University autonomy in Ukraine: Higher education corruption and the state

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ABSTRACT

Issues of university autonomy, self-governance, and centralization and decentralization are still at the forefront of higher education in Ukraine. This study of university governance suggests that the state is a major foe of university autonomy, though certainly not the only one. The system of centralized university governance is experiencing changes in its content, function, mechanisms, and approaches, while maintaining its unity and highly centralized structure. Thus, it is difficult to adapt and respond to free market forces and challenges brought to the fore by the Euromaidan political turmoil and the war that followed. Such phenomena as corruption in education and internal pressures, marketization of educational services and financial integrity, changing organizational and managerial structures of universities present challenges to university governance and force it to change. They may also facilitate strengthening of university autonomy. However, as long as the disease of corruption exists, all attempts to reform higher education are unlikely to be successful.

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1. Introduction

Ukraine as a state has almost never had sovereignty, and struggles with issues related to its regional divide, language issues, its slow pace of educational reform, and extremely sharp tone of political struggle (Osipian and Osipian, 2006, 2012). All of these characteristics leave their imprint on higher education. Russia’s annexation of the Crimea and the on-going military conflict in Donbas further complicates already complex situation. While the quality of education has deteriorated significantly over the last twenty-five years since the Soviet Union’s collapse, titles of “university” along with state licensing and accreditation are handed out generously, normally in exchange for bribes. Riddled with corruption, higher education institutions (HEIs) are largely incapable of producing professionals who would be able to serve the needs of a modern technologically advanced economy, if such economy is to be created in the country.

Ukraine’s eight hundred HEIs, most of which are public and enroll most of the students, are overseen by the Ministry of Education and Science, headed by Serhiy Kvít1 from 2014 to 2016 and since then by Lilia Hrynevych. Minister Kvít’s rhetoric about the importance of university autonomy does not reach far beyond the proclamation of the term itself. The newly introduced 2014 Law on Higher Education risks to remain on paper and falling short of full scale implementation. So do other reforms and initiatives, promised or announced by the new government. Supplemental and new laws on education are likely to follow in the years to come, because in contrast to Dr. Kvít who was trained in philology, Minister Hrynevych has

1 Serhiy Kvít served as a Rector/President of the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy from 2007 until 2014, when he was appointed as a Minister of Education.

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background in secondary education. In the meantime, the changes in the higher education sector, brought about by the war, are dramatic. Some HEIs struggle to relocate from the occupied territories, while others no longer exist. Some HEIs even learned how to benefit from the war. Being unable to attract faculty of high quality for decades they suddenly have received an opportunity to choose from the top-notch specialists who escaped the fighting zone. Nevertheless, these cases still constitute just isolated episodes. In general, the degree of adaptability is very low, and is not embedded in the university’s governing culture or structure. Ukrainian HEIs, with their Soviet-style bureaucracy, institutional rigidity, clear lack of flexibility and slowness in response to emerging new challenges, remain distinct from their Western counterparts. Simply put, HEIs were caught unprepared, as well as the system overall was and still is not ready for major shifts and external impacts.

Dramatic political and military events since 2014 that have shaken the country, along with slow attempts at a radical reform of higher education that have continued since 1990, make Ukraine an interesting case, worthwhile of scholars’ attention. The struggle for the country’s true sovereignty goes hand-in-hand with a less-apparent struggle for university’s autonomy. Drastic changes in the external environment, called to life by such dramatic events as the regime change and the war, urged HEIs and the educational authorities to turn to fundamental questions. These questions are: What is the university? What constitutes a HEI? What degree of state intrusion into educational affairs should be deemed necessary or acceptable?

In order to trace what the discussion on the topic of university autonomy or issues directly related to university autonomy, this paper uses literature existed on university autonomy and university governance. We also examine archival records of major media sources. This paper starts with an overview of changing functions of university governance and traces past events, discussions and discourse in the media in order to better understand recent developments in the sector of higher education. The period chosen, 1995 to 2012, covers Ukraine’s independence and educational reforms that had to assure the departure from the old Soviet educational system. Completion of the Bologna Process (a series of ministerial meetings and agreements between European countries to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher-education qualifications) was initially planned for 2012. Thus, the media coverage was expected to address both the process and its results/impact on the national educational system. Implementation of the Bologna Declaration anticipated the development of university autonomy in Ukraine. The period chosen for the analysis allows to observe both formative (intermediary) and summative (final results) evaluation of this painstaking process. This period also precedes the political turmoil—Revolution of Dignity of 2013, and the war that followed. It is especially enlightening to analyze media accounts of a relatively stable system before it was subjected to rapid and major changes caused by the war. Nevertheless, the process of reforming higher education continues—now under the new ruling political regime—and thus most recent changes related to university governance are addressed in the paper as well. The paper then proceeds with the discussion of university autonomy, corruption and internal pressure, and concludes with some generalizations.

