Education reforms and youth transitions in Central Europe since 1989 – a case of Poland

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Abstract
Since the collapse of communism Central Europe underwent complex economic, political and social reforms, including deep, structural reforms of education systems. This chapter provides an overview of the three major reform phases undertaken in Central Europe since the late 1980s. This is pursued in order to support analysis of how Central European countries have tackled implementing supranational and national education reforms and their effects on youth transitions. Poland has been selected as a core case study through which to illustrate the successes and weak points of the ongoing system transformation. Post-communist phases of transition within Central Europe - herein referred to as ‘deconstruction’, ‘reconstruction’ and ‘Europeanisation’ - have transpired over varied timeframes, sometimes overlapped, and were on many occasions uneven and incomplete. This is due to the acute complexity of the social, economic and political processes and constraints faced by reformers working within this region.

Introduction
Since the late 1980s, the Central European countries of Poland, the Slovakia the Czech Republic and Hungary have undergone significant political, economic and governance changes. These changes have been driven by ideological and politico-economic shifts at the regional and state level, with previously centrally-planned economic models fading in favour of democratic restructuring and free-market objectives. Decentralisation measures have variously reflected appeals to devolve governance, deepen multilateral partnerships with organisations and governments to the geopolitical west, and hone a collective (re-nationalised) imaginary. At the same time, efforts to reform these countries’ respective education systems have taken place relentlessly at local, national and supra-national levels.

While Central European countries each housed different economic organs and industries prior to democratisation, and are home to different ethnic and linguistic constituencies, they share some common ‘transition’ related themes which transpire from their experiences of late-20th century regime change. Three fundamental commonalities are: decentralisation, accession into the European Union in 2004, and a shift from education systems being organised around a socialist-driven ‘employment logic’ (Hirst & Peters 1970) -
with enrolment quotas and curricula being closely related to industry needs - to an ‘education logic’ (Raffe 2008).

The adoption of a demand-driven and growth-promoting economic model has meant that the skill base promoted in the ‘new’ economies has endured radical changes. These changes have had an immense social impact, with more students across the region deferring early specialisation to instead undertake academic general schooling. The proportional uptake of vocational secondary and technical schooling has suffered a drastic decline. Concurrently, in the early 21st century the ‘success’ of Central European transitions is publicly judged by way of academic aptitude (scientific capabilities, numeracy and literacy) and quantitative indicators of students’ school-to-work transitions (work status).

Extensive research was conducted on youth transition systems or ‘regimes’ in the early 21st century (Gallie & Paugham 2000; Walther et al. 2002; Raffe 2003; Pohl & Walther 2007; Verdier 2009). Growing interest in youth transition studies in post-communist countries is apparent (Kogan et al. 2011; Baranowska-Rataj & Unt 2012). The literature on the transition systems of the post-communist Central European countries reveals that there is no single common type of transitional experience shared across the region (Cowen et al. 2000; Kogan et al. 2011; Baranowska-Rataj & Unt 2012). Furthermore, there is little research available on current youth transitions and vocational education in Central Europe, a field which might shed light on the relationship(s) between industry and skills provision in a contemporary context.

Poland is the largest of the post-communist Central European economies and serves as an ‘entrepreneur’ of official European Union (EU) norms and standards to the EU’s near neighbours (Klatt & Stepniewski 2012). Poland has stood out in recent years for its students’ PISA scores (see Table 1), as well as for the country’s reputation for supporting the development of a well-skilled, cost-effective labour force (Jakubowski et al. 2010). As a result of reform efforts, Poland has gained recognition as one of the ‘rising stars in education’ (Hicks 2012). According to a recent OECD Education at a Glance report, Poland ranked within the top four OECD countries in rates of entry into university (81% compared to the OECD average of 60%) and the anticipated lifetime university completion rate among today’s youth (58% compared to the OECD average of 39%) (OECD 2013a: 3). Poland also exhibited one of the fastest rates of economic growth in the EU and it recorded significant growth in employment rates among recent graduates (Eurostat 2011). Furthermore, it is characterised by one of the lowest rate of early school leaving in Europe with only 5.4% of the population aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education and not in further education or training (Eurostat 2014).

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Table 1: PISA scores for select Central European Countries. Data sources from: OECD 2000, 2009 and 2013b.

This substantial climb in rankings has coincided with ‘academic drift’ away from vocational education. Notwithstanding international praise for its educational achievements, the youth unemployment rate in Poland in 2012, for young people aged 15-24, remained significant at 26.5% (OECD 2013c). The majority of those who have struggled to find work have been young people who have completed basic vocational programmes and/or did not graduate from an academic secondary education institution.

