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Higher education as soft power in the Eastern Partnership: the case of Belarus

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Abstract

The use of higher education (HE) as 'soft power' has a long history in Europe. In the contemporary policy framework, the European Union (EU) has utilised the transformative power of HE in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) via initiatives such as Erasmus Mundus, Marie Curie and Tempus to create active teaching and research partnerships with non-member states; and by doing so, it reiterates the EU's commitment to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the Bologna Process. Although laudable, these policies have had a limited effect in Belarus which has remained a laggard in its engagement with EHEA. Belarus remains a non-signatory to the Bologna Process, has limited introduction of the Bologna structure and has only partially engaged in the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). Student mobility from Belarus within the EHEA is poor and non-governmental HE initiatives, such as the European Humanities University (EHU), have succumbed to internal politics resulting in the formation of a 'university in exile'. This paper explores how effective EU HE policies have been in Belarus and offers examples of initiatives with the potential to develop HE as a transformative power in the country.

Keywords: Eastern Partnership, European higher education, Bologna process, Belarus

1. Introduction

The paper considers how higher education has been mobilised as a form of soft power by the EU as a means of promoting mutual cooperation and understanding through research and knowledge transfer. Although successful in most European Neighbourhood countries, one country - in particular, Belarus, demonstrates limited engagement in the EHEA project. Belarus, although geographically a European country, is a non-member of the Council of Europe

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and as such has not adopted the Lisbon Recognition Convention, Bologna Process or become a member of the EHEA. However, it has, to a limited extent, developed some higher education partnerships through European Union funding. This paper considers the case of Belarus and examines to what extent the EU's HE policies have affected Belarus and how, even when policies seemed to have failed, it has still been possible to deploy higher education as 'soft power' to stimulate debate and discussion, even in a stalled system.

The paper proceeds as follows: firstly, a brief discussion on the historical context of a shared European Higher Education (HE) area will be considered, then, secondly a brief theoretical introduction of Joseph Nye's (1990) "soft power" theory, as a "transformative power" (Grabbe, 2006), is discussed in the context of HE policy. Thirdly, the example of Belarus will be considered and the question of whether HE as 'soft power' is a legitimate theory in this case will be examined and conclusions will be drawn. It must, however, be noted that this paper does not focus on the geo-political nature of soft power per se nor the epistemological tenets underpinning international relations theory. The paper focuses on the operationalization of HE as soft power and on why, in the case of Belarus, the policy has arguably stalled; and what actions could be taken to promote integration in the European Higher Education Area in Belarus.

2. The European higher education area: a historical perspective

Higher education has been a form of soft power for centuries. In the Middle Ages, European universities were seen as essential to nations for the training of professional classes required to administer the pre-renaissance medieval world; and since the formation of the University of Bologna in 1088 until the Reformation, higher education institutions in Europe have operated within an internationally recognised and controlled system. Cadres of students were provided with special rights to travel across national boundaries, received instruction in a single, Latin, linguistic tradition, were examined in a manner practiced across the medieval world and received qualifications which were recognised from Constantinople to Oxford – therefore an integrated European HE area existed. However, since the Reformation to the late 20th century, the integrated nature of European HE has been inconsistent with differences in the standards of education, examination and transferability of qualification across Europe. During the post-war reconstruction of Europe, higher education was recognised as one of the cultural cornerstones and shared values of the Western Europe Union. The transformative power of HE was leveraged through the transitions of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) from the 1980s onwards and was particularly exploited by the European Union, national governments and non-governmental organisations as a form of "passive leverage" (Vachudova, 2005) to reinforce and promote both broad and focused Europeanisation agendas, dependent upon whether the recipient country aspired to ascend to the European

Union, to remain within the wider European neighbourhood or, in certain cases, to remain at the fringes of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

