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The power of policy translators: New university governing bodies in Hungary and Poland

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Abstract

The study investigates the reforms of university governing boards in Hungary and Poland. It seeks to fill that void and advance existing knowledge about the implementation of boards (councils) in CEE countries despite the great interest in HE dynamics in the region. The juxtaposition of the two countries is intentional because both share key characteristics, such as a common historical background (e.g. a communist past), geopolitical location (Central and Eastern Europe), the same institutional foundation for universities (i.e. the Humboldtian tradition) and domestic politics dominated by right-wing populism. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that the two countries, which are inspired by the same hegemonic policy ideas of NPM and had considerable similarities with respect to HE, arrived at different outcomes. This study therefore focuses on the process of policy translation and attempts to identify critical junctures that have led to structural divergence in the university governance model in the two countries. To achieve this, the research examines two parallel reforming processes that led to the introduction of new university governing bodies: consistories (2015) in Hungary and university councils (2018) in Poland.

Keywords

Higher education policy, university governance, Hungary, Poland, university boards

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The paper reports that despite being inspired by the same hegemonic ideals, struggling with similar policy challenges and sharing common historical background, the reforms in the two studied countries took remarkably different routes. In results, the Hungarian 'consistories' gain strong controlling powers and they are steered by the government while the Polish 'university councils' are largely powerless and elected by university senates. These empirical findings are interpreted against the backdrop of the Scandinavian institutionalism which sees policy transfer as an iterative process and a full account of it requires giving particular attention to the role of particular groups, individuals and institutions involved in the interpretation and adaptation.

Over the last three decades, many European countries have implemented governance reforms as a means to transform universities into more professionally managed organizations that are also accountable to society (Bleiklie, 2018; de Boer et al., 2010; Donina et al., 2015; Meek et al., 2010). This is part of the new public management (NPM) global reform script that has gained prominence in higher education (HE) (Bleiklie et al., 2017a, 2017b; Donina and Hasanefendic, 2019; Donina and Paleari, 2019; Gornitzka and Maassen, 2014; Hutner and Krucken, 2013; Krucken and Meier, 2006; Pinheiro and Stensaker, 2014). This trend—originating from Anglo-Saxon countries—has only recently affected Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and is being adopted through public policy, which is a critical mediator between global scripts and organizational changes (Bleiklie and Michelsen, 2013; Stage and Aagaard, 2020). Dobbins and Knill (2011, 2014) demonstrated the impact of historical pre-conditions in adapting to transnational trends, although this line of reasoning seems insufficient in explaining the divergent results of recent university governance reforms in Hungary and Poland.

This study seeks to fill that void and advance existing knowledge about the implementation of boards (councils) in CEE countries despite the great interest in HE dynamics in the region. The juxtaposition of the two countries is intentional because both share key characteristics, such as a common historical background (e.g. a communist past), geopolitical location (Central and Eastern Europe), the same institutional foundation for universities (i.e. the Humboldtian tradition) and domestic politics dominated by right-wing populism (Szelewa, 2020). With this in mind, it is interesting to note that the two countries, which are inspired by the same hegemonic policy ideas of NPM and had considerable similarities with respect to HE, arrived at different outcomes. This study therefore focuses on the process of policy translation and attempts to identify critical junctures that have led to structural divergence in the university governance model in the two countries. To achieve this, the research examines two parallel reforming processes (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000) that led to the introduction of new university governing bodies: consistories (2015) in Hungary and university councils (2018) in Poland.

University boards and councils

Over the last three decades, higher education (HE) has undergone a series of governance changes across Europe. These have been underpinned by the principles of new public management (NPM), which espouses the integration of managerial practices into public sector institutions (Bleiklie, 1998; Kogan et al., 2000; Paradeise et al., 2009; Pechar and Pellert, 1998) and the assumption that universities require more organizational autonomy and need to be professionally orchestrated (Boitier and Rivière, 2016) in order to adapt to the socio-economic external environment (Magalhães et al., 2018: 737) and become more accountable to society (Ferlie et al., 2008). This initiative entailed challenges in how universities were governed and led to a departure from the traditional models of *republic of science* (Polanyi, 1962), *republic of scholars* (Brubacher, 1967), organized *anarchies* (Cohen et al., 1972) and *loosely coupled system*s (Weick, 1976) into the development of so-called *complete* organizations (Brunson and Sahlin-Anderson, 2000). As a result,

