



New Actors, Administrative Measures and Conflicting Agendas: The Impact of the Pandemic on Internationalisation of Higher Education in Poland and Russia

*Svetlana Shenderova, Dominik Antonowicz,
and Marta Jaworska*

INTRODUCTION

This chapter considers the role of internationalisation policy actors during the COVID-19 pandemic. The internationalisation of higher education (HE) has been affected and reshaped by unprecedented crises. Overwhelming uncertainty and insecurity permanently influenced travel

S. Shenderova (✉)
Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
e-mail: svetlana.shenderova@tuni.fi

D. Antonowicz • M. Jaworska
Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, Poland
e-mail: dominik.antonowicz@umk.pl; Marta.Jaworska@umk.pl

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restrictions, and closed campuses became the obstacles that drastically changed the patterns of different internationalisation activities and academic life around the world (Rumbley et al., 2021; Oleksiyenko, 2021). This chapter examines how such a major crisis affected policies towards internationalisation of HE in Poland and Russia as divergent cases of semi-peripheral HE systems inside and outside the EU.

The selection of these neighbouring countries is purposive because they both similarly prioritised internationalisation to transform HE systems through national academic excellence initiatives (IDUB, 2020; 5-100, 2020). The study uses the concept of 'policy networks' (Rhodes, 2006) as a theoretical device that sees HE policy as an outcome of interdependencies between political actors in governing policy programmes (Jongbloed et al., 2008; Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2014). For Rhodes (2006: 427), 'policy networks are sets of formal institutional and informal linkages between governmental and other actors structured around shared if endlessly negotiated beliefs and interests in public policy making and implementation'. Addressing Poland and Russia as examples of semi-peripheral HE systems with a significant role for inter- and supranational actors in internationalisation (Castro et al., 2015), we include them in consideration with national actors.

The chapter argues that COVID-19 gave rise to new policy actors not necessarily related to HE. The rapid and largely unexpected empowerment of these actors profoundly affected the internationalisation of HE due to their impact on physical access to universities and unprecedented travel restrictions. The study shows that COVID-19 had a particular impact on the composition of policy networks in the field of HE amidst (a) an increase in national and supranational actors who as newcomers attempted to mark their new jurisdiction and (b) multiple new actors who exposed far-reaching inconsistencies and even contradictory policies. All those factors combined have impacted the internationalisation of HE. This is particularly so in countries with undisguised aspirations to have a more central role in global HE and attract international talent. The chapter has two fundamental aims. First, it is to explore the evolution of policy networks emerging around internationalisation in Poland and Russia; second, it intends to examine how this policy model was affected by the pandemic crisis and also what longer-term effect it will have on internationalisation in both countries under study. We also address the long-term effects of this crisis on the hierarchy of priorities in HE policy. The founding assumption of the study is that the COVID-19 crisis has de-prioritised

internationalisation as a policy goal in the field of HE in Poland and Russia. We rely on our systematic observations in both countries that outline a growing number of actors with divergent interests and conflicting agendas, which may affect internationalisation, often considered a major driver for HE modernisation.

In our analysis, we address the semi-peripheral character of the Polish and Russian HE systems, their similarities and the specific role of internationalisation in the transformation of HE systems. Then we specify the changes in the composition of governance networks and the role of actors involved in internationalisation policies. By comparing Poland and Russia, the chapter answers the question about how pandemic policy responses provided by national and supranational actors have contributed to changes in internationalisation activities in the two countries.

INTERNATIONALISATION FOR SEMI-PERIPHERAL HE SYSTEMS

The geopolitical location and economic history of both countries have determined the semi-peripheral character of the Polish and Russian HE systems, and specified their drive to cooperate with Western Europe (Shenderova, 2020; Krzeski et al., 2022; Sin et al., 2019). The notion of peripheries is vested in Immanuel Wallerstein's (1974) theory of 'world systems' which distinguished three categories of countries as belonging respectively to the core (centre), periphery or semi-periphery. In adapting Wallerstein's theory to HE, we classify the core countries as those that enjoy technological superiority, academic excellence and economic welfare, attract resources from around the world, and are the centres of diversified transnational businesses. On the contrary, peripheral countries are characterised by underdeveloped economies, and poor technological, research and education infrastructure. In between, there is a large (and heterogenous) group of semi-peripheral countries whose economies are diversified and technologically advanced, though to lesser extent than in the core, but sufficiently attractive for human resources from regional and global peripheries. Following Sin et al. (2019: 298), this chapter adopts a transposition of the international education economy evidenced by the inflow and outflow of students and staff. Poland and Russia have sought to balance inbound and outbound mobility of international and national students and academics. However, both countries have limited ability to attract students and staff from the core countries in relation to whom mobility flows are still markedly asymmetrical. This suggests that the

