

## **Diversity Matters: A Lesson from a Post-Communist Country**

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### **1. Is Higher Education in Former Socialist Countries a Problem or an Opportunity for European Education?**

Following the discussion on European Union higher education policy in the past few years, van der Wende concludes that the European Commission has gradually expanded its political ambitions in the sphere of higher education and the goals set for it. “The achievement of those goals”, he continues, “may become difficult [...] considering the lack of direct policy instruments and may also be particularly challenged by the concurrent enlargement of the EU with 10 new countries in Central and Eastern Europe” (van der Wende 2003).

There is no doubt that the remarkable enlargement of the European Union to include countries which until recently functioned within a political and economic system with different values, poses a strong challenge for its future development. The essence of this challenge can be expressed by the following questions: Is higher education in former socialist countries a problem or an opportunity for the European education? Will the development of higher education in the former socialist countries be more similar to the development of education in other regions of the world (USA or Latin America<sup>1</sup>) than to higher education in the leading European countries?

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1 According to Tomusk the development of higher education in post state-socialist Eastern Europe “in many respects resembles more countries like Brazil rather than Germany or France” (Tomusk 2004: 10).

The present paper is an attempt to outline some recent trends in the development of higher education in one post-communist country – Bulgaria. Following the “velvet” revolution of 1989, higher education in the countries of the former Eastern block appeared to be in a unique and highly complex situation. It was confronted with the need to simultaneously go through two fundamental changes, both being essential transformations of the system rather than mere changes. The first change is related to the general social transformation of the countries from totalitarian regimes. It is a change which is not and cannot be a single act, as far as the functional principles of higher education institutions and the regulation of their relations with the state and society are concerned.

In the same period, the higher education systems in most countries around the world have transformed into arenas of major, profound and intensive innovations in response to globalization, internationalization and massive diffusion of higher education.<sup>2</sup> As far as Bulgarian higher education is concerned, the influence of these processes is reinforced by its strong desire to join the European Union.

## 2. Research Methodology

One of the most powerful theoretical approaches in recent years, offering a sociological explanation of institutional and organizational development, is neo-institutionalism.<sup>3</sup> Its main thesis is that “organizations are structured by phenomena in their environments and tend to become isomorphic with them” (Meyer/Rowan 1977: 346) and that adopting organizations under similar external pressures will become more (structural) similar through a processes of convergence. The sociological neo-institutional theory explores, in detail, the ways in which institutional environments ‘imprison’ organizations in ‘iron cages’ by means of dif-

2 For example, introducing policies that focused on the quality and performance of the institutions is regarded not only as a change in the system but also as a change of the system (Neave 1998).

3 There is a lack of coherence in the ways the different institutional approaches are labeled. Scott speaks of “early institutionalists”, “early institutional theory” and “neoinstitutional theory” (Scott 2001); Selznick and Stensaker designate the same developments as “old” and “new” institutionalism (Selznick 1996; Stensaker 2004); Stensaker – following Greenwood and Hinings (1996) – uses the term “neoinstitutionalism” for “the coming together of the old and new institutionalism” (Stensaker 2004: 35); Levy also speaks about “new institutionalism” when he refers to the works of DiMaggio, Powell and Meyer (Levy 2004). In the following analysis I will use Scott’s designations.

ferentiating three mechanisms of institutional isomorphic change – coercive, mimetic and normative (DiMaggio/Powell 1983). Placing the emphasis on organizations' routine, repetitive and unreflective behavior, neo-institutionalism has undoubtedly contributed to uncovering the limitations to rational, technically functional organizational action and to understanding the nature of the processes of convergence and emulation of established institutions.

The main critiques of institutionalism (including the latest developments in neo-institutionalism) apply to its strong emphasis on the external determination of organizations and undervaluing of the meaning of their history, goals, interests and capability of rational action (Perrow 1986). In the sphere of higher education, empirical studies have emerged, which challenge or only partially support the argument that over time organizational change will result in convergence rather than divergence. It is especially important that these studies show the significant role of power holding actors and interests in the implementation of the various changes (Stensaker 2004: 29). A challenge to neo-institutionalism is also the large growth of private higher education institutions in many regions of the world. Diversity, rather than isomorphism, have become the leading trends in the development of the private sector in higher education (Levy 2004).