many European countries introduced structural reforms (Bleiklie and Kogan, 2007; Locke et al., 2011) that aimed to modernize university administrative structures and establish new governing bodies. to ensure universities can meet their obligations to their wider constituencies inside and outside the institution' (Shattock, 2006: 52). These new bodies have fostered hierarchical leadership and decision-making processes and introduced new governing bodies with the mandatory participation of lay members (de Boer et al., 2010; Kretek et al., 2013; Musselin and Teixeira, 2014). Austria, Finland, Russia, Norway and Portugal are amongst those countries that have established university boards (councils) in public universities, while others with a long tradition of such bodies include the UK, the Netherlands and Italy. The latter countries have recalibrated the roles, powers and structures of these bodies to meet new and increasingly diverse social expectations (De Boer et al., 1998; de Boer et al., 2010; Donina and Paleari, 2019).

By in large, the introduction of university boards (councils) was met with criticism or even overt opposition (Pechar, 2005; Poutanen et al., 2020), but this did not stop such reforms (De Boer and File, 2010). The new governing bodies were designed (a) to bring greater professionalism to managerial decision making, which has often been criticized for being financially inefficient and unduly process orientated; and (b) to build (or endorse existing) institutional links, raising awareness of the growing expectations articulated by external stakeholders. Traditionally, it has been the nation-state that solely represented public interest and provided financial resources in exchange for educating candidates for public service—a 'dual monopoly' (Neave, 2012: 23). The rise of the stakeholder society brought this longstanding historical relationship to an end and introduced new structural arrangements. University bodies, as new or revisited elements of a wider modernization of university governance, immediately attracted researchers' attention (de Boer et al., 2010; Kretek et al., 2013; Magalhaes et al., 2016; Veiga et al., 2016). However, little remains known about the implementation of boards (councils) in CEE countries despite the great interest in HE dynamics in the region. In this regard, 'CEE countries stand out as a particularly worthwhile object of analysis for scholars interested in policy transfer as well as policy legacies and path dependencies' (Dobbins and Knill, 2009: 398). In the literature, the CEE region is frequently presented as a uniform block, but a close examination shows both converging and diverting features (Dobbins, 2017; Dobbins and Leisyte, 2014). Previous studies (Rónay et al., 2020) suggests that Hungary and Poland have adopted the concept of university boards (councils) in notably different ways despite these countries' historical, institutional and political similarities, as well as being both influenced by similar managerial ideals advocated by the same transnational organizations (e.g. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], World Bank, European Commission [EC]). Therefore, this study seeks to explain why adopting a similar organizational concept has led to astonishingly different results.

To achieve these goals, this work was compiled as a comparative policy study based on an in-depth investigation of the reforms of university governance in Hungary and Poland through the process-tracing method (Bennett and George, 2005). The major corpus of empirical analysis is based on a triangulation (Denzin, 1978) of the following secondary sources separately in Hungary and Poland: (a) policy papers and reports, both national and international; (b) political manifestos; (c) policy reports and research papers published during the reforms and shortly thereafter; (d) minutes of parliamentary debates; (e) reports from a long process of consultation of key areas; and (g) central regulations at various stages of the policy process. The study was carried out by researchers who fluently speak either Polish or Hungarian, thus securing a comprehensive understanding of the content (and contextualization) and its relevance in international comparative studies. The collected empirical materials were chronologically arranged and then thematically mapped (Miles and Huberman, 1994) separately for Hungary and Poland. This helped us reconstruct the reforming process and identify major policy actors and their strategic agendas. However, the investigation in

both countries required not only a solid empirical foundation but also contextual knowledge about national systems, their histories and peculiarities. This is always a challenging task, as most of the available studies are published in local languages only. International scholarly seminars were held, during which policy processes were reconstructed and discussed, to have a common understanding of both national contexts.