This chapter, out of recognition of the complexities regarding supporting young people in their transition to further study or work during a period of rapid social and economic transition, provides an overview of the three major reform phases undertaken in Central Europe since the late 1980s. This is pursued in order to support analysis of how Central European countries have tackled implementing supranational and national education reforms and their effects on youth transitions. Poland has been selected as a core case study through which to illustrate the successes and weak points of the ongoing system transformation. Post-communist phases of transition within Central Europe - herein referred to as ‘deconstruction’, ‘reconstruction’ and ‘Europeanisation’ - have transpired over varied timeframes, sometimes overlapped, and were on many occasions uneven and incomplete. This is due to the acute complexity of the social, economic and political processes and constraints faced by reformers working within this region.

The state of education in Central Europe prior to transition

In the lead up to ‘liberalisation’, Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia were subject to highly-centralised governance. Societal and educational norms and standards were disseminated from the inner circle of Soviet socialist ideology in Moscow. While care must be taken not to over-generalise about educational experiences in Central Europe prior to democratisation, some common conditions related to this period are remembered among citizens today.

During the ‘communist’ period, the schooling system in all three states was characterised by a typical three-tier structure which began with eight years of standardised and compulsory basic primary education. This was followed by two to four years (four years inclusive of an apprenticeship) of basic vocational schooling, four years of technical training, or four years of general/grammar education leading to a maturity exam (matura or maturita), the latter supporting access to university. Post-primary vocational schools and upper-secondary vocational education and training were the joint responsibility of the ministries of different economic sectors and education departments within a highly-bureaucratised, inefficient system.

As signatories to the Warsaw Pact (1955), the major aim of education in these countries became preparing young people for life and a job ‘for the defence of the socialist homeland’ within a ‘developed socialist society’ (in Greger & Walterova 2007: 19). Policies of ‘statistical justice’ (Štech 2008: 10) sought to involve a greater diversity of social classes in society. The relationship between the state and industries before 1989 was strong and there was very little scope for ‘outside’ influence from international organisations or private interest groups, including NGOs. Exchange programmes were available for teachers, engineers and other professionals within the Soviet Union and its satellites, and workers also
crossed national boundaries further east into ‘partnership’ countries to assist with realising Soviet plans for urbanisation and internationalisation.

Higher education represented an ‘elite’ track, with typically less than 15% of secondary school graduates progressing to a university or college (Zalai 1997). State policy did not place any emphasis on increasing the level of education for all citizens, as education and training were state funded and many available jobs required low-level skillsets. The relative advantage of children from privileged backgrounds was to be weakened, while higher education quotas aimed to favour people of ‘worker stock’ (the proletariat) by applying ‘reverse discrimination’. There was a certain paradox to a system advocating social equality which was never achieved at the secondary school level; social background remained a strong factor in determining one’s educational opportunities. Czechoslovakia exhibited reverse discrimination between 1948 and 1990 (Wong 1998) and inequitable treatment also persisted in Hungary (Hanley & McKeever 1997).

Certain literature and pedagogical thought - such as that of Lev Vygotsky - was censored in the Soviet Union for reflecting ‘bourgeois elitism’, with trickle-down effects in Central Europe. Teaching practice was steeped in the rigid and instructor-centred doctrine of socialist pedagogy, with the projected aim of ultimately building a developed communist society (Hejnicka-Bezwinska 2014). As a result, education attainment was very low. For example in 1980 in Hungary, only 5% of students graduated from higher education and 15% graduated from upper-secondary (MEC 2008). Roughly 40% did not complete lower secondary schooling (ibid), this fact perhaps posing a challenge to arguments which link educational attainment to under-employment (Foster 1965 in Jakubowski et al. 2010). Similar numbers graduated in Czechoslovakia, with 61% of the age cohort studying in vocational schools, 15% in grammar schools (gymnáziums) and 20% in technical schools (Berend 2010: 271).

Poland’s socialist education system, 1945-1989

Since losing independence in the late-18th century, education in Poland had been closely aligned to nation-building efforts. As with Hungary - where the place of religion and nationalism in educating young people was a prominent and politically sensitive matter - Poland’s education program involved a Roman-Catholic code of values (moral education) and emphasised ‘Polish-ness’ (national history, culture and identity). During World War II (WWII), thousands of Poland’s teachers, professors and members of the intelligentsia were killed by occupying German and Soviet forces. During the same period, over 100,000 students were engaged in ‘underground’ schooling in Polish literature, language and history.