Wishing to take account of the findings of empirical studies as well as the new realities in the sphere of higher education (primarily in relation to the development of private higher education) some researchers argue for the need for “revised new institutionalism” (Levy 2004: 4) and for “the coming together of the old and the new institutionalism” (Stensaker 2004: 35). In both cases, as Levy clearly emphasizes, denouncing neo-institutionalism as “wrong”, “inapplicable”, “irrelevant” or “impoverished” is not the issue (Levy 2004: 3, 16), but rather an attempt to “re-assess and revise tenets” of neo-institutionalism and especially its emphasis on “isomorphism” (as in the case of Levy) or enrich it with ideas from early institutionalism (as in the case of Stensaker). It should be noted that authors following different institutional approaches question the existence of a sharp separation between them (Selznick 1996) and acknowledge some continuity between the different versions (DiMaggio/Powell 1991); they even claim that their ideas are not mutually exclusive (Stensaker 2004).<sup>4</sup>

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4 Based on the results of a study of the institutional changes in 6 higher education schools, Stensaker comes to the conclusion that different understandings of goals (goals as the outcome of power struggles and vested interests, thus a negotiated entity, and goals as a symbolic gesture to legitimate the organization towards the environment) “are not mutually exclu-

This paper argues that the institutional development of higher education in the countries of the former socialist block can provide additional evidence for justifying the need for and usefulness of mutual complementation and reassessment of the ideas of early institutional theory and neo-institutionalism. Such a research perspective would be richer and more heuristic because it would foster an understanding different aspects of institutional development, including those which are of secondary importance and, although not emerging as leading trends, outline real processes. It also could contribute to the understanding of both similarities and country peculiarities in the development of higher education systems and institutions.

I refer this perspective as open institutionalism. The attribute “open” means that early institutional theory and neo-institutionalism have different descriptive and explanatory powers for different problems and that they can be combined in various ways. The specificity of the subject of sociological investigation determines the specific “design” of the combination of ideas from different institutional approaches<sup>5</sup> Depending on the concrete research problems, different combinations would be possible – some with more “elements” from early institutional theory and others – closer to neo-institutionalism.

### **3. Institutional Models in Bulgarian Higher Education since 1989**

#### **3.1 Socio-Historical Context of the Institutional Changes in Higher Education**

The development of Bulgarian higher education in recent years can not be understood unless we take into account:

- the ideology behind the educational changes, the unique dissolution of the professional educational field in the wider social environment at the beginning of the social transition since 1989 and

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sive” (Stensaker 2004: 50). According to this author, legitimacy also “is a factor that may link old and new institutionalism”, as far as “both normative and cognitive processes are at play when an organization changes its identity” (Stensaker 2004: 210).

- 5 For instance, in order to explain organizational identity change Stensaker develops a specific theoretical framework combining “insights from old and the new institutionalism” (Stensaker 2004: 35-36).

- the specificities of the higher education system created during the totalitarian regime.

In the context of such a radical transition as the transition from a totalitarian society and entirely state-regulated economy to a democracy and market-oriented economy, the changes in the different professional fields are perceived not only from the viewpoint of this sphere alone but also from the perspective of their more general social meaning – as democratic or undemocratic, as defending or limiting the freedom of the individual. This diminishes awareness of the meaning and the role of a certain institutional change for the specific professional field as well as the potential difficulties of its implementation. An eloquent example of such a situation is the way the autonomy of Bulgarian higher education institutions was restored by legislation – an act which is very important for the understanding of the post-communist development of Bulgarian higher education. Instead of a principle regulating the relations between the state and certain institutions, in the period immediately after the “velvet” revolution university autonomy was perceived of as a challenge to the all-powerful socialist state since it created the conditions for freedom of thought and speech and thus set barriers to the authoritarian and totalitarian ambitions of the state authorities. For this reason the reintroduction of autonomy was viewed as a democratic political action, which supported the breakdown of the totalitarian social system.

As early as 1990 a special Academic Autonomy Act was adopted.<sup>6</sup> The very fact that the restoration of the autonomy of higher education institutions was perceived of as an expression of the democratization of Bulgarian society explains the speed and the manner of its legislative regulation, virtually without any discussion of the content of the law and without conceptualizing this legal regulation within the framework of the general situation in the professional field of higher education.

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6 Here is an impressive story of this most efficiently prepared law in Bulgarian educational practice. On 14 December, i.e. only a month after the beginning of social change, on the first day the National Assembly started work, a students' procession submitted an address to members of parliament demanding the autonomy of higher education schools. On 17 January a draft of the Academic Autonomy Law was published, and on 25 January it was unanimously approved by the National Assembly with no objections or additional proposals. The Academic Autonomy Act was adopted together with several other laws, which were defined by the official state newspaper “Rabotnichesko Delo” as “laws without which democracy is impossible” (Rabotnichesko Delo 1990). Among them, especially important was a law amending the Constitution, deleting items from Paragraph 1, which stipulated the leading role of the Bulgarian Communist Party in social life.

The Academic Autonomy Act adopted in 1990 undoubtedly had a positive impact on the development of higher education in Bulgaria. It created the foundation for the processes of diversification and real pluralism in the higher education system – new disciplines and institutes were opened, the first private higher education institutions were created, traditional old-fashioned teaching methods were discarded, the initiative and independence of both faculty and students were encouraged. At the same time, however, the academic community in Bulgaria either appeared to be unprepared to implement the advantages academic autonomy provided or, in some cases, hiding behind this principle, it initiated actions and changes which primarily served group or personal interests. Problems emerged due to the fact that the restoration of the university autonomy was not accompanied by the establishment of mechanisms for accountability and transparency in higher education, as well as mechanisms for the control and maintenance of quality standards.

