

# The Bologna Process in the Countries of the Former Soviet Union: an Outsider's Perspective

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Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the higher education systems in the fifteen independent states that once comprised it have gone through many changes. While a number of these republics have acceded to the Bologna protocols and joined the European Higher Education Area, a few have not. This article, written by two American researchers, offers an outsider's perspective on the history and current state of tertiary education in the post-Soviet republics as well as the challenges that remain as they seek to more closely align their higher education systems with those of Western Europe.

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## 1. Introduction

Many European countries have instituted changes in their higher education systems over the past two decades, perhaps none further-reaching than those of the fifteen countries that once comprised the Soviet Union: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. Already under pro-Western influence to reduce highly centralized control structures in the wake of the collapse of the party/state (Heyneman, 1998), the post-Soviet states received further impetus to align their tertiary educational structures with Western European norms – and thus increase the mobility of their students and the transferability of their degrees – with the Bologna Declaration of 1999. The changes made by these recently independent republics in the years since have varied in both form and substance and a number of challenges remain.

This paper is authored by two researchers based in the United States and therefore presents an outsider's perspective. Though the major reforms of the Bologna Process are well known to both the readers of this journal and those involved with higher education throughout the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), they have remained opaque to many in the United States who focus on domestic higher education issues. Even for American researchers such as ourselves who are interested in the changes in European colleges and universities ascribed to Bologna protocols, the view from outside the EHEA is likely different from that on the inside. It is with this caveat that we offer our understanding of the effect that the Bologna Process has had on tertiary education in the countries of the former Soviet Union as well as our view on the challenges these countries and the EHEA will face as they seek to "tune" their respective systems. Our approach to this topic may be different from that of scholars based in Europe. We attempt to note where our viewpoint may be especially U.S-centric. Nonetheless, our hope is that higher education researchers, practitioners, and institutional leaders working in Europe find these views of 'outsiders' to be of use.

## 2. Summary of the Bologna Process in the former Soviet republics to date

In the years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, changes to the higher education systems of its fifteen constitutive states have, in most cases, been great. Changes have also been varied among the nations, both in form and degree. Separating the general trend toward Western European norms begun in the 1990s from reforms made in accordance with the Bologna framework is difficult, if not impossible; so too is

giving an in-depth account of the current state of higher education in each country in this brief article. Three distinct themes emerge, nevertheless, in the story of the Bologna process in the post-Soviet countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. They are: (1) different timelines and (2) degrees of acceptance of the Bologna protocols; and (3) continued insularity among many of the post-Soviet countries. From these themes, each discussed in turn below, patterns of regional influence become manifest; so too does the continued antipodal influence of Russia to that of Western Europe among many ECA nations.

## 2.1 Different timelines of Bologna acceptance

Aside from the additions of the Holy See and the principalities of Andorra and Liechtenstein, the growth of the EHEA since 1999 has trended east and south<sup>1</sup>, with new member states coming from the Balkan Peninsula, Caucasus region, and central Asia.<sup>2</sup> The post-Soviet states that have joined the EHEA have done so in alignment with this west to east/north to south progression: the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (1999); Russia (2003) and the Caucasus states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (2005); and the central Asian state of Kazakhstan (2010). In fact, it is the addition of many post-Soviet states to the EHEA since the initial declaration that has contributed to its southeastward expansion. Of the former Soviet states that are not party to Bologna, all but Belarus are located in central Asia and lay on the margins of a largely contiguous EHEA.

The dates of accession (or continued non-accession) to Bologna among the post-Soviet states also align with the regional subgroups into which these countries are generally placed. Whereas the Baltic States stand apart from the rest as early signatories, the central Asian states of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – all but Kazakhstan – remain officially outside of the process. Why have the former Soviet republics joined the Bologna process in the manner that they have? The complexities and idiosyncrasies of each country's higher education system make that question difficult to answer with precision. Noting other socio-political memberships among these countries, however, a pattern of regional influence and identity emerges that may offer some insight.

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<sup>1</sup> The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was officially established at the Bucharest-Vienna Ministerial Conference in 2010, the tenth anniversary of the Bologna Declaration, which had set the creation of such an area as a primary objective.

<sup>2</sup> Information on Bologna signatories' dates of accession was accessed at <http://www.ehea.info/members.aspx>.

