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FROM THE SOVIET SYSTEM TO BOLOGNA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF DOCTORAL EDUCATION REFORMS IN KAZAKHSTAN

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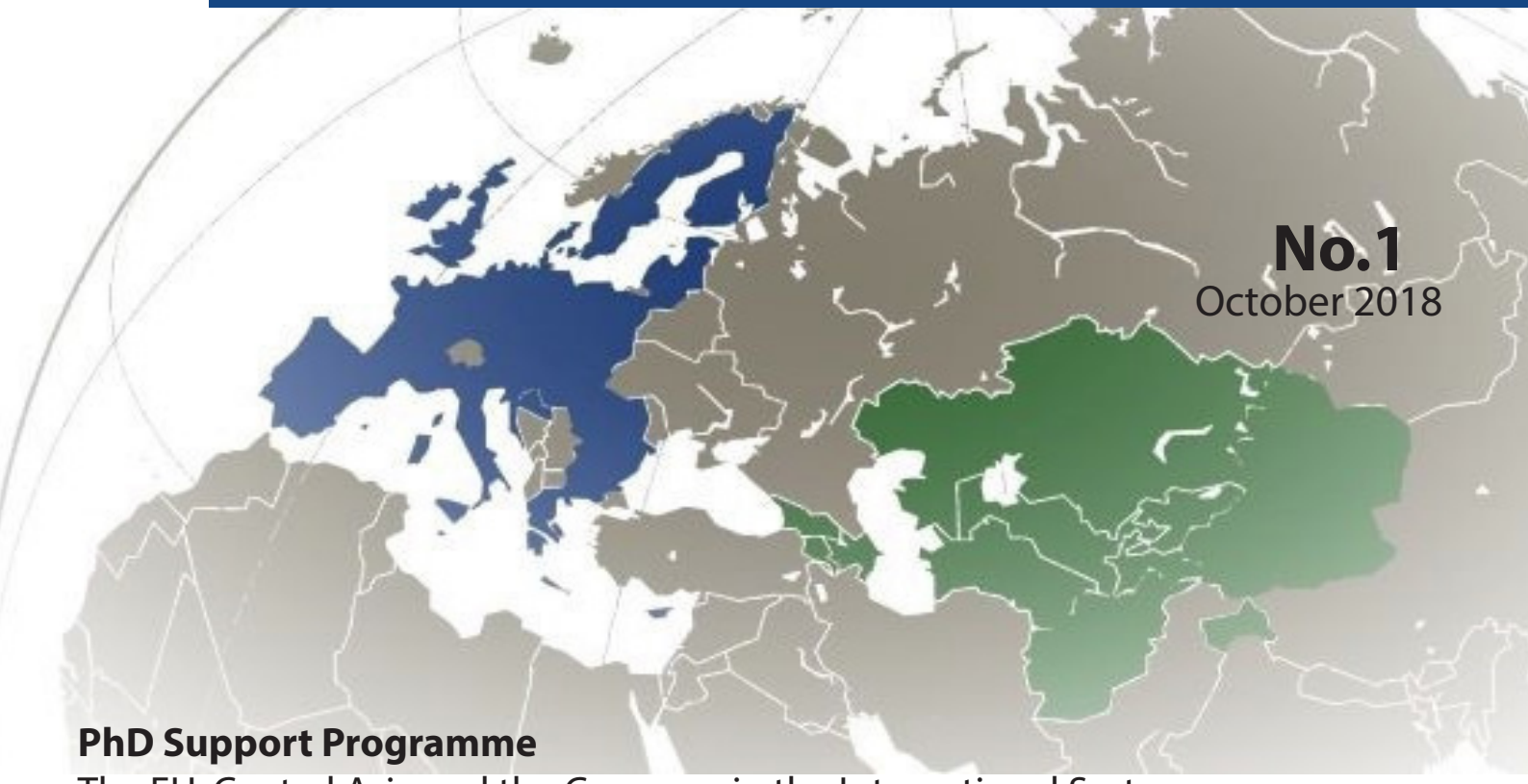

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Introduction

In 1991, Kazakhstan became an independent country and encountered the dramatic challenge of transitioning from a Soviet political order to an open market economy. During this transition, the country's higher education system felt significant shockwaves, mainly through a set of policies known as a "post-socialist reform package".[1] Introduced by different international aid and assistance programs, these policies gave start to number of reforms in higher education, most significantly in the area of governance, access and financing.

