

Glocalization of Higher Education in a Post-Socialist Country: the Case of Lithuania

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Abstract. The paper focuses on some aspects of reforming higher education in a post-socialist country. The study is based on a case analysis of transformations in Lithuanian higher education and addresses the overarching research question—why post-socialist countries, which three decades ago had similar or almost identical education systems, moved along different trajectories of change instead of initially predicted further convergence. Changes in a period of transition moved some countries closer to the predominant Western system of higher education, while some other former Soviet republics maintained many elements of the previous model or chose alternative paths of development. We assume that globalization of education still remains the driving force for many educational changes in post-socialist area. However, the Soviet legacy and other country-specific factors mod-

ify the rationale and the contents of the reforms which implies different final results. The level of socio-economic development is another extremely important factor which determines the quality and scope of education reforms. In comparative research we encounter the phenomena which is called glocalization—global developments in a specific area mix with local culture produce the specific outcomes. The study reveals that the global trends of standardization, marketization, accountability and cost-effectiveness to a certain extent correspond with the Soviet tradition of unification, lack of trust and punitive nature of controlling institutions. In Lithuanian case the Western ideas of reforming higher education were accepted selectively and stimulated reforms, which in general followed the common post-socialist pattern of „path dependency“ but at the same time produced some interesting country-specific outcomes.

Keywords: globalization and glocalization, higher education, post-socialist countries, education reforms, world culture and world systems theories.

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Introduction

Comparative studies of post-socialism is a challenging object of educational research, which, according to our understanding, still doesn't get as much attention as it deserves. There are not so many publications on the topic, at least in research journals published in English. During the last decade there were several comprehensive studies of post-socialist education [Silova 2010; Chankseliani, Silova 2018; Silo-

va, Piattoeva, Millei 2018; Huisman, Smolentseva, Froumin 2018], but, having in mind that a post-socialist world includes about 30 countries and occupies a vast territory of the Eurasian continent, it's far from enough. Semyonov and Platonova [2018] note that the simultaneous start of countries' own trajectories makes the observed period the field of „natural experiment“ which should be described. However, comparativists still insufficiently explore research opportunities provided by the above mentioned „natural experiment“. Perhaps one of the reasons is that development of education after the fall of the Berlin wall was considered to be a linear process of turning a „backward“ socialist system into a more „advanced“ Western one by just dully following the prevailing contemporary fashions in education. In comparative education the studies of post-socialist transformations were mainly focused on tracing the trajectories of the Western reform paths as well as broader concepts circulating internationally [Silova 2012]. Post-socialist countries were labelled „transition“ countries having in mind that after a certain transitory period, most probably with a somehow different pace and level of success, they will rearrange their systems of education in accordance with the Western standards. Therefore after a relatively short rise of interest Western comparativists apparently decided that the process of convergence will proceed along the traditional lines and the topic of backward countries catching-up with the West doesn't offer much new or interesting material for research. Bain [2010] notes that the belief of many researchers in the West was based on the assumption that there is one Western educational model that needs to be replicated and that there is only one way of implementing this model. Three decades have passed, and now it's obvious that the process of transition in post-socialist area is far from over. The term „transition countries“ currently is seldom used as it assumes that there is some final point in the process of transformation. However, nowadays it's almost universally acknowledged that change is a permanent state of being in a post-modern world. A Western model seems to become a moving target, a „brave new world“ of neoliberal capitalism didn't meet all the expectations, and the final goal of catching up with the West is currently questioned by at least some of the countries from the former Soviet campus.