In 1945, the main path for Poland’s post-WWII education reform was affirmed. It responded to the racialisation and patriotism of wartime European politics and drew upon the education model provided by the Soviet regime (Moraczewska 2010) in promoting equity, literacy and combatting sectarianism. Private schools were re-purposed and religious orders lost their right to organise educational activities. A standardised curriculum and prescriptive teachers’ books provided little space for supporting ‘innovation’, nor the creative application of information acquired by students. Narrowly specialised basic vocational schools produced low-skilled workers to toil towards the achievement of five-year central plans. The logic underpinning general education provisions was driven by the immediate needs of the ‘system’. Labour productivity rates were rendered less important than involving all people in the development of a people’s republic, and almost 50% of graduates entered into basic vocational schools after completing a compulsory primary provision at the age of fifteen.
In 1961, the Sejm (Parliament) passed an Act which rendered two years of vocational or agricultural training compulsory for all students.

In Poland, class-based selection into general academic senior secondary schools provided the children of peasants and workers with priority access. The stated rationale in Poland, as in Hungary (MEC 2008), was that this would support underprivileged children to pursue further education. In practice, however, during the 1960s only 10% of children from ‘underprivileged’ backgrounds attended academic senior secondary schools and less than 5% completed university (Levitas & Herczyński 2012: 57). Despite education being held in high regard across Polish society, many of those who sought quality vocational skills as well as an academic education were denied such an opportunity. Children from ‘elite’ backgrounds were concurrently held back from accessing formal higher education. For those who gained access to higher education, a textbook-centred approach to learning, and rigid directives on pedagogy given to teachers, aimed to ensure that students would be exposed to a provision that was both authorised by and acceptable to the regime’s policy makers. The overruling ideology - as well as the low regard for ‘choice’ and ‘self-determination’ in comparison to Poland’s current market system - prioritised full employment and society/industry-relevant schooling. The policy served as an ideological and political instrument for eliminating the influence and further development of the ‘enemies of the state’: Polish intellectual and business elites.

By 1990, approximately 22% of the relevant age cohort would progress through a general academic secondary school track while over 70% of young people graduated from vocational tracks (IBE 2011). To address what emerged as educational insufficiencies under the more deregulated competition and choice-driven market economy of the ‘post-communist’ decades, Poland - like other Central European countries freshly severed from direct Soviet influence - had to embark upon deep structural, curricular, economic and ideological reforms at a scale previously unknown to the region. By length and complexity, Poland implemented one of the most extensive education reform agendas of all OECD and EU states. These reforms led Poland to be recognised in the late-2000s by the OECD (2010; 2012) as a highly-educated nation and model reformer. This process began with the first step in transition: deconstruction.

Deconstruction: the first transition

Policy reforms in the post-communist countries of Central Europe were fuelled by the decision to deconstruct the one-party system (Jakubowski et al. 2010: 80-109). Čerych et al. (2000 in Greger & Walterova 2007: 15) deemed this ‘a period of annulation or correction’. The main task was to transform the preceding system by ‘liberalising’ the curricula and policies regulating education management and provisions. This involved school privatisation, re-introducing religious schools and foreign languages into school curricula, and deregulating student enrolment quotas. Deconstruction began at different times in different countries, with the Solidarity workers’ movement, Solidarność, seeking to recuperate Polish values from the early 1980s. Hungary’s reins on centralisation noticeably loosened from 1979, while Czechoslovakia officially abandoned communism in 1991 and became two separate republics in 1993, thus requiring separate policies. The initial work demanded the reorganisation of economic and political systems. This was achieved with immense input from the geopolitical west.

The notion of a ‘return to Europe’ dominated the policies of post-communist Central Europe. Notably, this ‘return’ largely reflected the desire to ‘leap forward to the
achievements of post-war Western Europe’ (Snyder 2003: 290) rather than to recoup the remnants of pre-war life. Such ambition, informed by idealised imagery of Western democracy, was expressed through the re-introduction of capitalist modes of production, distribution and consumption. Decentralisation and democratisation characterised all Central European countries at that time, while ‘learning from elsewhere’ was becoming a central tenet of educational transformation (Birzea 1994 in Silova 2009). Country-specific transition assistance, including the OECD’s Partners in Transition (PIT) programmes, was developed to provide guidance and support. The emphasis fell on dismantling what was in place rather than on opening up educational systems to the outside world and assisting educationalists and students to make fruitful choices about their futures (Birzea 2008). The uncertainties of the ‘double transition’ faced by Central Europe’s employment-seeking youth were further exacerbated by the changing political map and associated instability, with Tito’s Yugoslavia dividing into separate states and the two majority nations within Czechoslovakia also separating.

