

THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITY (FACULTY) IN TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETY: CASE OF ESTONIA

RESEARCH PUZZLE AND QUESTION

The role of university (faculty) in (post-)communist transformation has not been properly researched. On the one hand, literature on sovietology says little about the role(s) that academics (could have) played in bringing about the social change in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and Former Soviet Union (FSU). On the other hand, the key documents that supplied the blueprints for post-communist transformation stress the importance of education for long-term sustainable growth but leave the contribution of universities and their academics towards the build-up of the new regime ambiguous.

More particularly, literature on sovietology gives only limited understanding of the political, social and cultural functions of academics in soviet societies and their role in its fall. That is, the discussion about the role of academics has been taking place in the context of a larger Weberian social/status group known as intellectuals¹. That is, the object of research is typically defined so vaguely in these studies allow researchers to engage in considerable conceptual stretching—if needed intellectuals included just academics from universities and academy of science research institutions, more often, however, this group includes also journalist, writers, actors, musicians, painters etc. As King and Szelényi observe in one of the recent literature overviews: “[a]lthough we read quite extensively in the New Class literature, we could not find a satisfactory theory, and we were also often irritated by the lack of specificity and lucidity in this literature” (King and Szelényi 2004: xiv).

Literature on post-communist transition often stresses the importance of channelling funds into education. One can find such policy recommendations from the Washington Consensus (Williamson 1990: 11) Post Washington Consensus (Kolodko 1998) as well as EBRD's recommendations how to build up the market economy (Buiters, Lago, Stern 1997: 47). Furthermore, in the light of EU accession Estonian academics have found additional source of legitimacy – Lisbon Strategy - and have increased their demands for the public funds even more. By now, it has become rather common to criticize politicians and the general public for misunderstanding the role of academics in society (e.g. Dageyte *et. al.* 2000) and not making equally big funds available in the state budgets as the above mentioned document, Win Kok's report or draft of the EU's constitutional treaty allow to suggest (e.g. Villems 2005a, 2005b).

Despite the general feeling and widespread political rhetoric that stresses the importance of (higher) education, science, research and development (R&D), in none of these above mentioned documents or statements has the role of academics been specified. That is, academics who size the demand for public funds do not offer any meaningful help to understand how they support the transformation and/or development process. One gets the impression from their statements that any financial spending on education and science means economic and/or socio-political development. It is often implicitly coded into their belief that academics function as locomotives for economic progress and (higher) education and science are believed to be *Gerschenkronian* strong medicine that would allow Estonia to catch up with the developed world². That is, the positive correlation between education/science/R&D and development is believed to be self-evident therefore hardly ever deserves any discussion³.

¹ For examples of conceptual stretching see for instance Lagerspetz and Raud (1996) Steen (1997), Konrád and Szelényi (1979) as well as the numerous revisions of their theory by Szelényi (1986-87); Konrád and Szelényi (1991); Eyal, Szelényi and Townsley (1997). See also Bozoki (1999) for the literature overview on the intellectuals before and after the collapse of communism. Finally see King and Szelényi (2004) for the comprehensive literature overview of the theories of the New Class.

² See for instance Chase (1998), Flanagan (1993), Szczepanski in Peteri (1998), Tamm (1998), Munich (2000), Paasi (2000) and Villems (2005a).

³ It almost seems that the soviet propaganda machine managed to generate lasting impressions such as space travel during the Cold War and the military arms race that still shape the thinking of many people in the Former Soviet Union, including Estonia.

I believe that the above described pattern of conceptual stretching and oversimplified understanding of the role of academics in development needs to be changed. Therefore, the aim of my research is to make a contribution to the academic literature on the role of academics in the transformation of societies by answering to the following **research question**: what has been the role of academics in Estonian post-communist transformation?