At the initial phase of transition there appeared to be two dominant modes of reforming education: „returning to the past“ and „borrowing from abroad“ [Anweiler 1992]. The same tendency still can be traced nowadays, when the educational reforms tend to follow the long-lasting tradition of educational borrowing and lending [Spring 2009], but at the same time the process is almost inevitably followed by various manifestations of path-dependency [Szolar 2015; Leišytė, Rose, Schimmelpfenning 2018]. One of the possible answers to the overarching research question—why post-socialist countries, which three decades ago had similar or almost identical education systems, moved along different trajectories of development instead of initially

predicted further convergence—is that in each country one can observe different mix of cultural and historical specificity, Soviet legacy and the impact of global forces. The level of socio-economic development is another extremely important factor which determines the quality and scope of education reforms. In this respect former Soviet republics encounter very different socio-economic realities. Post-socialist countries had to learn the lesson that transition to market economy doesn't always bring prosperity. Inequality manifests itself not only within the countries, but also between the countries. For example, human development index in post-Soviet region ranges from very high (0,882) in Estonia to medium (0,656) in Tajikistan [UNDP 2020]. Idea of convergence is based on a theoretical assumption of world culture theorists that all cultures are integrating into a single global culture, in which world education culture is nested [Spring 2009]. However, the course of events during the three decades makes us think that perhaps world system theory, which claims that educational ideas are imposed by the economic power and global institutions, like the OECD and the World Bank, can better explain the peculiarities of post-socialist development. Supporting the arguments of world system theorists is postcolonial analysis, which stresses that Western-type education spread around the globe as a result of cultural imperialism. In its current manifestation, postcolonial powers promote market economies, human capital education, and neoliberal school reforms to promote the interests of the rich nations and powerful multinational corporations [Ibid.]. Divergence of post-socialist economies and social welfare models, as well as national education systems, can be explained by different roles allocated to them in the global market.

Comparative analysis of post-socialist countries is a complicated task for a number of reasons. One of the reasons is the lack of trustworthy information. The least complicated is collecting data about the EU and OECD countries, as all the member states possess vast statistical data bases: OECD Education at a Glance, EU Eurostat, etc. Quite different are the possibilities of getting reliable statistics, for example, about some Central Asian countries. The second reason is related to the territorial disputes. Many former Soviet republics have territorial disputes and it's difficult to judge which territory we should include in the comparison. Is Crimea a Russian or Ukrainian territory? Russian and Ukrainian sides will give different answers and educational statistics provided by them apparently will be different. The same applies to Transnistria, Nagorny Karabakh, South Osetia, Abkhazia, Doneck and Lugansk regions, etc. Still another problem, inherited from the Soviet past, is the tendency of showing-off. A typical example is playing with the results of PISA and other large-scale student achievement studies. Chapman et al. [2016] warn that one of the deficiencies of PISA is the ability of the countries to play with the results by entering data from a limited range of social and geographical areas within them. The trick of playing with data is often used for political reasons: authoritar-

ian political leaders like to boast the success of their countries and national educational agencies are obliged to reach the prescribed indicators at any cost. One may say that it's a rather common practice worldwide, but former Soviet republics have inherited the experience of extremely sophisticated ways of playing with numbers. One of the possible solutions to challenges emerging in post-socialist studies is a country case analysis. Case analysis approach provides researchers an opportunity to reveal country-specific peculiarities of development and to compare countries between themselves in areas wherever the data is comparable.

Though some authors note that the influence of globalization is exaggerated [Rasmussen 2003] or is „on a retreat“ [Spring 2009], in our study we rely on the assumption that globalization of education still remains the driving force for many educational changes in post-socialist area. However, the Soviet legacy and other country specific factors modify the rationale and the contents of the reforms with implies different final outcomes. Marginson and van der Wende [2007] note that global convergences are subject to local, sub-national and national influences and countervailing forces, including governmental regulation and academic cultures. Hence the effects of globalisation are also differentiated. Chankseliani and Silova (2018) observe that in post-socialist countries there is little evidence of educational convergence towards neoliberal educational goals when looking beyond policy rhetoric and digging deeper into local educational contexts. In comparative studies the phenomena is often called glocalization—global developments in a specific area mix with local culture produce the specific outcome [Niemczyk 2019]. In our case the mix is flavoured by the presence of Soviet legacy, the influence of which in different post-socialist countries may be quite different and range from total neglect to almost open adoration. We chose higher education sector for our case analysis as higher education seems to be the best example to illustrate global tendencies in education. Historically higher education was always more internationally open, and for that reason higher education systems, policies and institutions are being transformed by globalisation [Marginson, van der Wende 2007]. We selected several examples of development in higher education, starting with centralized school leaving examinations and ending with international university rankings, in order to reflect in what way these manifestations are accepted and transformed within the local context. In other words, the object of our research is the Lithuanian version of glocalization in higher education.