**Socio-political memberships**

Table 1 on page 5 shows the various socio-political memberships of the post-Soviet countries. The fifteen states, which are listed in the first column, are separated into two main groups: those that are Bologna signatories and those that are not. Memberships in other international organizations are indicated by a checkmark. These organizations are: the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the European Union (EU), the Schengen Agreement (SA), the Council of Europe (CE), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the Commonwealth of Independent States Free Trade Agreement (CIS-FTA). Also included in the table is a column for each country's status as a signatory to the European Cultural Convention (ECC). As a point of comparison, the fraction of other EHEA members (less the post-Soviet signatories) who are members of each socio-political organization is given in the first row of the table. By pointing out these memberships and supranational agreements, we do not wish suggest any direct relevance to their commitment to the EHEA. Rather, we intend to make more apparent how the decision to accede to Bologna and the timing of that decision may align with those commitments. This will be further discussed in Section 3.

Signatories (Date)	OECD <sup>a</sup>	EU	SA	CE	ECC	CIS	CISFTA
<i>Other EHEA Members<sup>b</sup></i>	25/36	24/36	21/36	All	All	None	None
<i>Baltic States</i>							
Estonia (1999)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Latvia (1999)		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Lithuania (1999)		✓	✓	✓	✓		
<i>Eastern Europe &amp; Russia</i>							
Russia (2003)				✓	✓	✓	✓
Moldova (2005)				✓	✓	✓	✓
Ukraine (2005)				✓	✓	✓ <sup>c</sup>	✓
<i>Caucasus</i>							
Armenia (2005)				✓	✓	✓	✓
Azerbaijan (2005)				✓	✓	✓	
Georgia (2005)				✓	✓	(✓) <sup>d</sup>	
<i>Central Asia</i>							
Kazakhstan (2010)					✓	✓	✓
Non-Signatories	OECD	EU	SA	CE	ECC	CIS	CISFTA
<i>Eastern Europe &amp; Russia</i>							
Belarus					✓	✓	✓
<i>Central Asia</i>							
Kyrgyzstan						✓	✓
Tajikistan						✓	✓
Turkmenistan						✓ <sup>c</sup>	
Uzbekistan						✓	

<sup>a</sup> OECD = Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development; EU = European Union; SA = Schengen Agreement; CE = Council of Europe; ECC = European Cultural Convention; CIS = Commonwealth of Independent States; CISFTA = Commonwealth of Independent States Free Trade Agreement.

<sup>b</sup> Non-former Soviet states that are official members of the Bologna Process (EHEA) include Albania, Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malta, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. The Holy See (Vatican) and European Commission, because of their special statuses, are not included in this list.

<sup>c</sup> Ukraine and Turkmenistan participate in the CIS, but are not official members.

<sup>d</sup> Though a member throughout much of the 1990s and 2000s, Georgia officially withdrew from the CIS in 2009.

**Table 1** Memberships of post-Soviet states in various socio-political organizations, by Bologna signatory status (date of membership in parentheses)

Visually, the checkmarks of the table clearly show that the regional differences in Bologna accession among the post-Soviet states are mirrored by the differences in their current socio-political organization affiliations. While all post-Soviet Bologna signatories are party to the European Cultural Convention<sup>3</sup> (and all but one – Kazakhstan – members of the Council of Europe), the supranational memberships of the Baltic States align the three countries much more with Bologna signatories in Western and Central Europe. Conversely, the Eastern European states of Moldova and Ukraine, the Caucasus states, and Kazakhstan have sometimes eschewed ties with the West in favor of continued political and economic bonds with Russia and each other. That Russia still looms large among this second group of post-Soviet states may be seen in the timing of their entries into the EHEA. Though the delay was as short as two years in some instances, post-Soviet signatories to Bologna outside of the Baltic only joined the EHEA after Russia did so in 2003.

## 2.2 Different levels/depth of Bologna acceptance

It is important to note that the higher education system in the former Soviet Union differed dramatically from systems in Western Europe. At the time of the transition, the structure, curriculum content, governance and admission procedures, for the most part, were identical across all fifteen of the republics. Since independence there have been multiple changes with the intention of changing the system from one designed under a command economy to one designed to serve a market economy.

For instance, immediately following independence, labor markets became free of state control and restrictions on travel were lessened. Graduates, for the first time, were allowed to work where they wanted and in whatever economic sector they wanted. Companies, now privatized, were not required to keep unproductive labor or maintain social institutions such as health clinics, kindergartens, or (unnecessary) vocational schools. These changes were immediate and required an immediate response on the part of higher education.

