, the EU institutions have played a major role in extending this market logic to an increasing number of sectors, including Education (Bruno, Clément, Laval, 2010). Existing studies confirm that ‘the Bologna Process combined with the willingness to emulate Western practices’ may accelerate marketisation trends (Dobbins, Knill, 2009: 416).

Although the recent reforms in Poland were inspired by heterogeneous rationales which cannot be reduced to adjusting to the EHEA and European Research Area (ERA), I will show

⁶ Interview with a civil servant, Ministry of Science and HE, 20 July 2010.

⁷ According to the author, this involves economies of scale, linkage to economic policies and competition-orientation.

how the European frameworks and recommendations were used strategically by actors who participated in the reform debates. Although it is not always possible to pinpoint direct borrowings from the BP, I argue that there is a noticeable convergence between the local reformist discourse and a certain type of official Bologna discourse, which insists on making ‘Europe competitive by producing a viable, modern and adaptable workforce which is capable of meeting the dynamic challenges of a knowledge society’ (Rozsnyai, 2003: 280).

Adapting national legislation: between Europeanization and marketization

The debate on a necessary reform of the Polish HE can be analysed as an opportunity for key actors to diffuse narratives on the threat of a growing backwardness of the country’s academic system in the context of international rankings. This kind of discourse emphasises competition as an imperative. The preparations of the new legislative projects on HE illustrate the high importance given to market-based considerations. In 2009, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (Ministry) announced a call for projects for a strategy of HE development. The winner was a consortium composed by the firm Ernst & Young Consulting and a liberal economic think tank called the Institute for Research on Market Economy (IBnGR) from Gdańsk.⁸ Both these structures brought together a team of experts – mostly academic teachers, who were known for having participated in the debate on HE and who had called for a radical reform of the system.⁹

Since the beginning of the tender a conflict emerged, as the Polish Academic Schools Rectors’ Conference (KRASP), a major academic interest representative, declared that the conditions of the call made it impossible for them to participate. Consequently, the Rectors’ Conference mobilised its own resources to elaborate an alternative strategy. This team was led by the honorary president of the KRASP (and former Rector of the Warsaw Polytechnic School).¹⁰ It included representatives of large universities and established experts, among them some of the Bologna Experts.

The diagnosis elaborated by the E&Y consortium refers to the recommendations of the Commission, which calls, according to the authors, for a ‘new model of HE, based on

⁸ Founded in 1989 by liberal economists close to the first democratic governments, this institute has provided scientific justification and expertise to the process of privatisations of state property. It is the home institution of the present Polish Commissioner for financial programming and budget, Janusz Lewandowski.

⁹ Some of them were close to the IBnGR while they occupied rather marginal positions in the academic system.

¹⁰ At the same time, he directed a think tank called the Institute of Knowledge Society.

leadership, management and entrepreneurship and not only on academic freedom and internal democracy' (Diagnoza, 2009: 17). The reference to reforms conducted in different European countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Netherlands) calls for 'the reduction of the role of the state and an increased university autonomy; the diversification of HEI; the concentration of research expenditure in the strongest universities; the professionalisation of the management system' etc. (ibid). Although it does not pretend that a universal answer exists to optimally organise HE, the report clearly takes a stance in favour of management methods inspired by the private sector.

The rectors' team elaborated a more consensual proposal, which does not call for a radical governance reform. It also refers largely to the BP, suggesting a stronger internationalisation of the system and a better quality of teaching and research. This strategy also insists on the need to differentiate HEI 'by using competition mechanisms'. The aim is to create institutions, which would enjoy the status of a 'flagship university' or 'research university' and will be able to 'occupy higher positions in international rankings' (Polskie szkolnictwo, 2009).

Paradoxically, the debate which followed these two competing proposals took place independently from the preparations of the HE law. The strategies could not be used as a working basis for the new legislation, as they were published at a stage when the legislative project was quite advanced. It seems that the main reason for launching the call for proposals was the necessity to spend some available EU funds.¹¹ The ministry ended up considering both strategies as a basis for further work on a subsequent development strategy which has not been published yet. This example shows that a key corporate actor, such as the academic Rectors' conference, can hardly be excluded from the debate about the future of University. At the same time it appears that the ministry did not wish to associate representative organs of the academic community to the elaboration of the new Act. However, ministerial officials did not hesitate to refer publicly to both strategies to legitimate themselves and show that they had consulted the academic community.