School Leaving Examinations and General Admission to Institutions of Higher Education

In 1997 Lithuania established the National Examination Centre and in 1999 ran centralized school leaving examinations for the first time. One of the key objectives of the reform was to build a bridge between secondary and higher education. The agreement of universities to sup-

port the reform process by recognizing the results of school leaving examinations and by not running their own entrance exams was crucial to the success of the program. Foreign partners, which provided technical assistance, were the Scottish Examination Board and Slovenian National Examination Centre [Bethel, Zabulionis 2000]. Luckily all major Lithuanian universities supported the examination reform. Initially some smaller universities and colleges hesitated as they were worried about the risks of competing for students with major universities, but eventually they also joined the system of common admission. Association of Lithuanian Higher Education institutions for Organization of Common Admission manages the system of admission to higher education institutions and in accordance with the results of school leaving examinations offers possible placements to students. Lithuania was one of the first post-socialist states to introduce centralized school leaving examinations. The reform was praised by the OECD experts, who noted that National Examination Centre „has done a remarkable job in improving the reliability, validity and comparability of examinations“ [OECD, 2002; 109]. During the next two decades there were several minor changes in running the examinations and assessing the results, but there were no attempts to challenge the existing system. However, in the long run the problems started to emerge. The introduction of the centralized school leaving examinations evoke a wave of private tutoring. A new market of educational services was formed, where teachers were earning extra income by preparing students for the forthcoming examinations. Research, conducted by the Research and Higher Education Monitoring and Analysis Centre (MOSTA), showed that 40 percent of students in the 12th grade were taught by private tutors. In the capital city of Vilnius the percentage was 47 [MOSTA, 2019]. Secondly, researchers observe a „backwash“ effect, when in the final grade teachers tend to change their curriculum in accordance with the tasks of the previous examination. Thus, instead of teaching the curriculum, teachers train students to complete the examination tasks. And, last but not least, centralized school leaving examination partially lost the primary function of selecting the most talented students for higher education institutions. During the last two decades the numbers of school leavers were decreasing due to demographical reasons and emigration. Currently there is practically no competition for admission to majority of the study programs with the exception of the most prestigious ones, e. g. medicine or law. The increasing numbers of students tend to choose studies in other EU universities. Universities in many Western European countries usually accept students' applications in autumn and on the basis of the results of the 11th grade decide about their admission to study programs. After students receive the confirmation of acceptance from a foreign university, national examination marks become irrelevant for them: all they need is to get the school-leaving certificate. Changes which happened during the recent years evoked discussions about cancelling or

modifying the centralized school leaving examinations. Critics claim that the exams have already completed their mission. The supporters of a modified model seek to align a classroom-based assessment with admission to higher education programmes through moderated grading, or to realign the framework and content of centralized examinations to reflect more fully the curriculum taught in schools. In 2017 the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports launched a project to establish an optional assessment, the results of which would be included in the secondary school-leaving certificate and would count as an equivalent of centralized school-leaving examination. Students will be required to plan, implement and present a project, which will be assessed by an independent assessment board. OECD experts warn to monitor closely the take-up of the project option and keep under consideration other means of assessment. In search of the possible alternatives the OECD experts suggest to consider using the 10th grade national student achievement examination as a component of higher education admission process—in conjunction with centralized school leaving examinations [OECD2017]. Higher education institutions remain the strongest supporters of the current system of using school leaving examinations for student admission. In case of introduction of optional assessment they claim to consider the option of re-establishing the entrance examinations.

