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Social and Cultural Dimensions of the Transformation of Higher Education in Central and Eastern Europe

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The thesis of this article is that the main factors contributing to the need to rethink higher education institutions today are linked to the advent of the global age. Although the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are not yet feeling the full force of the ensuing pressures, higher education here is likely to be affected very soon by globalization-related processes. Higher education all over the world, including Central and Eastern Europe, is no longer the unique part of the public sector that it used to be, either in explicit political declarations, in public perceptions, or in practical terms. Higher education is doubly affected by the local post-1989 transformations and by more profound and more long-lasting global transformations. To neglect either of the two levels of analysis is to misunderstand a decade of failed attempts to reform higher education systems in this part of the world.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the necessity of grounding current discussions about higher education reforms in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in a wider context of global social, economic, and cultural change. Its working assumption is that any thinking about reforms in higher education in general, outside a particular context of reforming the whole public sector (within a reformulation and a revision of the principles of functioning of the welfare state), remains incomplete. Similarly, any thinking about the institution of the university in particular (*i.e.*, about a small and élitist part of higher education) while disregarding the past context of its modern, nation-state-oriented, social role, place, and function, provided by the Humboldtian model in the new post-national global age, remains incomplete.

NEW FORCES *VERSUS* OLD FORCES

With regard to higher education, several working assumptions can be made. First of all, the transformation of higher education seems inevitable worldwide, as much in the wealthy OECD countries, including the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, as in the developing countries, the forces behind change being global in nature. These forces are similar, even though their current influence varies from country to country and from region to region.

The main forces that are driving the transformation of higher education today are old forces (governmental and public pressure for transparency and accountability, the focus on costs, effectiveness, productivity, and quality assurance, etc.) and new ones (new providers of higher education, rapid advances in technology, and changing social demands for renewable skills in the global age). The old forces call only for the changing of policies, but the new forces may require new ways of thinking about policy scholarship and policy making as well. In a non-American setting, the new forces of change in higher education would also include the internationalization of higher education research and teaching

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(including the predominance of English in the terms of the Internet and electronic communication) and globalization viewed, among other important aspects, as a renewed and critical focus on the services of the welfare state, the declining role of the nation-state in the global economic and cultural surroundings, and the corporate culture/business attitude invading the academic world today in an increasingly competitive and market-oriented global environment.

This article does not develop the theme of old forces driving transformations of higher education. These forces have been sufficiently covered in current research, both from a global perspective as well as from that of the Central and Eastern European region (a vast majority of the publications available on the subject of the reform of higher education in this region concerns these traditionally important issues). The focus here is on the forces driving the transformation of higher education systems that are completely new and that require a wider context for research analysis. The forces of globalization are of primal importance, yet they appear to be underestimated in current higher education policy and research, especially in continental Europe, including Central and Eastern Europe, as compared with policy and research in anglophone countries. These forces are undoubtedly bound to change the nature of the academic enterprise to a degree that today seems almost unimaginable. In order to demonstrate the power of the forces of globalization of higher education that are transforming higher education, it is important to evoke the political, economic, and social contexts of globalization-driven transformations in thinking about the nation-state and the welfare state, as the author has done elsewhere (Kwiek, 2000, 2001).

In the American context, new forces for change mean new providers, new technologies, and a new society. Here the whole globalized underpinning of higher education transformations is already taken for granted (Newman, 1999). In the context of Central and Eastern Europe, however, these forces need to be supplemented with more basic ones, those of globalization and internationalization. In the American context, the decline of the role of the nation-state in the economy that has been determined by powerful transnational players and the reformulation of the principles of the functioning of the welfare state along neo-liberal lines, as well as the corporate way of thinking about traditional public services, come naturally as part and parcel of the American social and economic transformations of the 1990s. But in the context of Central and Eastern Europe, an area that is much more dependent on the European political and economic scene, especially in the case of the countries about to enter the European Union, these issues in connection with higher education reforms may still seem irrelevant. The point made in this article is that the most powerful forces to affect higher education in the region are the new forces, not the old forces with which European higher education research and policy, at both national and European level, seem to be predominantly concerned.