Ultimately, the new legislative Act comprises some elements promoted by both strategies: the principle of a stronger differentiation among universities, the 'parametric' evaluation of HEI and references to the requirements of the BP. The text allows university authorities to fire teachers more easily. It also introduces a number of mechanisms enabling closer ties with the

¹¹ Interview with a HE expert, 28 April 2011; interview with a HE expert, 27 July 2011. The project was financed by the European Social Fund.

economic environment. However, it does not propose any radical reform of university governance. The law refers explicitly to the National Qualification Framework (NQF). The issue, which has been discussed by experts since 2006, was left on standby by the Ministry until it became clear that it had to be implemented after the publication of a recommendation by the European Parliament and the Council. The introduction of the NQF could amount to a significant change, as the Ministry had a so far proactive role in determining the content of the courses taught. For years, it set up so-called ‘minima standards of teaching’, which in effect meant lists of compulsory courses which had to be offered to students in each faculty. The NQF introduces entirely new mechanisms, as universities are encouraged to propose their own programmes. The new curricula should be strongly focused on ‘learning outcomes’, which is also a novelty in the Polish system.¹²

Both the debate on the reform design, led by academic experts, and the final legislative act refer to the Bologna Process and to global rankings to justify the introduction of a stronger differentiation and competition between HEI. However, this principle of competition elicited various appreciations.

The principle of competition: a broad consensus, but some dissenting voices

Commenting the legal acts on HE, the minister of Science and of Higher Education stated that she wanted to ‘introduce a maximum of open competition mechanisms, also as far as fund raising is concerned’¹³. When presenting the new reform to journalists she declared that the aim was to lead five Polish universities to the first hundred positions of the Shanghai ranking within a period of five years (Reforma, 2010). The reform authors refer to global rankings, structuring the text around the creeds of ‘autonomy’, ‘opening to the world’ and ‘entrepreneurship’. This shows, Ruth Keeling has pointed out, that national authorities do not hesitate to use the Commission’s educational discourse to justify their ‘*withdrawal from their traditionally active responsibilities for higher education*’ (Keeling, 2006: 213) or establish more competition between Universities, among which only a happy few will earn the ‘excellence’ label.

¹² The Ministry of Science and Higher Education, EU funds, National Qualification Framework for HE, <http://www.nauka.gov.pl/finansowanie/fundusze-europejskie/program-operacyjny-kapital-ludzki/krajowe-ramy-kwalifikacji/krajowe-ramy-kwalifikacji-dla-polskiego-szkolnictwa-wyzszego/>

¹³ Mira Suchodolska, Klara Klinger, interview with Barbara Kudrycka, «Uczelnie potrzebują konkurencji», *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*, 25.05.2010 p. 6.

It must be acknowledged that, on the political level, the successive HE reforms did not spark major controversies. During parliamentary debates, politicians on the left did not oppose the principle of competition between HEI, even if they introduced more social accents in their discourse. As a successor to the former communist party, the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) has opted since the 1990s to support liberal reforms and the EU accession. Thus, it could not disapprove of a reform presented as a means to ‘catch up with Europe’. The left MPs’ abstention during the final vote was motivated by the lack of regulations concerning the salaries of HEI employees.¹⁴

Although it is rarely contested as a basic means to differentiate the country’s HEI, the principle of competition elicits more hesitant appreciations once it is evoked in its international dimension. While most HE experts acknowledge the necessity to face global competition pressures, their views concerning the chances of Polish universities to strengthen their position in this game diverge. For instance, even convinced ‘Bologna Experts’ are aware that the process they promote entails the risk of unveiling the weaknesses of CEEC academic systems.

‘It is the Bologna Process that has activated competition channels, and as a result this part of Europe is not competitive.’¹⁵

In this perspective, the Commission’s attempts to develop alternative university rankings (U-Map, U-Multirank) have not been met with an enthusiastic response. Experts who have followed these discussions – be they ministerial representatives or academic experts – admit the ambiguous nature of these instruments. It seems that different NMS share the fear that the new tools elaborated by the Commission, meant to facilitate mobility by enhancing transparency, may accelerate the ‘brain drain’.¹⁶

The Polish retranslation of the Bologna Process

In spite of a relative indifference – not to say hostility – of the academic community towards the changes triggered by the BP, the expert discourse stresses the lack of alternatives and the necessity to align the Polish HE with the EHEA framework. The translation of Bologna provisions into the national legislation is a sign of the will to appear as a ‘good pupil’ among the states participating in the process. However, it may also be a way to force reluctant domestic HEI to comply with the Bologna requirements. Decision-makers and experts

¹⁴ Interview with a Polish MP, 27 April 2011.