Not only was decentralisation expected to encourage innovation and competition under the right conditions, but it was promoted as having a democratising effect: the concentration of influence in the hands of a few would lessen, and more diverse voices would be empowered to hear and be heard. In 1993, the European Round Table on Trade regretted that:

‘in most of the European countries, schools are integrated in a centralised public system, controlled by a bureaucracy that slows down their evolution and makes them not permeable to the demands coming from outside’ (ERT 1993 in Hirtt 2001: 8).

The call for greater flexibility through autonomy was articulated by the European Commission two years later: ‘the central question now is how to move towards greater flexibility in education and training systems’ (European Commission 1995 in Hirtt 2001: 8).

The Commission’s Eurydice network emphasised the international character of the movement towards deregulation, decentralisation and autonomy (Hirtt 2001). These influences played a significant role in shaping the character of the education systems of these new democracies in Central Europe. In 1997, the Czech Republic and Hungary were recognised by the OECD as being open and willing to engage with international development workers on policy analysis and reform since the 1990s, and as having achieved rapid development towards a decentralised economy, including in the sphere of education.

Central Europe was challenged by economic recession in the early phase of democratisation and market liberalisation. Recession was characterised by high levels of unemployment and the need to create a welfare system in order to protect the most vulnerable. Foreign direct investment, conditional loans and development programmes facilitated the ad hoc decentralisation and diversification of schools, methodologies and learning resources, and contributed to a shift towards education reforms becoming more influenced by international and/or business interests.

In post-‘Velvet Revolution’ Czechoslovakia, deconstruction took place during trying times. The masses were vulnerable to the flow-on effects of growing social differentiation, a decrease in the demand for skilled labour, economic decline and a shortage of kindergartens. The deregulation of kindergartens affected what would be taught at the school level, employment opportunities for early childhood teachers and the readiness of parents to work. Russian ceased to be the official second language for Slovaks and Czechs in 1993 (OECD
1997), scientific atheism was cut from the pedagogical faculties of universities, and school management swung towards ‘self-governance’. Civic education and history curricula were also updated, thus filling in the ‘white spots’ of national history. In Slovakia, teaching strategies in primary and secondary schools were influenced by efforts among NGOs to instil the principles of democratisation within school curricula. Project Orava, for instance, made use of integrative thematic instruction to promote democracy through its Step by Step programmes (Kosova & Porubsky 2007). Western notions of ‘best practice’ wielded strong influence over public opinion (Ibid, 2007: 112) and stimulated the objectives of the 1994 Constantine (Konstantin) Policy which laid out a ten year vision for achieving European Standards, such as extending higher education enrolments to 30%, increasing adult learner rates from 7% to 10.7%, and increasing high school retention from 40% to 80% (Zelina 2005 in Kosova & Porubsky 2007: 112). Public spending on education in the Czech Republic, measured as a proportion of GDP, rose after 1989 and peaked in 1995. Across post-communist Central Europe, public schools increasingly featured the delivery of flexible programmes focused around building ‘competences’, with teachers requiring less subject knowledge and more ‘soft’ skills as their teaching materials and general role(s) were redefined.

System deconstruction in Poland

The Poles were well-aware that years of centralisation had brought them unyielding economic, political and social ‘backwardness’ when compared to the dynamism of Western markets. A review of the Polish education system was undertaken as part of the OECD’s ‘PIT’ programme. The resulting report, delivered in 1995, supposedly inspired the whole-system reforms implemented by Education Minister Mirosław Handke (1997-2000). The Poles were deeply convinced that communism had a lesser impact on their level of cultural and educational development than on their economic structure, which had to be fundamentally reinvented (Dabrowski & Wisniewski 2001). This sentiment was not reflected in the OECD survey, which depicted a large proportion of the adult population of Poland as demonstrating low rates of literacy (OECD 1995: xiii).¹ Both the validity and reliability of this survey were queried in Poland during a subsequent uproar (Dabrowski & Wisniewski 2001). Beyond the survey, the international reputation of Poland’s labour force was tarnished by low rates of higher education completion in comparison to the nation’s high rates of graduation from work-specific basic vocational schools, a legacy of the preceding economic system.

Since the early 1990s, Poland’s educational policies - and its social and economic system more broadly - have been reoriented towards building a competitive knowledge economy with foreign assistance, following a ‘Western’ model of strategic development expounded by, among others, the European Round Table of Industrialists in 1989, the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), the OECD’s Decentralisation of Employment Policy and Local Management conference in Venice (1999) and the Lisbon Agenda (1999) (Hirtt 2001).