Some of the numerous higher education schools set up on the basis of the Academic Autonomy Act failed provide the basic conditions for normal functioning – qualified faculty, libraries, suitable premises, not to mention computers or research facilities. There were cases when the title “university” was used simply as an attractive advertising label, behind which stood unclear motives, professional incompetence and lack of responsibility. In order to survive, such “universities” opened their doors widely, lowering the admission criteria and practically enrolling everyone who wished to be a student.<sup>7</sup> Such facts provided favorable conditions for the legislative changes implemented in 1995, this time in the direction of limiting university autonomy and expanding the role of the state in higher education. The so called Unified State Requirements, developed by the Ministry of Education and Science, were introduced for each academic discipline. By nature, they were not standards but curricula featuring obligatory academic courses. Quite a long time was needed until it was realized that such interference of the state in the educational process limits the possibility of improvement rather than guarantees higher quality of education. The Unified State Requirements were discarded in 2002.

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7 The way some Bulgarian higher education institutions operated in a way which seemed to justify the warnings voiced long ago by Humboldt and Schleiermacher, and later by Jaspers, that university autonomy has not only positive sides but also poses some dangers and that “freedom is endangered not only by the existence of the state but also by institutions themselves” when they “neglect mandatory self-criticism” and “develop guild interests” (Jaspers/Rossman 1961).

The second factor which should be taken into account in the analysis of the institutional development of Bulgarian higher education are the specificities of the education system inherited from the totalitarian regime. The network of higher education institutions developed in the totalitarian period included only state institutions and was characterized by significant institutional specialization and differentiation. In the years before the “velvet” revolution in Bulgaria there were 3 universities, 35 specialized higher education schools (8 of which in the military field), which had 133,184 students in total. This model of specialized higher education institutions emerged in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but was established as the dominant institutional model after the socialist revolution of 1944. From the very start of that regime the authorities implemented a radical institutional restructuring of higher education – despite the opposition of a big part of the academic community – by removing 89 research institutes from the structure of the only existing university at that time and transferring them to the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and by the separation of several university faculties which were turned into higher education specialized schools – the Medical, Agricultural, Zoo-technical, Forestry, Religious and Economic Institutes. This model of specialized higher education schools was perceived as the most appropriate for the implementation of the political goals of the communist party. Its ideological ambitions to massively industrialize the country caused the establishment of a large number of specialized (primarily engineering) higher education schools. In 1989 about 40 % of the students in Bulgaria were educated in the 10 engineering higher education institutions.<sup>8</sup>

### **3.2 Facts and Trends in the Institutional Development of Bulgarian Higher Education since 1989**

In the past 15 years the development of the higher education institutional network in Bulgaria has been the result of the transformation and restructuring of the existing higher education schools and the emergence of new institutions. Today the higher education system includes universities, specialized higher education schools and colleges. There are 43 universities and specialized higher education schools (12 of which are universities); they offer Bachelor’s, Master’s and Doctoral degrees. There are 50 colleges, which provide training for the qualification of

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8 It is an impressive fact that at the end of the eighties 7,500 engineers graduated from higher education institutions of engineering each year, while in the most advanced industrial countries their number never exceeded 3,500 (Georgieva 2002: 17-18).

“specialist”. The private sector of higher education includes 4 universities, 3 specialized higher education schools and 9 independent colleges. Analysis in this paper is limited to the institutional development of universities and specialized higher education schools for the following reasons: a) the development of colleges in Bulgaria (the so called semi-higher education schools before 1989) has its own history and is worthy of being the subject of a separate investigation; b) 40 of the colleges are not independent, but function as a part of the universities; c) a relatively small number of students are educated in them, which in both state and private colleges is 8-10 % of the total number of students.

*Table 1: Universities and Specialized Higher Education Schools*

	1944/ 1945	1984/ 1985	1989/ 1990	1992/ 1993	1995/ 1996	1999/ 2000	2001/ 2002	2003/ 2004	2004/ 2005
State	8	38	38	37	36	37	37	35	36
Private	0	0	0	3	5	4	5	7	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>43</b>

*Source: National Statistics Institute (2005)*

The network of higher education schools is characterized by a prevailing number of small and medium-size institutions – 18 from the higher education schools educate less than 2,500 students, 8 educate between 2,500 and 500 students; 11 educate between 5,000 and 10,000 and 5 educate more than 10,000. The total share of the institutions educating up to 5,000 students is 63 %.