2. University governance

The nature and extent of institutional autonomy and its links with the issue of university governance has been addressed in numerous scholarly works over several decades. This on-going scholarly discussion relates to both developing and developed countries, including Australia (Christensen, 2011), China (Pan, 2007), Mexico (Ordorika, 2003), the UK (Tapper and Salter, 1995), and the US (Boone, 1991), to name just a few. Surprisingly, no scholarly work on university autonomy in Ukraine has been carried out, despite the significance of the topic to this country and the magnitude of the changes that have taken place in its higher education sector over the last two-and-a-half decades. The first question that emerges is that of defining “governance” as applied to the universities.

The definition of “governance” may vary depending on the field of research. Balderston (1995, p. 55) defines governance as the following: “A general definition of governance refers to the distribution of authority and functions among the units within a larger entity, the modes of communication and control among them, and the conduct of relations between the entity and the surrounding environment.” He writes that in a contemporary US university the conventional building blocks for governance within the university are its trustees, the executive administration, the faculty, and other groupings and units, such as student government and alumni. Balderston (1995) goes on to present the following list of functions that governance comprises: the safeguarding of institutional mission; the provision of a “buffer” between the internal world of the university and its external constituencies; oversight of the financial integrity and viability of the university; the enunciation of major policy standards and the initiation of actions of such magnitude that they could affect the viability of the institution; selection of the president and other key figures in the university hierarchy; and the balancing of interests between the contending stakeholders of the university. He underlines the importance of university autonomy in achieving its own goals. These functions appear to be similar to those found in other organizations, including both state bureaucracies and private corporations. And yet universities are much less deterministic organizations as compared to their governmental or corporate counterparts, and the nature and reasoning of their actions are more elusive.

Institutions denote both organizations and established practices. Neave (1995) also points out that institutions would prove more efficient if they were endowed with a greater degree of autonomy. There are some success stories that are necessary

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2 Institution denotes a significant practice, relationship, or organization in a society or culture; also something or someone firmly associated with a place or thing; an established organization or corporation (such as a bank or university) especially of a public character. Merriam-Webster Dictionary. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/institution Accessed May 28, 2017.
to the promotion of reform. Successful universities would have to demonstrate a distinctive profile of leadership in reducing financial dependence on the national government, the capability of developing university-industry connections, the strengthening of a formal graduate school, and a steadily-moving “up market” in attracting faculty, students, and academic standing among the universities of the world. The ways of changing university governance vary. Collegiums, bureaucracies, and political institutions have different organizational structures and perform these functions differently (Osipian, 2014).

There are global, supranational, national, and university-level influences on university governance and, broader, university autonomy. External pressure on universities comes from supranational and national levels, while internal pressure is generated by processes that take place within a given university. Yet another divide may be caused by domestic or international influences and involve national, university and supranational levels, respectively. As Partington (1994) points out, there are six areas that will continue to impact leaders and managers in higher education: the changing resource base allocation systems; more robust accountability at all levels; the encroachment of government; the influence of employers and other organizations; the impact of technological developments; and fluctuating policies on entry to higher education.

Dobbins and Knill (2014) offer an assessment of changes in higher education governance in France, Italy, Great Britain, and Germany by examining the interplay between transnational soft governance mechanisms and historically-embedded institutions of higher education. In universities, the legacy factor is very strong and historical conditions can influence the trajectory of their future development. The authors look into the issue of how external supranational force, namely, the Europeanization and trans-nationalization of the policy area, “have reconfigured institutions of governance and reshaped the allocation of autonomy between the state, professoriate, and university management.” (Dobbins and Knill, 2014, pp. 2–3) Braun and Merrien (1999) present case studies of the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Italy, the United States and Switzerland in order to follow a significant shift in the level of state-led political and internal processes in HEIs and argue that contemporary managerialism is a new form of state intervention, where both national and university levels matter, as well as that of the academics themselves.