That response has been handicapped by the fact that higher education institutions were controlled by specific sectors – agriculture, health, industry, transport, etc. – and consequently could not respond to the shifts in labor market demand with the necessary freedom. The agriculture ministry would demand that agricultural universities continue to produce agricultural engineers while the universities may have wanted

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<sup>3</sup> A prerequisite for membership in the EHEA since the ministerial conference in Berlin in 2003, the communiqué of which states that “[c]ountries party to the European Cultural Convention shall be eligible for membership of the European Higher Education Area provided that they at the same time declare their willingness to pursue and implement the objectives of the Bologna Process in their own systems of higher education”.

to develop programs in economics, business and foreign affairs. Thus each country in transition to a market economy has had to completely restructure its higher education system away from the previous control by specific sectors to one free of sector-specific control. This has neither occurred instantaneously nor with uniform speed. Some addressed the structure issue quickly and with finality. These included the three Baltic States, and eventually Georgia. Others such as Russia, Kazakhstan and Ukraine have addressed the issue more slowly; and still others, such as Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Belarus have yet to significantly address the issue. This inheritance makes the Bologna process more complicated than it is with traditional institutions in Western Europe. Table 2 on page 7 shows the control structures for higher education institutions (HEIs) among the former Soviet states as well as counts of public and private institutions in each country.

Signatories	Sector Control Structure <sup>b</sup>	HEIs (2012) <sup>a</sup>		
		Public	Private	Total
<i>Baltic States</i>				
Estonia	Single (Educational ministry)	18	16	34
Latvia	Single (Educational ministry)	34	22	56
Lithuania	Single (Educational ministry)	27	20	47
<i>Eastern Europe &amp; Russia</i>				
Russia	Multiple	634	446	1080
Moldova	Multiple	19	15	34
Ukraine	Single (Educational ministry)	661	185	846
<i>Caucasus</i>				
Armenia	Multiple	26	41	67
Azerbaijan	Multiple	36	15	51
Georgia	Multiple	20	37	57
<i>Central Asia</i>				
Kazakhstan	Multiple	73	73	146
HEIs (2012)				
Non-Signatories	Sector Control Structure	Public	Private	Total
<i>Eastern Europe &amp; Russia</i>				
Belarus	Multiple	45	10	55
<i>Central Asia</i>				
Kyrgyzstan	Multiple	33	21	54
Tajikistan	Split	30	0	30
Turkmenistan	Single (Cabinet of Ministers)	24	0	24
Uzbekistan	Split	75	0	75

<sup>a</sup> Data for this table were taken from EU Tempus reports on higher education systems in each country that were released in 2012. The numbers of public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) may now differ slightly. Tempus reports were found at [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/tempus/participating\\_countries/index\\_en.php](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/tempus/participating_countries/index_en.php).

<sup>b</sup> Values in this column represent a qualitative analysis of the sector control structures governing higher education institutions in the country: *Single* = HEIs fall under one ministry sector that crafts and implements education laws and policies; *Multiple* = HEIs are founded and controlled by multiple sector ministries that establish education regulations distinct from one another; *Split* = Various departments within an HEI fall under the jurisdiction of different sector ministries (e.g. school finances under the Ministry of Finance, vocational programs under the Ministry of Labor).

**Table 2** Higher education systems in post-Soviet states: governmental control structures and distribution of public and private institutions

In addition to structure, higher education curriculum constituted an additional issue. One problem of curriculum in the former Soviet Union was the curriculum characterized as being “blank”. Whole subjects, traditional in Western Europe, were unknown or significantly distorted. These blank areas included economics, most of sociology, business, management, political science, and many aspects of psychology and psychotherapy. The absence of these subjects was due to the assumptions of a planned economy as well as to the influence of the Communist Party. For instance, surveys were thought to be unnecessary or dangerous since they constituted a test of people’s real opinions instead of what the party had decided what people were supposed to think (Heyneman, 2010).