Polish and Russian HE systems are semi-peripheral ‘exporters’ with regard to Western Europe as the core (Sin et al., 2019; Shenderova, 2020).

This study is based on the assumption that the internationalisation of HE in semi-peripheral countries such as Poland and Russia generates different policy challenges and requires different measures to be undertaken due to the perceived lower academic attractiveness, economic and political resources, and the lack of a tradition of international education. Thus, we consider countries to be in the core if they are the major destinations for students and academics from the chosen countries. Polish and Russian students and academics prioritise Germany, the UK and France, but this is not the situation for students from this group of countries with regard to Poland and Russia as destinations of choice for HE (UNESCO UIS, 2019). These countries are also attractive for international students and academics from developing countries and other Western European countries. Internationalisation as ‘the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education’, that aims to contribute to quality improvement (de Wit et al., 2015: 281), is deeply embedded in HE systems of the core countries, where a significant number of higher education institutions (HEIs) are also internationally recognised research centres. They attract international students and staff to produce and disseminate new knowledge which they are able to do because of their relative abundance of financial resources (Uzhegova & Baik, 2020), academic freedom, university autonomy and accountability. The political and economic situation of the peripheral countries does not allow them to attract international students and staff. International students do not consider the degrees issued in peripheral countries as those which can increase their chances to become more competitive in national, regional and global labour markets. Therefore, a peripheral country is only able to undertake ‘one-sided’ internationalisation, with the outflow of students and staff predominantly from the national elites.

The point of departure for this chapter is in line with the aforementioned definition of internationalisation that stresses its intentional character as a part of broader policy measures. As de Wit and Altbach (2021) observed, internationalisation should be considered neither an automatic process nor a goal on its own. It can contribute to the improvement of the quality of education and research for all actors, benefitting the whole society. However, this is not always the case for semi-peripheral countries as they frequently undertake multiple uncoordinated or even patchy policy

measures only to boost the visibility and international reputation of a few selected institutions. However, we have to bear in mind that national policies are only mediators (Bleiklie & Michelsen, 2013) between global scripts (in this case, internationalisation of HE) and the constraints of local political culture and the institutional environment. This is so despite Knight (2003) highlighting the need to move from separate internationalisation activities to their integration into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education as its international, intercultural or global dimensions.

THE RESIDUAL EFFECTS OF THE COMMUNIST SYSTEM

The Polish and Russian HE systems were completely embedded in the planned economy of the Communist system and administered on the principles of direct control from ‘a single office’ (Lenin, 1917) up to the late 1980s. International aspects of academic collaborations, and international student enrolment and mobility were severely restricted as they were managed under close political and ideological oversight (Kuraev, 2014). This situation had its roots in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries when Poland and Russia economically regressed to ‘a resource periphery’ of Western Europe, while the latter could focus on industrialisation and enlightenment (Dutkiewicz & Gorzelak, 2011). Under the tsars and (later) the communists, the governments attempted to use HE as a tool to compete with Western Europe (Derluguian, 2011). However, the universities continued to be the objects of authoritarian interference from the government. The central governments were responsible for all policies including the limits of international cooperation (Shenderova, 2020). The self-serving communist bureaucracy at the top of the societal hierarchy controlled access to any international activity, monopolising them for the next generation of national elites. University managers controlled access to information related to international cooperation, or even travel abroad as the privileges which could be given (or taken away) in accordance with their preferences (Shenderova, 2011). Undergraduate and post-graduate degree programmes recruited international students primarily in socialist or developing countries in Asia and Africa, further promoting the political and economic supremacy of the socialist bloc (Antonowicz, 2020a; Arefyev & Sheregi, 2014; Katsakioris, 2019). At the same time, domestic industries requested international HE cooperation mainly within the

Eastern bloc, and only very sporadically with Western European countries (Froumin & Kouzminov, 2018; Antonowicz, 2020b).