The next round of substantial reforms came together with the Bologna encouraged policy discourse. In 1999, Kazakhstan was the first Central Asian country to sign and ratify the Lisbon Recognition Convention, an important document that set up the legal framework for the recognition of academic degrees among the European states. Since then, Kazakhstan has gradually started its journey towards the integration of its national higher education system with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The three-cycle Bologna system was introduced in 2004, and was followed by Kazakhstan's official membership in the Bologna Process in 2010.

There are different reasons that lie behind the country's motivation to function along the general lines of the Bologna accords. A major impetus for the new reforms was informed by Kazakhstan's desire to move towards the "European education standards".[2] By doing so, the country's Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) expected to establish a broader regional collaboration and enhance student and faculty mobility with European partners. While one would argue that the post-socialist states conduct reforms out of the fear falling behind internationally[3], in case of Kazakhstan it was rather the country's ambitious plan to develop its very own human capital.

Doctoral education, the upper echelon in academia, occupies a special place in these ambitious plans. Being the most advanced educational programme, doctoral education is expected to introduce state-of-the-art research to emerging knowledge societies such as Kazakhstan[4]. This is especially important in the context of a country that experienced an epistemological paradigm shift in a drastic way. With the breakup of the socialist bloc, the government of Kazakhstan faced the acute necessity of building its own national research agenda out of the crumbling remains of the strong Soviet science system[5]. Yet, the road was more meandering than straightforward. When conditions of academic research in the country had not improved, the OECD and the World Bank reported bluntly:

> "Research, development and innovation activities remain the least reformed area of the higher education system in Kazakhstan. The existing Science and Technology (S&T) base is a wasting resource that has already eroded significantly and is in danger of continuing decline."[6]

At that point, the national government perceived the integration with the EHEA as a remedy that could cure the existing difficulties. In joining the Bologna Process, Kazakhstan has committed itself to stay in line with the Bologna principles. One of the principles emphasizes the importance of enhancing the quality of research within academic institutions in ways consistent with the knowledge-based economy discourse that prevails in the world[7].

1 Iveta Silova and Gita Steiner-Khamsi, "How NGOs react," Bloomfield CT: Kumarian Press (2008): 2.
2 Iveta Silova,"Traveling Policies: Hijacked in Central Asia," European Educational Research Journal 4(1): 53.
3 Gita Steiner-Khamsi, "Education Policy in a Globalized World," in Challenges and reforms in vocational education, ed. Stefanie Stolz and Philipp Gonon(2012), 31-51.
4 OECD/World Bank, "Reviews of National Policies for Education: Higher Education in Kazakhstan", OECD Publishing Paris (2007).
5 Eric W Sievers, "Academy science in Central Asia 1922–1998", Central Asian Survey 22:2-3, (2003): 253-279.
6 OECD/World Bank, "Reviews of National Policies for Education: Higher Education in Kazakhstan", OECD Publishing Paris (2007): 26.
7 Bologna Process, European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, "The European Higher Education Area in 2015: Bologna Process Implementation Report", Publications Office of the European Union Luxembourg (2015).

Association stressed the importance of doctoral education in the international research area[8]. That is to say, the role of the doctoral education in Kazakhstan has had to be reimagined.

Nevertheless, the road from Soviet standards to Bologna policy norms has been full of different pitfalls, and the challenges of re-contextualization of the new norms do still exist. While one could argue that the "collapse of the socialist system made possible the globalization of education",[9] it is also true to point out the existing dynamic interaction between the urge for "Bolognazation" and the constraints imposed by the Soviet legacies.

This paper is a critical policy analysis of doctoral education reforms that have been made since Kazakhstan became an independent state. For a better understanding of the policy changes, the chronology of reforms is described according the three main periods – (1) pre-1991, (2) 1991-2010 and (3) post-2010. These time frames represent three different policy contexts in which the shift from the Soviet system to Bologna has taken place. Given the variety of pitfalls existing in the implementation of the Bologna Process in Kazakhstan, some policy recommendations are put forward for the decision-makers in the field.

The pre-1991 doctoral education: Understanding the Soviet context

Before the breakup of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, like other Central Asian states, followed the centralized system of higher education, i.e. the process of decision-making was lead and managed by the state. The doctoral education consisted of a two-tier system of a doctoral degree – Candidate of Science (*kandidat nauk*) and Doctor of Science (*doktor nauk*). Future Candidates of Science were enrolled in *aspirantura*, a graduate school based in different research institutes under the auspices of the Academy of Science and were generally trained to become researchers or faculty members at the university level.