Thus, in discussing the setting for higher education reforms in Central and Eastern Europe, it is not sufficient merely to cite old forces in operation (and quantitative changes resulting from them). The new forces (and qualitative changes resulting from them) are even more important. The older forces result from several decades of steady growth of higher education institutions to the point of the near-universalization of higher education in the affluent countries of the West. New forces, by contrast, come from the new political, economic, and social contexts (post-modern, post-industrial, global, post-Cold-War, post-national, etc.), possibly bringing about a revolution in higher education of an unprecedented scale and nature. Although both types of forces are important, the new forces appear to be underestimated in higher education policy writing in Central and Eastern Europe. The author, however, is in full agreement with Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie, the authors

of *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University* (1997, p. 1), who claim that "the changes taking place currently are as great as the changes in academic labor which occurred during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. … [T]he globalization of political economy at the end of the twentieth century is destabilizing patterns of university professional work developed over the past hundred years" and conclude that "higher education as an institution and faculty as its labor force face change unprecedented in this century".

Globally, we are on the threshold of a revolution in thinking about higher education. Higher education is asked to adapt to new societal needs, to be more responsive to the world around it, to be more market-, performance-, and student oriented, to be more cost effective, accountable to its stakeholders, as well as competitive with other providers. Traditional higher educational institutions seem challenged—and under assault—all over the world by new teaching and research institutions that claim to do the same job better, cheaper, and with no public money involved. New providers, responding to a huge societal demand for new skills, conveniently delivered, include for-profit educational firms, for-profit arms of traditional non-profit universities, virtual institutions, franchised institutions, corporate universities, etc. (and their extensive use of new technologies). The traditional basic structure of higher education seems unable to cope with growing and unprecedented workforce requirements in the West, especially in America. Locally, in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, academics are not prepared for these global challenges at all as they are customer driven rather than institution- or government driven, and the region is still far away from the American spirit of consumerism with respect to public services. But the American model of the state is bound to become increasingly attractive, considering its power and its promotion by American and, especially, transnational institutions.

THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Another working assumption of this article is that public policy in Central and Eastern European higher education needs to be especially aware of the global context of current worldwide transformation. It is certainly not sufficient to understand today that reformed institutions are certainly needed. The point is to perceive why it is that they need to be changed and what the role of the state, the public services it provides, including higher education, will become. The message of this article could also be that it is impossible to understand transformations in higher education today without understanding the concurrent transformations of the social world, including transformations of the state and of citizenship in the global age. As one of the most striking features of the new world is its increasingly global nature, neither policy makers nor policy scholars in higher education can ignore the huge social, economic, political, and cultural consequences of globalization.

Thus, generally speaking, in analyzing the changing social, political, and economic context of the functioning of higher education in Central and Eastern Europe, a double perspective should be taken into account: a local (post-1989) context and a global one. The issue becomes increasingly important given that after a decade of various attempts at reform, on the one hand, in many countries of the region the system is on the verge of collapse and that, on the other hand, there is increasing political, economic, and social pressure to rethink globally the very foundations of higher education in contemporary societies. The final result of current tensions will inevitably be the introduction of new legal contexts regarding the functioning of higher education and the implementation of new higher education policies. The impact of the resulting transformations is likely to be severe, considering the role higher education is currently playing in the countries undergoing

transition and that knowledge generally is likely to play in future "knowledge-based societies". It is important to move back and forth between the two contexts.

