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**Higher Education Reforms and Their Socio-Economic Contexts:  
Competing Narratives, Deinstitutionalization, and  
Reinstitutionalization in University Transformations in Poland**

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**Abstract**

The paper analyzes higher education policy in Poland in the last two decades with a focus on a diminishing role of university-produced institutional visions about the future of higher education institutions and an increasing role of government-produced instrumental visions. The processes of deinstitutionalization of traditional academic norms, habits and behaviors in the public sector are closely linked to the dramatic growth of private higher education. Traditional academic rules were weakening in the 1990s and there was no alternative set of academic rules, following the shock of the transition to market economy. The price of this process for public universities was the gradual institutional denigration of the research mission of elite universities. New legislation of 2008-2011 marks the beginning of a transformation from one order into another order, with new governance and funding principles at work.

MAREK KWIEK

## **Higher Education Reforms and Their Socio-Economic Contexts: Competing Narratives, Deinstitutionalization, and Reinstitutionalization in University Transformations in Poland**

### **1. Introduction**

The paper analyzes higher education policy in Poland in the last two decades with a focus on a diminishing role of university-produced institutional visions about the future of higher education institutions and an increasing role of government-produced instrumental visions, culminating in a recent (2008-2011) wave of reforms of the university sector.<sup>1</sup> The paper claims that processes of deinstitutionalization of traditional academic norms, habits and behaviors in the public sector are closely linked to the dramatic growth of private higher education. It argues that traditional academic rules were weakening in the 1990s and there was no alternative set of academic rules easily available following the shock of the transition to market economy. The price of this process for public universities was high, though: it was the gradual institutional denigration of the research mission of elite universities. The 1990s was the period of deinstitutionalization in public universities, with uncertainty about which academic behaviors are legitimate and which are not, what is the core of the academic identity. Processes of reinstitutionalization were only emergent with new reform proposals of the end of the 2000s. New legislation of 2008-2011 marks the beginning of a transformation from one order into another order, with new governance and funding principles at work.

The paper puts recent higher education reforms in Poland in a wider context provided by processes of massification of higher education systems combined with financial austerity of educational institutions, changing codes of academic behavior in the 1990s related to the emergent private higher education sector, and the strength of the two complementary, self-protective university narratives of (national) academic “tradition” and “institutional exceptionalism” of universities in Central Europe produced by the academic community. In

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<sup>1</sup> The paper will be published in Marek Kwiek and Peter Maassen (eds.), *National Higher Education Reforms in a European Context: Comparative Reflections on Poland and Norway*, Frankfurt and New York: Peter Lang, 2011.

Poland, universities are increasingly viewed from an instrumental, rather than institutional, higher education policy perspective. Reforms rationalize universities as organizations and are leading to their gradual construction as ever more formal organizations (rather than socially-rooted, traditional, and distinct institutions).

The paper is divided into the following sections: introduction; Polish higher education in 1990-2010 viewed through the concepts of institutionalization, deinstitutionalization and reinstitutionalization; incremental changes leading to a large-scale transformation; university-produced narratives about universities and its major components: themes of national academic traditions and institutional exceptionalism; rationalization of universities as organizations and universities as instruments for national political agendas; and conclusions.

Polish universities, despite huge massification of the system, have remained largely unreformed in the last two decades, following the initial radical changes right after the collapse of communism in 1989. Their adaptations to new postcommunist and market realities were much slower than adaptations of other public sector institutions and organizations, including social assistance, pension schemes, healthcare provision and primary and secondary education (Barr 2005, Inglot 2008). The latter were substantially reformed in the period from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s. In the last two decades (1990-2010), higher education system was steered by two new laws on higher education: the 1990 Law, introducing academic freedom and institutional autonomy, and the 2005 Law, adapting the system to the Bologna Process requirements. The core of the system, its relatively non-competitive funding modes, its heavily collegial governance modes and a complicated, obsolete, multi-level system of academic degrees and academic careers, remained largely untouched until the end of the 2000s (Kwiek 2009a, 2010).

History matters substantially: since the Second World War, universities in Central Europe had been functioning under communist regimes for almost half a century, and then the recent two decades of rapid transformations occurred (Tomusk 2004: 183-198). Underlying university-produced ideas about the university, its fundamental constitutive rules and practices, which might lead to convincing social narratives linking its past to its future, are much less socially relevant in the Central European region than in Western European countries. In Western Europe, prevalent ideas about the post-war university have been taking roots in the last half a century, together with the emergence of the post-war Western European welfare systems, or

welfare systems of “rich democracies” (Wilensky 2002). Central European countries were neither “rich”, nor “democracies”, and therefore there are currently no stable reference points for university-produced narratives about social and economic roles of universities. In the absence of powerful, commonly shared and historically-rooted ideas confirming the stable identity of the academic profession and the stable rationale for academic institutions, higher education reforms promoted in the region can take unexpected turns, with or without the support of the general public and the academic community. Also the impact of international reform agendas of higher education can be potentially higher in Central Europe, in the absence of strong national university narratives which would be both forward-looking and socially relevant. In Poland, university-produced narratives about the future of Polish universities are neither forward-looking, nor socially appealing, and it is the context in which a recent package of reforms (2008-2011) is being implemented.