The first domestic strategic reform to have enormous impact on Poland’s education system concerned decentralisation from Poland’s Ministry of National Education to the regional authorities in early 1990. Despite local authorities and educationalists voicing their concerns over such instant and challenging changes, the process of decentralisation began immediately. These alterations were not driven by an educational rationale, but rather by the

¹ The ‘world’s first large-scale, comparative assessment of adult literacy’ (OECD 1995) was held in 1994 and involved nine countries, including Poland.
obligation to dismantle the former political apparatus (Birzea 1996); the emphasis lay on destroying rather than creating or reforming. As communist elites remained in positions of power within the public service, the public as well as newly-elected (former opposition) representatives recognised that the only way to reform the system was to devolve responsibilities, including for schools, to local authorities who were mostly members of the millions-strong Solidarność movement. Once local authorities were made responsible for funding and managing local schools, they had to deal with teachers’ and students’ immediate needs. Decisions had to be made, and inexperienced, freely-elected governments had to implement rules and procedures relating to education provision as quickly and effectively as possible given the circumstances. In view of the scale of the task - as well as the need for ‘new’ skills and dispositions in the face of democracy and market liberalisation - it may be argued that reforming formal education was just as significant and dramatic as the concurrent economic and political changes.

What Bodine (2005) termed ‘radical decentralisation’ was spreading across Poland. This occurred as authority was granted to non-state actors to establish and operate schools, somewhat redolent of charter schools in the USA or free schools in the UK.² This process enjoyed high levels of popularity in Poland as parents and community groups, energised by the post-communist ‘emancipation culture’ (Kennedy 2002 in Bodine 2005), sought to exercise their freedom to choose their children’s school. Without this context, such acts of choice, fuelled by rebellion against the constraints of the preceding school system, may not have seemed so appealing in and of themselves, given the non-state schools’ for-profit status and limited quality monitoring procedures. As new types of schools opened, many small, regional public schools shut down as a result of the limited funds made available to them by local authorities. Beyond compulsory schooling, 30% of preschools were closed between 1990 and 1999 (Herbst 2008). Rates of student drop-out coincided with widespread financial difficulties and material shortages. Rates of employment declined and teachers’ salaries dropped in real terms. Teaching also lost status as a profession, while continuous (re-)learning rendered the profession undesirable in the context of rapidly-expanding wealth differentiation.

Reconstruction: the second transition

Following initial decentralisation, waves of structural education reforms washed through Central Europe.

In the early 1990s in Hungary, three major Acts influenced the operation, organisation and management of reconstruction-phase schools. Acts were passed on public education (e.g. Act 79/1993), vocational education and training (e.g. Act 76/1993) and higher education (MEC 2008). The Acts were later amended in response to economic and political constraints, international conventions, the renewed Hungarian Constitution, and shifting political and ideological agendas upheld by governments under the new system of democracy. The Public Education Act declared the rights of students to eight years of schooling followed by fee-free secondary (general) or vocational schooling. Compulsory schooling took students through the United Nations’ International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) stages 0-3 from the age of five to eighteen. A core curriculum, to be revised every three years, was introduced in 1998, and university entrance exams were launched. Centrally-accredited textbooks were

² In contrast to this, prior to 1989, institutes of education in Czechoslovakia had been financed according to the targets set by public enterprises or the ministries, rather than by the number of students enrolled.
The Czech Republic of the 1990s was characterised by debates on reforms. Public discourse variously toyed with neoliberal (individualist) and social state (collective) values for education, while oscillation between the desire for discontinuity and continuity plagued the transition (Birzea 1996 and Greger & Walterova 2007: 18). In the second phase of transition in the Czech Republic, characterised as ‘partial stabilisation’ (Kotásek, Greger & Procházková 2004 in Greger & Walterova 2007), many ad hoc operational changes were made alongside ‘bottom-up’ pro-reform and innovation measures. NEMES, PAU and IDEA were among the private firms to propose education reforms (Greger & Walterova 2007). The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport’s first programme for education reform was called ‘Quality and Accountability’ (1994) and reflected a shift towards longer-term visions. The state began to steer reform efforts from the mid-1990s and the Czech Republic joined international studies of student achievement, including TIMSS in 1995 and PISA in 2000, among other OECD projects. Tertiary professional schools were first established in 1992/3 and offered an alternative post-secondary education which had not previously existed. The Education Act recognised these schools as part of the education system during an experimental phase (1991-5), and by 2006-7 there were 174 tertiary professional schools (114 state, 28 private and 12 religious) in the Czech Republic that offered programmes culminating in diplomas. To qualify for access to such courses, students had to first complete their maturitní zkouška (Greger & Walterova 2007).