What is often recommended by public policy analysts today is the privatization of public higher education in Central and Eastern Europe following the introduction of new laws on higher education. Privatization is understood as a gradual process whereby higher education leaves the public sector of purely state-supported services and moves towards greater self-sustainability. The degree of privatization may, however, vary. The other options—a considerable increase in public spending on higher education, a reduction of research for the sake of maintaining higher levels of teaching, the involvement of industry and the military in financing higher education, or merely maintaining the current level of state financing of higher education and at the same time avoiding the collapse of the system—appear to be more or less unrealistic. As a British sociologist, John Urry (1998, p. 6) stated in general terms, there are two implications of globalization for higher education institutions: "attempts to defend their position as 'publicly' owned and funded bodies will mostly fall on deaf ears and one can expect further uneven privatization" and "an increased regulation of higher education somewhat comparable to that experienced by many other industries and occupations". In a new social and political environment introduced by theories and practices of globalization, it is not only the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), from among transnational organizations (see OECD, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1998; World Bank, 1994, 1997), that are extremely interested in stimulating new varieties of higher education on a global scale. Most recently, the World Trade Organization (WTO) has been concerning itself with the unrestricted importing and exporting of higher education within a set of complex rules deriving from the WTO protocols. The issue, in the long run, is especially vital for poor and developing countries, including those of Central and Eastern Europe. As Philip G. Altbach observes in his recent article in *International Higher Education* (2001, p. 3):

> with the growing commercialization of higher education, the values of the marketplace have intruded onto the campus. One of the main factors is the change in society's attitude toward higher education—which is now seen as a "private good" benefiting those who study or do research. In this view, it seems justified that the users should pay for this service as they would for any other service. The provision of knowledge becomes just another commercial transaction. The main provider of public funds, the state, is increasingly unwilling or unable to provide the resources needed for an expanding higher education sector. Universities and other post-secondary institutions are expected to generate more of their funding. They have had to think more like businesses and less like educational institutions.

The conclusion of the attitude Altbach summarizes, clearly favoured by transnational organizations, is the following: "in this context a logical development is the privatization of public universities—the selling of knowledge products, partnering with corporations, as well as increases in student fees".

The main factors contributing to the need to rethink higher education institutions today are connected with the advent of the global age and with globalization pressures. Although the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are not yet feeling these pressures in higher education, they are soon likely to be affected by globalization-related processes. Higher education worldwide, including higher education in Central and Eastern Europe, is no longer a unique part of the public sector: neither in explicit political declarations, nor in public perceptions, nor in practical terms. Higher education in Central and Eastern Europe is doubly affected by the local post-1989 transformations and by deeper and more

long-lasting global transformations. To neglect any of the two levels of analysis is to misunderstand a decade of failed attempts ("ten lost years", as Tomusk (2000, p. 278) puts it explicitly) to reform higher education. Public higher education in a decade is increasingly expected to be focused on teaching rather than on research, and on the needs of students rather than on those of academics. There will be a clear shift from the question, "what is it that higher education needs from society" to the opposite question, "what is it that society needs from higher education" (Newman, 1999). That puts higher education in a new position vis-à-vis society. Within a decade, Central Europe and the Baltics will most likely be part of the European Union, as parts of Eastern and southeastern Europe will probably also be. The implication for these states is more market orientation (Tomusk, 1998) and full exposure to globalization processes that still appear to be irrelevant. The fundamental assumption about the globalizing and globalized world is the primacy of economics over politics and culture, and the primacy of the private (sector) over the public (sector); hence, in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the expectation is of a dramatic diminution of the public sector and of the scope of the public services provided by the state.

Globalization is the political and economic reality with which the countries of the region will have to cope. It will not go away; it will come to the region and stay, as Jan Sadlak (1998, p. 106) rightly remarks (without, however, making reference to Central Europe): "The frank acknowledgement that globalization has become a permanent feature of our social, economic, and cultural space is essential in order to take advantage of what it can offer as well as to avoid the perils it may involve." Consequently, public finances, including the maintenance of public services, will be under increasing scrutiny in Central and Eastern Europe, following globalization (meaning primarily economic) pressures and the reform of the welfare state worldwide, with significant consequences for the public sector. (Strange as it may sound today, some contemporary public policy analysts compare the reform of public higher education with the reform of the energy sector, telecommunications, and the health care system. Within a decade in the region, that line of thinking, with analogies with other "deregulated" sectors, will in most probability be generally accepted.) What is expected is that the idea of the uniqueness of higher education in general, and of the university in particular, will finally be rejected, closing the chapter opened two hundred years ago in Germany with the modern university invented by Kant, Humboldt, Schleiermacher, and others.