Structurally, HE systems were detached from the dominant Anglo-Saxon model of learning because both Poland and Russia (as the part of the Soviet Union) followed the German one-cycle degree system. HE and research were separated and administered centrally in a bureaucratic manner. Each ministry oversaw narrowly its own jurisdiction determining the list of degrees available for students in each particular HEI depending on the needs of the particular industry. Rigid regulation, exhaustive accreditation procedures and micromanagement of degree provision continue to constrain international cooperation, and integration of international, academic and science affairs that in turn preserves the semi-peripheral character of national HE (Shenderova, 2020). Thus, centralism and a deeply entrenched ‘silo’ structure characterised Polish and Russian HE (though more so in the latter case). This complied with the logics of the planned economy and political oversight but hampered integration of HE and science, erected cross-disciplinary barriers, and exacerbated fragmentation of the systems much before their transformation in the 1990s. Market regulations were imitated; but they did not provide qualitative institutional changes (Dutkiewicz & Gorzelak, 2011). Internationalisation as a pivotal aspect of HE reforming agenda was broadly presented, vaguely defined and significantly evolved in strategic policy documents.

The establishment of private HEIs did not automatically replace the failed institutions of planned economies. Over-bureaucratised and centralised HE systems became heavily underfunded and fragmented, although rigid regulation remained almost unchanged. It made them difficult partners for international cooperation in HE. Western European countries partly helped Poland and Russia to transform HE systems by offsetting deficits in funding. The states which encompassed the EU in 1993 used national and supranational funding to support structural reforms in the chosen countries, for example, through special programmes such as TEMPUS-TACIS/Socrates/Erasmus (Burquel & Ballesteros, 2020). On the positive side, the voluntary entry into the Bologna Process provided Poland and Russia with common supranational governance aimed at achieving ‘greater compatibility and comparability of the systems of HE’ (EHEA. Bologna Declaration, 1999), and ‘harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system’ (EHEA. Sorbonne Joint Declaration, 1998). For both Poland and Russia, the Bologna Process became the major driver for internationalisation since they joined the

European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 1999 and 2003, respectively (EHEA, 2012). In fact, EHEA introduced fundamental changes in both HE systems requiring harmonisation of national curricula with respect to both structure and outcomes, which was absolutely necessary to facilitate international mobility. On the other hand, since 2004, Polish and Russian universities have been subjected to different supranational regulators due to Poland's accession to the EU. However, EU regulation also indirectly impacted Russian universities because of their collaboration with the partners in EU member states and relevant funding. Thus, post-Communist transformation and EU funding of internationalisation activities together with increasing outbound mobility opened a window of opportunities for semi-peripheral HE systems.

The last, but definitely not least important, aspect of internationalisation is related to excellence initiatives, which addressed the crucial role of international visibility of national HE systems on the global stage (President of Russia, 2012; Law 2.0, 2018). Internationalisation became a fundamental component of HE system transformation through a series of academic excellence initiatives. Poland announced *KNOW* (Competition for Leading National Research Centers) in 2011 and *IDUB* (Excellence Initiative—Research University) in 2019. Russia started earlier with the National Project 'Education' in 2006, followed by the 5-100 Russian Academic Excellence Project in 2013 and a new edition of National Project 'Education' in 2018.

The key performance indicators (KPIs) also referred to progress in the world university rankings as the milestones in Russia while 'international visibility' was emphasised in Poland; internationalisation activities were based largely on physical mobility of students and staff, as well as publications co-authored with foreign scholars (Mäkinen, 2021). Some KPIs and related university reports imitated internationalisation to the disadvantage of education and research due to their compartmentalised structure in university management (Shenderova, 2018a). Thus, internationalisation of HE became both the ultimate goal for HE reforms and a proxy of their success. Although these initiatives openly prioritised internationalisation activities as key measures of national HE *system* performance, the policy was matched by the assumption that *only a few selected universities* could fully seize the opportunities provided by internationalisation. Support was provided to the elite HEIs in order to help them join the league of world-class universities (Antonowicz et al., 2021) with the purpose of generating international prestige and agenda-setting power for national HE systems

(Volkov & Mel'nyk, 2019). This approach led to the dependency of Polish and Russian HE systems on international visibility and the success of only a few universities. In addition, internationalisation policies underestimated the growing dependence of Poland and Russia on the EU core after the 2007–08 financial crisis (Dutkiewicz & Gorzelak, 2011; Derluguian, 2011).