### **2.3 A separate circuit of student mobility among post-Soviet countries**

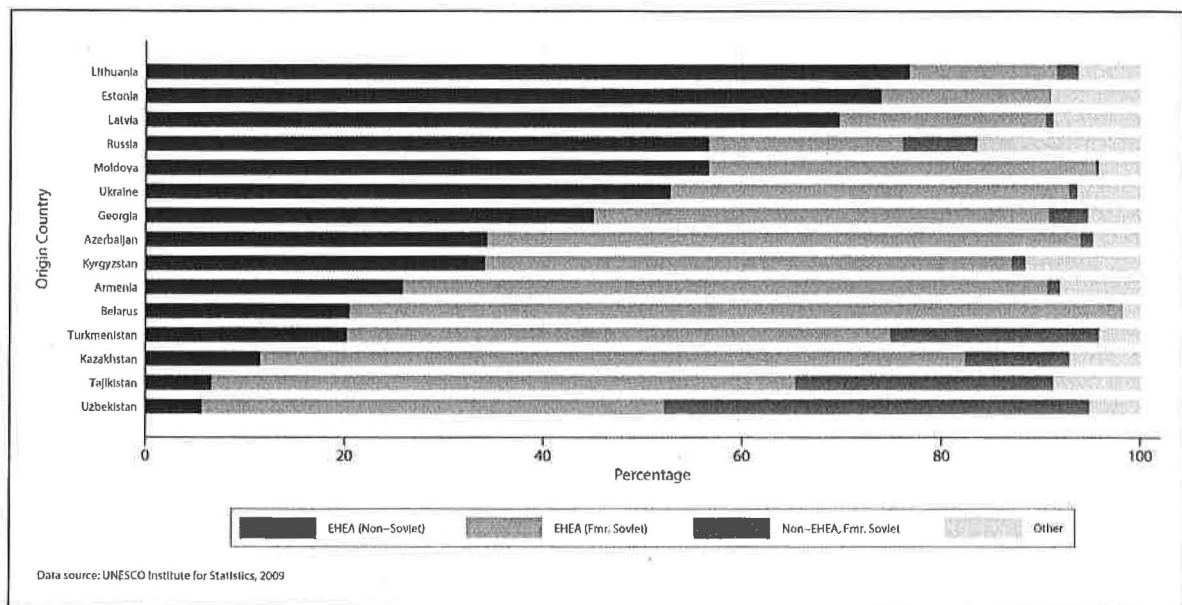
A major component of the Bologna Process from its inception has been the free movement of people and qualifications throughout the continent’s higher education systems. Be it among students and faculty who wish to learn and/or work at another university, graduates who would have their degrees accepted abroad, or employers who wish to have comparable metrics of qualifications among job applicants without the need to develop their own expensive testing regimes, the joint belief in mobility, transferability, and comparability lies at the heart of Bologna. Yet despite the number that have either joined the EHEA or made changes to their higher education systems in order to align them better with Bologna norms, many former Soviet states constitute a separate sphere within the greater EHEA in regards to student mobility.

Figure 1 on page 9 shows the relative percentages of higher education students from each post-Soviet country that studied abroad in 2009 in terms of their educational destination.<sup>4</sup> The four categories of destination state are: (1) EHEA member, non-Soviet; (2) EHEA member, former Soviet state; (3) Non-EHEA member, former Soviet state; and (4) other (e.g., United States or Asia). While all post-Soviet states – Bologna signatories and non-signatories – have more than half of their mobile students attend a higher education institution in a country in the EHEA, the relative percentage of mobile students who study in another post-Soviet country, either in the EHEA or outside of it, is significant. Among the countries represented in the bottom half of the figure, most higher education students who choose to study abroad do so in another former Soviet state.

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<sup>4</sup> Data were downloaded from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics database; data from 2009 were chosen due to their completeness as compared to data from more recent years. All percentages regard mobile students only, not the total number of students or those of tertiary age within the home country.