**Three-Cycle
Degree System
and the Bologna
Process**

Two-cycle (Bachelor and Masters) degree system was introduced in Lithuania in 1989 with the re-establishment of Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, which was closed down in 1950 for political reasons. The university was re-established with the support of expatriates from the USA and Canada who suggested the Anglo-Saxon higher education model as an alternative to the still prevailing Soviet one. The system was legitimized by the 1991 Law on Higher Education, which also introduced the scientific degrees of doctor and habilitated doctor instead of former degrees of candidate and doctor of sciences. Doctoral studies were introduced instead of aspirantura, and thus the two-cycle system was transformed into a three-cycle system. The nostrification procedure, which reviewed dissertations defended during the socialist period and converted Soviet-type candidate and doctoral diplomas into degrees of doctors and habilitated doctors, started next year after the adoption of the new Law in 1992 and lasted until 1995. The requirements for nostrification were not very rigorous and eventually 8454 scientific degrees were nostrified out of 8507 [Daujotis et al. 2012]. When in 1999 Lithuania signed the Bologna declaration, the three-cycle degree system in the country was already functioning for almost a decade. Universities didn't experience much difficulties of adopting the new system. After exclusion of ideological disciplines and military training, the former five year study programs were just fit for the four year Bachelor model. Some programs, e. g. engineering and medicine,

retained the previous study format. However, introduction of Masters level caused more difficulties. Some time and efforts were needed to realize that Masters is not just a further continuation of previous studies, but also implies either a deepening of knowledge in a more narrow study area or widening a range of competencies by choosing a different field of study (Masters studies in legal documents were accordingly classified as deepening or widening studies). The 2009 Law on Higher Education allows three-year Bachelor studies, however, universities are reluctant to shorten the length of studies as it implies the reduction of income and working hours for university teachers. In order to gain a competitive advantage some universities recently offered a shortened version of 3,5 year-long Bachelor studies. Certain problems of compatibility also emerged with the introduction of the binary higher education system in 2000, when former technicums were re-organized into non-university higher education institutions—colleges. Colleges were granted the right to offer studies of professional Bachelor, which last for three years, in contrast to university training of academic Bachelor, majority of which last for four years. Therefore, unlike in many other European countries, where students with first-cycle degrees are accepted to Masters degree programs without additional requirements, Lithuanian college graduates usually need to complete additional coursework before being accepted for a second-cycle degree at university [Leišytė, Rose, Želvys 2019]. Soon after gaining the status of higher education institutions the colleges started to lobby the introduction of professional Masters degree programs, to which students could be admitted after completion of professional Bachelor without any additional requirements [Želvys 2004], but on this topic they encountered a fierce opposition of universities. A new challenge was the introduction of the competence-based learning and the ECTS system. Competencies are defined as a dynamic combination of cognitive and metacognitive skills, knowledge and understanding, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills, and ethical values, which have to be developed during the studies and assessed at different stages of study programs [Gonzalez, Wagenaar 2008]. University and college teachers faced a complicated and time-consuming job of rewriting all the study programs in accordance with the requirements of a competence-based model. Since mid-1990s Lithuanian HEIs used the national credit system and ECTS was only used for mobility purposes. Based on the 2009 Law on Higher Education, the use of ECTS has become compulsory in 2011 [Leišytė, Želvys, Zenkienė 2015]. Many HEIs considered it as a simple technical problem and just transferred the national credits into ECTS. However, in fact the system of ECTS introduced a totally new approach of calculating and assessing the student workload. In 2011 Vilnius University launched a project of introducing the ECTS system into Lithuanian HEIs, which was funded from EU structural funds. Despite the apparently successful integration of the ECTS system there are still issues with the full academic recogni-