To summarise, Polish and Russian HE carry the burden of their past: the Communist residual effects and semi-peripheral character of HE are combined with an explicit striving for internationalisation in an attempt to enhance academic reputation and economic prosperity.

GOVERNANCE OF INTERNATIONALISATION IN POLAND AND RUSSIA: ACTORS AND NETWORKS

This study uses the perspective of theory of governance networks in order to examine the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on internationalisation of HE in Poland and Russia. As elaborated earlier, in the last two decades, both countries prioritised the internationalisation of HE with policy networks shaped by an increased number and variety of actors with growing interdependency and interplay (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012, 2015; Austin & Jones, 2016). We focus on the actors, their relationships and the interplay in governance networks that emerged around internationalisation policy. For this purpose, we adopt the concept of 'policy network' understood as referring 'to interest intermediation, interorganizational analysis, and governance' in government policymaking processes (Rhodes, 2006: 427). By doing so, we follow Klijn and Koppenjan (2014: 61) who defined governance networks 'as a set of autonomous yet interdependent actors that have developed enduring relationships in governing'. The focus of this study is on policy actors and their agendas involved in the internationalisation of HE at the national, international and supranational levels. It should be noted that the HE systems of semi-peripheral countries are dependent on external regulation and funding of internationalisation provided by supra- and international agencies that led to the increase of their salience (Castro et al., 2015). Therefore, governance networks and their complexity grow as HE systems and their internationalisation evolve.

Before the collapse of the 'Iron Curtain', the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (*SEV*) coordinated cooperation activities between the communist countries as the only supranational actor. The main actors of the HE systems in Poland and the USSR, including Russia, were

concentrated at the national level. As noted in the previous section, actors in the national HE systems were organised on hierarchical principles. The number of actors increased during the first decade of HE system transformation in Poland and Russia, especially between 1991 and 1993. The first actors of internationalisation were not related to national governments. They represented supra- and international organisations from the most popular mobility destinations of the Western European core, such as the EU Delegations, *Institute Français*, British Council, German Academic Exchange Service regional office (DAAD) and the Netherlands Education Support Offices (NESO NUFFIC). They attempted to boost international cooperation with the Western European countries (Gorbunova, 2011). It was relatively easier for Poland, where academics were already networked with the Western scholars fruitfully, whilst in Russia, it required more time and effort due to distrust of the West and political chaos in Russia in the early 1990s. Deeply rooted perceptions of HE systems at the Western European core as a significant factor of the economic success provided a fertile soil for the activities of inter- and supranational EU actors, who appeared in Poland and Russia at the beginning of the 1990s. This was followed by a slow process of emergence of independent national policy actors engaged in a limited de-nationalising of HE. These new actors fuelled international cooperation, in particular, physical mobility and to a lesser extent, structural reforms, when the credibility of national governments and responsible ministries declined simultaneously with the volume of university funding.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the supranational actors began to exert a more direct impact on HE systems especially with regard to quality assurance (through international accreditation agencies) and communication for research outcomes (international journals). The National TEMPUS Office opened in Poland and Russia in the 2000s, and it administered a series of programmes (e.g., Erasmus [Mundus, +; Jean Monnet]). These programmes used the EU funding for research collaboration, and academic and student mobility implemented mainly as exchanges, although some of them gradually transformed into collaborative degrees under the support of the international education agencies of the EU member states as well (Shenderova, 2018b). Other supranational actors such as the OECD, World Bank, and EHEA working groups were also involved in the internationalisation process in Poland and Russia. The Bologna Process turned out to be an important political step for both countries. Ultimately, the European Commission (EC) became one of the