There has been a sharp increase in student enrollments since 1989. The expansion of the number of students reached its peak in 1999.<sup>9</sup>

*Table 2: Students in Higher Education Institutions\**

	1990/1991	1998/1999	2000/2001	2002/2003	2004/2005
State	156,536	218,209	205,138	187,363	186,632
Private	0	29,803	25,499	28,349	32,845
<b>Total</b>	<b>156,536</b>	<b>248,012</b>	<b>230,637</b>	<b>215,712</b>	<b>219,477</b>

\* *Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral Academic Degrees*

<sup>9</sup> The reasons for this expansion and its “shape” – the distribution of students between different fields and institutions – are complex and their investigation is beyond the scope of this paper.



In view of the institutional characteristics of the higher education system, three significant changes have been implemented since 1989:

- development of the specialized higher education schools in the direction of incorporating the university model of higher education;
- emergence of the private sector in higher education;
- introduction of structural elements and practices transferred from other educational systems, such as the two-level model of higher education (Bachelor's and Master's degrees) and university quality assurance systems.

All three kinds of institutional changes are significant innovations in the higher education system existing before 1989, thus qualitatively changing its character. Their implementation is not simply an addition or expansion of the principles of the system but a rejection of basic rules and values which were followed for decades and their substitution with new ones. Therefore the legitimacy of the changes undertaken becomes a major factor for their success.

Within the institutional perspective, legitimacy is defined as an assumption "that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman in Scott 2001: 59). Legitimacy is a complex process, which has various dimensions and forms – cognitive, normative, regulative, and pragmatic (Scott 2001; Suspitsin 2004). The analysis of the three main institutional changes in Bulgarian higher education since 1989, highlighted above, is centered around normative legitimacy, i.e. around the ways in which the changes undergone by higher education institutions correlate and agree with the dominating social expectations, values and norms.

### 3.2.1 From Specialized Higher Education Schools to Universities – Legitimacy through Imitation

According to the neo institutionalism, in their desire to achieve legitimacy, organizations imitate already established and successful organizations, which generates increasing similarities, isomorphism and convergence between them. One of the three mechanisms through which institutional isomorphic change occurs is mimetic isomorphism. Mimetic isomorphism is a response to an environment which creates uncertainty (DiMaggio/Powell 1983: 150-151). The social environment, which emerged in Bulgaria in the first years since 1989, undoubtedly generated high uncertainty. The obvious need for radical changes in all social

spheres was accompanied by political instability and very slow economic reform at a high social price. Social hesitation emanating from the political and economic life found additional motivation in the sphere of education, due to the widely shared belief that during the totalitarian regime a well functioning education system was built which had made significant achievements. In this context, most higher education schools chose not to make reforms in the direction of asserting their individual profile, but rather in approximation and comparison to the institutional model assumed to be successful and socially desired. The university model exhibited by the oldest and most prestigious higher education institution – Sofia University – was unquestionably considered such a model. The university model attained additional attractiveness, due to the widely shared assumption that the university statute is in accordance with European traditions and would stimulate international cooperation between schools of higher education.

As already pointed out, the higher education system established during the totalitarian regime in Bulgaria included 3 universities and 35 specialized higher education institutions. The development of those 35 since 1989 followed the same direction, incorporating, both on the structural and symbolical level, the characteristic features of the university model. Gradual changes were accomplished to give these specialized schools of higher education the image of universities. For the academic community of the specialized higher education schools the changing of symbols proved to be especially important, so they invested much effort in renaming these schools into universities. National Assembly decisions granted them the title of universities and the right to be called so. In Bulgaria universities appeared which had students in only a few disciplines, mostly in the same field of knowledge. Today we have 12 complete universities, 13 specialized universities (among them there are 3 Technical Universities, University of Chemical Technology and Metallurgy, University of Mining and Geology, University of Economics, Agricultural University, Medical University, and even a University of Forestry) and 17 specialized higher education schools. Before 1989 20 % of the students were educated in universities now almost 46 % of the students are university educated.

The legal university status acquired by the specialized higher education schools was accompanied by some real changes taken from the university institutional model both on an organizational and educational level. The internal institutional structure of the schools of higher education was transformed analogously to those of the universities. New disciplines were introduced such as economics, law, management, business administration, marketing, computer sciences, social studies, etc. In a

number of cases, however, the changes accomplished gave them only the external appearance of universities. Behind the parading labels they continued to function (mainly due to a lack of qualified faculty) as specialized institutions offering strictly specialized education in the most old-fashioned disciplines and poor quality education in the newly established ones. Thus instead of remaining quality specialized higher education schools, they became poor quality universities.

The marked tendency in Bulgarian higher education towards renaming and restructuring specialized higher education schools into universities only confirms the argument that copying institutional models perceived as successful and prestigious is a real strategy of organizational change.