tion of studies or courses performed by students abroad [Ibid.]. Study programs in different universities are not identical, and faculty administration sometimes feels that students who have been away for one semester have missed some essential obligatory courses. In this case they can offer to undertake these courses during the next semester as the optional ones [Leišytė, Rose, Želvys 2019]. There also are other problems related to student mobility. Students who study and work refuse to leave the country for the whole semester as they fear of losing their jobs. A language barrier also exists as not all partner universities offer study programs in English. Many students don't know any foreign language other than English (except, of course, students of German, French or Russian philology). And, last but not least, students are hesitant to participate in mobility programs for financial reasons, because ERASMUS+ grant hardly covers the costs of living in more expensive foreign countries (e.g., the Scandinavian region, Switzerland or United Kingdom). Despite the above mentioned barriers, there are still more students going abroad than students coming to Lithuania. The dominating mobility tendency is moving westwards: Lithuanian students mainly go to Western European universities, while majority of the incoming students come from the Eastern Europe.

**Performance-
Based
Evaluation
and Funding**

At the end of the Soviet era 29 scientific research institutes were operating in Lithuania. Some of them used to be funded from central budget and after the fall of the Soviet regime part of the institutes lost their sources of funding. Doubts were also voiced about the relevance of their current research activities as their initial mission was to develop new technologies for the Soviet military-industrial complex. In a difficult economical situation of the early 1990s all scientific research institutes were equally underfunded, though their research input was uneven. In 1997 the Government formed several expert groups in order to assess the scientific productivity of research institutes and to link their performance with the level of funding. Experts classified all research institutes into six groups. The first three groups (more advanced research institutes) were expected to get 100 percent of state funding, while another three groups (less advanced research institutes)—75 percent of state funding. All institutes could pretend for the rest of the funding on a competitive basis. However, the government didn't dare to apply the new funding scheme neither in 1998, nor in 1999. In 1999 research institutes underwent another round of assessment and subsequently were divided into seven groups. In a distribution of the budget for 2000 a formula funding was applied with different coefficient for each group. In 2001 an updated formula was introduced both for research institutes and universities. 40 percent of research funding for both types of institutions was performance-based, while the rest 60 percent was provided for maintaining research infrastructure. Three groups of performance indicators

were applied for assessment purposes: number of scientific publications, number and budget of scientific projects, amount of income from applied research for the industrial and other needs (Daujotis et al., 2002). Eventually most of the institutes merged with universities and nowadays there are 13 independent state and 9 private research institutes, though further mergers are expected. During the last two decades there were several modifications of performance-based evaluation. The current model is a combination of peer review and formal evaluation. Universities and research institutes themselves have to select a certain amount of research production of highest quality (the so-called I level, which, e. g., in social sciences and humanities constitutes 20% of all the production). Expert groups, which are selected and appointed by the Lithuanian Research Council, evaluate the contents of I level research works. The rest of research production (II level) undergo formal evaluation, when experts evaluate not the contents, but the formal status of research production (e. g. papers published in journals with impact factor, which are included into Clarivate Analytics or SCOPUS databases, monographs published in international publishing houses, plenary presentations in international scientific conferences, etc.). Research production of both levels is evaluated in points, which are later used for formula funding of research institutions from the state budget. Research production is evaluated every three years. Though formula funding seems to be a relatively objective exercise, it permanently evokes disputes between different interest groups. There are always heated discussions about the “fair” proportion of distribution between “hard” and “soft” sciences. Research institutes always complain that for them research funding is the only source of income, while universities have a number of other alternatives. There was a decade-lasting debate about which international research databases should be considered as valid in assessing the research production. Several lists of databases, approved by the Lithuanian Research Council, were compiled, though finally the list was shortened to the two main databases—Clarivate Analytics and SCOPUS. There are also continued debates about the usage of the Lithuanian scientific language. English has become the premier language of business and the professions and the only global language of science, research and academic publication (Marginson, van der Wende, 2007). Researchers are highly motivated to publish in English and there are worries that Lithuanian scientific language is increasingly becoming second-rated. The peer-review evaluation model was developed following the British example. However, a small country has its own peculiarities, as there are few scientists working in specific research areas, and it's difficult to avoid the conflict of interests. Though formally the peer-review is anonymous, it's often easy to identify which colleague wrote the article. The practice of inviting foreign experts is expensive, and, of course, a number of important publications (e. g. monographs about Lithuanian literature and history) are still written in Lithuanian.