The Doctor of Science was the highest award in the academic system of the Soviet period. *Doktorantura* had no fixed program length, but it usually took five to fifteen years to accomplish the program. Priority to study in *doktorantura* was given to those who strived for excellence in research and looked forward to producing exceptional novelty in science.

Higher education in general, and the doctoral programs specifically, were a very significant part of the ideological and the industrial agenda of the Soviet government and they functioned to meet the socioeconomic needs of the USSR. As scientific and technological developments were often associated with "national strength" and "progress," it is no wonder that the Soviet researchers were often symbolized as holding "visible and influential positions of power".[10] In the context of this paper, it is important to understand these patterns because the legacy that characterizes the Soviet doctorate with prestige and authority still exists. Until the fall of the Soviet regime, the doctorates, especially those obtained in Leningrad and Moscow, had a high reputation and were considered as representatives of a "world class" education. "World class" here is associated with the general quality of research training and methods that the doctoral students have received.[11] Speaking of the quality, it is also worth mentioning that the level of corruption in higher education was relatively low during the Soviet period.[12]

Until today, the Soviet doctorate is used as an "imaginary quality standard" with which new reforms are compared to and opposed to.[13]

8 European University Association/Jessica Carter, "Annual Report 2015" (2016): 13.9

9 Gulnara Y. Tampayeva, "Importing education: Europeanisation and the Bologna Process in Europe's backyard—The case of Kazakhstan", European Educational Research Journal, 14(1) (2013): 75.

10 Eric W. Sievers, "Academy science in Central Asia 1922–1998", Central Asian Survey 22:2-3, (2003): 255.

11 Eric W. Sievers, "Academy science in Central Asia 1922–1998", Central Asian Survey 22:2-3, (2003): 253-279.

12 Ararat Osipian, "Education Corruption, Reform, and Growth: Case of Post-Soviet Russia", SSRN Electronic Journal (2009).

13 Olena Fimyar and Kairat Kurakbayev, "'Soviet' in teachers' memories and professional beliefs in Kazakhstan: points for reflection for reformers, international consultants and practitioners", International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 29(1), (2015): 86-103.

On the other hand, there is fierce criticism of the Soviet frame of mind in the academic community. Eliutin made a sharp comment that the students in the Soviet higher education were trained according to "a pre-established recipe" with a set of prepared solutions that can be transferred to the industry.[14] Another reason why the Soviet higher education system failed is the lack of free intellectual inquiry and a fairly low level of innovations produced for the national economy (Tomusk, 2004).[15]

With a national economy being in a lamentable position during the fall of the Soviet regime, reforming higher education and science was meant to be the newly independent country's priority. However, the post-1991 period was a challenging time that put Kazakhstan's stability at risk, so it has taken a while to initiate transformations in this field.

1991-2010: First steps towards Bologna

While the former Soviet patterns of higher education, specifically the doctorates, remained influential during the formation of a new higher education agenda, the period of 1991-2010 experienced radical changes in many ways. During the two decades, the country's higher education system made a drastic shift, both structurally and contextually. To some extent, the forces of globalization and recommendations derived from powerful international organizations, the World Bank and the OECD imprinted the changes in the national policy, but more significantly, the local policy-makers followed the country's aspiration to develop excellence in higher education.[16] Concurrently and consequently, this aspiration was under the influence of some key issues revolving around the doctoral education worldwide. Some trends that affected the doctorate during this period of time in the global arena are described by Nerad as follows[17]:

> (1) a change in the mode of research production; (2) the increasing importance of translational skills; (3) the increasing standardization of doctoral education; (4) a quest for greater accountability; (5) and increased global communication and creation of international networks (p. 5)

Nevertheless, the academic research was almost dead due to the overall political and economic instability that existed in the country during the transition period. Furthermore, the rigid hierarchical structures of academic institutions remained intact and did not give space for thorough transformations in the field of science. The only changes that academia witnessed in Kazakhstan was the introduction of new qualifications based on the Anglo-Saxon model of the Bachelor and Master. Further procedural changes, however, did not occur until 2004.

In 2004, the government adopted amendments to the existing Law on Education. The purpose of the new amendments was to enhance the integrity of the national higher education system. More importantly, it paved the way for the introduction of the new PhD degrees that would bring Kazakhstan closer to educational standards of the EHEA. In the road to Bologna, this step is considered crucial, but it was not until 2011 that the Soviet model of a two-tier doctorate became the remnant of the old system. For several years, a two-tier doctorate model and a newly introduced PhD model

14 V.P. Eliutin, "Higher education in a country of developed socialism. Part. 1: The organisation and structure of the public education system in the USSR. Chapter 10: Administration, organisation, and control in HE", Soviet Education 26(10) (1984): 22.