most influential policy actors indirectly redesigning the degree structure into a three-tier system, fuelling the international exchange of students and staff through Socrates/Erasmus programmes and shaping accreditation standards for national quality assurance agencies in Poland. The internationalisation has gradually become instrumental and strategic for both countries under study. Internationalisation for Poland and Russia was not only a matter of reputation of the system or individual HEIs but a strategic policy direction to integrate (historically de-coupled) national systems of science and HE with the global one. It was pursued under the general heading of ‘internationalisation’ which entailed adoption of hegemonic ideas such as ‘world class’ or ‘excellence’ and translated them into local (national) contexts. The adaptation of abstract ideas to specific local circumstances was associated with so-called strategic agency (Oliver, 1991). In order to do so, both national governments developed a broad scope of policy measures that caused major shifts at the system, national and individual levels. In Russia, it was more of a top-down policy model, while in Poland, it was more balanced, but in both cases, the strategic role was played by the governments. The list of policy initiatives that aimed to boost internationalisation is long and diverse. It stems from strong requirements to publish the results of research primarily in international journals indexed either by Scopus or Web of Science and linked it into the national system of academic advancement. In some fields of science (such as social sciences), it triggered revolutionary changes in publishing patterns. Furthermore, governments prioritised institutional and individual collaboration with international (mostly Western) partners, dedicating special source of (conditional) funding for partnerships with prestigious universities. Last but perhaps not least important is a fashion to establish international committees and boards. It starts from international evaluation committees that oversee excellence initiatives (5-100, 2018; IDUB, 2020) down to international boards of even small institutes. Internationalisation of science and HE was not a mere slogan (as in the past) but strategic agency that affected almost every aspect of the HE system. Not every institution or every individual was able to meet those expectations and embrace internationalisation pressure. However, they had no choice but to imitate ‘internationalisation’ by publishing predatory journals, cooperating with universities of suspicious reputation and dubious status or simply ‘purchasing’ publications from renowned scholars. But all those efforts demonstrated how strategically important internationalisation became for both Poland and Russia and some could rightly note it as the TINA (‘there

is no alternative') syndrome. The 2010s witnessed the rise of new and non-traditional domestic actors who administered internationalisation policies and consequently exerted a profound impact on internationalisation of HE (Antonowicz, 2015). In particular, national governments initiated the set-up of national arms-length organisations. In Poland, the National Agency for Academic Exchange (*NAWA*) was founded in 2017 modelled on DAAD. The Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland (*KRASP*) supported by the Ministries of Education and of Foreign Affairs established the *Study in Poland* programme (2005), operated autonomously by the private foundation *Perspektywy*. The latter joined the network of internationalisation policy actors with their own business models and agendas (Sin et al., 2019).

In Russia, 18 government or quasi-government agencies have been involved in the administration of a series of internationalisation initiatives (Shenderova, 2020). For example, the Agency for Strategic Initiatives (*ASI*) managed the Global Education State Programme, which selected persons to study abroad in the leading world universities (Shenderova, 2014). State non-profit organisation *Sociocenter* generated KPIs of the 5-100 Russian Academic Excellence Project and gathered university reports. Due to perceptions of international visibility as an intervention into world university rankings (Mohrman et al., 2008; Salmi, 2009) agencies such as the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), Times Higher Education (THE) and especially Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) became the salient actors of internationalisation in Poland and Russia. A growing number of actors coordinated occasionally, but contributed to substantial growth of students involved in mobility. The number of international students in Poland was 3400 in 1990/1991, reached 10,092 in 2005/2006, and increased to 84,689 in 2019/2020 (GUS, 2021). The number of international students in Russia grew from 100,000 in 1990 to 309,000 in 2018 (Frumina & West, 2012; Gurko et al., 2019). However, these actors have been much less effective in attracting international academics, often shifting this responsibility onto universities.

These updates of internationalisation policy networks in Poland and Russia set new goals and leveraged emerging opportunities to expand the international perspective to national HE systems, selected universities, their top managers, academics, staff and students. However, new actors similarly continued to follow a semi-peripheral approach in the imitational manner of the 1990s. Spectacular numbers through physical mobility by themselves did not provide the totality of institutional changes and the

quality of HE and research for all students and staff, so critical to internationalisation (Teichler, 2004:24; de Wit & Altbach, 2021). In addition, the actors in the internationalisation policy followed deeply embedded Soviet traditions to consider access to internationalisation as a privilege. For example, administrators of 5-100 and ‘Global education’ initiatives suggested allowing internationalisation and autonomy as a privilege given to a few universities within a narrow ‘zone’ only (Volkov & Mel’nyk, 2019).