Following 1989, reforming the welfare state basically did not mean reforming higher education systems. Other public services were viewed as substantially more important in the early 1990s. Higher education sector in Poland, after granting academic freedom to academics and institutional autonomy to institutions in the early transition years, was in general left on its own, with no major governmental long-term strategies, and with a powerful policy emphasis on increasing access to higher education (Kwiek 2003, 2008b). In the early years of the transition period, both domestic and, especially, international policy actors were paying little attention to social policy (setting up unemployment systems was the only area of priority concern at that time) and no attention to higher education policy. Neoliberal policymakers of the time focused on stabilization, liberalization, and privatization policies (Orenstein and Haas 2005: 145ff). The general lack of reformers’ focus on higher education had far-reaching consequences for the next decade (the 2000s). A decade and a half of small-scale changes in public higher education in Poland have only recently been followed up by large-scale changes in 2010-2011. New regulations culminated in an amendment to the 2005 law on higher education (March 2011) and introduced fundamentally new rules of the academic game: universities are increasingly becoming instruments for national political agendas, and their market orientation is much weaker than expected by the public. The process of reforming social policies in Central Europe during the postcommunist era in general turned out to be “much longer and much more difficult than most experts anticipated”, as analysts note (Inglot 2005: 3). Polish universities, after two decades of drifting, are vulnerable to undergo deep changes whose implications are still unclear.

## **2. Institutionalization, deinstitutionalization, and reinstitutionalization: Polish higher education in 1990-2010**

Let me refer now briefly to interrelated notions used by students of institutional change, particularly by “new” institutional theory in political sciences as developed by James March and Johan P. Olsen, which will be guiding my discussions of Polish higher education reforms: institutionalization, deinstitutionalization and reinstitutionalization (see also March and Olsen 1976, 1989, Peters 1999, Deephouse and Suchman 2008). For March and Olsen, an institution is “a relatively enduring collection of rules and organized practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and relatively resilient to the idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing external circumstance” (March and Olsen 2006b: 4). Constitutive rules structure institutional behavior: rules prescribe what is appropriate action: “to act appropriately is to proceed according to the institutional practices of a collectivity, based on mutual, and often tacit understanding of what is true, reasonable, natural, right, and good” (March and Olsen 2006a: 690). Basic logic of action is rule-following, and models assuming “logic of appropriateness” are opposed to models assuming “logic of consequentiality” (see Peters 2005). Institutionalization is both a process and a property of organizational arrangements and as a process it includes the following three dimensions: increasing clarity and agreement about behavioral rules, increasing consensus concerning how behavioral rules are to be described, explained and justified, and increasing shared conceptions of what are legitimate resources in different settings and who should have access to, or control, common resources (Olsen 2010: 127). Deinstitutionalization, in contrast, implies that

Existing institutional borders, identities, rules and practices, descriptions, explanations, and justifications, and resources and powers are becoming more contested and possibly even discontinued. There is increasing uncertainty, disorientation, and conflict. New actors are mobilized. Outcomes are more uncertain, and it is necessary to use more incentives or coercion to make people follow prescribed rules and to sanction deviance (Olsen 2010: 128).

And, finally, reinstitutionalization implies, inter alia, “a transformation from one order into another, constituted on different normative and organizational principles” (Olsen 2010: 128). Deinstitutionalization, as W. Richard Scott notes in *Institutions and Organizations*, refers to

processes by which “institutions weaken and disappear”, as well as to “enfeebled laws”, “diluted sanctions”, “increasing noncompliance”, “eroding norms”, “diminished force of obligatory expectations”, “erosion of cultural beliefs and the increasing questioning of what was once taken for granted” (Scott 2008: 196, see also Djelic and Quack 2008: 301-304). Indicators employed to assess the extent of deinstitutionalization range from “weakening beliefs to abandonment of a set of practices” (Scott 2008: 198). Deinstitutionalization, as defined in a seminal study by Christine Oliver (on “The Antecedents of Deinstitutionalization”), is

a process by which the legitimacy of an established or institutionalized organizational practice erodes or discontinues. Specifically, deinstitutionalization refers to the delegitimation of an established organizational practice or procedure as a result of organizational challenges to or the failure of organization to reproduce previously legitimated or taken-for-granted organizational actions (Oliver 1992: 564).

Institutionalized organizational practices can “fall into disfavor or disuse” (Oliver 1992: 566). Of the three pressures that can lead to deinstitutionalization (political, functional, and social), the social pressures are most useful for present analyses and come closest to Olsen’s normative-oriented accounts of deinstitutionalization. Social pressures lead members of the organization to discard (some) institutionalized practices; increasing normative fragmentation means a loss of consensus on the “meanings and interpretations that they attach to ongoing organizational tasks and activities” (Oliver 1992: 575). There is also increasing “erosion of institutionalized rules through a declining normative consensus and cognitively shared systems of meaning” (Djelic and Quack 2008: 302).

Deinstitutionalization in the present paper is specifically linked to the first decade and a half (1990-2005) of the postcommunist transition period in Polish higher education (marked by two laws on higher education: of 1990 and 2005), and reinstitutionalization is linked to reform initiatives following 2005, and, in particular, a coherent reform program of 2008-2011, marked by a set of six laws of 2010 reforming research sector and a new law on higher education of 2011.