As noted in Agasisti and Catalano (2006, pp. 248–249), the most significant characteristics of Braun and Merrien’s (1999) new managerialism model are

- Universities are considered as subjects endowed with their own autonomy in producing teaching, research and services, though playing a public role by being producers of socially useful goods. This vision is in opposition to the ‘Humboldtian’ one of the university as a place of creation and diffusion of culture without strong external influences.

- The state plays a significant role in the determination of the system’s strategic objectives, thus limiting universities’ autonomy. The state evaluates the use of public resources and the extent to which objectives are achieved. The results obtained by the institutions are therefore subjected to evaluation and control processes.

This notion of new managerialism applies to public universities, but the state can also influence private universities. In the case of private HEIs, mechanisms of state influence include licensing, accreditation, and taxation.

Cooperation and convergence of national systems may also be a result of external impacts. Dobbins and Knill (2014, p. 9) suggest that “the Bologna Process operates as a loosely coupled system for the exchange of expertise and know-how and the promotion of concrete principles, approaches, and policy strategies.” Dobbins and Knill (2009) analyze the impact of signing by twenty-nine European countries of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 by focusing on Central and Eastern Europe. According to their view, the Bologna Process signified creation of a collective supranational platform to respond to newly emerging challenges and pressures, which has in turn urged significant domestic reforms. Such challenges and pressures include the creation of common educational and labor markets, globalization, and marketization of education. Dobbins and Knill (2009, p. 397) point out that,

Although the degree and speed of change vary considerably across countries, the signatory countries have started to develop policies “that for the European agenda towards converging systems of higher education” (Huisman and Van der Wende, 2004, 355). Essentially, the Bologna Process is the culmination of and European answer to other protruding external factors such as the knowledge society.

3. Ukraine’s place in the Bologna Process

When it comes to Ukraine, there are at least two basic considerations regarding university governance. First, the discussion of university autonomy is a quite recent phenomenon in this former Soviet republic. This is easily explained by the fact that under Soviet domination, the destiny and the degree of university autonomy was decided by the central authorities, and thus no open discussion of such issues was welcomed. Second, with the opening up of the system, although it occurred very slowly, the experiences of other systems in developed countries (and making comparisons between systems) became of high interest. Here, understanding the underlying processes is important in making the right comparisons.
There is a commonly shared perception among Ukraine’s educators that while the country’s higher education moves toward Europeanization, European national educational systems slowly transform into the US-type models. In fact, the opposite is true. European systems are incredibly stubborn to any changes in governance and funding. Even the UK, which started introducing tuition and decentralized governance in its HEIs in the late 1990s, is now considering abolishing tuition and fees altogether. On the contrary, in the former Soviet republics, including Ukraine, higher education is, in largest part, for tuition already. University governance has undergone some changes since the early 1990s. What emerges is the duality between the formally-imposed European conformity and the more fundamental market reforms, both of which are taking place in Ukraine. Both the visual Europeanization and market orientation are externally imposed by the state. While the latter is now transforming into a more evolutionary and natural process picked up by HEIs, the former remains a purely bureaucratic enterprise. Universities in Ukraine are allowed to set their tuition to vary not only by university but by the major, degree, and form of study, including day-time or by correspondence. Every year rising tuition reaches new heights (Ksenz, 2006; Newsru.ua, 2008). Due to a high level of corruption in admissions to the HEIs and high prices, students from households with low or average incomes are effectively cut off from top universities and high quality education.

The Bologna Declaration is imposed on universities and aggressively implemented by the state while many universities oppose it (Newsru.ua, 2011). This is just another example of the centralized approach to the educational reform. Furthermore, the Bologna Declaration means conformity in standards, not in the ways national systems are governed and funded. What one may observe in contemporary Ukraine is the beginning of de-facto privatization of higher education under the covers of Europeanization and the Bologna Declaration. In Ukraine, private HEIs, of which even the most advanced ones cannot compete with state universities, attempt to copy their state counterparts in everything, including patterns of university governance, instead of developing innovative structures and methods of education delivery.