3. Higher education as soft power

Joseph Nye (1990) notes that a country's soft power rests on three resources - its culture, its political values and its foreign policies – and a country's higher education system may embody all three. When deployed well, these resources act as a form of passive leverage towards sponsored countries wishing to access or emulate a donor country's values; and unlike hard power, which asserts influence by coercion or use of force or sanctions, soft power emphasizes the use of co-option by attracting the sponsored country within the donor's sphere of influence. Nye argues that higher education as soft power has been used tacitly in transitional politics since the Marshall Plan and more actively since the 1980s (Nye, J., 1990; 2004a; 2004b) by acting "...on the ability to shape the preferences of others" (Nye, 2004a, p. 12) in order to gain a desired outcome. Nye argues that the modern history of higher education as soft power began in post war Europe. Between 1958 and 1988, over 50,000 citizens of the Soviet Union visited the United States of America as part of formal educational exchange visits (Nye, 2004b, p. 14). This form of academic movement was subsequently adopted by the European Economic Community in the 1980s with the founding of the Erasmus programme. Nye contends that, because exchanges took place between elite groups, linkages developed between one or two key contacts that had a significant transformative effect in the medium to long term (*ibidem*). Therefore, the role of higher education is more than simply that of soft power; it is a form of "transformative power" (Grabbe, 2006) which has been used systematically by national governments, the EU and other bodies as a tool for Europeanisation. Education and training, for example, form an entire chapter of the *acquis communautaire* and within this chapter higher education is considered, amongst other criteria, through engagement in programmes (Erasmus Mundus, Tempus and Marie Curie), equivalence and transferability of educational qualification and freedom of movement of students within the EHEA. Since the late 1980s, the political map of Europe has changed considerably. Many countries that previously fell under the influence of the Soviet Union have now ascended to become member states of the European Union. Other countries, such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have remained on the borders of both the European Union and the Russian Federation, thus forming a unique set of neighbourhood countries which form the European Eastern Partnership (EaP). These countries have developed either unilateral or joint initiatives with the European Union and other European bodies such as the Council of Europe for the promotion of mutual development.

One such initiative, which actively demonstrates the use of co-optation by attracting countries within a sphere of influence, is the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) which began with the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) and aimed at reasserting the cultural and historical concept of a shared, single higher education area. The Bologna Process, launched in 1999, created the initial phase of the project which was developed by member states through voluntary cooperation in order to promote educational opportunities, transferability of qualifications and free movement of students within the EHEA. In 2000, this was supplemented by the European Research Area which specifically focused on developing the European “knowledge triangle” of research, education and innovation. The EHEA has developed in 5 phases with 29 countries, founding the EHEA in 1999 with 17 additional countries joining by 2007, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (all joining in 2005). The notable exception to the EHEA is the case of Belarus.

The following section considers why Belarus culturally, politically and through its internal and external policies, has stalled in its accession to and acceptance by the other 47 member states of the EHEA.

4. Higher education in Belarus: the current context

Belarus’ exclusion from the EHEA is highly complex but can be abstracted into two simple tenets:

1. Failure to reform the extant system to standards acceptable by the EHEA member states;
2. Political failure by the state to ensure academic freedom.

Belarus actively participated in the Bologna Follow-Up Group which assessed its readiness to join the EHEA in 2012. The group noted that the principles and values of the Bologna Process, such as academic freedom, institutional autonomy and student participation in managing higher education, were not sufficiently upheld in Belarus and consequently, in April 2012, Belarus’ accession to the EHEA was blocked by the meeting of EHEA ministers, a decision that will remain valid until April 2015.

In response to a written question¹ to the European Parliament on 7 June 2012, the European Commission (EC) however noted that the cooperation with Belarusian higher education was not unsubstantial:

“The EU has been supporting the modernisation of higher education in Belarus through the Tempus and Erasmus Mundus programmes which facilitate the creation of networks and partnerships with counterparts in

¹ Question for written answer to the Commission Rule 117, Filip Kaczmarek, E-005772/2012, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getAllAnswers.do?reference=E-2012-005772&language=EN>.

the EU and the mobility of students, researchers and academics. In its *proposal for a new programme, 'Erasmus for All', the Commission expressed strong support for the Neighbouring countries and proposed to continue these actions.*

Since 2007, Belarus has participated in 13 Tempus projects, involving 20 Higher Education Institutions for a budget of approximately 5 million euro. 11 of these are Joint Projects, based on multilateral partnerships promoting exchanges on themes like curriculum development, university governance and links between higher education and society.