Structural reforms in Poland

As in other Central European countries, efforts were made in Poland to raise the overall level of education through education reform. Significantly, frequent changes in government did not create a stable environment for designing a long-term education reform strategy. A public official from the Ministry of Education interviewed by the authors in 2013 for the purpose of this paper, and who assisted several Ministers to implement structural reforms in the 1990s, believed that political and economic unpredictability did not encourage education reforms on a large scale, particularly without the support of educators and teachers:

‘During the early years, there was very frequent government turnover; there was not even time to prepare strategies. There has been certain stability under Handke, because he was a Minister long enough. Education has never had obvious, explicit goals. Secondly, there was a widespread belief that the education sector would not tolerate rapid changes so we have to take a slow approach to reforms. Thirdly, there was no such pressure like in the economy. They have already re-introduced ‘white spots’ in the history curriculum and opened the possibility of creating non-public schools. Teachers were not big supporters of change, and this is a very large and influential group of voters. In the 90s a large representation of the Teachers Union was in parliament. So there was this type of thinking among politicians: ‘do not antagonise teachers because they will discourage parents’. There was no enthusiasm for change.’

Finally, in the late 1990s with stable, decentralised local governance and a profound demographic turn, favourable conditions and political will supported the introduction of reform efforts on a larger scale. The financial cost of reform was acceptable for the Minister for Finance, Leszek Balcerowicz, as the anticipated declining number of school students, due to demographic factors, reduced total costs. In May 1998, proposals for reform were

subsidised, and employers’ professional representative bodies provided input into curricular development and professional examination procedures (MEC 2008: 19).
announced by the Minister for Education. Mirosław Handke, interviewed in 2013 for the purpose of this paper, explained that the reform was based on three goals:

I. The achievement of universal education at the secondary level and a marked increase in the number of tertiary admissions,

II. The promotion of equal opportunity to access education at various levels, and

III. Improvement of the quality of education provision through ensuring an appropriate balance between knowledge transfer, skill development and shaping youth character to achieve the integration of education and upbringing.

The third objective is interesting as it reveals that ‘quality of education’ was defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and ‘good character’, placing responsibility on schools for both education and upbringing. Minister Handke explained that he proposed that all schools would be autonomous; however, the values the schools embodied should be known upfront:

‘In this reform, each school is gaining autonomy but will need to develop an educational programme evident to all its parents. If you want to have Mahomedan culture, go ahead, but make sure that all of the parents are aware of it. You see, education cannot be detached from a value system. This is one of the elements of this reform.’

Handke advocated building strong links between schools and parents as well as with local Catholic parishes. In his opinion, Catholic values should be integrated into the community through local Catholic schools (Handke 2009). This approach was highly criticised - particularly by the opposition and secular media (Gazeta Wyborcza 1998) - and was consequently removed from the reform. In 1999, structural reform was officially implemented. Primary schooling was converted to reflect a six year programme with two different stages, integrated and block, followed by three years of lower-secondary school (gimnazjum) and an upper-secondary track. Compulsory general schooling was thereby extended by one year. Unlike in Hungary or the Czech Republic where a gimnázium/gymnazium traditionally provided an elite ('grammar school') programme, Poland’s gimnazja offered general secondary schooling. Students were tracked into academic or vocational upper-secondary schools following nine years of compulsory general schooling in a system resembling some in Western Europe. Structural changes were accompanied by curricular and financial reforms. The notion of a ‘core curriculum’ was developed, aiming to provide schools with extensive autonomy and local responsibility: that is, teachers were endowed with professional discretion and greater co-authorship over how they would teach and through which examples. Delaying vocationalism by one year arguably played a significant role in the high performance of Polish students in the PISA tests of 2009 and 2012 (Jakubowski et al. 2010). To be taken upon the completion of primary and lower-secondary stages of education, external examinations and tests were introduced and overseen by an assessment board. Such tests arguably help to shape what teachers focus on and how - despite the loosening of the Soviet-style textbook-centred approach to schooling - as their competence as pedagogues is judged against their students’ success in comparison-enabling testing regimes such as PISA and TIMSS.

Of the post-communist countries of Central Europe to partake in PISA testing between 2000 and 2009, Poland is the only one to have demonstrated improvement over time.
The Czech Republic’s results declined. Hungary’s remained quite stagnant, with performance gaps between the higher and lower performers fuelling criticism around education inequities. Slovakia’s education system was deemed the second most ‘elitist’ of the EU Member States, while the Czech Republic (5th), Slovenia (7th), Poland (9th) and Hungary (18th) scored more favourably against this criterion (Schraad-Tischler & Kroll 2014).