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Theoretical perspectives that are used to address the above mentioned research question are as follows:

1. New Class theories that try to disclose the relationship between knowledge and interest as well as knowledge and power⁴. The knowledge-class theories of the 1970 that were supplied by Daniel Bell, Alvin Gouldner, and George Konrád and Ivan Szelényi are especially applicable.
2. Elite theories⁵ which are sceptical of the possibility of democratic rule and explain the origins, functions, mission and profession of intellectuals. Also the theory of elite settlement developed by Adenyl and Schitters that emphasizes the role that elites play in the transformation of totalitarian systems to democracy is relevant. According to this tradition, deals between incoming and outgoing elites by negotiated pacts are preconditions of peaceful and successful reform change.
3. Critical theory that tries to explain criticism of social action, stresses the self-consciousness (critical self-reflexivity) of the critic as well as asymmetric relationships of power and information. Theories of knowledge by Jürgen Habermas and forms of capital by Pierre Bourdieu are especially relevant.
4. Max Weber's concepts of legitimacy and understanding of political order as an area of conflict between classes, status groups and classes. I.e. his recognition of the tension between the efficiency of bureaucratic rule and popular political participation is also a relevant and insightful theoretical perspective for my research.

EXPLANATORY FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS

My research tries to offer an explanatory framework of how the role of academics changes over the course of social transformation. I hypothesize that there are three clearly indictable stages that academics go through during the transition period. First, during socially turbulent times academics able and willing to capitalize form the historical moment due to embedded social and cultural capital. Second, as the society develops, some of the revolutionary academics integrate into the newly established power structure, some return to their original occupations as their temporary roles are taken over by more professional groups. Regardless whether the integrated or returned are more numerous, the original situation reverses in the third stage. That is, it is not so much the university that supplies the political institutions with experts but the other way around--the newly established power structure starts to supply universities with lectures.

To document this change, a survey, a documentation analysis and follow-up interviews are conducted. Based on the survey, two observations are expected. First, I believe to be able to observe considerable academic elite involvement and participation in politics in early transition process. Second, I expect to

⁴ The early new class theories claim that intelligentsia will form the basis of new dominant class (critics of Marx such as Bakurin). The second wave of this school emphasizes that the new social agents-mangers and technocrats would take the control over from owners. The latest version of this intellectual tradition emphasizes the knowledge: humanistic intellectuals together with technical intelligentsia will take the power.

⁵ The classical power tradition represented by Karl Marx, Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto and Mills argues that elite rule is the consequence of the economic change in within a society. The pluralist tradition rejected the unitary elite theory and argued consequently that democratic political system is in its essence a polyarchy system of competing interests and minorities. Outstanding establishers and developers of this tradition are Robert Dahl and John Higley.

document the reasons why academics withdraw from daily politics. Based on the follow-up interviews, however, I expect to be able to document the extent and role played by university faculty in these early transition processes. Last but not least, based on the study of faculty composition I expect to find that contrary to the early 90's when universities supplied government institutions with experts, ministries and other state offices have by now started to supply academia with lectures.

The proposed hypothesis would be proven wrong, should it turn out that academic elite played a very minimal role in bringing about the 1989 socio-economical changes. That is, should I learn that the number of academics involved or that their contribution to bring the 1989 peaceful revolutions and social processes that followed was very minimal.

The proposed hypothesis would be proven equally wrong, would the study show that universities are not employing experts from out-side academia rather than still supplying power structures with experts.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

In line with warnings of philosophers of educational research such as Richard Pring (2000: 43-56) not to draw a sharp contrast between different kinds of enquiry, and appeals of comparative methodology classics such as Charles Ragin (1987) to go beyond quantitative and qualitative research strategies, my study tries to take into account the understanding that

[t]he scientist has to articulate a methodology which is a response to the object of enquiry and not simply a response to the reconstructed data associated with that object. The scientist has therefore to ensure conceptually that new finds and explanations do not simply reproduce existing 'data' self-fulfilling (Robbins 1998: 45).