The remaining 2 projects are Structural Measures; contributing to the development and reform of education institutions and systems at a national level, addressing issues linked to governance reform, or enhancing the links between higher education and society.

Since 2004, 50 Belarusian students have received a scholarship for Erasmus Mundus Masters Courses and around 450 Belarusian nationals have taken part in the action 2 mobility scheme (2007-2011), experiencing a different, international, perspective of their academic subject and strengthening their future employability and personal development. Belarusian universities have developed good practices related to international cooperation and academic curricula.

Belarus also participates in Platform 4 of the Eastern Partnership on *'contacts between people', a forum for dialogue on education and training.'*

However, regardless of the EC statement, Belarus remains an outlier within the EHEA. The following section considers the two themes in more detail; firstly, failure to reform.

4.1. The Bologna process

The principal aim of the Bologna Process is to coordinate the various higher education systems in European countries under one cohesive set of rules, applicable to all, so as to promote student and faculty mobility within a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with the purpose of further study or employment. It also aims to improve the attractiveness of European higher education, so that many people from non-European countries may aspire to study and/or work in Europe and, through the European Higher Education Area, improve Europe's knowledge base and thus to ensure further development of Europe as a stable, peaceful and tolerant community benefiting from a cutting-edge European Research Area. Finally, it aims to facilitate greater convergence between the U.S. and Europe as European higher education adopts aspects of the American system and vice versa.

By 2005, five of the six Eastern Partnership countries had become signatories of the Lisbon Recognition Convention and Bologna Process. Only

Belarus remained outside the framework. In the recent report, Higher Education in Belarus (European Commission, 2012, p. 9), the European Commission noted that, firstly, Belarus' level of integration was "being implemented by ad hoc groups under the supervision of the Ministry of education". This may account for the erratic behaviour within the Belarusian government whereby one set of policies is rejected; however, at the same time, third party initiatives are able to proceed with ministerial approval. Secondly, only limited or partial implementation of the three-cycle structure (Bachelor-Master's-Doctorate) advocated by the Bologna Process was evident in Belarus with various combinations of student workload and duration of study at Bachelor and Master's levels. Thirdly, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) remained un-adopted and a national credit transfer system was in use with learning outcomes defined by a national steering committee and implemented through a series of laws and regulations. Finally, the Bologna Diploma Supplement was not in use. Unlike other Eastern Partnership countries, Belarus would, theoretically, need to undertake significant reforms in order to comply with these requirements in order to ascend to the European Higher Education Area.

4.2. European Commission's programmes supporting higher education

The higher education reform, as noted above, remains an important tool in the EU's relations with the EaP area. The main initiatives include Erasmus Mundus, Tempus and Marie Curie; and to a lesser extent, the EU's Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) Jean Monnet Actions which are available to EaP member states; however, their impact in Belarus remains sporadic.

The EU's Erasmus Mundus (EM) programme aims to enhance quality in higher education through scholarships and academic cooperation between Europe and the rest of the world by impacting individuals through recognized study periods abroad, in-depth knowledge of European higher education, improved linguistic skills, intercultural experience and enhanced employability and institutions through the internationalization of higher education in EaP countries, building institutional partnerships, improving capacity in design and management of joint degree programmes and by developing capacities in accreditation, recognition and international student mobility.

The EM programme is divided into three actions: a. joint programmes, b. partnerships and c. attractiveness projects. Since 2007, 22 partnerships have been established with EaP countries with over 262 occurrences within the 6 EaP member states and costing the EU €84.1 million. Over 3443 scholarships have been funded for EaP students at the undergraduate level, 488 at the postgraduate level, including 42 students studying for Doctorates. Furthermore, 482 visiting fellowships were created for faculties. The EU has recently committed to a sharp increase in Erasmus Mundus funding with the 2013 call accounting for €29.4

million and creating an additional 1080 scholarships for EaP students. However, Belarus' engagement remains more limited than that of the other EaP members with only 50 out of the 3443 undergraduate scholarships (1.45%), 4 of the 448 postgraduate scholarships (0.8%) and only 2 faculty fellowships of the 482 so far awarded (0.04%) to Belarusian applicants.