Although a clear lack of university autonomy and corruption represent major problems for Ukraine’s higher education, other problems persist as well. These problems include weak knowledge of the English language among university professors, near total absence of access to Western academic publications, and self-centered self-serving academic culture. The attempted departure from Russian language in educational programs and research did not result in massive replacement of Russian with English. As a result, Ukrainian language dominates the academy, and it is considered a relatively rare language, which prevents globalization. The Ukrainian education system is incestuous in being inward-looking. At the same time as Ukraine is seeking to leave post-Soviet Eurasia and integrate into Europe, its faculty and students are not integrated into Western intellectual space. Very few Ukrainian academics attend major world academic forums and conferences and even fewer publish their articles in Western peer-reviewed journals. Finally, Ukraine has far too many higher education institutions many of which are diploma mills. Most recently, Pozchajlo and Rodichkina (2017) highlight this issue in the discussion of major problems faced by Ukrainian HEIs, including low quality education and corruption. The authors suggest that, “Most Ukrainian universities are factories for the printing of diplomas that use state budgetary funds and mimic education in silent agreement with the students. The latter pretend to learn and believe that they are taught. And the state pays for it. This should be stopped” (Pozchajlo and Rodichkina, 2017). Due to this set of persisting problems Ukrainian higher education is not geared to assist in Ukraine’s Europeanization and modernization and does not facilitate the country’s integration into a globalized, English-speaking world.

The successful completion of the Bologna Process is unlikely without the development of true university autonomy. For Ukraine, developing university autonomy appears to be problematic. Judging by the level of depreciation of its higher education, Ukraine moves away from the now dominating concept of the knowledge society, distancing itself from the civilized democratic path of development, shared by Western democracies. In order to reverse this negative trend, the country has to re-conceptualize its higher education and reconfigure many parameters of the existing system, including university governance and management and degrees of university independence from the state.

4. Theoretical and methodological aspects of Ukraine’s education system

Autonomy is a concept broadly used in political science, and philosophy, and also may be found in political economy, medicine and other disciplines. Depending on discipline and contexts, autonomy refers to moral responsibility, independent decision-making, accountability, and self-government. Autonomy may also refer to an individual, group, organization, institution, or the people. Professional autonomy is a term broadly used in the West. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary offers the following definition of the term: “the state of existing or acting separately from others; the power or right of a country, group, etc., to govern itself.” Medical definition of autonomy is most interesting, as it denotes the quality or state of being free and self-directing and, importantly, independent from the organism as a whole in the capacity of a part for growth, reactivity, or responsiveness (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2017). In Ukrainian educational context, it denotes detachment from the Ministry of Education and Science, and, more broadly, from the state.

University autonomy is a relation between the university and the state that allows the former to act in its own self-interest even if it does not coincide—or even contradicts—the interest of the latter. Universities that do not enjoy the autonomous status have their curriculum, instruction and research dictated, or at least controlled, by the state. University autonomy as a concept, if implemented successfully by the state, will result in autonomous university or, more specifically, a network of autonomous universities operating and developing in Ukraine. The Law on Higher Education, signed by President Poroshenko
on August 1, 2014, defines university autonomy as “autonomy, independence, and responsibility of university in making decisions regarding the development of academic freedoms, organizing educational process, scientific research, internal governance, economic and other activities, independent selection and allocation of human resources within the limits, set by this Law” (Law on Higher Education, 2014). Thus far, Ukraine’s university governance structures have been distinct with corrupt hierarchies (Osipian, 2009c).

The old Soviet system was capable of fulfilling its major task of supplying qualified workforce for the planned economy. At the same time, this system was ineffective and inefficient. Changes in university governance, including autonomy, are needed because of the changes in the external environment, including new demands of the market-oriented national economy. The system of centralized governance is experiencing changes in its content, functions, mechanisms, and approaches to solving new problems. However, this system preserves its highly centralized structure. Bureaucratic and collegial organizations are difficult to adapt to free market forces. This is true not only for post-Soviet Ukraine, but also for the West, under conditions of the market economy. Administrative and professional hierarchies, parallel in many dimensions, each of which employs different strategies, behavior, structure of relations and decision-making, make the process of changes nonlinear and diverse.

5. Methodology and results

In order to address the issue of university governance in Ukraine, this study turns to media accounts. The rationale behind using the media is as follows. Media reflects changes, major shifts, recent phenomena, as well as significant events and particular cases, including in the higher education sector. Thus media outlets are reflective. At the same time, media shapes public perceptions regarding these major changes and events, and in this sense media is proactive. This study uses fourteen national media sources, twelve of which are daily news outlets. These include Den’, Hazeta po-ukrainski, Hlavnoe.ua, Golos Ukrainy, Korrespondent, Kyiv Post, Newsru.ua, Svidomo, TSN.ua, Ukrainska Pravda, Ukrayina moloda, and Uryadovy kur’er. There are also two weekly media outlets, Dzerkalo tyzhnya and Doba. Most of these sources are published in both Russian and Ukrainian. There are few exceptions; Uryadovy kur’er, the official government newspaper, is published in the Ukrainian language only. Doba and Svidomo are also published in Ukrainian only. In contrast, Glavnoe.ua is available in the Russian language only. Finally, Kyiv Post is a weekly English-language newspaper, but its web site offers news in English, Russian, and Ukrainian. The period for the media reports used in this article is from 1995 to 2012.