Just as Bourdieu's early research synthesises as different tools as statistical analysis and ethnographic techniques, my dissertation tries to combine a range of methods. As indicated in the previous section, it includes surveying, statistical analysis, interviewing as well as document analysis.

It is probably correct to argue that one of the reasons for the current situation where research dealing with the role of academics in social transformation in ECE/FSU does not go much beyond speculating on the role of intellectuals has to do with the difficulty of data collection. Indeed, collecting the data necessary for proving the above described explanatory framework of the role of academics in social transformation is time consuming (large number of interviews to be contacted, documents to be collected and analyzed). Furthermore, the importance of local context and language make the cross-country comparative study almost impossible for a single researcher, and I do not expect to be an exception. Therefore, I have to limit the empirical study to a single country, which limits the generalization possibilities but, nevertheless, is justified for theory development purposes. That is, in Lijphart's 1971 categorization, I am undertaking a hypothesis-generating case study based on one country that is justified in areas where no theory exists, yet. The role of academics in social transformation definitely is one of those areas.

I selected Estonia for three reasons: (i) its typical post-communist legacies, (ii) smallness, and (iii) the contextual familiarity. More particularly, Estonia fits very well to represent ECE/FSU post-communist transformation because, like most other countries in the region, she inherited all the typical socialist legacies. However, the major reason for selecting Estonia for the study was her smallness that allows me to conduct a complete sample survey—to cover all the university level institutions and academics teaching there, without discriminating against ownership form or professional rank. Last but not least, Estonia was selected because I have a competitive advantage—language and context familiarity as well as personal contacts. In principle, it should improve the quality of research. Yet, it may also be a source of bias(es) that I hope to avoid with the help of non-Estonian advisers and reviewers.

DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

To overcome the difficulties associated with document collection as well as to enhance reliability of the research, methodological tool known as triangulation is being used. This technique involves cross-referring and crosschecking data with the aim of producing a more robust or holistic picture. It is done by employing several instruments: standardized, yet, anonymous questionnaire; interviews; and documentation analysis. In other words, reliability and validity is increased by double-checking the data collected from questionnaires by making, interviews with current as well as former policy makers.

The core of the questionnaire indicates academic elites' personal and occupational history, connections and involvement with political movements, parties, individual politicians as well as government institutions in general. I am especially interested in academics' involvement in party program development and public policy making. As mentioned, some parts of this collected data are double-checked by in-depth interviewing and reviewing the personal composition of the government and parliament expert commissions⁶. All this will be done in order to produce as robust theory on the role of universities in post-communist social transition as possible.

PRELIMINARY NON-EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

In order to test the previously mentioned hypothesis quite detailed survey data about the roles that academics have taken in public policy process has been collected. Although, the statistical analysis of the answers to this standardized questionnaire have been computerized (it includes data about 582 randomly selected Estonian academics out of 4750 who taught in the academic year 2001/02), the statistical analysis how some 700 different variables might interact with each other still needs to be carried out. As the interviews are also scheduled to take place only in the second half of 2005, the following section will give an overview of the non-empirical findings so far. To order increase the readability, it has been organized as answers to three interrelated questions:

1. What is being transformed (or aimed to be transformed) in society?

Economy – Soviet modernisation project put universities together with the academy of sciences to the centre of the modernisation project. Although considerable resources were channelled to higher education and R&D, Soviet modernisation project failed. It was argued that big part of this failure has to do with the defining features of soviet higher education - narrow specialisation, authoritative teaching and assessing methods, stress on factual knowledge rather than application and use of knowledge in an unanticipated circumstances. Instead of leading the Soviet society to a new developmental level (not to mention communism) higher education together with the R&D sector trained narrow minded engineers who failed to compete with the West in the development of new technology. The more SU depended on innovation and creativity, the larger the difficulties of the Soviet modernisation model and possibilities to compete with the West turned out to be.