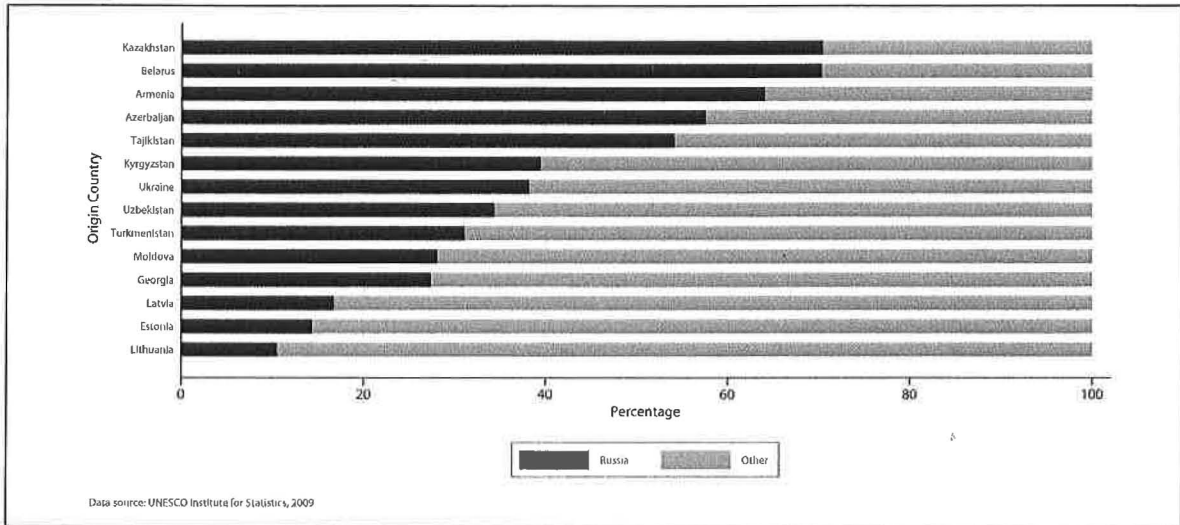




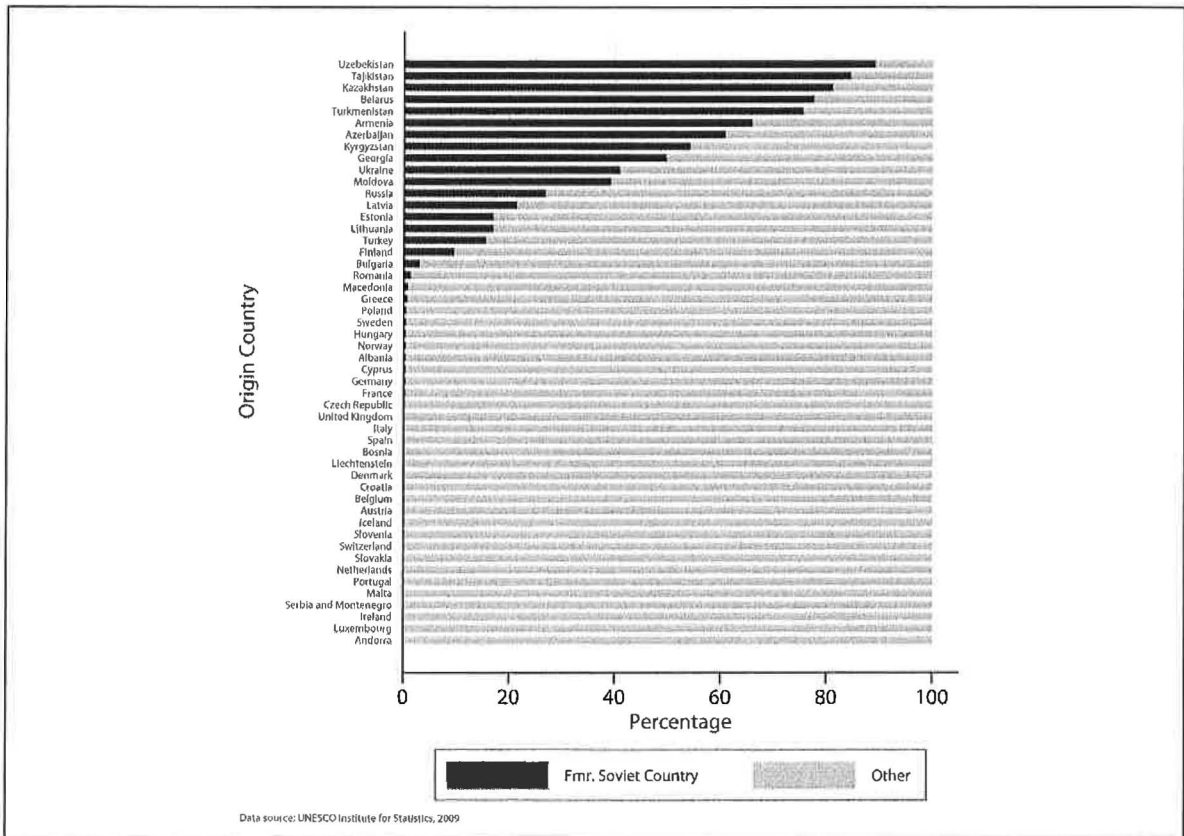
**Figure 1** Location of tertiary students who study abroad as a percentage of all outbound students from origin country (Bologna signatories in bold)

Obscured in the first figure is the large influence that Russia exerts on the second category of students from the other fourteen post-Soviet states. Figure 2 on page 10 again divides internationally mobile tertiary students, though this time by (1) those that study in Russia and (2) those that study anywhere else. In all but the Baltic States, over a quarter of all mobile students study in Russia; in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan the number is greater than 50 percent.<sup>5</sup> Thus in Figure 1, it is the migration of higher education students to Russia, that is the primary reason such as large percentage of internationally mobile students from other post-Soviet states can be said to study within the EHEA.