The logic of the reforms, policy translation and policy borrowings

HE reforms, especially their policy outcomes (Boxenbaum and Pedersen, 2009; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009), are a popular area of research which has drawn considerable attention amongst scholars worldwide (e.g. Capano, 2018; Gornitzka et al., 2005). This implies that policies are not passively transferred within the same category of countries, as described in older versions of institutionalism (Meyer et al., 1997). Instead, countries use the concept of 'policy transfer', which recognizes the role of agency and embraces 'the logic of choice in [the] selection of policy ideas, the interpretation of circumstances or [the] environment and (bounded) rationality in imitation, copying and modification by decision-makers' (Stone, 2012: 3). In this way, countries adopt fashionable policy concepts, the ideas behind which are subject to interpretation and adaptation to fit the local context. This automatically diverts our research interest from conditions of diffusion into mechanisms of policy translation and adaptation (Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008: 222).

This study rests upon the assumption that reforming university governance is, for the most part, a voluntary initiative undertaken by public authorities (i.e. national governments). However, in HE, such reforms are frequently brought about by transnational organizations that apply subtle and powerful pressure. These transnational organizations are widely identified as carriers of hegemonic ideas and institutional imperatives (Donina and Hasanefendic, 2019; Shahjahan, 2012; Vaira, 2004) through a variety of soft measures, such as policy recommendations, thematic policy reviews, international rankings or simply sending international experts with professional legitimacy to support them (Vaira, 2004). Such a role is performed by international (*certificated*) organizations that enjoy high professional authority and, therefore, can indirectly act as reform entrepreneurs. A major line of literature suggests that transnational organizations play a pivotal role in HE reforms (Bassett and Maldonado-Maldonado, 2009; Botto, 2016; Hartley et al., 2016), and the only matter disputed is the degree to which organizations, such as the OECD, the World Bank or the EC, can influence or even steer national policy agendas. The role of transnational organizations has been widely discussed, and these institutions have been frequently criticized for making national governments follow certain policy ideals with a wide array of coercive instruments (e.g. the loans system).

However, in HE, transnational organizations operate primarily through indirect instruments, such as unbinding policy recommendations (Amaral and Neave, 2009); these are nevertheless often taken for granted as *silver bullets* by overcommitted policy makers whose agency is constrained by bounded rationality, lacking the information and cognitive capacity to evaluate the potential costs and benefits of alternative options (March and Simon, 1993). Such strategies lead to the widespread adoption of hegemonic concepts, such as *world-class universities*, *knowledge economy* or excellence initiatives and producing structural 'isomorphism' (Meyer et al., 1997). However, despite the strength of hegemonic ideas and the power of global models, Scandinavian institutionalists have long challenged the assumption that ideas travel freely (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005) and that supranational policies are not passively embarked on (Kosmutzky and Krucken, 2015; Mampaey, 2018). Instead, they claim that when these ideas reach different countries, they are subject to interpretation (translation) in accordance with locally specific systems and institutionalized practices (Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008). As prudently acknowledged by Røvik (2002),

ideas, myths and symbols may be broad and encompassing, but as policy instruments, they are often groomed and narrowed to fit a political agenda of reforms. This is simply the essence of policy translation, which occurs 'where policy meanings are distorted, transformed and modified' (Lendvai and Stubbs, 2007: 176). In short, abstract global concepts require translation into national *policy agendas* that fit them into specific organizational *arrangements* within a given national environment. Greenwood and Hinings (1993) referred to the fact that archetypes of these (e.g. university boards) exist in an abstract form, but their implementation requires transformation into a particular organizational setting. The process of adapting such abstract ideas into specific local circumstances is not automatic and is steered by the *strategic agency* of policy actors (Oliver, 1991). Czarniawska and Sevón (2005) emphasized the prevailing role of policy interpreters, who are actively involved in transfer and translation processes and who use their interpreting powers to pursue their goals (cf. Pinheiro and Stensaker, 2014). They do so by attributing specific accounts to ideas or organizational models within a national context. Hence, identifying policy translators and examining their strategic agencies are critical to capturing the logic of reforms. This study examines how the concept of university boards has been translated and adapted into national legislation in Hungary and Poland. The prime focus is on the impact of the policy actors (and their strategic agencies) involved in translating the concept of university boards into concrete legislative provisions.