This tendency is also in line with the thesis of the supporters of the “Common World Educational Culture” model<sup>10</sup> that “the main expansions in higher education occur under the umbrella of the university per se, not in disparate narrow-gauge institutions” (Frank/Meyer 2005: 3). However, the Bulgarian experience shows that the legitimizing potential of copying of the university model is not unquestionable. When the copying of the model remains only external, it can have a de-legitimizing effect as well.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.2.2 Private Higher Education – Legitimacy through Differentiation

Undoubtedly one of the most significant changes in the institutional development of Bulgarian higher education since 1989 was the emergence of a private sector. Bulgaria lacks virtually any practical experience in this sphere. Not only during the totalitarian regime was there no functioning private higher education institution, but even in the period before the socialist revolution in 1944. In the time before 1944 private higher education had a very weak presence and did not generate particularly positive attitudes, neither among the academic community nor among the political elite and the general public.<sup>12</sup> The only existing private

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10 The phrase “Common World Education Culture” as a synthesis of the approach to education developed by John Meyer and his colleagues and students was introduced by R. Dale (2000).

11 The title “university” itself can have both a legitimizing and a de-legitimizing effect. While it associates the institution using this title with a certain transnational tradition, it also highlights the difference between the real status of the institution and what it pretends to be (Boyardjieva 2002).

12 In 1938 a special regulation with the status of a legal act was issued, which affirmed the privileged status of state schools of higher education. It ruled against private higher education schools calling themselves universi-

higher education institution in the country – the Free University – became state owned in 1940, i.e. before the socialist revolution (Boyadjieva 2003).

The first private higher education institutions emerged in the very first years after the “velvet” revolution of 1989. The way the private higher education schools in Bulgaria were created and legitimized proves Levy’s conclusions that “diversity exceeds isomorphism when private higher education is growing and that diversity appears to stem more from technical rationality than from organizational rationality, as emphasized by new institutionalism” (Levy 2004: 16). I will analyze the establishment of the first private university, which is also considered the most prestigious one – the New Bulgarian University (NBU). The university was set up following a decision of the National Assembly in 1991. It started with 500 students and in the academic 2003/2004 year already 13,963 students were being educated in 19 basic, 47 Bachelors’<sup>s</sup>, 50 Masters’ and 12 Doctoral programs (NBU 2005).<sup>13</sup>

New Bulgarian University was conceived not only as a different, but also as a radically new organization. The main purpose uniting the founders of NBU Association in 1990 was to “explore, develop and implement *alternative educational approaches and curricula*” (NBU Association Statutes 1990, *italics mine*) and on this basis to create an “*alternative university whose flexibility of structure will challenge the fixed and virtually unchanged higher education structures in Bulgaria*” (NBU 1991: 2, *italics mine*).

The idea of the New University arose from the conclusion that there was a crisis in Bulgarian education. In terms of values, the idea was founded on the rejection of “*uniformity*” of the totalitarian communist regime and the acceptance of diversity and pluralism as the main values in social life. In the sphere of higher education, “communist uniformity” was associated with the fact that “despite the existence of several higher education institutions with humanitarian profile, *we in fact had one university*, with an identical system of producing specialists (NBU 1991: 2, *italics mine*). According to the founders of the new university, the inherited structures from totalitarian times were not only “uniform”, but also “fixed and unchangeable in principle”, which meant they were entirely

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ties, offering disciplines which are taught in the state institutions of higher education and issuing diplomas for full completion of higher education.

- 13 Evidence of the prestige of the New Bulgarian University is the fact the it was the only Bulgarian university, which, through its Department of Cognitive Science, was nominated twice (in 1998 and 1999) for the international Hanna Arendt Award, honouring higher education institutions from Eastern Europe, which demonstrated the desire and capability to reform and develop (Dahrendorf 2000).

impossible to reform or change. Therefore they saw the way out of the crisis in the creation of “another system, as opposed to a single one”. So that the new organization sought legitimacy not through similarity and imitation of the established model of higher education, but through purposeful and systematic distinction from it – it aimed to be a “*different university*”, offering “*different education, different from the established one*” (NBU 1991: 2, *italics mine*). In the initial documents creating the New Bulgarian University, the comparison with the oldest and most prestigious Bulgarian University – Sofia University – was clearly present – a comparison which aimed to highlight the qualitative difference of the new institution. This difference was sought in all possible aspects:

- *status* – the new university is private, Sofia University is state owned;
- *organizational principle* – the new university is set up as a structure “whose essence is the constant construction of dynamics” which aims to offer multi-level individualized education, whereas Sofia University is based on tradition and the “security of the solid form” (NBU 1991: 4, 6).
- *organisational structure* – New Bulgarian University is organized into faculties and departments which “are not created to last for ever but can be transformed according to new scientific trends”, whereas the faculties and departments of Sofia University personify the “sclerosis of the oldest established disciplines” (NBU 1991: 3, 7)
- *educational philosophy* – New Bulgarian University offers wide-profile education with interdisciplinary character, which is to be completed through a selection of courses and students’ individual studies; education at the Sofia University, on the other hand, is based on uniform mandatory curricula for all students and uses lectures as the dominant teaching method.
- *attitude to students* – the new university encourages and relies on students’ activity, whereas at the Sofia University they are “treated as high school pupils” and are passive recipients of the educational process;
- *funding* – the new university “cannot be poor in any respect” (NBU 1991: 3) and thus it seeks diverse funding sources, whereas Sofia University depends primarily on the state and suffers drastic shortage of funding.