The present paper claims that processes of deinstitutionalization of traditional academic norms, habits and behaviors in the public sector are closely linked to the dramatic growth of



private higher education (see Kwiek 2011a, 2010). It argues that traditional rules of (authoritarian, communist, ideological) higher education were weakening and there was no alternative set of academic rules easily available following the shock of the transition to market economy following 1989. A sort of normative vacuum appeared in higher education sector in which all sorts of codes of academic behaviors and rules and norms of academic conduct suddenly became possible and socially acceptable, without the risk for academics of the exclusion from the academic community as bound by those codes, rules and norms. The dramatic growth of private higher education in the 1990s was made possible by this type of deinstitutionalization of traditional academic norms and habits in public universities. The price of this process for public universities was very high, though: it was the gradual institutional denigration of the research mission of the university, and continuing underfunding of research in universities. Decreasing academic interest in research (academics being increasingly involved in paid teaching in both public and private sectors) was accompanied by decreasing public research funding available.

In Poland in the 1990s (as in several other postcommunist countries), rules constituting the heart of the institution of the university, for years, were not followed, and this not-following of the rules was not sanctioned: dozens of thousands of academics from public universities, especially those most prestigious, and especially in social sciences and the humanities, were generally systematically neglecting the traditional research mission of their (until then still research-oriented) universities and were full-time engaged in additional paid teaching in emergent private institutions. Academic moonlighting became the rule, not the exception. The traditional “logic of appropriateness” (March and Olsen 2006a) in the university sector was not stopping the turning of huge social energy into additional teaching in profit-driven, although nominally non-profit, private sector. All sorts of public justifications were created on an ad-hoc basis. Massive involvement of Polish academics in the development of private higher education led to gradual denigration of the research mission of public universities where they kept their primary employment. The “logic of appropriateness” assumes that:

Rules are followed because they are seen as natural, rightful, expected and legitimate. Actors seek to fulfill the obligations encapsulated in a role, an identity, a membership in a political community or group, and the ethos, practices, and expectations of its institutions. Embedded in a social collectivity, they do what they see as appropriate for themselves in a specific type of situation (March and Olsen 2006a: 689).

The collapse of communism in general, and the emergence of the private sector in higher education in particular, made traditional academic rules look no longer natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate. The 1990s was the period of deinstitutionalization in public universities, with uncertainty about which academic behaviors are legitimate and which are not, what is the core of the academic identity. Processes of reinstitutionalization were only emergent with new reform proposals of the end of the 2000s. New legislation of 2008-2011 marks the beginning of a transformation from one order into another order, with new governance and funding principles at work. One of the fundamental consequences of the large-scale phenomenon of the growth of the private sector in the 1990s, accompanied by the processes of deinstitutionalization in public universities, was limited academic pressure on reforming public universities, including limited pressure on increasing impoverishing academic salaries in the public sector. Salaries were extremely low but holding multiple (sometimes more than two) posts in both public and private sectors was tolerated.

For a period of almost two decades, rules of university behaviors, especially in elite institutions, were different than ever before in history, and “deviant courses of action” were not sanctioned – these new actions (like moonlighting and low research productivity) were not viewed as resulting from norms alien to the institution. Consequently, Polish universities became strongly redefined institutions, with consequences for their missions (gradual denigration of research), public funding (much lower than should and could potentially be), social prestige (decreasing in general) and for their governance structures (after the initial changes in 1990, there were limited, if any, changes in management and governance structures, and the first law on higher education following the new law of 1990 was passed only 15 years later, in 2005). Lessening of traditional (academic) norms led to substantial institutional transformations, introducing new institutional cultures accepting actions and behaviors traditionally (academically) non-acceptable in elite institutions, like the general neglect of research and moonlighting in private sector institutions. Universities, with underfunded faculty seeking additional outside employment, and institutionally catering for part-time fee-paying students who provided a considerable share of income (15-40 percent of annual university budgets in the 1990s, depending on the type of institution), were gradually losing their research focus. As Paul Pierson reminds (from the perspective of historical institutionalism), “early steps in a process may fundamentally restrict the range of options available at later ones” (Pierson 2004: 133-134; see also small adjustments leading to gradual

institutional change in Mahoney and Thelen 2010: 1-37 and Streeck and Thelen 2005: 18-33), and this may have been precisely the Polish case of higher education expansion through privatization. The two decades of growth of private higher education would strongly support the path-dependence model: once the new sector emerged in the system to introduce competition and increase access, everything else, including deinstitutionalization processes in the public sector, was a mere consequence of this first step. The denigration of traditional academic norms and acceptance of new academic codes of behavior have led to the phenomenal growth of the private sector on the one hand (330 institutions, 33.3 percent of enrollments and 633.000 students in 2009) and, on the other, to the unprecedented decline in research performance of the public sector and its lost research aspirations, particularly in “soft” disciplines. Consequently, due to the lack of powerful academic pressures on increasing public funding for university research, the phenomenon of dual privatization (internal and external, see Kwiek 2010) has led to lost research opportunities of Polish higher education in general. (Partially) self-imposed decrease in research aspirations in the 1990s has clearly led to decrease in research production, with low visibility of Polish universities in an international research landscape (e.g. in European and global university rankings).