In all of the selected media sources, this study traces materials that contain any mention of university autonomy and related issues, such as state-university relations, its governance, management, administration, finance, funding, corruption, admissions, licensing and accreditation; as well as such general issues of higher education as marketization, governance, management, administration, finance, funding, and corruption. Other relevant terms and categories are taken into consideration as well. This study goes through all publications in each of the above sources, choosing all relevant materials. It does not rely solely on key words search, analyzing instead the essence of each publication or news report, even if it does not contain certain key words. Thus, this study does not limit itself to content analysis in its traditional understanding, turning instead to more advanced qualitative techniques. Finally, this study uses a quantitative approach and follows the dynamics of media reports on university autonomy and related issues as they appear annually in the media. As a result, this mixed methodological approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the discussion of university autonomy as it develops. The total number of media reports on university governance in Ukraine, distributed by media source, during the period of 1995–2012 is presented in Fig. 1.

Dzerkalo tyzhnya appears to be the most fruitful of all researched media sources when it comes to highlighting the issue of university governance, with well over one hundred reports. Newsru.ua and Den’ also feature a relatively large number of the reports, with around sixty in each of the news outlets. Some thirty reports may be found in Kyiv Post, while the remaining ten media outlets present either one or no reports on university governance. The dynamics of media reporting on the issues related to university governance is clearly upward and is especially vivid in 2010, 2011, and 2012. Clearly, the interest to the issues of university governance, including university autonomy, is on the rise. The dynamics in the total number of media reports on university governance in Ukraine during the period of 1995–2012 is presented in Fig. 2.

There is a frequent mention of university autonomy in reports directly related to university governance, and university autonomy, as a term, apparently causes the most vivid discussion. However, in just about all of the media reports, university autonomy is presented as an opposition to external pressure from the state, and the Ministry of Education and Science in particular. At the same time, almost none of the reports on university governance connect it to the market reforms. This is a huge shortcoming, because these reforms may be the key in reshaping university governance. While not reported directly, these issues may be extracted from media accounts assuming the good knowledge of the context of the reform.

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4 There is a difference between Institutes and Universities in Ukraine, which distinct the system from many Western educational systems, including that of the US. Historically, the Russian Empire borrowed its education system from Germany and hence it had two diverse paths: institutes that prepared specialists in different applied professions, such as railway engineers or economic planners, and universities that prepared cadres for academia. Over the past quarter century, Ukraine converted many of its specialized Institutes into universities, mostly by adding highly marketable departments of economics, finance, management, political science, and foreign languages. However, the true change has yet to take place.
6. University and the state

The then President of the National University Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (NaUKMA), Serhiy Kvit, said that the former Minister of Education and Science Dmytro Tabachnyk, who served under President Viktor Yanukovych, was not interested in the academy as “an effective autonomous university without corruption… If our university is prevented from developing normally, then I have only such an explanation: obviously, the minister does not need such a precedent as an effective university that, moreover, is operating without corruption.” (Kyiv Post, 2010) Kvit is well-known for his stance on university autonomy and equally for his opposition to Tabachnyk. While reporting on the earlier media coverage of the conflict, Mykhaylo Wynnyckyj (2010) commented: “Not to mention that NaUKMA has a unique corruption-free reputation — an achievement that very few other Ukrainian universities can boast.”

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5 Serhiy Kvit, who served from 2014 to 2016 as a Minister of Education and Science, was replaced in his ministerial office by Lilia Hrynevych, appointed in April 2016.