Gaining legitimacy by differentiation from that which already exists, is familiar and has been established as the only possibility for decades, accomplished is not only in practice but on a symbolic level as well. Ac-

cepting diversity as a fundamental feature of the image of the emerging institution was encoded in the university's name – *New Bulgarian University* – and its motto: *Do not fear diversity* – “*ne varietatem timeamus*”.

The strive to be different is not valuable for its own sake. It has its conceptual justification in the creation of those institutional prerequisites which would stimulate innovation in university life, and in this way, make the attainment of new goals possible. Therefore it is a matter of creating a sustainable institutional environment which is not only alternative but “*productive* with is alternativeness” (NBU 1991: 6, *italics mine*). In its mission statement, New Bulgarian University formulated its ambition to be an “innovative institution”. Throughout its existence it has really proven to be an institution which diversifies the Bulgarian educational space, affirming new goals, principles and values. It is the New Bulgarian University which introduced the Bachelor's and Master's academic degrees, the credit system and distance learning long before the other institutions did. It should especially be noted that even after the institutionalization of these innovations in the overall higher education system in Bulgaria, i.e. beyond the “initial life cycle” (DiMaggio/Powell 1983: 148) of the Bulgarian post-totalitarian higher education, NBU continues to maintain its innovative spirit, to create its own specific image and to assert its legitimacy through its difference from the rest. Again, it was the first university to define itself as entrepreneur-minded and set itself the strategic goal to incorporate entrepreneurship at all organizational levels as the main feature of its identity (NBU 2002).

The creation and operation of the first private university in Bulgaria, since 1989, shows that there are social actors which, under certain social conditions, adopt legitimization through differentiation not only as a desired strategy, but also as the only one possible. This appears to be a successful long-term strategy when differentiation is founded on positively defined new goals and is accompanied by purposefully pursued and successfully implemented innovations.

### 3.2.3 Externally Imposed Change – Legitimacy through Interpretation

Since the Bologna declaration in 1999, one of the main topics of interest in the European context has been the impact of the European higher education initiatives on the national systems of higher education. The principle of subsidiarity prevents the European Union's (EU) involve-

ment in the higher education policy of the different countries.<sup>14</sup> The EU instrument for the development of a coherent and comprehensive strategy in education was defined as an “open method of co-ordination” which should draw on tools, organized as “mutual learning processes” (Council of the EU 2002). Simultaneously the Bologna process was launched in 1999 as a joint initiative of 29 countries to create common European higher education standards by 2010. Although the Bologna process is not part of the European Union’s activity in higher education, there are signs that the European Union “is increasingly taking over it” (Tomusk 2004). Some European officials even convey the message that all signatory countries of the Bologna Declaration have no choice but to fully implement the 9 objectives of the process for if they do not “the process will leave European higher education less strong and united than before” (Reding 2003: 3). It seems that the creation of a European Higher Education Area is a simple act of externally imposed compulsory changes. However, the real processes are much more complex. For this reason, it is impossible to comprehend them by using traditional methodological schemes – for example by applying the classical version of the implementation analysis and regarding the emerging relations and practices as having been created entirely ‘top-down’.

I will focus on two institutional changes in Bulgarian higher education which both resulted from the desire of the country to join the European Higher Education Area:

- introduction of Bachelor’s and Master’s academic degrees and
- introduction of the university assessment and quality assurance systems.

In both cases it is not simply a matter of improving the existing institutional models but introducing structural elements based on new principles and values, and thus giving new qualitative characteristic to the overall system of higher education. The Bachelor’s academic degree has no analogue in the history of Bulgarian higher education, which was initially developed under the influence of German educational traditions, and later – under the Soviet influence. As far as the university quality assurance system is concerned, the values upon which it rests – responsibility, transparency, accountability to society, initiative – contradict those established during the totalitarian regime, which substituted social

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14 Article 149 of EU Amsterdam Treaty (1997) states that “the Council [...] shall adopt incentive measures (in the sphere of education), excluding any harmonization of the laws and regulations of the member States”.

interests with party interests and lacked transparency in every social sphere.