Quality Assurance and Institutional Evaluation

The 1991 Law on Higher Education granted Lithuanian HEIs institutional autonomy and gave a start to a short but interesting period of academic freedom, when Soviet regulations concerning higher education were canceled, and new regulations were not created. HEIs launched a variety of new study programs with catchy names without having much expertise or specialists to teach. Soon it became clear that this absolute “freedom to teach” can not last for long, and in 1995 the government established the Centre for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. The mission of the centre was to accredit new and assess the ongoing study programs. Methodology of evaluation and assessment was borrowed from abroad. The centre appointed groups of experts for the assessment of each study program. Experts studied self-evaluation reports, participated in on-site visits, assessed the infrastructure and the teaching corps, explored the needs of labour market and employment possibilities of graduates, etc. The officially declared purpose was to provide HEIs with expertise, help and support. However, soon the punitive nature of the assessment became evident. Institutions, which sincerely listed challenges and shortcomings of the study programs in their self-evaluation reports, soon found out that experts tend to copy them in their final reports and present them as an argument in case of negative assessment. Eventually the authors of self-evaluation reports abandoned the practice of critical self-analysis and switched to the well-remembered from the Soviet period method of showing-off, which in Russian slang language is called “pokazucha”. The dates of the site visit are negotiated beforehand. Before the visit the faculty administration started to organize preliminary meetings with the staff and the students and trained them to give the “right” answers during the forthcoming discussion with the experts. Another problem is related to the limited size of the country and national higher education sector. It appeared that it’s difficult to avoid the conflict of interests when selecting a group of experts. In a small country everybody knows each other, and often the expert has to evaluate either a partner institution or his/her rivals. One of the options is inviting foreign experts, who usually face no conflict of interests. However, then the costs of assessment increase significantly. For the purpose of reducing the costs, often the centre for quality assurance of one Baltic country just invites experts from the other two. In order to save time and resources a new scheme was introduced several years ago. According to the scheme instead of the experts started to assess not a single study program, but the whole group of study programs (e.g., the group of social sciences). The assessment experiment caused confusion in some areas of studies. There were cases when the group of study programs was not accredited, but single study programs within that group still had valid accreditation (full accreditation of study program is valid for six years, temporary—for three years). Administration of universities could’t understand on what grounds the group assessment of study programs can terminate the

accreditation of valid single programs and asked for a legal explanation. Finally in 2018 the Constitutional Court ruled out that decisions to terminate accreditation of single study programs which already had valid accreditation for the forthcoming years are unconstitutional [Lietuvos Respublikos Konstitucinis Teismas 2018].

In 2005 the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education initiated the EU-funded project of creating a system of institutional evaluation in higher education. With the assistance of foreign partners the methodology of institutional evaluation was developed and in 2010 the Ministry of Education and Science granted the Centre for Quality Assurance in Higher Education the right to start institutional evaluation of HEIs. After getting acquainted with the self-evaluation report and site visit, the international group of experts has to make the assessment of four key areas of HE activities: management, quality assurance, research and studies, impact on regional and national development. Experts also evaluate the resource base of HE institution. In case of positive evaluation institutional accreditation is granted for the period of 7 years. If at least one of the key areas receives negative evaluation, temporary accreditation is granted for 3 years, and in case of second negative evaluation HEI has to terminate its activities [Studijų kokybės vertinimo centras 2020]. The system of institutional evaluation is punitive in its nature, and for that reason one can hardly expect a trustworthy relationship between the Centre of Quality Assurance in Higher Education and HEIs. No wonder that HEI representatives look upon the group of visiting experts with fear and suspicion. In addition to that, one can observe cases of applying double standards in making decisions on institutional accreditation. E. g., Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences was subject to the second negative evaluation and was forced to merge with another university in order to continue the teacher training study programs. European Humanitarian University, which emigrated from Minsk in 2005 because of the conflict with the country authorities and offers study programs for Byelorussian students, also received the second negative evaluation, but for political reasons as an exception the government granted the university the right to continue the studies. In order to avoid biased decisions of local accreditation authorities, some universities prefer to get accreditation from the European University Association or other internationally acknowledged accreditation agencies.