<sup>5</sup> It is only because of the regional influence of Kazakhstan that the percentage of students who out-migrate from the central Asian republics to Russia is not even higher.



**Figure 2** Relative student outmigration from post-Soviet states to Russia as percentage of total (Bologna signatories in bold)



**Figure 3** Relative student outmigration from all EHEA and post-Soviet states to post-Soviet republics as percentage of total

As a point of comparison, Figure 3 on page 10 shows the relative student outmigration of all Bologna signatories and post-Soviet states to post-Soviet countries as a percentage of the total number of their internationally mobile students. Other than Turkey, no EHEA country outside of the former Soviet Union sends more than 10 percent of its mobile student population to a post-Soviet state; the average is just over one percent. Once more, the Baltic States stand closer in relation to Western and Central Europe than Russia and the other former Soviet republics. Yet they too send more students to other post-Soviet states than do any other EHEA member country.<sup>6</sup> There are many reasons that internationally mobile students in these countries may choose to study in another former Soviet republic or Russia in particular. Language compatibility and the sheer size of the Russian higher education system are just two. Nonetheless, these three figures demonstrate that by the metric of student mobility, the higher education systems of the fifteen post-Soviet states represent a sub-circuit within that of the EHEA.

### **3. Challenges for post-Soviet higher education systems moving forward**

In light of the current status of their respective higher education systems as well as their history, the fifteen post-Soviet states face a number of challenges as they seek to further integrate into the EHEA, or, in the case of non-signatories, either gain signatory status or align their tertiary structures according to Bologna protocols so that they may remain in step with their regional neighbors that have done so. Four challenges that we believe to be of primary importance – corruption, private higher education, mobility of students and qualifications via ECTS, and integration into the European community – will be discussed below.

#### **3.1 Private higher education**

The image of private higher education is often influenced by public images of Yale, Princeton, and Harvard, private institutions with high credibility and high attention on the public good. Private higher education, for the most part, in the former Soviet Union is quite different. As McLendon (2004) points out, private higher education in this area

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<sup>6</sup> Russia, being the primary or secondary destination of choice for mobile students from the other post-Soviet states (that is, a hub), in turn sends a relatively higher percentage of its own mobile students to countries outside of the former USSR.

has little resemblance to that known in North America. Kainar (a private university in Kazakhstan) is not Harvard. With the exception of those institutions that are owned and managed by international foundations, such as the Central European University, or those institutions that maintain accreditation standards outside the region, such as the American University in Central Asia or the Kazakh/Turkish University in Kazakhstan, private higher education institutions are really proprietary schools. These are family-owned and operated for profit. They concentrate on teaching and ignore both research and social service. They utilize underpaid faculty from public institutions who seek extra income. They concentrate curricular offerings where there is immediate vocational demand (business, accounting, English language) and ignore others. Given the inadequacy of the public sector in terms of size and flexibility, these proprietary schools serve a needed function. But in terms of quality they can be a problem. Moreover they sometimes spread a counter-productive ethos. They may offer a degree to student who can pay, but student responsibility to perform may be underemphasized. Students sometimes are led to believe that if they pay the required fee the higher education institution is then required to offer them a degree. This attitude adversely affects the reputation of the sector at large and offers a difficult complication to the Bologna efforts to consider degrees and course credits transferable.

### **3.2 Corruption in higher education**

Corruption was anticipated in many public services and functions, but the spread of corruption in the education sector has come as a shock. Few in 1991 anticipated the depth to which the “disease” would take over or the impact it would have on the reputation of the higher education systems. Payment for grades, bribery to gain entry, corruption in institutional accreditation and professional licensing has become so commonplace as to threaten the reputation of entire systems (Anderson and Heyneman, 2005; Silova, Johnson and Heyneman, 2007). The corruption of higher education has been found to raise the cost of hiring; it has been found to lower graduate salaries; it has reduced the economic returns expected to higher education investments (Heyneman, 2004a, 2004b; 2007; Heyneman, Anderson and Nuraliyeva, 2008; Heyneman, 2013). While improvements have been made, the lingering reputation of corruption within the higher education systems of some former Soviet states has the potential to derail the transferability of credits and degrees from those countries even as they join the EHEA (Heyneman, 2014).