The Bachelor's and Master's degrees were introduced into Bulgarian higher education with the Higher Education Act of 1995. From a social point of view, those were years of acute and continuous economic crisis, high unemployment and political instability. As far as the higher education system is concerned, despite the presence of positive changes after the "Tender" revolution (de-ideologizing of the teaching process, diversification of academic disciplines and institutions, the establishment of the first private higher education schools), the inherited principles and structures remained dominate. The Higher Education Act of 1995 was created as a reaction to the Academic Autonomy Act of 1990 – it limited the autonomy of higher education institutions and established stronger state control over the development of higher education through the introduction of unified state requirements for the content of academic curricula and a state register of academic disciplines. Thus, the described specifics of the social and educational environment in which the new academic degrees were introduced, loaded the change with certain, so called, "Bulgarian" tasks. The officially launched motive for this change was the desire to stimulate Bulgarian higher education to join the European education area. The results of surveys conducted have however shown that, according to the academic community, the real reasons were different. According to some experts, the reason was to lower expenditures for education by decreasing the number of students, in the opinion of others, the reasons were political and educational: "to overcome the consequences of the previous period of university autonomy", to stimulate the internal reform of higher education schools as well as the restructuring of the sector (Slancheva 2000: 21-22). A widely held belief was that the introduction of the new academic degrees was an "administratively imposed" change, which was not felt as an "objective need" and was therefore an "arrogant, unjustified interference of the state in higher education", "the next mechanical transfer of foreign experience" (Pavlov 2000: 13).

The uniqueness of the overall context in which the new academic degrees were introduced, primarily the legislative framework of higher education system and the lack of a real labour market, predetermined the result. "A three-step structure was introduced without actually changing anything" (Pavlov 2000: 13). It was more of a "renaming" rather than a meaningful reform (Slancheva 2000: 28). Instead of generating significant changes in university activities, the innovation itself went through certain modifications, which not only made it lose its identity but also diminished its power to affect the other elements of the system. In most



cases, the academic curricula were reviewed in a formal way by compacting the former 5-year curricula into 4-year curricula while keeping the orientation toward narrow specialization. Thus, the Bachelor's degree did not obtain the status of an independent final degree, but remained a "preparatory phase for the forthcoming Master's degree", which explains why "it is considered less prestigious – something similar to an incomplete Master's degree" (Slancheva 2000: 29-30). The data from a recently carried out survey show that only one third of the representatives of the universities' governing bodies consider their universities ready to harmonize their academic degrees with the Bologna two-cycle degree structure (Pashkina 2005: 86).

University assessment and quality assurance systems were made official with the Amendment to the Higher Education Act of 1999. In this case, similar to the new academic degrees, a significant change in the system of higher education was introduced without the existence of a conceptual framework. Elements of such a concept appeared much later in 2004. In the new amendments to the Higher Education Act, approved at that time, the goal of the university quality assurance system was defined and specific rights were delegated to the higher education institutions to define the parameters of the system (Higher Education Act 2004).

The way the university quality assurance systems were introduced and, most importantly, the specifics of the existing model of the national higher education system significantly influenced their status and their outcomes. Within the state higher education model, which remains dominate in the country, quality control is necessarily highly centralized and "unavoidably a mechanism of enforcing power", whereas, as a procedure, it is diminished to the "elementary comparison of specific academic situations with the imperative standards set by the state" (Dimitrov 1999: 107-108). According to a representative study<sup>15</sup>, conducted more than 5 years after the higher education institutions were legally obliged to implement quality assurance systems, 18,4 % of the responding faculty said that there were no such systems in their schools, 20,5 % assessed their operations as formal, 41,3 % assessed them as positive, 0,4 % as negative, and 19,4 % responded with "don't know". The data obtained makes it obvious that one of the basic elements of the quality assurance systems – surveys of students' opinions – does not work. Only 34 % of the students said that such surveys were carried out in their departments. Regarding the effect of these surveys on the learning process,

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15 "Factors influencing the quality of higher education in Bulgaria", performed by the Association for Social Studies 2004 (Dimitrov 2005: 112)

the highest percent of students (20,7 %) did not see any change. The data also show a sharp discrepancy in the students' and faculty' assessment of the effectiveness of student opinion surveys. While 45,9 % of the faculty think that the academic faculty take students' opinions into account and try to improve their teaching methods, only 10,9 % of the students said the same.<sup>16</sup>

The analysis of the introduction of the Bachelor's degree and the university quality assurance system in Bulgarian higher education institutions reveals that the effect of structural innovation and the way it is perceived are contextually determined. The context, including both the characteristics of the wider social environment and of the specific professional field, not only affects the speed of implementation but its content parameters as well. Two methods of incorporating an "imported" institutional model into a functioning system of higher education stand out. The first is a formal one – the innovation is simply placed next to the other elements of the system, without actually interacting with them and without causing any significant changes in the system. The second is interpretative. In this case, social actors are not passive recipients of institutional patterns developed somewhere else by someone else, but active interpreters, who can easily change the innovation's purpose as well as its content and role. It is especially important to emphasize that in both cases – the formal and the interpretative – the result of the "importing" of models only makes the Bulgarian educational system externally seem more similar to the higher education systems from which models were adopted.