Thus the re-invention of higher education in the region should be accompanied by both conceptualizations and activities of the academy itself. Otherwise unavoidable—and necessary—changes will most likely be imposed from the outside. This eventuality calls for critical thinking. The world is changing radically, and there are no indications that higher education institutions will be spared the consequences. They will most likely have to change radically too. The academy must start thinking about its future, drawing on its human resources. Currently, in Central and Eastern Europe, draft laws and discussions about reforms are being neglected by the academic community at large. And a new legal context for the functioning of higher education, rather than corrections to old laws on higher education, are of utmost importance in bringing about the necessary transformations. It would be useful for the academic community in Central and Eastern Europe to have a comparative view of three legal, economic, and cultural contexts in which it used to operate, currently operates, and will operate: the first being the 1980s (the communist period), the second being the 1990s (the transition period), and the third being the opening of the new century in which changes to come are unavoidable. Although it is necessary to realize that "things will never be the same", it is also necessary to attempt to envisage how they might actually be.

Rethinking the social, political, and cultural consequences of globalization is today a crucial task for the social sciences. The decline of the nation-state—which is viewed as a transfer of power to new transnational political and economic players—is strictly linked to violent processes of globalization which, consequently, will lead to the redefinition of such fundamental notions as democracy, citizenship, freedom, and politics (Friedman, 1999). It may also lead to the redefinition of the social role of the university. In the situation generated by the emergence of the global market, the global economy, and the withdrawal of the state, called also the decomposition of the welfare state, a constant deliberation is needed about new relations between the state and the university in the global age (Strange, 1996; World Bank, 1997). For the moment, a tentative conclusion that a public policy analyst could draw would be the following: let us not look at higher education issues in isolation from what is currently going on in the public sector and in the institution of the state. These changes do, and will, influence thinking about higher education. It is no use to keep referring to the rights gained by the university in modernity (*i.e.*, to the rights gained in the times of national states through the Humboldtian model of the university), as modernity, philosophically speaking, may no longer be with us. Redefined states may have somewhat different obligations, somewhat different powers, and it is not certain that state-supported, national public higher education systems, as well as universities, will be a part of their most basic spheres of obligations and responsibilities. Worldwide, right now, the institution of the state is looking for its own place in a new global order, and higher education issues may seem to it of secondary importance. It is important to understand this reality and to use the critical thinking inherent to the academic world to make another attempt to think through higher education in a new social environment.

REFORMULATION OF THE EDUCATIONAL ROLE OF THE WELFARE STATE

What influences higher education today? Following what was stated above, the main global factors contributing to the transformation of higher education can be summarily labeled as "globalization". They can be put into three separate categories: first, the collapse of the crucial role of the nation-state in current social and economic development, with its vision of higher education as a national treasure contributing to national consciousness; second, the reformulation of the functions of the welfare state, including new scope for public-sector activities to be funded by the state; and, third, the invasion of the economic rationality/corporate culture into the whole public sector worldwide. Higher education is no longer to be viewed as a unique public sector, nor are the problems of reforming higher education in Central and Eastern Europe unique. These are global problems for which global solutions must be sought by global organizations, such as the World Bank, the IMF, and OECD, as well as, most recently, the World Trade Organization, which are more than ever before interested in higher education. Moreover, the following other factors are determining a new situation for higher education including: new technologies, new student bodies (increasingly diversified ages, returning and working students, learners involved in life-long learning), new higher education providers: for-profit, corporate universities, virtual universities, mixed (traditional/virtual) providers, new—increasingly global—student expectations, and increasingly competitive, market-oriented, success-greedy social environments, and phenomena (The Futures Project, 2000).

Pursuant to the idea that higher education is no longer a unique part of the public sector in Central and Eastern Europe, one should ask who the competitors of public higher education institutions are. They are of a twofold nature: first, they are the newcomers in the

field of higher education and, second, other public institutions and public services provided today by the state.