6 Mykhaylo Wynnyckyj is a director of the post-graduation school at the National University Kyiv-Mohyla Academy.
In 2005 eight Ukrainian universities: L'viv, Chernivtsi, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk, and Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Ukrainian Catholic University in L'viv, and University of Economics and Law in Kyiv, created a consortium aimed at experimental implementation of university autonomy with support from the International Renaissance Foundation (Kasianov, 2005; Press Services, 2006). The on-going discussion of the recent developments related to new legislation of higher education bore its fruit. Thanks to the overthrow of the anti-democratic regime imposed by Yanukovych, the new law on education was adopted in 2014. The main point of contest between different drafts of the legislation was precisely the issue of university autonomy and what it entails in terms of practical matters. On the one hand, there has been a clear understanding that the reform of university governance and implementation of true university autonomy is the cornerstone of educational reform aimed at modernizing Ukraine’s higher education. On the other hand, concerns have been voiced consistently of university autonomy, giving way to rectors to convert universities into their family enterprises with a lot of personal profiteering and little knowledge generation (Kasianov, 2006). Despite the approval of the new law, Ukraine’s higher education sector is struggling as never before. Recent dramatic and indeed tragic developments in Ukraine have deprived millions of people in the Crimia, Donetsk, and Luhansk regions of an opportunity to take the standardized test starting in 2014. Similar grim prospects are made for 2018. Already in a dare state, Ukrainian higher education may find itself in a very serious condition, passing the point of no return on its way to complete failure. And this failure will inadvertently cause even larger problems for the entire country. As Oleksiyenko (2014) warns us, “the failure of higher education institutions was the underpinning of a failed state” (p. 14).

The need for university autonomy and self-governance is based not only on the search for higher effectiveness and efficiency in the higher education system, but also on the ineffectiveness of the state in governing the education sector. The government in Ukraine is in constant political turmoil and is ineffective in addressing needs for public sector restructuring. Moreover, the state may become more violent and authoritarian as related to such institutions as universities. To oppose the state dictate, rectors argue for more autonomy. The media is also involved in the discussions of the ministerial dictate over the university autonomy (Kostyuk, 2012; Zerkalo nedeli Ukraina, 2010; Newsru.ua, 2012). Legislative process regarding the ongoing educational reforms continues, which gives universities more space for maneuvering and trying to take an active part in shaping the new legislation.

Former Minister Kvit was one of the most outspoken advocates for university autonomy, arguing for close ties between research and education and English language programs, in order to make universities more open to the world (Bazhal, 2011). Nevertheless, Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and Ostrozhskaya Academy were deprived of their special status and moved under the governance of the Ministry of Education and Science (Newsru.ua, 2010). Moreover, Ukraine does not recognize foreign degrees. Apparently, when it comes to action, the then Minister Kvit had not moved far beyond his conservative predecessors in changing the system. In addition, Ukrainian leadership is afraid of university autonomy as an evil that will let universities’ rectors to rule their institutions at their will. In the leadership’s minds, university autonomy is directly associated with corruption. Kvit’s successor, Minister Hrynevych, stated in 2016 that increased university autonomy should be counterbalanced with strengthening public control (Kramatorsk Info, 2016).

NaUKMA is just one vivid example of the tensions between universities and the central government. Conflicts periodically emerge in relations of the government with small and large HEIs, including such flagship universities as Taras Shevchenko Kyiv National University, Donetsk National University, and Kyiv National Polytechnic University. Such conflicts frequently involve the issue of rectors being dismissed at will by the Ministry of Education and Science. Changes in the ruling political regime are followed by major shifts in university leadership. On October 28, 2011, a student demonstration of about a thousand took place in Kyiv right in front of the Ministry of Education and Science’s central building. Students of Ukraine’s largest HEI, Kyiv National Polytechnic University, were protesting the dismissal of the University’s rector and one-time Minister of Education (1994–1999) Mykhailo Zghurovsky. “We are not as much for Zghurovsky, as we are against Tabachnyk, dictate of the Ministry, and liquidation of the university autonomy. We are for our lawful right to elect our rector,” said one of the participants (Podolyan, 2011). As a result, Tabachnyk promised students to spare the rector.

7. Corruption and internal pressure for reform

Similar to its predecessors, the ruling political regime possesses immanent leverage over Ukraine’s universities through the high level of corruption existing within the institution. Bribery and other forms of corruption widespread in the country’s HEIs, are used by the government to justify its pressure on the HEI’s leadership. Corruption in higher education in Ukraine is being discussed openly, including in both domestic and Western media (MacWilliams, 2005a; Bondarchuk, 2007) and scholarly works (Osipian, 2007, 2009a; 2009b: Round and Rodgers, 2009). In 2005, Ukraine’s president Victor Yushchenko asked universities to end corruption in the admissions process (MacWilliams, 2005b). Later he repeated this demand more than once, including in his Address to the students of Ukraine’s flagship HEI, Taras Shevchenko Kyiv National University (Presidium Prezydenta Ukrainy, 2006). That same year a survey of students showed that Ukraine’s HEIs were still viewed as highly corrupted. Yushchenko’s successor, President Yanukovych, also had serious concerns regarding the low quality of educational services offered in a large number of HEIs (Newsru.ua, 2010). Corruption is illegal, which gives the state authorities the base to subject Ukraine’s universities to the state’s sanctions, control, and oversight, as long as there is corruption.