In both Poland and Russia, internationalisation is an important policy goal but most primarily an instrument to boost academic reputation—a critical asset for semi-peripheral HE systems. Clearly, there is a wide range of actors engaged in enacting the internationalisation of HE and with different motives and agendas, but they all seem to pull in the same direction. It is also noted that the policy of internationalisation of HE causes considerable controversy in both countries as some suggest that instead of real leverage for the HE system, it is a reputation-driven (or ranking-driven) artificial ‘window dressing’. Again, as in the 1990s, semi-peripheral HE systems imitated international trends without significant institutional changes. They continued to reproduce the Soviet silo structure of academic, science and international affairs under the popular motto of internationalisation. Its actors have not been able to provide a sustainable international dimension to HE and research. They propagated a ‘competitiveness enhancement’ but in fact established ‘international showcases’, which have shrunk since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

THE PANDEMIC AS A CHALLENGE FOR HE POLICIES

HE policy was brutally interrupted by the rapidly unravelling and unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. It caused a major crisis in HE affecting almost all its core functions. Following Rosenthal et al. (1989: 10), we understand a crisis as ‘a situation in which there is a perceived threat against the core values or life-sustaining functions of a social system that requires urgent remedial action in uncertain circumstances’. Bringing damages or losses, the crisis also paves the way for new solutions and may lead to unexpected social, political and organisational changes (Kingdon, 2014; ‘t’ Hart, 2014). The pandemic crisis attributed considerable power to new actors, who unexpectedly impacted internationalisation with their own agendas and commanding role.

The pandemic affected the internationalisation of HE in three major ways. First, it introduced the issue of public health at the forefront of HE

policy and institutions. For the very first time, public health became one of the major policy concerns in HE, and it opened doors for new policy actors with their own strategic agendas and policy goals. In Poland, the Ministry of Health (MoH) deployed administrative measures to protect Polish citizens and restricted international mobility which was deemed a major source of virus transmission. At the peak of the pandemic, the MoH imposed important constraints regarding closing campuses, quarantine rules for international travellers and (later) vaccination requirements. These measures had a particular impact on the internationalisation policy in Poland, which borders three non-EU countries (Ukraine, Russia and Belarus), which provide the majority (60%) of international students. The same is true for Russia, where most international students come from the countries which used vaccines not approved by the Russian Sanitary and Health Inspection (*Rospotrebnadzor*). Consequently, the national ‘pandemic’ actors from outside of HE, who affected internationalisation policies, played a more significant role than such supranational actors as EU/EC pandemic task forces, European Medicine Agency (EMA), and World Health Organization (WHO). These ‘non-HE’ actors hampered international mobility in 2020, impeded national internationalisation initiatives, resulting in declining sustainability of national HE systems in general because of their high dependence on the external environment as highlighted earlier.

Secondly, the arrival of new actors represented a major shock to the HE system but also provided a major reason for a reshuffling of the hierarchy of existing policy actors. The tensions between the sets of old and new internationalisation policy actors highlighted the increased complexity of their interplay and appeared on the national, regional and institutional levels in both Poland and Russia. The salience of the most prominent new actors stemmed from their responsibilities to control national regulation aimed at protecting public health. The border control services entered internationalisation with their own agenda and authority to determine entry requirements. Russian border and sanitary services prioritised the resolutions of national government, while in Poland, these actors merely executed EU directives relating to entering the Schengen zone. However, when entrance requirements started to vary in the EU member states, the role of national border services significantly strengthened. They followed government regulations but also had discretion to interpret each particular situation individually, causing confusion, and inconsistencies in the implementation of frequently updated pandemic regulations. It should be