The above data point to Poland’s success in reforming ‘academic’ education and equitable access to education. However, the reforms implemented in 1999 completely abandoned the vocational education track. This wave of reforms resulted in the closure of 6,000 vocational schools and the disintegration of relations between vocational schools and industry (Kabaj 2010). It had damaging consequences for the whole vocational and training system, including financial, curricular, labour market and pedagogical dimensions. The declining quality of skill training, very low status given to vocational education, limited access to upskilling, and problematic transitions to meaningful work contrast with more ‘occupationalised’ labour markets (e.g. Germany) where the completion of occupation-oriented training is a basic prerequisite for entering skilled employment (Skrobanek et al. 2011). Furthermore, Poland’s VET sector is now characterised by a low level of involvement by industry representatives in skill formation at all school levels and minimal exposure to real-world industry experience for all VET students. There is the particular importance held by individual firms in the development of skill formation strategies and processes which dominate the direction of school-industry partnerships and the level of industry engagement afforded to schools (Klatt et al. 2015). It results in the growing inequality between education groups rather than affirming equal educational opportunity and decreasing the chances of the majority of VET students for successful transitions to labour market.

**The third transition: Europeanisation**

The historic date of 1 May 2004, when the aforementioned Central European countries joined the EU, marks an important turning point in their turbulent modern history. EU enlargement sits at the heart of transformation ‘from national sovereignty to community membership’ (Halasz 2007) and ‘knowledge society’ priorities. Formal education in European countries had always been strongly related to nation building efforts. In the current phase of globalisation, the influence of EU processes on Member States is unquestionable.

In recent years, the term ‘Europeanisation’ has been utilised by scholars of international relations, the social sciences, and European studies to explain multi-layered and interlinked policy making within the EU. For Murray (2009, 227-244), Europeanisation is influenced by ‘the transnationalism and the interdependence of the EU and of national administrative and governance systems’; which transform both the EU and its member states. An extensive area of research into power and influence in the EU has resulted from such transformations.

In the context of education policy, Europeanisation occurs at a national level where national political structure, administration, policy processes and policies are ‘oriented into the European direction’ (Nugent 2006: 523). ‘National adaptation’ is understood as a change of position or policy resulting from participation in joint EU decision-making processes, in particular through the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). The OMC is the method of governance utilised within EU negotiations on politically sensitive policy matters, such as education. OMC is a promising Europeanisation instrument as its mechanisms are based on learning and knowledge diffusion (Klatt 2014). During our interview in 2013, an official
from the Ministry of Education, with experience of representing Poland at European Council meetings, explained how ‘soft mechanisms’ influence national policies:

‘Although “hard instruments” of the EU Treaty do not include education, we are bound by a gentlemen’s agreement to act on the negotiated regulations or benchmarks. Of course non-compliance does not bring splendour and, of course, there are other benefits if they judge us positively in Europe’.

The national policies are also influenced by global trends, including the strong relevance of the OECD. Grek et al. (2009: 129) have argued that the EU is a ‘friendlier face of globalisation’ as it offers quality assurance frameworks and guidelines on ‘best practice’ without the jurisdiction to interfere with national curriculum standards. Indeed, it provides a platform for discussion, the exchange of ideas, and a space where smaller, less powerful nation states can raise their voices.

Multiple developments in education policy in the EU - the Lisbon Strategy in particular - are founded on human capital theory and the task of developing Europe into ‘the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world’ (Lisbon European Council 2000). The advancement of education as an economic priority by governments around the world indicates that education is being positioned to potentially deliver social and economic returns which were more difficult to achieve when national education policy appeared more insular. In Central Europe, global and European policy influences - both pre- and post-accession into the EU - have resulted in further reform efforts which have had transformative effects on the nation-states’ economic, social and educational policies (Birzea 2008). European Structural Funds have been recurrently utilised in the region to support European integration and development.

**Europeanisation in Poland**

Since joining the EU, Poland’s policies have been reoriented towards building a competitive knowledge economy and following EU directives. Polish universities have adjusted their study structure to the 3+2+3 year model laid out by the Bologna Process, which most closely resembles the UK ‘Anglo-Saxon’ configuration of higher education. Teaching standards have been adjusted for comparability with qualification requirements for regulated professions already implemented in the other EU member states. A policy shift, towards emphasising learning outcomes more so than inputs, has been introduced to schools and higher education institutes in line with the European Qualifications Framework. Poland’s government explicitly stresses the role of its National Qualification Framework (2008) as an instrument for national reform; the ‘learning outcome’ approach is presented as providing an instrument for increasing the coherence, quality and relevance of education and training (Ministry of Economy 2008). Later, a proposal for a comprehensive Polish qualifications system, informed by the Polish Qualifications Framework (PQF) was approved and adopted in 2011, and has become part of a broader reform which seeks to modernise qualifications at all levels and across all sub-systems. Consecutive Polish governments have followed a neoliberal approach consistent with the market-responsive rationale which the reforms are grounded in. The Strategy for Development of Education to Year 2013 clearly states that ‘a role of education (...) in achieving the Lisbon objectives is unquestionable’ (MEN 2007: 4).