High level of corruption not only subjects universities to state initiated actions, but also makes university autonomy vulnerable to the state’s intrusions. Riabchuk (2007) considers the transformation of Ukrainian dysfunctional institutions to
those that are easily blackmailed as one of the paradoxes of the post-Soviet transition. Universities value freedom, while the state often prefers authoritarian rule and can use blackmail to make them appeasable and loyal to the regime. The system where corruption is promoted and tolerated and then is used for coercion on the side of the state may be applied to HEIs. Coercion, collusion, and control based on corruption and graft may, to a large extent, be definitive in the state-university relations in Ukraine (Osipian, 2008, 2010; Zaloznaya, 2015, 2017). One of the major external intrusions into the university’s affairs is the nationwide standardized testing campaign that took place in 2008 (Kovalchuk and Koroliuk, 2012). The notion of external character and hence apparent independence, of this standardized testing initiative is emphasized by involvement of the foreign agencies, championing frantically for the testing campaign (Osipian, 2015). In reality the standardized test introduced in 2008 and designed specifically to curb corruption in admissions to HEIs, may be used as a tool of state domination and pressure on colleges and universities.

The sociological study of the attitudes towards the university autonomy in Ukraine, performed within the framework of the project on university autonomy as an integral part of civil society, was intended to highlight the issue. However, the results of such studies remain unpublished. There are believes that the introduction of the standardized, computer graded testing has led to a dramatic decline of corruption during admission procedures. These believes may have some theoretical rationale, but the rigorous empirical support for such claims has yet to come. There are also claims and speculations that the general public tends to consider independent standardized testing as one of the most successful educational reforms in Ukraine thus far, though these claims have yet to be substantiated by documented evidence. On the other hand, independent testing does not eliminate corruption on other stages of academic development, including semester examinations and graduation procedures.

According to the findings of the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, forty-seven percent of the students dealing with faculty and administration members in 2007 gave bribes as demanded, while another twenty-nine percent offered bribes at their own initiative and thus initiated bribe transactions. Kyiv International Institute of Sociology examined changes in these figures over time and found that the percentage of those who believe that there is corruption in admissions to HEIs has increased from sixty-five percent in 2008 to seventy-three percent in 2009 among high school graduates as prospective college students, and from sixty-eight percent in 2008 to seventy-nine percent in 2009 among prospective students’ parents (Corruption in Ukraine. Comparative Analysis of National Surveys: 2007–2009, 2009, p. 4). This is of no surprise, as sixty percent of Ukrainians perceive HEIs as highly corrupt institutions (Corruption in Ukraine, 2012, p. 17).

According to the results of a household survey, conducted in 2011 by the Ukrainian State Statistics Committee, thirty-five to forty-eight percent of those surveyed, who attend educational institutions of different levels, made informal payments to their faculty in HEIs or teachers while in school. In 2010, the research conducted by the Institute of Applied Humanitarian Research under the Corruption in Ukraine project found that the incidence reached fifty-three percent “when the question was expanded beyond simple bribery to include more insidious forms of malfeasance, such as using contacts or exchanging favors. Charity donations made to educational institutions with ulterior motives are also quite common but are difficult to measure, as their corrupt nature depends on the subjective intent of the donor.” (Corruption in Ukraine, 2012, p. 20) Large scale surveys, conducted during the previous years, including in 2005, also indicate extremely high levels of corruption in higher education (Shaw et al., 2014). Studies that apply qualitative methods, including focus groups and semi-structured interviews, show similar results: levels of educational corruption in Ukraine’s HEIs are unarguably high (Round and Rodgers, 2009; Zaloznaya, 2012).

The situation with corruption in higher education saw little change since Petro Poroshenko has come into power and promised a sweeping anti-corruption campaign. Transparency International Ukraine reports that in 2015, thirty percent of Ukrainians were complaining about corruption in education, including college admissions (Segodnya, 2015). In 2017, the democratic Initiatives Fund reported that twenty-five percent of students gave bribes. Moreover, only fifteen percent of them said that faculty and administrators extorted bribes from them. At the same time, two thirds admitted offering bribes in exchange for good grades. In their view, it is easier to pay a bribe than to master the subject (Bekeshkina, 2017).