¹⁵ Interview with a Bologna Expert, 27 October 2010

¹⁶ Interview with a Bologna Expert, 4th August 2011.

involved in the preparation or the implementation of the recent legislation claim that Poland was the second country – after Belgium – to integrate the BP into the law. An MP, who has coordinated the parliamentary debates leading to the adoption of the 2011 law, insists on the necessity to apply the BP in order to attract foreign students. The latter has become a vital need for the Polish HE due to the demographic depression which will considerably lower the number of students.

“We have analysed different solutions to become – I will use the NATO language – interoperational and compatible. I would say that, in general, this Bologna declaration is a real pact of civilisation for us.”¹⁷

However the decision to translate the principles of the EHEA into national legislation may entail some side effects. There is the risk of rigidifying some formally flexible rules of the Bologna Process, based officially on voluntarily importing ‘best practices’. It may also lead to some confusion between the reforms directly inspired by the BP and other provisions, disconnected from the European level, but who could be perceived by the academic community as being part of the same package¹⁸. This case illustrates one of the fundamental findings of the sociology of translation: that translating is always connected with displacing and that ‘translating is expressing in one’s own language what others say and want, it is acting as a spokesperson’ (Callon, 1986: 204)

However, although most HE experts support the necessity to comply with the European recommendations as much as possible, further interpretations of this compliance rationale may vary. For those advocating a profound reform of the Polish HE, usually inspired by the American educational model, the BP only appears as a necessary stage, a means guaranteeing a better ‘compatibility’ of the national system with its foreign counterparts.

“It is a very good thing that they [the recent legal acts] have adapted our system to the Bologna system as we have to be compatible, I mean, maybe British universities do not care and they do whatever they want, but if you are Cambridge or Oxford you can afford to do that, but we cannot”.¹⁹

Concerning the way the concepts circulating in the European sphere (‘knowledge society’, ‘university of the future’, ‘lifelong learning’ etc.), are imported, a bandwagon effect can be observed, not only among the administration but also among academics, who often take them

¹⁷ Interview with a Polish MP, 27 April 2011.

¹⁸ Interview with a Bologna expert, 29 April 2011

¹⁹ Interview with a Polish academic professor and expert, who has participated in the elaboration of the strategy of the development of Polish HE, 24 October 2010.

for granted and contribute to their diffusion both in their scientific and expert publications. However, this importation of external approaches and terms gets more complicated once the decision is taken to transform certain concepts (such as ‘student-centred education’ or ‘learning outcomes’) into binding measures. This policy process, from the agenda-setting to the implementation, is more complex than the illustrations presented in ‘Bologna stocktaking’ reports or Eurydice progress maps.

On the one hand, there is an agreement between the academic experts and HE civil servants that in order to ensure its wide acceptance, the educational ‘Eurospeak’ should be translated as unambiguously as possible. Several glossaries have been edited to provide detailed explanation of the new terms to the academic community. On the other hand, finding a proper term in the national language for its English counterpart is more than a purely technical problem. It has to do with the understanding and acceptance of a policy framework, whose origin is distinct from the local traditions. Experts and official reports recall the difficulties in transposing certain English terms such as ‘qualifications’ into Polish, where the same word may have quite a different meaning.

‘A big problem, which is still being discussed, even if it may seem irrelevant, is terminology. This is funny, but it is the reality: one of the elements, which still trigger opposition from the [academic] milieu, is terminology. (...) We speak about the descriptors of qualification levels and these words lead sometimes even to aggression. (...) Frankly speaking, I do not understand why there is such a debate. For example nobody protests when during seminars we use the word ‘outcomes’ [in English], which is really terrible.’

Although experts do not often openly discuss this, the extent of the external intervention in the internal governance of universities and the HE policy remains a politically sensitive question.