Same ideas, similar problems, different solutions

Historically, universities in Hungary and Poland have performed prominent roles in society by standing for freedom, civil rights and democratic values (e.g. Białecki and Dabrowa-Szelfer, 1994). In the past, many of these universities were frequently subject to brutal attacks by communist regimes. Shortly after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, both Hungary and Poland passed laws to restore the legal foundations for the liberal concept of universities driven by self-governing principles and strong collegial control by professors (Dobbins, 2011; Dobbins and Knill, 2009). It was a symbolic move that was often wrongly perceived as the assimilation of modern Western institutions, while 'it is reasonable to suggest that the Humboldtian referential model might well have regained the place it once occupied in the period between the wars, rather than being overtaken by a species of *Drang nach Osten* [spreading into the East]' (Neave, 2003: 29).

However, the initial enthusiasm associated with the restoration of universities as autonomous and self-governing institutions did not last very long. Severely underfunded and infrastructurally underinvested universities were doomed to fail in meeting largely unrealistic social expectations, giving rise to numerous disappointed and critical voices. These mainly pointed to the lack of social responsiveness and public accountability, as well as the deficit of professional management at universities. The peak of criticism came after the turn of the millennium. In Poland, this was mostly due to the uncontrolled HE expansion (Antonowicz et al., 2017), falling quality standards (Marciniak, 2016), de-institutionalization of the university research mission (Kwiek, 2012a, 2012b) and simply poor management (Thieme, 2009). In Hungary, ineffective financial management, a lack of accountability (Polónyi, 2009; Szolár, 2010) and the decaying role of international competition in rankings (Fábri, 2016) came to the foreground (Rónay, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). In both countries, the surging criticism was additionally weaponized by the expanding popularity of world university rankings, which placed their universities disappointingly low and far below the aspirations of both their governments and societies (Boyadjieva, 2017). Additionally, universities kept avoiding major structural reforms despite the strong criticism for being ineffective, unaccountable and unprofessionally managed. These aspects were identified as areas for improvement by experts, researchers and, most importantly, transnational organizations in Poland (OECD in

2007 and World Bank in 2004) and Hungary (World Bank in 1998). The modernization of university governance appeared to be a silver bullet and a plausible solution for many of the diagnosed problems. Hence, both governments introduced, amongst other changes, new university governing bodies that could address emerging challenges.

Hungarian consistories: The controlling tool of the government

After the fall of communism, higher education institutions (HEIs) were given considerable organizational autonomy and self-governing powers as critical parts of the pre-war institutional model. The residual effect of communism also affected the government's role, and 'the ministry [in Hungary] basically played a passive legal supervisory role' (Kováts et al., 2017: 575). Gradually, this policy model and related organizational arrangements became perceived as an anachronism and were considered unfit to address major challenges, such as the serious financial difficulties experienced by some HEIs. It triggered some voices underscoring the need for greater managerial professionalism (Barakonyi, 2004; Hrubos et al., 2003; Keczer, 2007; Polónyi, 2006; Rónay, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Seténi, 1994). To address these concerns, the Hungarian government set out to modernize university governance by using a review by the World Bank (1998) as justification to address the financial ineffectiveness and inward-orientated management of HEIs. It established a 'social council'[1] at the turn of the millennium, as well as a 'governor body'[2] and a 'financial council'.[3] While the first body was eventually abandoned by legislators, the governor body was initially abolished by the Constitutional Court (see: 41/2005. (X. 27.) AB decision) and eventually was transformed by the government into the University Financial Council, although the new body did not have meaningful power within the structure of university governance (between 2006 and 2012). These first measures were not only extremely controversial but also did not lead to any substantial improvements. The pressure for reforms increased with another critical study of the effectiveness of innovation systems (ERDIS) (Schuller, 2010) together with an investigation carried out by the State Audit Office of Hungary (Nemeth, 2015) focussing on the HE system. The review indicated striking deficits in professionalism and leadership as key factors responsible for the underperformance of HE in Hungary.