After the change of regime, Estonian universities have learned to believe and argue that they could be the major source of national economic development if enough financial resources were made available to them. Even though that statistics about the current state of affairs of Estonian economy as well as the surveys conducted among businessmen suggest extreme doubt of the potential of Estonian scientist to have an economic contribution, academics have put forward and found support among political forces to strategies that would again like to put the university and R&D into the centre of national economic development.

Polity – Estonian universities were important institutions to (il)legitimise the Soviet political and economic model, and have a mixed record in terms of the impact in strengthening the Estonian civil society during the soviet era. They were definitely not at the for-front of the resistance movement but still contributed towards

⁶ In order to take an advantage of the possibility, the survey asked additional questions about teaching and research activities.

the restoration of independent Republic of Estonia by engaging in selection and socialisation of political and cultural elites.

More particularly, universities were to legitimise soviet rule in Estonia in two ways. First, academics were there to teach and students there to learn Marxist-Leninist ideology that was supposed to make the relatively well-educated individuals (future soviet professionals and elite) not to question the rule. Second, universities were to legitimise soviet rule by making an important contribution to the soviet modernisation project. But university failed to create the well educated *homo soveticus* with appropriate soviet identity, mentality and obedience as well as the economic progress that would have put the superiority of the soviet model beyond question.

Members of university teaching personnel cannot be said to have engaged in the fight for independence because:

- their behaviour and loyalty were “lightly” controlled by and career made dependent on the membership of Communist Party;
- sentences were written into soviet Penal Code in order to discipline, reinforce the loyalty and if necessary punish for the activities that could be interpreted as anti-soviet activities or attracting youth to act or become anti-communist;
- curricular (including the hidden one) was centrally determined;
- publishing was (self-)censored;
- they lacked superior scientific knowledge.

Like academics, students of the Estonian institutions of higher learning hardly engaged in pro-independence resistance movement. But unlike academics they did engage in activities that contributed towards the creation and sustenance of institutions engaging in extra-curricular academic activities. These *invisible colleges* were set up and run by the students, united people that were interested in subjects and topics that were not officially taught at universities, organised meetings and field trips where students and guest lectures made presentations, collected and disseminated material that was difficult to get through official sources. In other words, universities functioned quite similar to prisons. Just as prisons often fail to achieve the aim of transforming a criminal into law obedient citizen, universities did a poor job in creating the proper Soviet elite that would truly believe in Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism. Just as prisons function as mach-making and continuing education centres, so did the institutions of higher learning especially the national university in Estonia. Both of these establishments brought together a group of people that learned to know each other, thought new skills to each other and contributed towards the built-up of social capital/trust. After realising from the institutions both of the groups have proved to behave differently than expected from them by the regime. Criminals commit new crimes and as will be discussed later, university graduates make policy making and business life less open, democratic and transparent.

After the restoration of independence, universities have continued to play an important role in selection and socialisation of local political and social elites. National university along with other traditional providers of higher education have kept their privileged position in the society as well as in the process of elite selection and socialisation. The honeymoon period for new providers of university education was very short lived due to increasing number of institutions and successful rebellion of the public universities. The role of foreign universities in this process has been increasing and could grow even more in the future along with the larger political and economic possibilities.

Social structure – Soviet industrialisation policy that sent a large number of students to acquire higher education, had a much larger effect on polity than on stratification. Soviet leaders took functionalist view on higher education and could not therefore foresee that the massification of higher education could affect Soviet society in a different way. They do not seem to have been aware of the “side effects” of schooling and that the “key aspect of modernisation is the demand for increased participation in politics”, which if not met, may lead to revolution.

Indeed, statistics shows that Estonian/Soviet institutions of higher learning did supply large number of university graduates, even though it is unclear whether these graduates started to seek political power in

addition to occupying the technocratic positions in 1970s, as argued by *New Class theorists*. Should the speculations be correct, modernisation theory according to which there is some correlation between the country's socio-economic development and the type of political system, seems to have worked in Estonia. In other words, leaving the large proportion of well-educated population out of the political process together with the emigration policy, Soviet regime put an extra pressure to the socio-political situation. Soon before long, the policy of "no voice, no exit" led to the events of 1989/91.