### 3.3 Mobility of students and qualifications via ECTS

Internationally mobile tertiary students from post-Soviet countries often choose to study in other post-Soviet countries. This tendency is in sharp contrast to that found among other EHEA countries, which collectively send almost none of their students to post-Soviet states. Why is this the case? As mentioned above, culture and language likely play some role. Despite its capacity, students from countries outside the former Soviet Union may simply be unaware of opportunities in Russia. Whatever the reason, the higher education systems of post-Soviet countries – even those within the EHEA – are not entirely connected to those in Western and Central Europe. Since the interconnectedness of educational structures throughout Europe is central to the Bologna framework, a post-Soviet circuit of student mobility distinct from the rest of the EHEA threatens the core of the process. Mobility of their students throughout the entirety of the EHEA, therefore, represents another key challenge for the former Soviet republics countries.

To improve the mobility of students via the transferability of academic credits, the Bologna framework has designated the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) as an appropriate credit standard due to its perceived success within the Erasmus Programme. Described as “learner-centered system” (*ECTS Users' Guide*, 2009), ECTS is designed to measure student-learning outcomes as well as give structure to degree cycles, which are often measured in relation to the workload required to earn a number of ECTS credits. Even though it has been noted that “ECTS is designed to act as a ‘grade converter’” (Karran, 2004, p. 413), ECTS has become the standard academic credit structure in many national higher education systems, including those in a number of post-Soviet states not officially party to Bologna protocols.

Despite the fact that the policy papers of the Bologna process have separated quality assurance and credit transferability, these issues are two sides of the same coin. Whereas the Bologna framework operationalizes quality assurance at the institutional level in terms of accreditation, credit transferability is a *de facto* measure of quality assurance since such transfers rely on an agreement between a student and an institution (or between two institutions) that the credits in question represent a certain quality/quantity of educational attainment or student-learning outcomes. Institutions of higher education have a choice when measuring the quality of a transfer student's credentials: they can judge using macro-level information, i.e., the quality of the awarding institution as a whole, or micro-level information, i.e., the quality of a student's hitherto education as discretely measured by academic credits. Judging the gestalt academic quality of another institution or department can be very difficult under the best of circumstances; language and cultural barriers that arise when considering a foreign university only make the task more difficult. The use of ECTS

**Quality assurance  
via ECTS**

credits allows universities (and eventually employers) to work at the micro-level, thereby crediting each student with the learning s/he has achieved independent of his or her institutional pedigree. In part for this reason, ECTS has become a core component of the EHEA in terms of student mobility and international degree recognition.

### European dimensions

When using ECTS credits to measure the quality of program outcomes, however, one must also ask: says who? Which European nations, institutional bodies, or higher education institutions decide what constitutes quality curricula, be it by law or simply convention? Signatories to the initial Bologna declaration (1999) desired the “[p]romotion of the **necessary European dimensions in higher education**, particularly with regards to curricular development, inter-institutional cooperation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research”. But what exactly are “necessary European dimensions in higher education” (emphasis in the original document) and how are these decided? While the answer is unclear, it is less likely that educational institutions on the periphery of the EHEA, i.e., the post-Soviet states, will be able to make changes to pan-European curricula that are not acceded to by the preeminent higher education institutions of the continent’s central powers even though the reverse may be true. In other words, if an ECTS credit is to have the same value throughout the EHEA, it seems more likely that the University of Oxford or the Sorbonne rather than East Kazakhstan State University will set the European standard. For post-Soviet countries with the fewest economic, political, and cultural ties to Europe, the “European dimensions” of ECTS may be the most difficult to implement.

European values aside, it may be argued that having the best universities in the EHEA set ECTS learning standards will force other institutions to improve, thereby increasing excellence for all. Due to past issues of corruption and perceptions of low quality among many post-Soviet higher education institutions, ECTS standards determined in this manner would be – the argument would go – a boon for their students who wish to study or work abroad since it would allow them to demonstrate their competences without need for an additional measure of ability or proof, such as an examination. But what of the majority of tertiary students in the post-Soviet states who study domestically (as do most of their peers in the rest of Europe)? Though comparability of learning outcomes and credit structures in order to facilitate mobility means little for these students, whose needs, furthermore, may be structurally different from those of their more mobile peers, the educational outcomes for all are shaped by the demands of the peripatetic minority.