In response to these strong claims, the government undertook a serious policy step of overhauling university governance after 2010. It began by amending the Constitution (the Fundamental Law of Hungary)[4] to allow the government to have the right to directly control the finances of public HEIs.[5] It subsequently introduced the position of *university chancellor* to be put in charge of non-academic matters. The university chancellor was a ministerial appointee on equal footing with the university rector (Rónay, 2019b). Finally, and most importantly, new legislation introduced the *consistory board* (hun. *Konzisztórium)* (see Act CXXXI of 2015 on the amendment of Act CCIV of 2011 on National Higher Education) as a landmark move by the government to gain almost full control over public universities. Not only did the government consistently pursue university governance reform, but it also largely monopolized the policy process.

The Hungarian word *konzisztórium* evolved from the Latin word *consistorium* and originally referred to the organizational device of the absolute monarch that was used to control operations at a university (Keczer, 2007). The rationale behind the reforms was presented in two policy papers (*Fokozatváltás a felsőoktatásban. A teljesítményelvű felsőoktatásfejlesztésének irányvonalai, 2015; Fokozatváltás a felsőoktatásban - középtávú szakpolitikai stratégia, 2016*) that clearly expressed the need for direct interventions by the government in university governance and emphasized the importance of engaging representatives of the wider socioeconomic environment. The policy papers provided the foundation for the introduction of the consistory board. This entity consists of five members, three of whom are appointed by the minister, alongside two permanent

ex-officio members, i.e. the rector and the chancellor. The majority of the consistory members must come from outside the university, and they must not have any formal relationship (i.e. contractual, voluntary, etc.) with the institution. Formally, candidates to a university's consistory were to be put forward by the university senate, student unions and key social and economic organizations, although neither was the list of potential candidates transparent nor were the suggestions binding for the government. Lacking transparency contributed to politicization of consistories by giving the government considerable room to take arbitrary action without complying with basic transparency measures (Rónay, 2019b). Yet, consistories have become political instruments of increased control over public universities, as they gained power to make strategic decisions and control financial activities. The most important role refers to the prior consent right (NHE art 13/C) regarding not only financial and strategic decisions but also mid-term institutional development plans, including strategies for research, development and innovation (NHE art 13/C). As consistories have both supervisory and decision-making powers, and they are directly accountable to the government, serious questions may be raised about their latent functions and constraining impact on university autonomy. Formally, consistories have no legal basis to interfere with core areas of academic life (i.e. research and teaching). However, strategic development plans and university budgets directly impact almost every aspect of university business. Such strong financial powers paired with vague appointing mechanisms make consistories useful controlling devices in the hands of the Hungarian government. The implementation of consistories became another step in the transformation process towards a centralized and state-controlled system of HE.

The implementation of consistories encountered passive opposition from the Conference of Hungarian Rectors (MRK). The major point of contestation was consistories' right to elect rectors. The latter was eventually dropped by the government, but consistories remained in place. Overall, the government did not encounter massive opposition, which resulted from (1) withering buffer organizations and other agencies made more dependent on the public (state) purse, thus experiencing a decrease in their political and financial autonomy; (2) the exhaustion of mobilization capacity after years of illiberal reforms in Hungary; and (3) the pragmatic behaviour of rectors who, like in any centrally controlled system, rely on the political whims of the ministry that arbitrarily streams public funding directly into selected HEIs. Therefore, rectors (individually) wanting the best for their universities at least try not to bite overtly the hand that feeds them (see more: Kováts et al., 2017).

In short, consistories were established top-down by the government, subverting relatively weak opposition from the academic community. The government marginalized other policy actors and took a commanding role in adapting an abstract concept of university boards into the Hungarian institutional environment. The central premise for introducing the consistories was to bring economic efficiency and professionalization to university management, an issue that was identified by the government as critical for HE. Overall, the introduction of consistories failed to meet basic transparency measures; they substantially undermined public accountability, and, for the time being, they seemed to perform more as controlling institutions in a way that is attuned to their historic name.