What was especially important was the fact that no new socially convincing university-produced narrative on the mission of universities was produced in the last two decades, and the traditional Humboldtian narrative was gradually losing its social legitimacy. As Claus Offe, from another perspective of political sciences, explains,

Institutions come with an implicit theory about themselves, an ‘animating idea’ that provides reasons for their support and defense. ... An institution that is entirely incapable of providing widely accepted reasons for itself is, as it were, intellectually naked ... and, for this reason, in a precarious position and vulnerable to challenge (Offe 2006: 12).

The 2008-2011 wave of higher education reforms in Poland is socially feasible and technically possible because there is no widely socially recognized and commonly accepted animating idea (or overarching story) about Polish universities that could be successfully defended. Sweeping, perhaps even revolutionary changes are discussed, and results of public discussions are still unpredictable. The new law may lead in many unspecified directions. For universities, the turn of the decade is a “critical juncture” period in which potential changes

are sweeping and no major socially appealing counter-narrative, either a set of reform proposals or an overarching story, can be produced by the academic community.

In the “critical juncture” periods (to refer to historical institutionalism, Pierson 2004: 133-166; in contrast to equally consequential “piecemeal changes”, as in Streeck and Thelen 2005, Mahoney and Thelen 2010), when traditional “animating ideas” seem outlived, generally deeper institutional changes are possible. There is at least a double danger, though: first, too many alien norms may be invading the institution of the university, transforming the institution to its core; and, second, too heavy reliance in reforms (reforms of intellectually, ideationally, “naked” institutions at the moment, in the absence of a convincing, internally-produced, university-produced and widely accepted overarching story about their social roles) on political short-term concerns. As Paul Pierson reminds in his criticism of the theory of institutional design (see Elster et al. 1998):

The question of actors’ time horizons constitutes a central issue for analysts of institutional design. If politicians often have short time-horizons, this has important implications for theories of institutional design and change. Where designers have short time horizons and the short-term and the long-term effects of institutional choices are distinct, it becomes far less likely that institutions will be designed to achieve functional outcomes over the long term. Long-term institutional consequences may be *by-products* of actions taken for short-term political reasons (Pierson 2004: 112).

Institutional and systemic consequences of the *laissez-faire* higher education policies in the 1990s and beyond, including the emergence and booming of the private sector based on its parasitic relations with the public sector (its use of academic staff, buildings, libraries, and even sports halls of the public sector) are still holding public institutions in their grips. And current “critical juncture” period in Polish higher education may evoke (short-term) political solutions which may hold public institutions in their tight grip for another decade. The private sector brought about the massification of higher education and opened the system to students from lower socioeconomic strata; at the same time, the accompanying long-term costs, especially for elite public universities, only emerge to be seen. The implications of the 2011 law on higher education are still not fully clear as the law is going to be accompanied by about 40 detailed by-laws. Reinstitutionalization, or passing from one organizational order to

another, possibly brought about by new 2008-2011 reform initiatives may have many faces, some of which still cannot be determined.

### **3. Incremental changes leading to a large-scale transformation?**

The focus on funding reforms in the public debate on the future of universities and in policymakers' discourse is clearly understandable. In the last few years, even prior to the economic crisis (which has hit Poland only marginally, so far), no governmental policy projections assumed increased public funding for higher education or for research performed in higher education. In the current wave of reforms no possibilities of a substantial increase in overall public funding for both areas are mentioned, except for a new "pro-quality subsidy" to be used for new, selected on highly competitive basis, KNOWs (National Leading Research Units) and increased doctoral stipends. The fundamental assumption of almost every piece of legislation related to higher education under discussion in the Polish Parliament in the last three years is its core final clause: the proposed act will have "neutral impact on the public budget", meaning: no increases in overall public funding levels are expected. Higher education, as well as research in higher education, has not stopped being a low policy priority, as conceptualized by Bob Deacon already in 1997 in his study about Central Europe of the 1990s (Deacon 1997); it still is a low priority, regardless of which political party is in power. With a new wave of reforms, the previous model of the "misery for all" (i.e. very limited and generally non-competitive research funding, allocated to all rather than to most competitive units and academics through research grants), will be replaced with a new model of competitive, mostly grants-based research funding. New mechanisms of allocating research funding are expected to be much more performance-based and aimed at providing competitive individual or group research grants rather than institutionally-distributed lump-sums for research, as has been the case since 1990s. But national research funds are going to remain at the same level.

There is a useful distinction between "changes within fairly stable institutional and normative frameworks" and "change in the frameworks themselves" (March and Olsen 2006b: 14). Central European transformations in higher education in the early 1990s clearly belong to the radical, latter, while transformations in the 2000s are more of the incremental, former type. But in the Polish case, the most recent wave of reforms (2008-2011) could have a potential of changing again "the frameworks themselves". It is too early to have solid evidence, though, as

accompanying regulations are still in the making. Recent reforms are clearly processes of constructing new institutional norms and new academic codes of behavior, intended to replace formerly predominant ones in the 1990-2005 period.