### 3.3 Discussion and Conclusions

The development of Bulgarian higher education since 1989 has occurred in a society undergoing radical social change with periods of deep political and economic crisis. For this reason it is not surprising that even today – 15 years after the "velvet" revolution – the Bulgarian higher education system can be described as post-communist, bearing some signs of its totalitarian past, (the overcoming of which will be linked to the general development of society) and suffering from the "diseases" of the transition period, namely – ineffectiveness of universities' management structure, inadequate financing, evidence of corruption, lack of public accountability and transparency.<sup>17</sup>

16 This very low opinion of the effectiveness of surveys of students' opinions was recently confirmed again (Pashkina 2005: 69).

17 See for example the empirically based analysis of some of these problems in Dimitrov 2005.

The institutional development of higher education in Bulgaria since 1989 provides additional evidence for justifying the need for and usefulness of the mutually complementing ideas of early institutional theory and neo-institutionalism. This development can be comprehended within the theoretical framework of an “open institutionalism” which includes more insights from early institutional theory than from neo-institutionalism. More concretely, the analysis of the development of Bulgarian higher education since 1989 gives grounds for the following conclusions:

- Institutional changes in higher education schools, viewed as complex organizations, are determined by a number of factors and implemented in a complex, non-linear way. Environments of higher education institutions include not only the professional field but also the broad social (political, economic, cultural) environment, which has direct influence on them as well as an indirect impact through its effect on the professional field. Thus, higher education development, both at the national level and the level of the individual school, is related to the simultaneously developing processes of similarity and divergence, of imitation and differentiation, of real and symbolic changes.
- Institutional changes in a particular higher education system cannot be comprehended without knowing the history and the specifics of the system. The existing system of higher education is not only a storage room in which institutional innovation can be literally placed. It is a structural space of interrelated institutions, principles and values, which actively influence the reception and the content of the innovation by transforming it or including it in networks which endow it with a certain character. The way Bulgarian higher education has incorporated “imported” institutional models confirms Stensaker’s conclusion, that different higher education schools actively interpret external demands as ‘translated’ external definitions in a way which matches their own needs” (Stensaker 2004: 194-196). Even coercive political influence does not always lead to institutional isomorphism because external influences (either normative imperatives from the state or cultural expectations of the environment) are subject to interpretation by organizations and are thus incorporated in their practices in various ways. The development of Bulgarian post-totalitarian higher education is also in line with Kruecken’s observation “that universities adapt new challenges rather to existing practices and identity concepts than adapting these practices and concepts directly to their environments” (Krücken 2003: 332).
- Not only are organizations affected by their environments. Environments themselves are not constant unchangeable values. They con-

stantly change, even under the influence of the organizations functioning within them. In periods of deep social change, higher education institutions not only represent and reproduce socially established values and principles, but actively contribute to the establishment of new ones.

- Under conditions of deep social transformation, successful legitimization is attained not only by imitating institutions perceived as successful in a given social context, but also by differentiating from them and identifying with external, in this sense foreign to the specific context, institutional regulations and order.
- The institutional development of higher education in the countries of the former socialist block shows that the implementation of European initiatives can not be understood as simple ‘top-down’ effects on national systems unproblematically leading to the emergence of a common European Higher Education Area. There are different mechanisms through which the Europeanization process affects higher education institutions in different countries and this “variety of mechanisms [...] is itself a diversifying factor” (Dale 1999: 2).
- The supporters of the “Common World Educational Culture” model have demonstrated the existence of global trends in university development, based on universal norms and culture. But – as they also acknowledge – “there are, of course, traditional country-to-country and university-to-university variations” (Frank/Meyer 2005: 37). In order to comprehend the way the concrete universities are functioning, we must understand how global trends are localized and why these “country-to-country and university-to-university variations” exist.

#### **4. The European Education Area in a Globalizing World**

In a recent publication of the European Commission, “uniformity” and “over-regulation” are defined as “bottlenecks” of European higher education. It is argued that although “sufficient compatibility between the different national regulations is indispensable” “European higher education is and needs to remain diverse with respect to languages, cultures, systems and traditions” (European Commission 2005: 6).

The globalizing world constitutes a radically new social environment. In the words of Bauman the post-modern world is a “multivocal world of uncoordinated needs, self-procreating possibilities and self-multiplying choices”, “A world in which no one can anticipate the kind of expertise that may be needed tomorrow”. In such a world “the recog-

dition of many and varied ways to, and many and varied canons of, higher learning is the condition *sine qua non* of the university system capable of rising to the postmodern challenge”. Therefore “it is the good luck of the universities that there are so many of them, that there are no two exactly alike [...]” (Bauman 1997: 25)

Comparing birds’ and people’s houses, one of the greatest Bulgarian writers Yordan Radichkov says:

“house after house, almost all similar: door, window, tile, chimney. Man cannot think of anything else, he just builds a house as he has done it since old times. But the bird thinks of things. One bird builds with mud, another with hay, a third one with thorns, the woodpecker makes a hole in the tree and builds a house inside [...]. One should wonder how the bird makes such nests, each one so different from the other.”

We cannot learn to fly in the sky like birds, but we can learn from the way they live on the land.

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