University Rankings

The tradition of ranking universities in Lithuania can be traced back to late 1990s. The first ranking attempts, based on few evaluation criteria (numbers of students and study programs, research production, etc.) were undertaken by several privately-owned newspapers and journals („Veidas“ and „Verslo žinios“). The authors of these rankings were journalists: no wonder that they were subject to continuous critique by higher education authorities as well as the academic com-

munity. Some universities just refused to provide data for these kinds of league tables, and journalists in retaliation placed them in the lowest ranking places. The first attempt to construct a professional ranking system was undertaken in 2006, when a group of researchers from four Lithuanian universities together with their Western partners completed a EU-funded research „Capacities of Universities to Implement Masters Studies“ (Studijų kokybės vertinimo centras, 2006). According to the designed ranking model universities were distributed into three categories: A—strong universities, B—medium universities, and C—weak universities. The ranking criteria were: quality of student enrolment, quality of studies, research potential, research production, resources and infrastructure, community service and public relations, management and planning, institutional prestige. The process of ranking revealed 5 strong universities, 5 medium universities and 5 weak universities (at that time there were 15 state universities in the country. Private universities were not ranked). The ranking exercise aroused stormy reactions of critique and dissatisfaction, mainly coming from universities which were classified as weak. Nevertheless in 2010 the Ministry of Education and Science approved the EU-funded project „Design and Implementation of the Ranking System of Lithuanian HEIs“ with the overall budget of 2,5 mln litas (about 720000 euro). After the unprecedented wave of protests the project was canceled and the idea of creating state-funded and state-run ranking system of HEIs on a governmental level was never raised again. The privately-owned journal „Reitingai“ continues the ranking tradition and twice a year publishes rankings of university study programs. Lithuanian universities are also visible in a number of international university ranking schemes. Vilnius University is a national leader in all international university rankings (ranked 458 in QS World University Rankings, ranked 601–700 in Academic Ranking of World Universities, ranked 750 in Webometrics, ranked 801–1000 in Times Higher Education World University Rankings). The other two universities which are ranked in international university rankings are: Vilnius Gediminas Technical University (ranked 591–600 in QS World University Rankings, ranked 1328 in Webometrics) and Kaunas University of Technology (ranked 1000+ in Times Higher Education World University Rankings). QS World University Rankings perhaps is the best known and most often referred university ranking in Lithuania. In QS Emerging Europe and Central Asia Rankings Vilnius University is ranked in the 18th place, below leading Russian, Estonian and Polish universities, but above Byelorussian, Ukrainian and Latvian universities (QS World University Rankings, 2020). Lithuanian universities also participate in the European U-Multirank ranking system. One of the benchmarks of the State Education Strategy for the years 2013–2022 is to have at least one university among top 500 universities in the Academic Ranking of World Universities [Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas 2013]. In practice the place of Lithuanian universities in international rankings has no legal, finan-

cial or other implications. It's up to universities to decide whether to participate in international ranking schemes and to what extent to treat the ranking exercise in a serious manner. Usually universities use their place in international university rankings for the marketing purposes.