‘Well, yes, frankly speaking we do not talk about this open method of coordination, even though we are aware of the fact that while applying these extra-normative forms of action the Commission influences the shape of the reform very strongly. But frankly speaking it is better not to talk about it in this country, as it could be considered sometimes – not always – as an attack on freedom, on the autonomy of an EU member state concerning the definition of legal rules and the governance of the higher education system’.²⁰

The experts’ attitude towards the BP bears some ambiguities. On the one hand, it appears as a necessary set of rules to be transposed in the national legislation and as a source of progress.

²⁰ Interview with a Bologna Expert, Warsaw, October 22nd 2010.

On the other hand, some principles linked to the setting up of the EHEA – such as the continuous comparison between the university systems or the growing competition between them remains a source of concern.

IV. Two or Three Things I Know About Them: the Educational Entrepreneurs

In spite of claims about the voluntary character of the provisions elaborated at the EU level, the pressure to adopt them seems high in the NEM. Focusing on the experts' activities is useful to explain how European proposals are being translated as imperatives and followed by policy effects. The experts have become essential links between the EU institutions and the academic community. According to some authors, expertise has become 'a new method of academic governance', leading to an 'economist definition of the University' (Garcia, 2008: 67). The political uses of expert knowledge have been the object of several publications (Boswell, 2009; Dumoulin & al., 2005) and more specifically, in the European context (cf. Saurugger, 2002; Gornitzka, Sverdrup, 2008). Expertise has been analysed as a method of administration and legitimization, which allows the Commission to build strategic alliances in order to better control its environment (Robert, 2003; 2010). As far as the transformations of the HE in the European context are concerned, recent publications have analysed the functioning of expert groups at the European level, such as the *Bologna Follow Up Group* (Lažetić, 2010) or the groups in charge of '*peer learning activities*' linked to the Open Method of Coordination (Lange, Alexiadou, 2010). However, the circulation of experts between the national and the European level and the translation and diffusion of European decisions into the national context deserve further attention. We could posit the hypothesis that HE experts – rather than universities as such – are the agents who take advantage of their proximity with the European institutions and networks to ask the national decision-makers to take measures allowing the implementation of policy instruments and goals elaborated by the European working groups and during the ministerial meetings.

To follow the construction of the EHEA, formally, several working groups have been set up in Poland, but few of them are active. The Bologna Council set up by the Ministry in 2004 was meant to play the role of the *National follow-up group* but its members meet only sporadically and it remains an empty shell.²¹ The Rector's Conference set up a similar group, which is less formal and serves as an information provider to this corporatist organisation.

²¹ Interview with a Bologna Expert, October 27th 2010.

There is no national equivalent to the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG). When we turn to the national representatives participating in the activities of the Bologna Follow Up Group, it is difficult to find traces of their active involvement and several working groups do not include a single Polish representative. Initially the national administration saw these bodies as its playground; the tendency was to reserve the possibility to represent Poland only to civil servants. In cases where no higher officials were involved, the middle range civil servants were preoccupied with issues of hierarchy, instructions, and protection of information contained in the working documents. Following the bureaucratic traditions, the BFUG documents were considered as secret state documents, which did not facilitate the circulation of information, even among experts. Progressively, participation in the BFUG has been enlarged to the Bologna Experts, who were however bounded by the rule of confidentiality. Sitting alongside official ministerial representatives, they have in certain cases not been allowed to express their opinion on behalf of the Polish government²².

With the growing numbers of European networks and working groups, extensive ministerial gate-keeping on the information related to the EHEA and the European Research Area (ERA) is impossible. Those of the experts who participate in European networks and interest groups such as the European University Association (EUA) get access to some BFUG documents. Due to the scarce communication between the civil servants and the experts it is difficult to say that there was a concerted strategy of the Polish participation in the Bologna Process.

Among the individuals who were involved in the diffusion of the BP in the academic community, the group of the so-called 'Bologna Experts' (BE) has to be analysed more thoroughly. Its 23 members act as intermediaries between the European level, public authorities and HEI. Some of them are regularly asked to participate in ministerial working groups or in European networks.²³ Their accumulated expertise seems decisive in this respect as some of them have been members of different groups representing the academic community. While focusing more closely on the characteristics of the BE group, we should investigate the structural reasons of their authority and the types of resources they have accumulated. I cannot propose an exhaustive interpretation here, but I can outline several

²² Interview with a Bologna Expert, 4th August 2011.