Polish university councils: Overselling and underdelivering managerial structure

The concept of a university council (*rady uczelni*) has historical ties to the communist regime, which attempted to take over the control of universities through university social councils. These were introduced twice (in 1968 and 1985) and each time as a direct consequence of students' unrest and democratic protests on campuses (Zaremba, 2018). Officially, the task of social councils was to enhance the links between HEIs and the social environment, culture and economy of their regions, although there was little doubt that the Communist Party wanted to curb universities'

(already very insignificant) autonomy (Mucha, 1985). Both in 1968 and 1985, the HE law left the composition, scope of power and mode of activity of social councils to a minister, who appointed all their members upon prior agreement with local administrations. Social councils were designed to control the internal affairs of academic institutions and therefore were rightly seen as oppressive and political. Shortly after the fall of the Iron Curtain (1990), social councils were removed from HE law (1990)

In democratic Poland, the new law adopted the pre-war model of university governance, in which autonomy and self-governance became the founding principles of new organizational arrangements, putting aside public accountability and professional management (Dobbins, 2015: 21, Szadkowski, 2021). It also largely silenced any serious attempt at policy discussions on the modernization of university governance. In particular, the concept of university councils and opening up universities to the influence of external stakeholders were avoided because of their past unequivocally negative connotations. But the political pressure to revisit the governance mode was growing together with dissatisfaction with university performance. It came not only from politicians disappointed by the poor position of Polish universities in global university rankings, but also from transnational organizations (OECD, 2006; World Bank, 2004) and some Polish scholars (e.g. Antonowicz and Jongbloed, 2015; Thieme, 2009). The government (2009) eventually brought the idea of boards into public debate (Dakowska, 2013), only to abandon it immediately as a result of a hostile reception from the academic community. The Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland (KRASP) was overtly against the modernization of university governance (KRASP, 2007). After such a long time of resilience, there was a growing awareness that, in the long run, universities cannot simply resist the modernising pressure, and instead of blocking changes, the academic community (through its representative organizations) needs to take a more active role in pursuing changes. At the same time, such large bodies always represent a wide range of very different (often conflicting) interests and constituencies that hinders development of common reform projects.

After 2015, the Polish government not only enjoyed a stable majority in the parliament but also proved to be highly effective in implementing its political agenda. Furthermore, the government did not want to pursue structural reforms totally against the academic community, which mastered the art of blocking reforms. The role of buffer bodies, such as the Council of Science and Higher Education (RGSW) and, in particular, KRASP, has always been strong; they have managed to resist, modify or refract most of the substantial changes in relation to university governance (see Antonowicz, 2015).

The ministry proposed a long and participative reforming process (see more details: Antonowicz et al., 2020; Dziedziczak-Foltyn, 2017; Vlk et al., 2021) during which the concept of university councils was brought into the centre of public debate in 2016. It was proposed by the researchers and experts from three independent teams commissioned to design the agenda for reforms. As Vlk et al. (2021) argued, the visions presented by the three teams stayed largely at odds with the dominant conservative voice of academia, so the concept of the councils could no longer be delegitimized and simply swept under the carpet. The government also commissioned a panel of EC international experts, whose report suggested the need to reform university governance:

> Panel agrees that the nature of the external stakeholders on the boards of trustees should be appropriate to the mission and profile of the institution and emphasises that all institutional types should have a board (European Commission, 2017: 61).

It was clear that the government received both political and professional legitimacy to modernize the university governance model, including the introduction of new governing bodies. But it was

also aware that the implementation of new governing bodies required at least a tacit acquiescence of the academic community. The large-scale consultation process facilitated by the National Congress of Science could only facilitate discussions and give rise to various (frequently radical) policy ideas. The government needed strategic partners that would legitimize the reforming agenda in the academic community. It shared or delegated much of the translating power to representatives of the academic community in exchange for their approval of the new governance model.

At the same time, there was a widespread perception that an overhaul of the university governance model is politically unavoidable. The modernization of the model was suggested by major transnational organizations (OECD, World Bank) directly supported by three teams of researchers and policy experts (EU). For major policy stakeholders, such as KRASP or RGSW, blocking university councils (considering the overall political situation) might be less effective than taking a more active role in adapting an abstract concept of such boards into the local Polish institutional and historical environment. It became a critical moment for the reforming process because the government was able to fulfil its political promises of reforms, and other policy actors could still secure their interests by selling 'old wine in new wineskins'. Some authors (Vlk et al., 2021) suggest that KRASP backed Law 2.0 for enhancing the position of rectors within the university power structure; however, there is no evidence to support this claim.