Discussion and Conclusions

Transition in Lithuanian higher education can be characterized as a hasty and radical process. All the above mentioned changes were implemented during the first decade of the independent statehood. One can assume that 1990s was the most favourable period for educational reforms, when the belief in the supremacy of the Western educational model was almost universal and all new approaches suggested by the Western experts were accepted without any critical reflection. Besides that, the perspective of the EU accession forced the country to speed-up with the reform implementation. Rado [2001] noted that the problem of educational transformation in Central and Eastern Europe was that the process of change was compressed into a very short period of time. Therefore there was no space and time to properly place educational goals within its environment. Of course, eventually the new developments, including the centralized system of student admission, the three-level study cycle, performance-based funding and mechanisms of quality assurance, made the Lithuanian system of higher education more compatible with other systems in the EU and beyond. However, the rationale, the mode of implementation and, quite often, the final results of reforms differed from similar transformations of higher education in other countries. Centralized school-leaving exams exist in many EU member states, including Finland, which is often praised for its effective education system [Sahlberg 2015]. In Lithuania the argument of educational effectiveness was also declared as the main purpose of reforming the examination system: the new system enabled upper secondary school graduates who wanted to be admitted to universities and colleges to take one set of examinations instead of two. However, we assume that the main reason for reforming the examination system was the lack of trust: HEIs didn't believe in the objectivity of results of school-based examinations. Since Soviet times there was also a lack of trust for entrance examinations because of real or imaginary cases of corruption involved in the process of student admission. A centralized system where the possibility of cheating was minimized apparently satisfied all major interest groups. Current discussion about possible alternatives to maturity examinations demonstrated that the issue of trust is still high on the agenda. The Bologna process and introduction of competence-based learning contributed to further unification of higher education. Bologna initiative can be viewed as an example of making European higher education more standardised, comparable, accountable and cost-effective. The European Commission sees higher education in terms of a knowledge industry, whose products should compete against similar prod-

ucts in the global marketplace [Tomusk 2004]. A set of competencies for a certain profession is developed in response to the needs of the labour market, so in fact competence-based learning is not a student-centered, as it's officially declared, but a market-centered approach to higher education [Želvys, Akzholova 2016]. Post-socialist countries, including Lithuania, which had a long-lasting experience of a unified Soviet higher education model, willingly accepted the labour market-driven and standards-led Bologna initiative. Striving to control the system via greater standardisation and accountability (just like during the „old good Soviet times“) is one of the many manifestations of path-dependency in education. The introduction of instruments of quality assurance, borrowed from Western higher education agencies, initially was supposed to help HEIs to improve the quality of studies. However, almost from the very beginning the system of quality assurance was transformed into a punitive instrument. The national quality assurance system urges to terminate study programs which have certain quality problems and otherwise could be improved with some additional help and support. With the introduction of institutional accreditation the threat of possible negative consequences of evaluation challenges the very existence of HEI. One of the possible explanations of the punitive nature of the quality assurance system is its cost-effectiveness. Evidently it's cheaper to close down the study program instead of investing additional human and material resources for its further improvement. The Soviet system of education was highly centralized and standardized, therefore one of its advantages was that it was relatively cost-effective: the unified model is the cheapest one because it doesn't provide alternative paths which increase the overall costs. Therefore the current neoliberal ideas of cost-effectiveness in education were eagerly accepted by national policy makers as they seemed quite rational and appropriate in a situation of limited financial resources. The same applies to the model of performance-based funding. The model is based on the assumption that research in HEIs must be cost-effective: not only in a sense of getting income from R&D projects, but also in publishing in high-status research journals with the lowest possible costs. University rankings is another example of market approach in education: league tables can act as a powerful marketing instrument. Therefore it's quite natural that many university ranking schemes are developed not by governmental agencies, but by commercial structures. It also means further standardisation as HEIs are ranked by applying some common evaluation criteria. It seems rather surprising that Lithuanian government eventually abandoned the plans of making university ranking a formal instrument of measurement. However, it was the outcome of political struggle between major political parties and not as a result of a thorough education policy analysis. In some other post-socialist countries the rank of the university in a league table is a rather important quality indicator and can determine the amount of state funding.

Lack of trust and support in post-socialist higher education is inherited from the past. A trend of measuring, controlling and making institutions accountable and cost-effective has its roots both in the former Soviet command system and in the current manifestations of new public management. These are just some of the examples of educational development where the heritage of Soviet-type socialism successfully coexists with contemporary Western neoliberalism.

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