The Trans-European Mobility Programme for University Studies (TEMPUS) enables higher education institutions in EU member states and partner countries to engage in structured cooperation through "consortia", which implement Joint European Projects (JEPs) with a clear set of objectives and Structural Measures (SM). Tempus also provided Individual Mobility Grants (IMGs) to individuals working in higher education in order to promote mobility for knowledge transfer in partner countries.

Since the mid-1990s, in EaP countries, TEMPUS had provided hundreds of IMGs and sponsored 270 JEPs and 65 SM projects accounting for €165 million. The outcomes of these projects in the EaP include: modernised curricula and implementation of Bologna principles; capacity building for academic & support staff; modernised learning and teaching approaches; upgraded laboratories, IT equipment and libraries; the introduction of quality assurance culture and mechanisms; the internationalisation of universities; new approaches to university governance and structures; enhancing links between education and enterprises and new laws on higher education. In the 2013 call, €42 million has been allocated to EaP countries for proposals and it is estimated that this will fund 50 new projects. This increase of €13 million in the 2012 budget represents an increase of 30.9%. In comparative terms, Belarus has not engaged as substantively with the Tempus programme as other EaP countries. Between 1990 and 2006, 37 Tempus projects were run in Belarus; however, under Tempus IV, 8 projects are currently run in the country. One positive outcome from the Tempus engagement, however, has been the movement of the Belarusian HE system towards preparing and then introducing a sustainable strategy and procedure for Quality Assurance compatible with the international procedures of education quality.

4.3. Political failure by the state to ensure academic freedom

Although the EHEA ministers sighted Belarus' laggard approach to the HE reform as a reason for rejection from the EHEA, the evidence noted above does not fully adhere to this position. Belarus has engaged in EU cooperation projects and has to some extent implemented significant reform in the HE system. Belarus' principal problem is therefore the second tenet, political failure by the state to ensure academic freedom.

The Belarusian higher education system is controlled through the President of the Republic of Belarus, Government, state bodies (Ministries) and

regional authorities. The Ministry of Education controls and coordinates the field of higher education and is responsible for strategic planning. Due to the tight policy control and implementation of HE as a strategic resource for the country, higher education is subject to the so-called ‘presidential vertical’ (Korosteleva, 2005) whereby presidential appointees control each level of policy design and implementation. Therefore, if an external policy is acceptable to the regime, it will be allowed to proceed with little state interference. If, however, the policy is deemed controversial, the state apparatus is positioned in such a way as to ensure the policy stalls. This has led to the ‘ad-hoc’ approached cited by the EC (2012).

For example, the European Humanities University (EHU) was founded by a group of Belarusian academics in 1992 to offer Belarusian students a variant to the heavily ideologised and didactic approach to learning prevalent in the Belarusian higher education sector at the time. Similar projects were already underway in Central East European countries, such as the Central European University in Hungary, and the EHU aspired to similar goals of academic freedom, openness and free discussion. The case of the EHU, however, demonstrates the problems associated with the deployment of higher education as soft power in an unreceptive state. In 1994, when Alexander Lukashenko became President of Belarus, he mistrusted the ambitions of the fledgling EHU and, as Pavel Tereshkovich, Head of History at the EHU, notes “saw the EHU as designed to prepare a new Western-thinking elite and said: ‘We don’t need such an elite, we will prepare our own’” (Tereshkovich, 2013). The Presidency actively campaigned against the EHU and, via the Ministry of Education, demanded the EHU cease operation. After a period of détente, the Belarusian government eventually withdrew property rights from the EHU thus forcing it to close in 2004.

Although the EHU failed within the country, this has not led to the end of the project. The Belarusian HE system is tightly controlled; however, over the past decade, a number of adaptive strategies have emerged which have allowed Belarusian students and scholars to contribute to EU led projects which, in the longer term, may lead to further reform within Belarus.

5. Ways forward?

During its brief existence in Minsk, the faculty and students of the EHU were able to mobilise significant international assistance including gaining recognition from the European Commission, the Nordic Council of Ministers, US government, and private donors such as the billionaire George Soros who had ceased philanthropic engagement in Belarus in 1997 (Rich, 1997). As such, the EHU ceased operations in Minsk and moved to a new location, just over the border in Vilnius, Lithuania as a ‘university in exile’. Over 1600 Belarusian

students are currently registered with the EHU which, as a Lithuanian registered university, meets not only the aquis guidelines discussed above but also, as a regulated higher education institution, it fully engages in the Bologna Process, thereby enabling graduates with recognised and transferrable qualifications within the EHEA.