15 Voldemar Tomusk, "Three Bolognas and a Pizza Pie. Notes on institutionalization of the European higher education system." International Studies in Sociology of Education 14 (1) (2004): 75-95.

16 Stephen Heyneman, "A comment on the changes in higher education in the post-Soviet Union", European Education, 42(1), (2010): 76–84.

17 Maresi Nerad, "Globalization and the Internationalization of Graduate Education: A Macro and Micro View", Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 40 (1), (2010): 1-12.

were functioning concurrently with the only distinction that the latter was adopted as a taught degree. In 2005, two of the country's largest public universities – Eurasian National University and Kazakh National University – began piloting PhD programs. As part of the new reforms, the universities started to look for new partnership opportunities with Western institutions. Simultaneously, the MoES started funding international research training stays for domestic doctoral students as well as providing co-supervisions of theses by Western professors. This step was the country's attempt to reduce the high level of corruption that existed in the doctorates after the fall of the USSR when the doctoral degree became a commodity that could be sold and purchased. The black market where dissertations were on sale had been ballooning and there was no sanctioning system for this business.

Another phenomenon, namely persons seeking to "keep up with the Joneses" and defend their Candidate and Doctorate degree in a hasty manner, had been completely phased out. This dynamic shows that in a post-socialist education reform context, the national policy-makers are not only responsible for the structural and procedural changes, but they are also expected to create "a fundamental transformation in the learning culture"[18]. With the hope to do so, the government-run scholarship *Bolashak* expanded its funding to train the talented students in the PhD programs of the most prestigious universities abroad in 2006. It was expected that these students would come back to Kazakhstan upon their graduation to teach and conduct research at local academic institutions. Tied by the government's contract conditions, the majority of students indeed came back to the country, but they experienced personal difficulties of adapting their internationally gained knowledge to domestic academic realities. That is to say, *Bolashak* has become a decent response to solve the challenges of Kazakhstan's weak system of science, but it also enhanced the social tension among those who were trained according to the Soviet standards and those who received international PhD degrees.

Gradually, the two-tier Soviet model of doctoral education was eliminated and legislation supporting this reform was introduced. In 2010, Kazakhstan officially accepted the three-cycle model of higher education of the European standard and ended up becoming an official member of the Bologna Process and the EHEA.

Post-2010: Bologna as a policy mandate

Since 2010, policy-makers in Kazakhstan have been widely spreading the rhetoric on the importance of building a "new" system of science in various policy programs and official documents. By "new" they meant an innovative culture of research that is accountable, transparent and able to address the challenges of a knowledge economy. While the whole national higher education system was put on stake, there was hope that a recently established Bologna framework of a doctoral education would bring positive changes to the innovative agenda of the country. On the one hand, the newly introduced changes were expected to provide opportunities for internationalization of young researchers and PhD students via collaboration with the partners abroad. On the other hand, it was expected that a new Bologna policy mandate would bring Kazakh research to the global arena.

The sad reality, however, is that the new changes have not delivered the quality as expected[19]. The implementation of the Bologna Process has become a "dysfunctional formality"[20], and there are a number of reasons for that. First of all,

18 C. Webster, I. Silova, A. Moyer, and S. McAllister, "Leading in the age of post-socialist education transformations: Examining sustainability of teacher education reform in Latvia", Journal of Educational Change, 12(3), (2010): 348.

19 Aliya Kuzhabekova and Aizhan Temerbayeva, "A Bird-View of Doctoral Education Reform in Kazakhstan", Higher Education in Russia and Beyond, 3(9), (2016):11-12.

20 Moldiyar Yergebekov, and Zhanar Temirbekova, "The Bologna process and problems in higher education system of Kazakhstan", Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 47, (2012): 1475.

English, which is a lingua franca of international scholarship activity, was at a low level among the university students and professors. The question arose how the outcomes of Kazakh research could be distributed globally via international conferences and journals. Instead of addressing this issue, the MoES introduced the new requirements that all PhD students are expected to publish in international impact-factor journals as well as defending a dissertation in order to be conferred the degree. The new policy led to two critical effects: the decrease of students enrolled in PhD programs from 2011 on and a low rate of successful defense of doctoral dissertations.[21] The problems of transparency and accountability did not disappear, but instead aggravated the present situation. A new publishing business started to bloom, where researchers from the post-Soviet region with similar challenges could publish their articles at a relatively high price. Publishing in international journals has become another type of commodity for Kazakh researchers and this problem still exists.