After the collapse of communism and restoration of independence, Estonian state policy of higher education has been controversial and reproductive. On the one hand, it has created a system where regardless of one's social background, student does not have to take any direct responsibility for his or her post-secondary educational choices if s/he performs well at high school final exams. For the selected, Estonian state provides higher education free of charge. On the other hand, the policy represents the wish to create responsible citizens. It is forcing students and their families to take full responsibility of the educational choices and financial commitments that they make.

Culture – Rather than offering a counterhegemonic discourse against the official ideology, universities were important institutions to spread the acceptable line of Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist thought through teaching and research. Yet, universities made an important contribution to the local culture - it kept Estonian language alive and reproduced local Estonian elite. In this context, the fact that teaching took place in Estonian was more important than the content. Although further comparative research is needed to establish the (details of the) causal effect, it is very difficult to imagine that restoration of independent Republic of Estonia could have been possible without locally trained national elite, national language, culture and means to communicate these.

After the restoration of independence, universities have been very supportive towards the Europeanization. Academics and students alike, enjoy without any critical doubt the possibilities for academic travelling and research supported by the EU Commission. In this sense, universities may well become to be known the destructors of local culture in the long run.

2. What is being transformed in higher education?

Estonian institutions of higher learning have put on a new dress without cleaning or changing much underneath. More particularly, institutional differentiation has increased but as the students and their parents are unable to observe the real value of the offered higher education, transformation has mainly took the form of "educational arms race" where the physical conditions of the school and the outlook of classrooms is far more important than what is going on inside of these.

For instance, the model of assessment has not changed much. That is, the soviet assessment practices have not entirely ended in the Republic of Estonia. There are still institutions and departments within the establishments that continue to put group pressure and conformity among students through oral exams and the display of student test results openly in the schools' hallways. Also, the fact that students can retake exams several times without being really penalized for it, shows in addition to the soviet legacy also lack of vision, and unwillingness of the universities to change. It does not support the neo-liberal/conservative public policy aim to create citizens that are capable of taking responsibility for their action.

Likewise, changes in the curriculum have been cosmetic. Political regime change, increased academic freedom, contacts with the western institutions as well as the information technology revolution (expansion of internet) have allowed the university administrators to eliminate classes that aimed to develop Marxist-Leninist worldview and loyalty towards the regime; learn and copy the curriculum from the West. Yet, the change is intangible as the very same academic freedom that has allowed these new subjects to be introduced, allows them to be thought as the lectures see appropriate.

3. What is driving these processes?

During the soviet era these processes were driven by the regime's need for legitimacy, desire to catch up and suppress the west as well as cold war. More particularly, Stalin and his followers saw university as an important institution that would allow the SU to industrialise, catch-up and suppress its capitalist rivals. He anticipated that the expansion of higher education and consequent change in social strata will put people with proper education, ideological and class background to the key positions in the Soviet society. It was believed that higher education (especially in the areas of natural science and engineering) would make the SU the most rational and productive society in the history of humankind.

After the collapse of communism, academics and to some extent also the market has been driving these processes. That is, human capital and endogenous growth theories have offered the well organised and connected interest group of academics the reasoning why public funds should be invested into (higher) education and R&D. Rather than investing any effort into studying these theories and their empirical tests, they have served as an ideology that explains the Estonian socio-economic reality, place in international economic system and most importantly – has provided the program for political action and guidelines for drawing up the state budget.

Neo-liberal reforms carried out by Estonian governments have created a situation where students and their parents are willing to cover extremely high costs of higher education because it seems to be the only legal way to get a high paying job with appropriate social prestige – the ticket to western living standard. Last but not least, the *Say's Law* (which says that supply creates its own demand) could explain part of the escalated demand and development of new "sexy" programs in business administration, PR, languages and law.

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