Law 2.0 (Sejm, 2018) rearranged university governance to make it slightly more professional, accountable and responsive to the broader society. The central aspect of reform was the introduction of university councils, which became one of the three pillars in the governance of HEIs, alongside the senate and the rector. The council (Art 19.1) consists of six or eight members elected by the university senate (without any further approval), amongst which at least half must come from outside the university, including the chair of the university council. A representative of the student union also mandatorily sits on the council. Law 2.0 set only basic requirements for candidates for election to the university council (Art 20), such as clean criminal and disciplinary records and no history of cooperation with state security during the communist era. Interestingly, the law imposed an age limit of 67 years for members and prevented them from sitting in more than one council at the same time. The size of university councils and the number of lay members were to be determined by individual universities (but the latter must still comprise at least 50% of the council), together with the formal requirements for council members and their own pre-electing procedures (e.g. search committee, public hearings, and recommendations from organizations).

The concept of Polish university councils is a result of a compromise between the government and major policy actors representing the academic community. The composition of the new governing bodies (with 50% lay membership) satisfied the political agenda, but the councils' modest scope of power was largely designed by the academic community. Therefore, the purview of competencies of university councils is limited compared to initial loud governmental announcements. Formally, it can be divided into three categories (Art. 18): (a) monitoring management, (b) voicing opinions and (c) participation in the rector's election. The monitoring aspect focuses mostly on the university's management and supervision of its financial affairs. The only weighty power that the councils have is the ability to approve or reject budget implementation (although it can only give unbinding opinions about budget plans). Their other powers are soft and pertain to voicing opinions on long-term development strategies and implementation, as well as on drafts of the university statute. The translating power of academic buffer bodies (KRASP, in particular) resulted in turning the councils into friendly and non-interfering advisory bodies. The government's lofty reforming ambitions had to be cooled in return for the legitimacy of major policy actors (KRASP, RGSW and the Students' Parliament). This resulted in only modest reforms of university governance, although the introduction of university councils was presented primarily as a symbolic break from a very hermetic governance model.

Discussion

The empirical findings demonstrate considerable differences between the new university governing bodies implemented in Hungary and Poland. These variations refer not only to the composition, scope of power and forms of public accountability but also to the trajectory of the reform process. In previous studies (Dobbins and Knill, 2009; Gornitzka and Maassen, 2014; Vaira, 2004), this structural divergence was frequently explained by historical or cultural preconditions that produced certain path dependencies. However, it seems not the case for Hungary and Poland because they share historical, institutional and structural HE environments.

The key to account for the identified disparities is held by the concept of policy transfer, which underscores the role of interpreters of policy ideas and organizational innovations (Stone, 2012: 3). This sheds light on the process of adapting ideas (including policy ideas) and organizational models. The concept claims that these ideas are not subject to simple diffusion but frequent re-interpretations and even refractions produced by policy interpreters (Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008). In Hungary, the translation of global ideas was monopolized by the government, which also controlled the policy process almost single-handedly. Not only did it attribute an oppressive label of 'consistories' to the newly established university boards, but, most importantly, it also weaponized them to serve political goals. Oddly enough, the concept of university boards, with its emphasis on economic efficiency, professionalism and public accountability, was transformed into an administrative device to control universities. It may sound like a paradox, but an openly anti-liberal Hungarian government used a managerial organizational concept to keep universities on short leash. However, it must be borne in mind that since 1998, the Hungarian government has been developing a state-controlling system with centralized political (administrative) control (e.g., chancellor system) over HEIs with strong interventionist power. It largely stays in line with a long process of weakening Hungarian liberal democracy and of increasing the use of more authoritative instruments in public policy. Kováts et al. (2017 583) prudently summarized this longitudinal process as 'the pendulum swung back to a well-accepted, more autocratic leadership style with more centralized HE governance models'. Other policy actors, such as the MRK, the National Union of Students in Hungary, the Trade Union of Employees in Higher Education and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, were largely powerless in mobilising the academic community, which were already exhausted by the continued but ineffective struggles with illiberal governments. The Hungarian government built a hegemonic position in the public realm and did not need any support or legitimacy to pursue the reform agenda in HE. It only adopted an abstract concept of public accountability and professional management (Nemeth, 2015; Fokozatváltás a felsőoktatásban - középtávú szakpolitikai stratégia, 2016) in a way that suited its political agenda.