Transformations of postcommunist universities in Central Europe can be viewed as resulting from several powerful, interrelated, internal and exogenous, pressures. First, there were internal pressures to continue with rules and organized practices inherited from the communist period. Second, there were internal pressures to survive in the turmoil of economic “shock therapies” of the beginning of the 1990s and beyond and in the midst of fundamental financial austerity (incomparable with the situation in the 1970s and the 1980s under communism; this is where resource dependence perspective could be useful: as Pfeffer and Salancik argue, “the key to organizational survival is the ability to acquire and maintain resources. ... What happens in an organization is not only a function of the organization, its structure, its leadership, its procedures, or its goals. What happens is also a consequence of the environment and the particular contingencies and constraints deriving from that environment”, and this is what was key in the 1990s, Pfeffer and Salancik 2003: 2-3). And, third, there were internal and exogenous pressures to design and employ new rules and organized practices, responding to the three guiding principles of the reforms in the early 1990s: academic democracy, academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Transformations of universities in the 1990s were specific in kind, and distant from those designed and ongoing in Western Europe (see Scott 2007a, 2007b, Kwiek 2006, Tomusk 2004 and, for a panoramic view of transformations in Western Europe, especially, Neave and van Vught 1991, 1994).

Like other hitherto stable social and economic institutions, also postcommunist universities in the early transition period found themselves in a temporary social and cultural vacuum and were unable to either easily return to their “business as usual” course from the communist period, or to adapt to new “Western” ways of functioning (with different governance and funding modes). As a consequence, they are still under largely intuitive construction. Suddenly, and to an extent unexpectedly, academic institutions faced huge organizational and financial challenges and had no elaborate guidance on how to handle these in the form of clear national policies or clear national strategies. Inherited academic identities, rules and habits, patterns of thinking and acting, routines and practices, academic norms, culture, and ethos were useful in institutional survival strategies only to some extent. Rule-following

(traditional rules), for a time lasting from between a few years and a decade and a half, did not work, as rules inherited from communism were deemed obsolete, authoritarian, anti-democratic, and new rules were still in the making. External shocks related to “postcommunist transition” in economy and the financial austerity prevalent throughout the 1990s were driving the dynamics of institutional change. Academic institutions (and academics themselves) were responding to mostly economic shocks in the way a resource dependence model expects them: seeking how to manage to survive (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003: 258-262)

But we argue that the solutions to the problem of the economic survival of public universities in the 1990s – the prolonged, widespread, systematic denigration of the research mission of the university, and the focus on part-time teaching and fees accompanying it – stopped them from thriving in the 2000s and beyond (Kwiek 2010). The academic culture which emerged in the 1990s is still defining codes of academic behavior today, forming an internal blocking mechanism which cannot be easily overcome as it is based on norms and codes of behavior internalized by thousands of academics who see their primary legitimate role in the university sector as teaching. In the 1990s, new, temporary patterns of academic behavior emerged. Routines and practices which took root in the institutions were delinked from previous routines and practices.

There were two main sources of renewed academic behavior: the weakening of traditional rules (which in research universities combined teaching and research) resulted from the coexistence in the mid-1990s of financially deprived public sector institutions and financially thriving private sector institutions, followed by the emergence of large-scale fee-paying studies in the public sector itself. Privatization of higher education led to the fundamental reconfiguration of which actions were believed to be “appropriate, natural, and legitimate” (Olsen 2010: 127) in public universities. Essentially, the shadow of the austere 1990s and individual and institutional survival strategies of the 1990s continue to have a powerful impact on new generations of researchers and subsequent educational policies in the next decade and a half: until the last wave of reforms in Poland, the research mission of the university was becoming increasingly obsolete, in both academics’ minds and in rare and inconsistent governmental strategies. Permanently low public investments in research and development in higher education reflect the view of policymakers of universities as teaching-focused rather than research-intensive institutions. Academic institutions (and academics)

were essentially left on their own to survive in the 1990s. When debates about possible directions of reforms became intense in the early 2000s, the teaching focus of universities was only marginally criticized. Clark's "academic oligarchy" in Poland (Clark 1977) was widely promoting its own views of what appropriate academic norms of conduct and codes of behavior were, what was acceptable as academic identity, and what was the essence of belonging to the academic community. In this the important point was to keep the status quo of the transition period of the 1990s as long as possible: to be able to focus on fee-based teaching, preferably in at least two institutions (and, as resource dependence perspective would explain, with at least two salaries).

#### **4. University-produced narratives about universities: national traditions and institutional exceptionalism**

Academic communities in Central Europe, with Poland in the forefront, in the last two decades have been producing (and presenting to the policy makers and the general public) self-protecting narratives about universities as institutions which should be heavily guarded against any influence of market- or competition-oriented mechanisms. Throughout the region, the narrative of national "academic traditions" and that of "institutional exceptionalism" were extremely successful. It is only in the last few years that supranational ideas (especially originating from the European Commission and the OECD) are gaining enough strength to become gradually translated into national legislation, as in the Polish case. Consequently, self-protective narratives seem to be losing grounds and their social appeal is diminishing.

Thus, until recently, regional academic narratives focusing on national academic "traditions" and "institutional exceptionalism" of universities as organizations vis-à-vis other public sector organizations, was very powerful, as was the narrative focusing on "exceptionalism" of postcommunist universities vis-à-vis their Western European counterparts, with the prevalent denigration of the value of any international or global ranking exercises. Both narratives have become considerably weaker in the last few years, due also to prolonged public debates about low or extremely low positions of Central European universities in global rankings, which led to bigger social pressures to reform higher education systems, eagerly used by governments.