noted that the countries considered the status of academics and students differently. Russia requests work permits or student visas even for short-term mobility, unlike Poland where visas are not obligatory for short-term academic mobility. Therefore, in Poland, academics and students have an uncertain status being neither residents nor tourists, especially those who arrive with family members. It may be interpreted differently by any officer directly at the border. Thus, one can maintain that the pandemic increased the salience of border services in internationalisation policies and contributed to increased uncertainty in HE. Polish sanitary services did not play an important role in policy-making, unlike policy implementation in particular regions/cities because of their influence on the measures always applied in the context of numerous local factors, such as number of cases, hospital capacities, including intensive care units and rate of vaccination. The divisions of sanitary services in Poland and Russia (where they cooperated with local authorities) became the most prominent actors at the regional level, not directly affecting internationalisation activities, but determined to close or open campuses together with the universities.

Thirdly, the different health measures and in particular, vaccination strategies, became one of the critical factors in drawing new maps for international HE. Poland and Russia have implemented different strategies to overcome the COVID-19 crisis, trying to minimise the effects of quarantines and restore mobility flows in accordance with ability of each state to produce their own vaccine and approve the vaccines produced in other countries. Each country developed its own specific approach to vaccination stemming from a very liberal approach to mandatory vaccination for anyone who wishes to access public buildings. In addition, vaccine rivalry established new barriers for internationalisation as different countries (political blocks) approved different vaccines (EMA, 2022). Therefore, national and supranational agencies (EMA, MoH in Poland, and Sanitary and Health Inspection *Rospotrebnadzor* in Russia) became the dominant actors of internationalisation policy and significantly impacted the mobility flows due to their responsibilities for sanitary measures including approval of the vaccines of certain producers. At the same time, these actors did not consider internationalisation of HE as a priority, and thus, they had no reasons for exempting international students or academics from severe restrictions.

Finally, closed campuses shifted university life and international collaborations in HE and research to online. This move had a tremendous impact on the broadening definition of internationalisation, which was

commonly understood and measured by the number of incoming and outgoing students and staff. Virtual campuses, online conferences, open lectures and seminars suddenly offered unique opportunities for distance education and research to participate in global circulation of thoughts, participate in discussions, and present results of empirical studies. These are all new circumstances that affected the traditional internationalisation activities (student and staff mobility) and badly hit recruitment agencies that largely facilitate internationalisation. They are also important partners in particular for HEIs from semi-peripheral countries, who do not enjoy a global reputation and need to put considerable effort into attracting international students. They work with both governments and universities and therefore are considered parts of policy networks.

We must admit that it is extremely difficult to predict a long-term impact of the pandemic on internationalisation of HE in Poland and Russia. Throughout the chapter, we attempt to demonstrate a strategic role of internationalisation for HE in both countries under study. It is evident that systemic and institutional reputation have been a major driver of internationalisation in HE. As semi-peripheral countries, Poland and Russia have to rely on strategic actions of those actors who set the rules in global HE. So it remains pivotal whether world-ranking agencies and other organisations with power to distribute prestige modify their approach to internationalisation. Considering long-term disturbance of the pandemic, these actors might undermine the traditional view of internationalisation and give less weight to a number of international staff and students in the table leagues. The latter weakens the ‘reputational drivers’ and perhaps softens pressure to employ or enrol international staff and students. However, if internationalisation becomes less prominent for the reputation of the HE systems, the Polish and Russian governments can re-consider their strategic agency in the field of HE by de-prioritising the international dimension of HE policy.

The pandemic caused not only the rapid development of electronic platforms of communication (Hilliger & Perez-Sanagustin, 2022), but it also upgraded online programmes into fully legitimate methods of learning. Simultaneously, the pandemic opened new venues for international research collaboration which is less costly because it does not require expensive travelling and does not consume great amounts of time—both critical resources in academic profession. For academics from less affluent countries and in particular of a lower status, it opened a window of opportunity to participate in transnational scientific discourse. So perhaps, even