²³ One of them is a member of the Network of NQF correspondents. Another participates in the EHEA Information and Promotion Network.

characteristics that make these experts who have worked in the group since the beginning stand out.²⁴

1. The experience accumulated in the administration of their HEI and especially of the internal reforms implemented since the 1990s to facilitate the internationalisation of their faculties is the main common characteristic of the BE. In several cases, they have suspended their academic career to focus on the management of their HEI or on the expertise activity. The current leader of the group, a philosopher, was in the early 1990s involved in the reform of her institution, the Warsaw School of Economics. Other members have contributed to the implementation of the ECTS system in their universities or schools (the Warsaw or Łódź Polytechnics), as early as the 1990s. They have promoted the two-tier system to facilitate students' mobility. Owing to this kind of engagement, the individuals analysed have sometimes established ties with the European Commission, well before the launch of the Bologna Process. Some of them became 'ECTS-DS Counsellors' due to their efforts in promoting the ECTS and Diploma Supplement Labels in their HEI. Some of the BE had benefited from the Tempus programme of the early 1990s, which one of them calls 'the best invested EU funds in Poland'²⁵.
2. This experience comes with institutional recognition. These experts were mandated by their deans or rectors to coordinate the internal reforms of their HEI. By accumulating increasingly esoteric knowledge linked to the BP, they have become precious allies and advisors to the academic authorities. For years, the BP team was composed mainly of representatives of large public HEI institutions, although there is a noticeable tendency to diversify their profiles. Some of the group members are part of bodies representing academic interests such as the Rectors' conference. This most active core of the BP group are thus multi-positioned agents.
3. Lastly, their membership in European networks and working groups is an unquestionable source of legitimacy for the BE. Participating in European meetings and promoting the European agenda in Poland provides them with leverage which cannot be explained by their formal attributes. Although the experts are not formally

²⁴ The members of the group are nominated formally by the ministry every two years. Due to the short tenure of some of the members, I focus here on the experts who have been members of the group since it was set up in 2005. Originally referred to as 'Bologna Promoters', the group was called 'Bologna Experts' two years later. There are ten women out of 23 members. As in other countries, the group also includes some representatives of students and staff.

²⁵ Interview with a Bologna Expert, 4th August 2011.

empowered to implement the PB, they contribute *de facto* to this process. This contribution may take different forms. First, the experts participate in numerous workshops, trainings and conferences aimed at the academic community. They accept invitations from university representatives to consult their proposals and explain what is expected from them. Secondly, they participate in several teams and working groups set up by the ministry (such as the Steering committee for the National Qualifications Framework). This affiliation – combined with the financing provided by the Commission – provides the experts with a certain amount of leverage. Speaking in the name of European authorities, they refer to their original texts and recommendations. They confront them with the national legislation, pointing out inaccuracies, contradictions and explaining what should be changed.²⁶ They can develop similar arguments in the ministerial working groups where they explain the stakes of the Bologna strategy and the consequences of its implementation or non-implementation.²⁷ Like Howard Becker's 'rule enforcers', BE are exposed to a double challenge: on the one hand, they 'must demonstrate that the problem still exists'; on the other hand, they have to show that their 'attempts at enforcement are effective and worthwhile' (Becker, 1991:157).

*'There is a dramatic lack of awareness on the Bologna Process in academic circles and its implementation is very incorrect'*²⁸

In some cases, the discourse of the Bologna Experts may resemble the type of 'rule creators' that Becker calls 'crusading reformers'. This is linked to the perception of 'their mission as a holy one' (Becker, 1991, 148): *'We travel across Poland and we spread the Gospel'*²⁹

However, it would be exaggerated to consider BE as autonomous experts. They are facilitators, who help in getting the European message across to the academic audience. This audience, composed mainly of university teachers and staff, is exposed to the experts' message during around 100 'Bologna seminars' yearly. It happens during these meetings that the BE are perceived as representatives of the ministry and confronted with various grievances from their colleagues. Although their expert status usually pre-dates the Bologna Process, their affiliation with European networks provides them with various types of

²⁶ We could compare this activity to Howard Becker's figure of 'moral entrepreneurs' (cf Becker, 1991).

²⁷ This does not mean that the BE's opinions are necessarily appropriated by legislators and regulators. On the contrary, several interviewees point out situations where a specific term has been misunderstood or misused in the final version of an act, which can lead to difficulties with making the BP operational on the national level.