Self-protecting narratives of national academic "traditions" and of "institutional exceptionalism" existed in internal and external versions: with respect to other public sector



organizations locally, and with respect to Western European universities internationally. They were so powerful that, in general, privatization policies, so widely spread all over the region and all over the public sector, were basically not applied to higher education sector, except for revenue-driven, autonomously self-imposed, internal privatization: charging fees from part-time students (Kwiek 2008, 2010). While the pension systems in the region were widely privatized, and while healthcare systems in the region were also reformed and opened to privatization, for instance, via the encouragement of the emergence of private, individual policy-based healthcare – the public higher education sector was relatively immune to both privatization and marketization trends owing to the two socially convincing narratives, often in national variants. With one exception which suited the academic oligarchy perfectly: fee-based studies in a nominally free public sector, and competition in the private sector for multiple-employment, while keeping basic employment in a non-competitive public sector.

Following Peter Maassen and Johan P. Olsen from their recent seminal book, the paper assumes a fundamental difference between instrumental and institutional perspectives in viewing the university. In an instrumental perspective, the university is involved in a “set of contracts”: “support, economic and otherwise, depends on contributions. Change reflects a continuous calculation of relative performance and costs, and the University, or some of its parts, will be replaced if there are more efficient ways to achieve shifting objectives”. An institutional perspective, in contrast, assumes that well-entrenched institutions “reflect the historical experience of a community, that they take time to root and they are difficult to change rapidly and radically” (Maassen and Olsen 2007: 27). As an institution, the university is involved in a pact based on “long-term cultural commitments”. The instrumental view of the university dominates most reform programs and debates, both at the European level and at national levels, Poland included. Olsen raises a fundamental issue: “What kind of University for what kind of society?” (Olsen 2007: 25). Polish higher education reforms of the last few years are a perfect example of tensions between viewing the university as an institution (by the academic community) and viewing it as an instrument for national political agendas (by the government). In the absence of socially convincing ideas about the future of universities produced by universities themselves (universities feeling lost in the midst of ongoing social and economic transformations), new ideas are increasingly being produced by the state, especially governments involved in reform programs. Not surprisingly, in these new discourses (for instance, the 2005-2008 first, and, especially 2008-2011 discourses about the

need of reforms in Poland), universities are clearly viewed from an instrumental rather than institutional perspective (Olsen 2007: 26-28).

At the same time, arguments supporting the direction of reforms clearly show that universities in Poland are no longer viewed as “specific organizations” (Musselin 2007: 78-79). While Musselin’s answer to the question about the specificity of universities as organizations in Western Europe is positive, reform programs in Poland show at least concerted efforts to make this specificity irrelevant and to introduce to higher education system new non-academic and business-originating models. Universities in Poland seem unable to protect either their institutional identity or their institutional integrity, unable to produce and promote a common, socially convincing and relevant narrative for the society at large about the social, cultural and economic roles of academic institutions in the future.

But institutions without powerful, legitimizing, founding ideas at their disposal are much more easily subject to radical reform programs – which may be the Polish case of 2008-2011 reforms and beyond. Under specific historical circumstances, in the absence of strong defense mechanisms in the form of convincing and relevant social narratives, even such historically-embedded institutions as universities are at the mercy of politicians and political parties. Polish reforms of 2008-2011 may lead in fundamentally unexpected directions, even though the era of shock therapies of the early 1990s, when almost anything could happen to almost any social area, has been over for a long time. The absence of convincing narratives produced by the academic community and defended by the academic community (creating their identity), combined with the double factor of the existence of weak, unconvincing, backward-looking narratives produced by the traditional academic oligarchy and of the strong governmental willingness to reform the sector rightly viewed as unreformed, may lead to unexpectedly deep changes.

One of possible defense mechanisms is shown by Olsen in his discussion of “institutional imperialism”, or of the will to achieve ideological hegemony of one institutional sphere (like politics) over another institutional sphere (like universities): “typically, an institution under serious attack reexamines its pact with society and its rationale, identity and foundations, its ethos, codes of behavior and primary allegiances and loyalties. ... A possible outcome is the fall and rise of institutional structures and their associated systems of normative and causal beliefs and resources. Arguably, the University now faces this kind of situation” (Olsen 2007:

28). So far in Poland, the reexamination of the ethos is not happening, despite fervent public debates. The government grip on universities has never been so strong in the last two decades as it is at the moment, and the future of public universities has never been so unpredictable.

What seems to matter more for the overall strength of the instrumental view of the university prevalent in the region is the relatively weak foundation of traditional organizational and funding patterns. Both the communist period and the two decades of postcommunist transformations are not strong enough, or legitimate enough, reference points for the production of convincing narratives based on the vision of the university as a community of scholars. Consequently, universities in the region – if, as in Poland, exposed to the pressures of comprehensive instrumental reform initiatives strongly supported by political programs – seem much weaker partners in a stakeholders’ dialogue about their future than universities in Western Europe. Polish universities might witness further incremental changes, as in previous years, but more probably they will witness massive, tectonic shifts in the very roots of their governance and funding regimes, following the implementation of the new 2011 law.

### **5. Rationalization of universities as organizations and universities as instruments for national political agendas**

Reform attempts in Poland in the last few years lead to the construction of the university as an organization functioning in an environment of other organizations. Reform attempts are accompanied by incremental changes so far, i.e. slowly changing ways of organization and funding. The reform attempts of 2008-2011 introduce, for the first time in the last two decades, fundamentally new rules of the game, though: for the first time, a say of the state as a stakeholder is different from a say of (the part of) the academic community represented by the rectors’ conference (of academic higher education institutions, or KRASP) as a distinct stakeholder.