The major initiative to fight corruption in higher education has been the introduction of standardized testing to promote more transparent and less corrupt college admission process. Starting in 2008, HEIs run admissions based almost exclusively on scores received on standardized tests, organized by the Ukrainian Center for Educational Quality Assessment (UCEQA). Additional application points or alternative processes exist for certain categories of people, including socially protected individuals and high school graduates who obtained a medal of distinction. Finally, there are also different processes or additional criteria for admission to specialized programs, such as performing arts. The implications of the introduction of the standardized computer graded tests for the level of corruption in higher education admissions remain to be seen and the impact to be measured.

There are some speculations that the rank of a college administrator necessary to influence any change in university admission scores regarding each particular applicant went up, which may mean that the number of bribes will decrease, while their value will increase. According to the report “Gender Aspects of Corruption in Higher Education in Ukraine” (2010), the introduction of standardized testing

\[ \text{has generated new forms of abuse, such as forgery of papers in order to qualify for the special treatment intended for students with disabilities, orphans and residents of the Chernobyl Zone.} \]

7 This is the area where in 1986 an accident happened at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station in Ukraine.
students are given priority and privileges in university admissions. Corruption therefore seems to have shifted to securing the required certificates that confirm the privileged status: bribes go to the officials who are authorized to issue these certificates and to admissions officials who turn a blind eye to suspicious documents or who consult on how to bypass the student selection system.

As a result of widespread corruption, low faculty and student morale, outdated curriculum, lack of any meaningful research, and poor quality of instructions, most of Ukrainian HEIs, labeled as universities, have very little in common with the notion of a modern university, accepted as such by the world academic community. In fact, most of them are mere commercial and vocational schools, similar to those that existed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the tsarist Russia, and may be labeled as community colleges, at best. Quite a few others are nothing but diploma mills and exist only on paper, while managing to receive and renew state-granted licenses and accreditations. The university autonomy is not the ultimate goal of the educational reform. The goal is to increase the quality of educational services and broaden the access to such services, including through decreasing the level of corruption. However, the absence of true university autonomy puts additional breaks on any significant and meaningful changes.

At present, Ukraine's higher education remains in the catch twenty-two situation: it cannot develop university autonomy without having true universities first, nor can it build true modern universities without having university autonomy as an embedded feature. Due to this—although oversimplified—logical impasse, Ukraine's higher education sector is left in limbo and is highly unlikely to move to any direction that would bring meaningful change. Despite a significant increase in the volume of discussions focused on the university autonomy and related issues over the last two decades, including in the media, and the bold rhetoric of the current post-Euromaidan ruling regime, no major advancements in promoting and achieving university autonomy should be expected.

8. Conclusion

The study of university governance in Ukraine suggests that the state itself is a major obstacle to the expansion of university autonomy, but certainly not the only one. Changes in university governance are needed because of the changes in the external environment, including the national economy. The system of centralized university governance is experiencing changes in its content, functions, mechanisms, and approaches. The system's remaining unity and highly centralized structure make it difficult to adapt to free market forces. Such phenomena as educational corruption and internal pressure, marketization of educational services and financial integrity, and changing organizational and managerial structures of the universities present challenges to university governance. These phenomena become forces of change and may also facilitate strengthening university autonomy. The key question that remains is how to transform these foes into friends.

The mantra of “university autonomy,” pronounced continuously by Ukraine's academic leadership, is not likely to break the status quo of the obsolete system of university governance and to bring positive change, while such an improvement is badly needed. As long as the educational disease of corruption continues to flourish, all attempts to reform higher education by Serhiy Kvit, Lilia Hrynevych and the future ministers of education are doomed to fail. The task is to withdraw the state from academia, to make it an exogenous determinant in university governance, not an endogenous one. This task implies the creation of a competitive environment, where different external forces will struggle over the right to influence HEIs. Thus far, the state and the ruling regime has managed to preserve a near monopoly on overall university guidance, exercising power through its educational authorities, and denying true university autonomy to those few institutions potentially capable to implement it successfully. Despite some progressive rhetoric, the state remains a major foe to the university autonomy. An alternative—perhaps most useful and viable in the long run—will be foreign influence. This foreign influence will fall into the realm of external influence from abroad and imply technical assistance, expert advice, and in many instances direct management and governance. This external influence might work only when internal forces and conditions are ready and willing for a significant change.

References