Other educational providers are, for instance, private national institutions, private foreign institutions, national and foreign corporate certification centers, national and foreign virtual education providers, and mixed education providers. Most probably, in an increasingly market-oriented social environment, prospective students (and their families) will be increasingly market oriented as well. That fact is confirmed by sociological research. The unreformed institutions will not be able to face the pressure, and will either be reformed on a day-to-day basis suggested by economic rationality, or they will lose their students to other market-oriented providers.

The second group of competitors are other public institutions and public services such as, for instance, primary and secondary education, pension systems and organizations caring for the aged, basic health care, social insurance, institutions of law and order, prison systems, public administration, etc. (Hovey, 1999). The competition with other sectors of the public sphere is a zero-sum game. Even though some sectors win, others lose. At the same time, the total amount of public money received in taxes is likely to be smaller rather than larger, following the trend in OECD countries (Beck, 2000).

PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION UNDER SCRUTINY

Thus another thesis is that public higher education institutions in Central and Eastern Europe will be increasingly under public scrutiny. The reasons are manifold. The following are the most important of them. First, there is the widespread public perception of the academic community as still being immune from public criticism, as élitist, non-reforming, non-transparent, and non-accountable to society—hence, decreasing public support accompanied by declining public trust in higher education institutions generally. Second, the public funding of higher education is, in general, decreasing. There are other pressing new societal needs that require high levels of funding, especially in Central and Eastern Europe during these times of social transformation.

To give a Polish example, in 1999–2001 Poland was introducing and running four major reforms. These concerned the health care system, the administration and administrative division of the country, social security, and primary education (Kwiek and Finikov, 2001).

At the same time, there is no pre-given model for the services that are accepted for funding from the public purse. Neither Western European models, nor the previously used planned-economy models, nor most recent transnational models constructed along neo-liberal lines, are fully accepted. The public is witnessing a general failure in terms of helping young people to adapt to the world around them. Academic knowledge in a filtered form, rather than skills and knowledge of the surrounding world, is what is being transferred in higher education systems to the students today. What also supports the thesis that public higher education is under severe scrutiny is the fact that all (public and private) institutions, including governmental agencies, the corporate world, the institutions of civil society, and the core institutions of the public sector, are being forced to change. In general terms, all this change is a reflection of the end of the stable world governed by modern traditions. In this context, the inherited prestige of higher education, in general, and of the institution of the university, in particular, is unlikely to be able to resist change (Scott, 1999).

The increasing public scrutiny is also the final consequence of the enlightening mission of higher education. Members of the public are finally able to judge their higher education institutions (awareness of the performance of higher education institutions has become widespread, accompanying the massification of the systems in Central and Eastern Europe).

The region is beginning to witness a new generation of students with a new, fundamentally consumerist, attitude, especially in the private sector of higher education, characterized by an "I pay, I demand" line of thinking. The cost of higher education in an increasingly mass model of its functioning would require an enormous amount of funding that most probably none of the countries in the region are able to provide. Higher education is already one of the most expensive public services financed by the state today (a direct consequence of advanced research and rapidly growing numbers of students). Finally, two different reasons need to be mentioned. In the global, increasingly post-national age, the national pride that used to guide the public attitude to higher education is not of prime importance any more. The end of Cold-War competition also means the end of the international race in the sciences and the end of the space race as a part of a larger confrontation within a bi-polar world of hostile superpowers. There is also growing public awareness of the tax money spent for the state in general, and for its specific public services, including, in particular, public higher education. The awareness in question is at the same time accompanied by a general avoidance of taxes on the part of both transnational and local corporations.

It is most likely that public higher education institutions in the region will soon have to account for every penny spent, every research project conducted, every course offered, every new department created and old department maintained, as well as for every PhD student and full-time professor. The institutions may have to considerably increase the workloads of their faculty members, reduce the scope of their research agendas, and shift their priorities to teaching—mainly undergraduate teaching. In the long run, higher education institutions in Central and Eastern Europe will probably increasingly be teaching institutions. These changes may be accompanied by the lowering of the social prestige of institutions and their faculties and by the relative lowering of salaries (compared to other professionals) and of social understanding for the need for non-applied research. Research activities may in part move to corporate laboratories, think tanks, and wealthy private as well as selected state-supported élite research universities.

FAILURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION REFORMS

What is important to understand is that in the past decade of mainly failed higher education reforms in Central and Eastern Europe, the social and economic surroundings have changed dramatically. The state has sharply reduced the level of funding of public higher education and has begun to reform the public sector generally (Tomusk, 2000). As part of the Polish effort to qualify for EU membership, Polish higher education has been expected to co-operate with EU institutions, assisted by various aid programmes. And what is extremely important is that very significant transformations in thinking about higher education in particular (and the public sector in general) have occurred worldwide, especially in anglophone countries. It appears that worldwide tendencies in a rapidly globalizing world can no longer be disregarded, especially in those regions, to which Central and Eastern Europe belongs, that are undergoing vast social and economic transformations. While it was acceptable, ten years ago, to disregard the global context in thinking about higher education, it is impossible to do so now immediately following the end of the Cold War. The world is no longer what it used to be, for processes of globalization have apparently brought about transformations of an unprecedented nature and scale. The world about which we have been thinking in philosophy, sociology, political science, and political economy (that is to say, depending on the discipline: the modern world founded on reason and rationality, social communication, and dreams of a social order, the world separated into national entities and closed in the formula of the "nation-state", the world of a social contract in which there is

a strict connection between welfare state, capitalism, and democracy, finally, the world in which there is a clear priority of politics with regard to economics) is disintegrating along with its gradual passage to the global age.

Thus, again, it is important to view the changing academic surroundings and the current problems of higher education in Central and Eastern Europe in a more global context, for it is in this context that higher education systems here will be operating sooner or later. The problems faced by Central European academe are not exactly—and not distinctly—Central European problems. These may be reinforced by local issues, but the main structure of the transformations going on is common to large parts of the world. The changes in higher education are going hand in hand with the changes in the public sector generally, and the issue of the massification of higher education—and hence rapidly growing costs and generally a declining level of education—is global. The German-inspired nation-state-oriented and welfare-state-supported university is most probably beyond reach in any part of the world today.

Thus, no clear and consensual model for the reform of higher education in Central and Eastern Europe has been found after almost a decade of permanent reforms or attempts at reform. The models provided are divergent; the very world is in the process of being made. The exact features of the global world being entered are still unknown; hence, the nature of higher education of the future is equally unknown. A number of persuasive visions of the future exist, but their usefulness depends on the direction that the reform of the state will take globally. It is this reform that will, in the final analysis, affect the region as well. Its functions, role, and tasks have been under severe scrutiny. The state in its new global surroundings will probably be forced to shift its priorities, and state-supported higher education may not be among them. The redefinition of the responsibilities of the state in a deregulated, globalized world may be a very painful process, not only for higher education, but for the larger part of the traditionally conceived public sector.

The fundamental issue is whether or not the state, in times of harsh economic competition, will be able to finance public higher education institutions in light of its unavoidable further massification and the constantly rising costs of advanced research activities. In most general terms, the issue is whether or not higher education is still viewed as a public good or is already seen as a private commodity, and how successfully higher education can compete with other publicly funded services today. Although it is always theoretically possible that the states in the region will dramatically increase their support for higher education, considering the current situation described above, including the pressures of globalization, it seems very unlikely indeed.

So far as reforms are concerned, the options are as follows: first, a "business as usual" attitude, *i.e.*, the rejection of any awareness of a new situation (higher education institutions themselves, faculty, and management) and hence no important reforms attempted (governments). Second, the beginning of conceptualizations of reforms in very broad terms, followed by a reforming higher education law itself (and constitutional guarantees of free education, in most cases in Central and Eastern Europe). Or third, the beginning of reform in higher education without an awareness of the new world into which Central and Eastern Europe will be entering, with its new global challenges, including that of reform as a never-ending process. The decisive factor will not be politics, media campaigns, or agreement between the state and higher education institutions themselves, but public pressure in a new sense: the pressure of consumers, *i.e.*, students (and their families). In the worst scenario, the turning point will be a near collapse of higher education systems.