²⁸ Interview with a Bologna Expert, 27 October 2010.

²⁹ Interview with a Bologna Expert, 29 April 2011.

resources: institutional, symbolic and financial. The EU support to BE activities deserves attention as it influences their institutional allegiances and the reconfiguration of power relations in the academic field. Their Commission funding allows them to assert their ‘independence’ from national institutions and interest groups. The term of ‘co-construction’ of HE policies, involving national representatives and EU institutions applies well to these entrepreneurs (Lange, Alexiadou, 2010). Their ability to combine several memberships allows them to be heard by academic publics although they do not hold formal power positions and have partially disengaged from research activities.

Harmonising HEI or widening the gap?

The implementation of the BP in the NMS is an asymmetrical and ambiguous process. It has been noticed that ‘the Commission’s re-reading of the Bologna Process in the context of its Lisbon objectives for research primarily benefits the big players – ‘old’ Member States with established elite universities, and the existing top research institutions’ (Keeling, 2006: 213). In spite of this tendency, the implementation of the BP in the NMS did not lead to protest movements similar to those observed in Germany, Italy, Austria or France. It seems that the NMS try to play the game of European HE systems harmonisation. Without being proactive participants of this process, they are eager to earn the status of ‘good pupil’ in different benchmarking exercises.

Like in other countries of the region, Polish universities have been trying to establish English-speaking courses, quality assurance systems and to reorganise their whole system to approximate what is done ‘in the West’. However their structural and material problems do not facilitate the task. Among local experts prevails the sense that the only way to face the growing international competition is to accept the rules of the EHEA game and to concentrate all the efforts to support a few universities, who would gain international visibility and prestige. While most experts support the principles of the BP, it does not prevent them from sharing more pessimist views about its general outcome.

‘The Bologna Process – I say this with the utmost respect, as it is our fault – of course I am the most sincere supporter of the Bologna Process – but... now it unveils our weaknesses and shows what the statistics try to hide and in a moment, it may be the nail in our coffin’³⁰.

³⁰ Interview with a Bologna Expert, Warsaw, October 27th 2010.

Those of the experts who are most involved in the process are aware that the harmonisation of HE systems across Europe and the benchmarking process combined with an increased competition between universities may very well widen the gap between both parts of Europe and worsen the phenomenon of intellectual exclusion.

While the establishment of an EHEA has been critically analysed as the subordination of universities and of knowledge production to market forces (Bruno 2008; Schultheis & al, 2008), the relative privatisation of the Polish HE pre-dated the Bologna Process, being a direct consequence of the regime change in 1989. The opening up to international advisors in the context of democracy assistance followed by the EU accession process has contributed to the transfer of terminology elaborated in the European context. Successive legislative acts have tried to institutionalise the principles of competition, quality assurance and several curricula reforms. However, the implementation of these provisions has yet to be specified. The rapprochement with the job market has so far remained largely a statement of intent. The monitoring of the alumni's careers is not yet a common practice. The construction of the EHEA has clearly been a strong incentive for reform even if it is difficult to distinguish its direct and indirect effects. For some, the changes induced by the NQF could mean a 'revolution' in comparison with the former teaching habits. For others, institutional inertia may limit the impact of the reforms. The fact that the recommendations elaborated at the European level have been translated into legal frameworks with their local interpretations and internal contradictions may provide the Bologna Process with a specific domestic translation. The internationalisation and Europeanization of Polish HEI was neither a steady nor a uniform trend. Some HEI – located in big cities, hosting recognised research centres and having international connections – were able to play a proactive role and implement pilot projects as soon as in 1990s. In many faculties, the Bologna provisions were implemented late due to pressure from above and without a larger debate.

Playing the European game has to do with visualising, trying to fill and measuring the gap. The participation in European networks and Peer Learning Activities was the occasion for Polish representatives to compare the practices of different countries and to consider various solutions to their problems. The EU funds made available before, but mostly following the accession, allowed hard and soft investments enabling Polish HEI to adjust to European standards. However, while the harmonising of European HE systems is illustrated by the

successive Bologna stocktaking reports, the same process unveils other sources of concern. The growing competition between European and global universities does not benefit every institution. This gap in competitiveness between the different parts of Europe, may well become wider and more visible as international university rankings thrive.

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