Another challenge that came along with the Bologna policy reforms is the escalation of the "Bologna versus Soviet" polemics among the representatives of academia. It was claimed that research paradigm has drastically changed from fundamental science to applied knowledge so that the new policy mandate provoked a storm of negative emotions among the scientific elite that was educated in the USSR. The Doctors of Science did not take the PhD holders seriously and saw the equation of the Soviet *doktorantura* to the PhD as a "devaluation" of their doctoral statuses. In their minds, the degree of the Doctor of Science is the "pinnacle" of a scientific career while the PhD degree is just another qualification. T his polemics illustrates that in the context of Kazakhstan and perhaps other states of the post-Soviet region, the concept of "Soviet" is not a distant past. It is here and now and it still echoes in the educational initiatives of the country as a strong cultural and historical legacy that is difficult to combat[22].

In order to combat existing challenges, the new Nazarbayev University was created in Astana with the decree of President Nazarbayev. The Nazarbayev University has been offering Western-style PhD programs since 2013. It is expected that the university will contribute significantly to national knowledge and research production and will become a flagship among other academic institutions. The ideological aim behind the creation of Nazarbayev University is the President's expectation to raise a new generation of internationally oriented researchers who will be able to conduct world-class research and translate their experience to scientists from the "mainstream" universities. The challenge with this assumption is that the university is perceived among other Kazakh universities rather negatively due to its special "autonomous" status. At the moment, the Nazarbayev University is the only higher education institution in Kazakhstan that can tailor its own curricula without following the strict standards of the country's Ministry of Education and Science (MoES). Given this "special" status, Nazarbayev University created English-taught doctoral programs where PhD students are trained and supervised by international faculty and where they are expected to produce applied research. Decision-makers in higher education policy have a firm belief that a new generation of PhD students and researchers from the Nazarbayev University will somehow contribute to the mitigation of the existing polemics on "Soviet vs. Bologna", or "Soviet vs. International".

Conclusion

Kazakhstan has a unique educational landscape where different trajectories and traditions of higher education policy can be found. The Bologna discourse has been prevailing in this landscape since it has become a strategic tool for

21 OECD, "Education at a glance, OECD indicators", OECD Publishing Paris (2017).

22 Dariusz Misztal, "Theories of social remembering", Open University Press, Milton Keynes (2003): 120.

developing Kazakhstan's ambitions towards a national system of higher education. The shift in epistemological and research paradigm towards European standards does not only signify the country's readiness to expand its innovation agenda, but it also shows that Kazakhstan is ready to create a "new geopolitical space" in the region. Complexity is added to this rhetoric by the Soviet legacy which continues to dominate in the philosophy of the country's research and education sphere. This is understandable as it has been more difficult to bring changes to post-socialist societies compared to other parts of the world that are "untouched by the Soviet mentality". Combating the "Soviet mentality"[23] is challenging, but it is a necessary step to ensure that the new reforms and policies actually work.

The criticism and challenges of the new PhD model as mandated by the Bologna Process suggest that Kazakh policy-makers do not approach doctoral education reforms holistically. The reforms that the decision-makers propose are generally ad hoc in nature, meaning that they do not address the fundamentals of the problem. This makes the implementation of the Bologna policy a fitful and disrupted process.

While the shift to the European model of a PhD has been a major step towards the Bologna Process, it seems clear now that the new doctoral education programs are rather "raw" and in need of improvement in order to provide enough research expertise. Given the importance that the doctoral education has for Kazakhstan, the following recommendations are suggested to policy-makers and those engaged with further doctoral education reforms.

In order to avoid subjective criticism of the Bologna Process and the European-model PhD in Kazakhstan, current PhD programs require a thorough analysis based on quantitative and qualitative indicators. Moreover, a competitive academic environment should be established through the development of domestic research journals and through the creation of a national index of scientific citation that would accumulate all publications made by Kazakhstani researchers. While the outcomes of research are generally presented in the form of descriptive texts with little or no solid methodological and theoretical basis, it is apparently necessary to develop more courses on academic writing and research methodology for PhD students from "mainstream" universities. In order to motivate PhD students to stay at universities upon their graduation, post-doctoral programs need to be developed at all Higher Education Institutions (HEI) which provide doctoral programs. Finally, a national alliance of young researchers should be established in order to promote better research partnerships between PhD students from different universities in Kazakhstan and Europe.

23 Gulnara Y. Tampayeva, "Importing education: Europeanisation and the Bologna Process in Europe's backyard—The case of Kazakhstan", European Educational Research Journal, 14(1) (2013): 83.

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