Significantly, Poland as well as other Central European countries have not only adjusted to EU regulations, but also played a role in informing EU-wide education policy. Poland’s 2011 Presidency provided a vital channel for domestic priorities to influence EU
education policies. The priorities voiced by Poland at this time included: mobility for learning purposes, modernisation of the university system, intensification of the implementation of language competences, and continued action on lifelong learning (Cedefop 2011: 1).

In 2008, a special team was established for coordinating the Presidency within the Ministry of National Education. Its staff underwent specialist training in the practical aspects of participation by Polish governmental administrators in the decision-making process of the EU. This provision was delivered by a consortium of three foreign training institutes. As a result of the changes demanded in order for Poland to assume the Presidency of the European Council, the Ministry’s rigid decision-making procedures have been transformed. Such changes have endowed ministerial officials with additional flexibility when participating in negotiations at the EU level.

During Poland’s Presidency, several final documents on education for all EU members were adopted. These included a declaration concerning the promotion of language, learning and multilingualism; a declaration concerning mobility in the new generation of EU educational programmes; and conclusions concerning increasing the efficiency of tools supporting the competencies of young people. One of the education-relevant initiatives of Poland’s Presidency related to the country’s well-established foreign policy objectives including strengthening cooperation with the EU’s eastern neighbours. A conference, organised during the Presidency, entitled ‘Eastern Dimension of Mobility’ provided a new contribution to the European Neighbourhood Policy, and placed especial emphasis on the significance of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Special attention was paid to the mobility of students, teachers, academics, young people and businesses from the sporting and cultural sectors from the EaP countries like Georgia or Ukraine. The idea behind the conference was to engage with the EaP countries and to listen to their expectations. It included representatives of the relevant ministries, universities, research centres, students and teachers’ associations and other national agencies from the Eastern neighbourhood engaged by EU programmes. The conference led to a discussion in the EU forum about strengthening the development of instruments fostering mobility between the EU and EaP countries. It concluded by adopting the official Council Conclusions on the eastern dimension of Youth Participation and Mobility (2011/C, 372/03) which invited the Commission and Member States to develop mobility programmes and exchange opportunities that include young people from across greater Europe.

In sum, the 2011 Council Presidency enabled Poland to not only advance the education policy of all EU member states, but also to engage countries outside the EU with the objective of increasing the educational opportunities available to young people further east. Europeanisation and the OMC have enabled Central European member states to model their systems on their Western European counterparts while also playing an active role in shaping the discourse on education policy in Europe. Such practices are all the more significant when viewed in light of 20th century geopolitics.

Conclusion

Since 1989 and the beginning of fast-paced changes to Central Europe’s formerly-centralised education systems and structures, some aspects of education have stabilised while others remain in flux. The main challenges for all post-communist countries in the area relate to the (in)equality of educational opportunities and high rates of youth unemployment. The phenomenon of ‘brain drain’ - with many young and well-educated professionals migrating to the more-developed economies of Western Europe - also presents a challenge.
The success of reforms since the 1980s is unquestionable but many reforms neglected less-quantifiable reference points such as traditions and beliefs (Silova 2009). Where teachers previously played a pivotal role as knowledge and culture workers, and students were collectively tasked with building a ‘brave new world’, the contemporary system - characterised by extrinsic, individualised incentives, competitive wage structures, self-determination, competition amongst fellow graduates for career opportunities, and a fear of losing social status - presents a sharp shift in lived social reality. It proves to be very challenging for uninterrupted and successful transitions of young people from education to labour market.

Following two decades of reform efforts built atop the dismantled socialist system and subsequent efforts to borrow policy from more-established states, Central Europe needs a long-term vision for education. One solution may lie in education policy that is constructed on the basis of internal references, local desires, and a long-term vision of what the region wants its future to look like and its citizens to become. The uncertainties faced by students, as well as the ‘reform fatigue’ faced by education sector employees, deny citizens both the opportunity to flourish in their chosen fields and to share their learning journeys without regular feelings of bitterness, frustration and flailing hope.

The pre-emptive production and discussion of historically-, socially- and economically-contextualised research into ‘glocal’ policy interfaces may serve to anticipate the next ‘phase’ of reform and how it might position local youths of diverse backgrounds in relation to economic capital and a means of economic and social development into the future. Given the weight attached to supra-national policy priorities and finance in the formation of state-level education reform in contemporary post-communist Central Europe, Poland’s case may also provide a timely caveat to developing economies and reformers pressurised by internal hopes and external bodies to achieve western (neo-)liberal ambitions in a few short decades.

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