### Tuning of higher education structures

To facilitate curricular adjustment in order to ease mobility, the Tuning Education Structures in Europe project was instituted with the support of the European Commission in 2000; today this university-based project claims the participation of most of the Bologna process mem-

bers.<sup>7</sup> The Tuning Project was designed for use with ECTS, which it claims, “can also facilitate programme design and development” (Gonzalez & Wagenaar, 2008). In other words, ECTS credits can shape curricula, rather than the other way around. It is precisely for this reason that Amaral and Magalhães warn that “[when tuning] is combined with recommendations about accreditation, one runs the risk of unleashing strong pressures towards more uniformity” (2004, p. 87). With more uniformity of curricula, higher education institutions throughout the EHEA may have less opportunity to differentiate themselves in order to serve different student populations and/or the unique needs of their respective regions and nations.

The ability of higher education institutions to differentiate, important for all EHEA members, may be paramount in the post-Soviet states that wish to build more robust and autonomous higher education systems in the wake of their transition to market-based economies. The World Bank reports that

[t]he leading options for improving tertiary education [in transition economies such as those of the former USSR] include introducing more flexible and less specialized curricula, promoting shorter programs and courses, making the regulatory framework less rigid, and relying on public funding approaches that encourage institutions to respond to market demands for quality and diversity. (2003, p. 113)

Uniformity of curricula under rigid central planning is what these countries had when they were part of the Soviet Union; some still do. In order to improve the systems of which they are a part, higher education institutions in the post-Soviet states need the flexibility to educate students in ways that best serve their interests, and, by proxy, regional and national interests. ECTS credits and other Bologna “tuning” schemes like them that were built for international mobility may impede rather than support educational goals that are unique to the former Soviet republics. It will remain a challenge in the coming years for these countries to align their higher education systems and credit structures more closely with those of the rest of the EHEA while simultaneously working to meet their own national needs.

### **3.4 Integration into the European community**

Because we are not Europeans we have to approach the Bologna process with caution. The basic rationale to create a larger more flexible higher education system in Europe is undeniable. Europe would be stronger economically and socially if there were greater fungibility in

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<sup>7</sup> Information about the Tuning Project in Europe was found at <http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/>.

its systems of higher education. On the other hand, as Americans we tend observe the process unfold with a wary eye. For us, the role of government appears to be counter-productive to the intended effect. The reason why credit, course, program, and institutional transfers are successful in the North American environment is that the control over acceptance is at the lowest institutional level. In the case of course transfers into our own department, departmental faculty alone make the decision whether to accept or reject prior credits. We may reject a course transfer that other institutions accept on grounds that, in our view, it did not constitute sufficient quality. It is difficult to imagine such a system being effectively implemented if authorities outside of the institutions themselves mandate acceptance. Admittedly, this is an extreme prospect and may not accurately represent the system currently used by most European higher education institutions. We know that many European universities accept or deny credits and transfers just as do universities in North America. Our concern simply is that increased centralized processes designed to “tune” higher education systems via degree or credit conformity in the name of integration may have unintended consequences by declaring equivalency for what in fact is not.

Extending the Bologna process to those post-Soviet countries that lie outside of the European Union appears to be an especially problematic. Labor laws and restrictions over immigration may affect the mobility of students. Future integration into the European Union is likely to be problematic since the legal environment will have no effective central structure. This lies in contrast, for instance, with the role of the federal government in the United States whose higher education role, while modest, is nevertheless significant in setting standards for equity, encouraging innovation, and using universities to pioneer research.

But these two handicaps are minor by comparison to the latter two problems. These include the inheritance of structure and content from the era of central planning and Communist Party hegemony. This inheritance will continue to pose problems of integration and flexibility with European institutions. Endemic corruption on the other hand is the most problematic handicap to the Bologna process outside of the European Union. Corruption in higher education is so serious a “disease” that if not effectively addressed it will likely bring the Bologna process to a halt. It is difficult to imagine the London School of Economics or the University of Porto allowing the transfer of credits or the recognition of equivalent degrees from institutions whose legitimacy is suspect. In addition to the objection from individual institutions, it would be irrational for countries in the European Union to place their national higher education systems at risk.

There are many ways, however, in which the Bologna process could be used to lower the risk of corruption and to help guarantee international standards under which the Bologna process could proceed



safely. Institutions with ambitions to achieve world-class status have to adhere to the standards of providing an ethical infrastructure typical of world-class universities (Heyneman, 2013). These can be implemented through a combination of courageous rectors and an encouraging environment provided by the state.

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