The model adopted by the EHU, however, demonstrates the adaptability of higher education as ‘soft power’. It should be noted that 25% of EHU students are permanent residents in Lithuania. 75% of students remain resident in Belarus and study online by using virtual learning environment technology. Many of the faculty members employed by the EHU travel to Vilnius on short term ‘flying faculty’ contracts and, as it operates independently of the control of Belarusian authorities, many Belarusian students have been able to benefit from a western European education, without the requirement to leave their country of residence, thus placating to some degree, the possible ‘brain drain’ which has affected other EaP member states.

As noted in the EC report, Belarus’ level of integration was ‘being implemented by ad hoc groups under the supervision of the Ministry of education’ and in an erratic manner. It is argued that, whereby formal EU level policy initiatives may be rejected, other initiatives are able to proceed with ministerial approval. For example, a Yerevan State University project managed to implement an MA programme sponsored by the EU and taught across four EaP countries, including Belarus (Belarusian State University), which recruits resident students and offers them tailored programmes within the region. The programme was organised by Yerevan State University in Armenia (a Bologna signatory in 2005) and funded by the European Commission’s European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). Faculty staff was recruited from several European Union and EHEA member states on a similar ‘flying faculty’ model. Academic staff flew to Minsk to deliver taught modules focusing on the political dimension of human rights, others – to Ukraine or Moldova - to engage in other dimensions, accredited under the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), in intensive two-week blocks per module. The students were then examined and awarded an EHEA recognised Master’s degree, whilst remaining resident within the Eastern Partnership countries. This programme demonstrates that higher education can permeate across borders, even into countries that are seemingly resilient to external cooperation.

The EHU case demonstrates the engagement of ‘soft power’ in higher education, and highlights the problems that one institution has had to overcome in order to provide internationally recognised and quality higher education delivery for Belarusian students. Juxtaposed to this, the low level approach adopted by Yerevan State University demonstrates that, even in the most reticent of countries, higher education as soft power can still be deployed.

5. Conclusion

This paper has considered how HE has been mobilised as a form of ‘soft power’ by the EU as a means of promoting mutual cooperation and understanding through research and knowledge transfer. Joseph Nye’s concept was discussed and the reasons for Belarus’ laggard status in joining the EHEA were elucidated. It was noted that Belarus failed to achieve EHEA status for two significant reasons; firstly, its apparent failure to reform the extant system to standards acceptable by the EHEA member states, and secondly, political failure by the state to ensure academic freedom. These tenets were explored and, although on the first inspection, they seem valid, the former argument was questionable as Belarus has engaged to a significant level in the EHEA Follow-Up Group and EU through various HE actions including Tempus, Erasmus Mundus and Marie Curie. It was also noted that, although engagement with EU HE policies was more limited than with other EHEA / EaP member states, this may be rather due to the control exerted by the Belarusian government and the unwillingness of EU member states to support the governmental level engagement, than to the unwillingness of individual academics and students in Belarus to engage in joint projects.

Two significant projects were noted. The European Humanities University, which, although failed within Belarus due to political pressure, exists as a ‘university in exile’ in Lithuania and is providing Belarusian students with EHEA recognisable qualifications. Secondly, the Yerevan State University project which utilises a flying ‘faculty model’ to enable young Belarusian scholars to be taught by subject specialists in the diplomatically sensitive disciplines of human rights and international relations. It is exactly these sorts of projects that exemplify the concept of HE as ‘soft power’.

In conclusion, the EU has demonstrated significant leverage of HE as soft power by promoting its culture, political values and foreign policies to the EaP countries. In the case of Belarus, the EU has made significant progress in reforming the HE system; however, due to political détente in the areas of human rights and academic freedom, full reform is currently untenable. However, it has been demonstrated that low-level interventions can be achieved and should be promoted in order to set into motion a grassroots academic transformation within the country.

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