Strangely enough, opposition to reforming public higher education comes from all its stakeholders. In the case of Poland, from the point of view of the state, reforms are too

demanding as an intellectual effort, the (short-term) social costs of reform are too large, and reform other than increasing state support would imply a direction against a widespread popular belief in free higher education (regardless of its quality).

The issue of free higher education guaranteed by constitutions in certain Central and Eastern European countries is a hot political issue. For the faculty, the status quo seems acceptable, for it is known. Reforms and their consequences are unknown, *i.e.*, potentially threatening. The general direction in favour of greater accountability and heavier workloads (accepted as a future reality) is evident. Generally, the faculty reflect a passive mentality, a feature inherited from communist times, an inability to adapt to new, revolutionary changes as a result of systemic reforms and, finally, an age factor, for the average age of professors in Poland is around 60.

As far as the public is concerned, reforms are not, for a number of reasons, perceived as pressing. It is still relatively easy and cheap to earn higher education degrees. However, the public awareness that reforms will raise standards, make studies more competitive, and most probably more expensive, is correct. It is also important to note that currently the students are not particularly market oriented (there is a limited correlation between the types of studies and the type of future employment); hence, credentials are still viewed as a fetish.

Another stakeholder in higher education, industry, is eliciting only a very limited need for advanced research owing to a difficult economic situation. Therefore, there is still only light pressure, on the part of industry, for highly qualified workers.

Finally, on the part of transnational institutions that are traditionally viewed as supporting reforms in the region, there is still only light pressure for reforms in public higher education. Other public-sector areas are viewed as more important and more in need of reform (the health care system, the pension systems, social security, etc.).

The attitude of the public, of the industry/business community, and of transnational institutions is likely to change soon. That of the state and of the faculties (of higher education institutions themselves) is unlikely to change. Reform will come as the result of a long process given that the main stakeholders involved, the state and higher education institutions (the staff), are unwilling/unable to proceed with reforms. But as the result of public debate and business community requirements for the labour market, as well as supranational recommendations to cut public expenses generally, the state and the institutions (faculty) will be forced to introduce far-reaching changes in order to avoid the loss of social credibility.

CONCLUSION

Given that because of the current global ideological climate and powerful globalization pressures public higher education institutions in Central and Eastern Europe do not have much of a chance to avoid the processes of privatization (in the long run), they should be well aware of current stakes rather than ignoring them in a "business as usual" attitude. In order to avoid being merely an object of future transformations, the academic world, in the current situation, should understand the general direction of the changes affecting their institutions and try to influence the transformation. They should participate in the creation of, and in the debates about, the legal contexts of the functioning of higher education and mobilize themselves along with the personnel of think tanks in order to lobby for the best choices available. They should form coalitions of experts, legislators, and academics in order to influence both the state and public opinion in favour of their views, make use of international recommendations when reasonable, but oppose them when not, and always remember that the old, golden era of the academy will never return.

The single most important recommendation for the state and legislative bodies is to begin (or rather intensify) their work on new laws on higher education that would introduce means for the gradual privatization of higher education rather than trying to block the process so that the decomposition of public higher education institutions in Central and Eastern Europe can be stopped.

It is also of vital importance, nowadays, to be able to keep a thin balance between looking backward and looking forward, between taking the past (the modern idea of the university) and taking the future as points of reference in discussing the condition of higher education in the region. It is important not to be retroactive and past oriented. The world is in a period of history in which the traditional, philosophy-inspired, nation-state-oriented, and welfare-state-supported, modern university, for a variety of reasons, is no longer culturally, socially, and economically acceptable. These are facts that cannot be changed.

The future of higher education is taking shape right before our eyes, and it is the task of the academic community not only to analyze these transformations but to influence them as much as possible.

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