if the policy shift occurs, it does not impair research collaboration because the system of professional advancement remains strongly embedded in global world of academia. Therefore, those institutions and individuals already engaged in international collaboration will continue it under the pressure of their respected professional environments. It can lead to rethinking international mobility's (Aghayeva, 2022) role in internationalisation of HE and pull down some of existing barriers. It could also benefit particularly Russian academics who need visas to most of the developed countries (e.g., Schengen zone). Also, for the HE policies in Poland and Russia that are focused on attracting international students as important sources of university revenues, the development of virtual learning came with both threats and opportunities. Many universities in both countries lost a significant part of their revenues but rapid (albeit uncoordinated) development of online tools also facilitated unorthodox forms of international collaboration. Such initiatives are more accessible and beneficial for the individuals involved, but perhaps less attractive for countries and HEIs because they are less profitable and elude various reputational measures (e.g., rankings).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Initiated in the 1990s, the shift from a state as a single actor to the networks of actors triggered a dramatic change in the internationalisation of HE in Poland and Russia. It softened and partly decentralised the administrative and bureaucratic approach to HE policy, but at the same time, it explicitly prioritised the internationalisation of HE and research as a major policy goal to transform the HE system. In addition, excellence initiatives in both countries added a considerable amount of extra resources that followed sets of international benchmarks against which HEIs were evaluated. It demonstrates (elaborated earlier) the significance of the international context in both countries. The semi-peripheral character of these two countries indicated that they have both aspirations and some capacity to advance and take a more prominent position in global HE. Furthermore, Poland and Russia (despite differences between the two countries) showed considerable political commitment to leverage the international reputation of their HEIs through restructuring their HE systems, and adopting international rules and performance measures. It became possible due to the emergence of new policy actors (regional, national and supranational) that have begun to exercise their impact on

HEIs. These actors contributed to substantial progress in attracting international students and increasing the research visibility of Polish and Russian HEIs, with some assistance from the boost to their reputations indicated by university rankings as proxy. The role of government—which previously exercised its hegemonic position—was weakened and dispersed among other networks of policy actors. Some of them enjoy only semi-autonomous status, though with some discretion to determine institutional goals. It also entails the use of a wide range of policy instruments deployed to enhance the internationalisation of HE. While the state has exercised its power through administrative measures, most of the other actors tend to use more subtle and indirect tools to steer HEIs. The pandemic has had a crucial impact on the internationalisation of HE almost everywhere, halting the physical mobility of students and academics and giving rise to various cross-border education and scholarly activities.

However, Poland and Russia with their history of a centralist administrative tradition faced far more profound changes at the policy level. The pandemic opened doors to new policy actors who invaded the field of HE from public health and national security. They are not only complete strangers to this sector, with different policy priorities and institutional agendas, but most importantly they use hard administrative measures to achieve their goals. And in both countries, policy actors with such strong administrative powers quickly become dominant in the field and prevail over other actors with competing agendas. To add insult to injury, they often do not recognise the exceptional status of HE, downplay the institutional autonomy of universities, and ignore the fact that internationalisation lies at the core of the academy.

The pandemic opened the door to new policy actors with a political mandate to play a more central role in the public realm. Among them, public health officials, local sanitary agencies and also law enforcement officials become key actors in many sectors of public life. In countries such as Poland and Russia, with a long tradition of top-down control of various aspects of social life such policy actors—weaponised with administrative tools—found a fertile ground to exercise their powers. This pandemic will hopefully be gone soon, but the threat of future waves of the pandemic, possible new contagious mutations or the outbreaks of other lethal viruses are real. In countries like Poland and Russia with long traditions of centralism, and a hegemonic role of state bureaucracy with ubiquitous detailed regulations, those new actors may remain in the field of HE for a long time and become an important part of the policy-making process.

Some say that *extreme times call for extreme measures* and beyond any doubt the pandemic has been an ‘extreme time’ for HE. Furthermore, what was initially thought to be only a temporary disturbance became a new reality in HE. For Poland and Russia, it does not only mean that new actors have entered the HE policy domain; it also marks their presence with strong administrative powers and own agendas. To make matters more complex, other policy actors would likely be marginalised because they have mostly soft policy instruments at their disposal. But for Poland and Russia with such a long tradition of bureaucratic and administrative governance of HE, it is an alarming situation for at least two reasons. First, policy actors with hard administrative powers have a legitimate position to set a policy direction in the field of HE. Second, most of the new actors have their own specific agenda which is frequently at odds with the internationalisation of HE. Those two factors combined pose a great challenge and uncertainty for the future of internationalisation of HE in Poland and Russia.

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