The coercive political strategy with a hegemonic role of the government clearly distinguishes the Hungarian reforms from the Polish ones. In the latter case, the government did not want to risk an open conflict with the academic community, which used to play a dominant role in HE policy. Therefore, it delegated *editorial powers* to major policy stakeholders, allowing them to translate the concept of university boards into the Polish environment and adapt it to the existing university power structure. Contrary to the Hungarian government, the Polish government traditionally performed a passive role in HE, confining itself to mere administrative functions, known as *the policy of no policy* (Antonowicz et al., 2017; Kwiek and Maassen, 2012). For both KRASP and RGSW, the bottom line was to minimize the impact of the new governing bodies on university internal affairs, particularly their non-interference in the rector's election, and the Students' Parliament was keen to keep a student representative on the council. They used the role of translators, who can command their individual (or collective) interests, and imposed a specific account of the concept

of university boards and their organizational arrangements. The study points to *soft actors* (Czarniawska and Sevon, 1996a) with interest, resources and identities to use their privileged policy-making positions to adapt innovations in a way that would suit themselves.

Since the mid-1990s, the two studied countries have developed two distinctive sectorial policy logics and political cultures. In Hungary, the HE policy is driven by the hegemonic role of the government, which stays in bold contrast with the Polish logic of network governance. The Hungarian government has frequently used its privileged position to implement major structural changes, such as institutional mergers (Kováts et al., 2017), chancellor systems in universities, consistories and, most recently, university foundations (Hopkins, 2021), as well as soft ideological agendas, such as the abolition of gender study programmes in universities (Rónay, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). The state-controlled HE is also based on the system of institutional and individual dependencies, which impairs the already weak opposition in the academic community. This is very different from Polish HE policy, which is generally carried out in some form of cooperation with major policy actors (KRASP, RGSW or the Students' Parliament). The government does not always follow the advice of other policy actors, and it occasionally tries to pursue its ideological agenda unilaterally. This has already occurred in other sectoral reforms, such as with the justice system (Sledzinska-Simon, 2018), but thus far, the government has not risked implementing major structural changes in HE unitarily.

Conclusions

Policy concepts can easily travel and spread across countries and organizations, which tend to mimetically follow leaders in the field. In particular, if these concepts are advocated by transnational actors, such as the OECD and the World Bank, which enjoy strong professional authority, the process of diffusion gest a normative shape. This study argues that the concept of university governing bodies can take surprisingly different (and distant) forms while being implemented in countries characterized by similar historical, cultural and political features. This work sheds light on policy translators and their strategic agency that can modify and even distort policy content when adapting it to the local environment. Despite sharing many common features (historical, political and institutional), Hungary and Poland developed different sectoral policies in the field of HE. By saying so, we do not refer to drafting legislation, which is normally carried out by the government, but we point at (prior to it) the way a policy is designed through adaptation of theoretical concepts into local institutional arrangements. The latter serves as the key to understanding such immense structural disparities between Hungarian consistories and Polish university councils. This study demonstrates the concept of governing boards as mere heuristic devices expressed in abstract language. In this way, the role of translators is to convert such a concept into concrete policy initiatives by attributing it specific (local) meanings and adapting it into national contexts. This study provides evidence that even in similar historical, cultural and political conditions, the same policy ideas can be translated and adapted in widely differing ways. It depends on the sectoral policy and overall political culture which distribute roles and rules in the process of policy translation. Therefore, there is a need for further in-depth research to explore the impact of policy translators whose role, although critical, remains both under-conceptualized and under-researched.

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Notes

1. Introduced by Act XCVII of 2000 on the Amendment of Act LXXX of 1993 on Higher Education
2. First version of Act CXXXIX of 2005 on Higher Education (the regulation was abolished by the Constitutional Court)
3. Second version of Act CXXXIX of 2005 on Higher Education
4. The fourth amendment of the Fundamental Law of Hungary (passed on March 25, 2013)
5. Fundamental Law of Hungary, Art. X, Section 3: 'Higher education institutions shall be autonomous in terms of the content and the methods of research and teaching; their organization shall be regulated by an Act. The government shall, within the framework of the Acts, lay down the rules governing the management of public institutes of higher education and shall supervise their management'.

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