The reform initiatives may be regarded as a beginning of a passage from one order to another order, with different normative (and organizational) principles (Olsen 2008: 9): as reinstitutionalization processes. The ministerial documents defining “Basic Assumptions” (which officially accompany amendment to current legislation) show the extent to which the new order is potentially different from the previous order. There are six major weak areas in Polish higher education to which new legislation responds: no funding streams awarded to

universities directly on the basis of high quality teaching and research (no quality-supporting mechanisms through funding); low levels of internationalization of studies; inadequate structure of study programs, with huge overrepresentation of study programs in the social sciences and education; complicated career ladders for academics; obsolete management modes; and weak links between universities and their socio-economic environments. Consequently, the changes to be introduced in the amended law focus on three pillars: first, “effective model of management”, two, “dynamic model of academic career”, and three, “effective model of education” (MNISW 2010: 3). The fundamental changes are related to increased university autonomy, wider use of quality-supporting mechanisms in teaching and research and stronger links between universities and their environments.

University autonomy will be increased through leaving the decision of opening new study programs to faculties rather than, as so far, leaving it to the Ministry and its closed national list of study programs possible. These so-called “standards of education” are abolished, and most top research performing and autonomous faculties will be able to open and close down their study programs. Other faculties will still need Ministry’s approval for new programs. The integration of universities with their socio-economic environments will include education together with employers, education at the request of employers, and the involvement of practitioners from the world of business in defining learning outcomes and study programs in vocationally-oriented study areas. In university management, there will be two alternative procedures to have a new rector: either in a traditional way of university-wide elections, or in a new way of competition between external applicants selected by newly created boards of trustees. In most general terms, a dynamic model of academic career means less complicated procedures related to obtaining PhD degrees, habilitation degrees, and professorship titles, more transparent procedures and more closely related to measurable, objective criteria. A new model of education includes closer links between study programs and labor market needs, increased internationalization of studies, and increased rights guaranteed to students as consumers of paid and free educational services in both higher education sectors. The two overarching dimensions of changes are autonomy and competitiveness, and there is a long catalogue of detailed changes increasing university autonomy vis-à-vis the Ministry and increasing competitiveness of both teaching and research funds available to both sectors (MNISW 2010: 1-14).

The 2008-2011 wave of reforms in Polish higher education – as well as a decade-long reforms of healthcare system – can be viewed as a way of “constructing organizations” out of public services, as “organizational reforms” (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000). The difference between the state as a single organization consisting of many sub-units prior to the reform attempts (public higher education services, public healthcare services etc.) and the state as “a kind of polycentric network consisting of many separate organizations” is becoming more clear:

Whereas relations between public entities used to be characterized by many of the typical attributes of large hierarchies, such as setting rules, giving orders, inspecting and providing information, their interaction now includes features that are more typical of the relations between autonomous organizations, such as competition, collaboration, negotiation, advising, contracting, selling and buying (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000: 730).

Negotiations, contracting, selling and buying in the healthcare sector following the 1999 reforms are (at least rhetorically) standard practices; the same practices are emergent in the higher education sector together with a new wave of reforms (and possibly in the next wave of reforms, based on an emergent national strategy for higher education development until 2020). What a recent wave of reforms brings about to Polish universities can be also referred to as processes leading to “the rationalization of universities as organizations” (Ramirez 2006): as other organizations, they are increasingly expected to have goals and plans for attaining them, and are becoming more formally organized. As Ramirez notes, “the idea that an entity should be influenced by the ‘best practices’ of other similar entities is more likely to take place if the entities are imagined as formal organizations rather than as historically rooted social institutions” (Ramirez 2006: 240-241). Universities are in the process of being “turned into organizational actors” and are on their way of “achieving full organizational actorhood” (Krücken and Meier 2006: 253). They are required in the new law to have elaborate institutional strategies, and in draft national strategies – they are expected to present their missions and visions, to be accepted by boards of trustees.

Olsen (2007) suggested four “stylized visions” of university organization and governance: the first portrays the university as “a rule-governed community of scholars”, the second as “an instrument for national political agendas”, the third as “a representative democracy”, and the

fourth as “a service enterprise embedded in competitive markets” (Olsen 2007: 28-33; Maassen and Olsen 2007: 55-134). The four visions of the university generally coexist in time, being “enduring aspects of university organization and governance. The mix of visions varies over time and across political and cultural systems” (Olsen 2007: 36).

Of special interest to the Polish case are the two first visions. In the first vision, university operations and dynamics are governed by internal factors, while in the second vision, university operations and dynamics are governed by environmental factors. The university’s constitutive logic is identity based on free inquiry, truth finding, rationality and expertise, while in the second vision it is administrative: implementing predetermined political objectives; criteria of assessment are scientific quality in the first vision and effective and efficient achievement of national purposes in the second; reasons for autonomy mean that authority to the best qualified is the constitutive principle of the University as an institution in the first vision and means that they are delegated and based on relative efficiency in the second vision. And finally, change is driven by the internal dynamics of science, it is slow reinterpretation of institutional identity, and rapid and radical change occurs only with performance crises in the first vision; and change means political decisions, priorities, designs as a function of elections, coalition formation and breakdowns and changing political leadership in the second vision (Olsen 2007: 30, Table. 1). (Clearly the 2008 change in political power in Poland, following the elections, meant the abrupt ending to one reform program, and beginning of preparations of a different reform program, now in the final stages). Olsen’s stylized vision of the university as an instrument for shifting national political agendas is the following:

It is an instrument for achieving national priorities, as defined by the government of the day. The University cannot base its activity on a long-term pact based on constitutive academic values and principles and a commitment to a vision of civilized society and cultural development. Instead research and education is a factor of production and a source of wealth or welfare. ... A key issue is applicability and utility of research for practical problem-solving, such as defense, industrial-technological competition, health and education (Olsen 2007: 31).

In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe – economies which have experienced prolonged periods of financial austerity – fully-fledged national debates on the price of social

objectives met via national higher education systems in the context of other national priorities in public spending have not taken place so far. The vision of the university as a strongly market-oriented service enterprise has been weak. The reason of the absence of the application of strongly marketized way of thinking about higher education, vis-à-vis other social and infrastructural priorities seems strongly rooted in the social acceptance of the traditional vision of the university, still prevalent, and only slowly beginning to erode. Expenditures in higher education and research in higher education have not been not viewed by the society at large as directly competing with expenditures in other priority areas – which may not last long.

Polish higher education is still operating according to traditional, Humboldtian, and, to a large extent, communist, rules of the game, i.e. the rules of the university as a “rule-governed community of scholars” (Olsen 2007: 29-31), as an institution based on academic values, to an extent unparalleled in EU-15 higher education systems. While in Western European systems the co-existence of different models (the traditional model and three instrumental models in which the university is a tool) is prevalent, in Poland reform attempts are intended to replace a ruling traditional model, transformed only marginally in the last 20 years, with Olsen’s model of the university as an “instrument for national political agendas”. A shift in policy thinking and in new legislation has a clear direction: away from the Humboldtian Ivory Tower, faculty-centered model, towards the model in which the university’s role is to consistently follow national political agendas.

Surprisingly, especially in the context of changes in other public sector services, the move towards the (public) university as a “service enterprise embedded in competitive markets” is of marginal importance (the growth of the private sector did not lead to the emergence of competitive markets: it is almost fully dependent on public sector academics and infrastructure, does not compete directly or indirectly, except for a handful of institutions, with the public sector, and to a large extent caters for students from lower socioeconomic strata). Strikingly, while all other public sector services are increasingly being reconceptualized towards market orientation and market-like models (see Kwiek 2007), public higher education seems to be reconceptualized as a new tool for national political agendas, with surprisingly limited encouragement to be more market-oriented. The role of market mechanisms in new legislation (as well as in the two strategies for the development of higher education until 2020 under public discussion) seems much more modest than could be

expected. Consequently, while the welfare policies generally are increasingly under pressures to become more marketized, higher education policies generally are under pressures to be ever more closely linked to the needs of the national economy and national economic priorities. The strong market-oriented vision in Olsen's typology seems present at the level of governmental rhetoric but not at the level of new national strategies or new national legislation. It is too early to discuss actual reform implementation as most measures will come into force in the next two years, though. Polish reform programs and accompanying public debates, as in other European countries, are driven by an instrumental view of the university, while, as discussed above, the logic of possible developments suggested by the Polish academic profession is traditional and institutional. The instrumental/institutional divide makes the two discourses generally incompatible. And this is where tensions related to new reform initiatives have their roots.

## **7. Conclusions**

The paper puts recent higher education reforms in Poland in a wider context provided by transformations of postcommunist universities, processes of massification of higher education systems combined with financial austerity of educational institutions, changing codes of academic behavior in the 1990s related to the emergent private higher education sector, and the strength of the two complementary, self-protective narratives of (national) "tradition" and "institutional exceptionalism" of universities in Central Europe produced by the academic community. Until recently, universities were relatively immune against both market forces and competition pressures. In Poland, universities are increasingly viewed from an instrumental, rather than institutional, higher education policy perspective. As elsewhere in Europe, reforms rationalize universities as organizations and are leading to their gradual construction as ever more formal organizations (rather than socially-rooted, traditional, and distinct institutions). The pact between universities and the society is weak and narratives produced by the academic profession about the future of universities are no longer socially appealing. New ideas are promoted, produced by national governments and rooted in supranational ideas produced by the OECD and the European Commission. Consequently, in view of large-scale reform attempts throughout the public sector, universities are vulnerable to changes with possibly undefined long-term effects. And, as elsewhere in Europe, there is strong need for Polish universities to reexamine their social and economic roles, their contributions to societal and economic needs alike, their fundamental allegiances and



loyalties, their norms and behaviors, ethos and foundations, in the face of changing legal and financial environments that can determine their developments for the next decade. While universities in Poland are increasingly being constructed as organizations functioning according to the instrumental model of serving national policy agendas, the academic community needs to scrutinize national variations of this model, and be able to assess its long-term consequences. The role of path dependence in institutional transformations is vital, in relation to both socio-economic and higher education policies. Differences between Central and Western Europe in higher education governance and funding trends, as well as in university knowledge production, may be larger than expected, and that the role of historical legacies (five decades of communism and two decades of postcommunist transformations) may be more long-term than has been generally assumed in current social science research about Central Europe.

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