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## **Ideological foundations of educational reforms in Ukraine**

**Abstract.** *There is a great need for action with regards to reforming the Ukrainian higher education system. However, the exact nature of such reforms in terms of structure and content is a contested matter. It becomes evident in an analysis of current legislative reform endeavours that some of them are guided by Western European standards such as strengthening university autonomy, safeguarding freedom of research and encouraging scientific transfer, whilst others are oriented towards (post)Soviet traditions such as centralization, pronounced hierarchies and a mere focus on teaching.*

*The key question to be dealt with in this article is: Which underlying, still active, productive ideological patterns are preventing a restructuring of the Ukrainian higher education system oriented towards Bologna and accordingly Western standards?*

**Keywords:** *higher education reform in Ukraine, analysis of current legislative endeavours, new tendencies in higher education politics, academic freedom, Bologna process, corruption.*

### **1. Introduction**

In comparison to elementary political questions, such as the membership of a military alliance, political sphere, community of values, etc., problems concerning education play a subordinate role for political decision makers in Ukraine. Financial and intellectual resources are more concentrated on the agricultural and energy sectors. However, the quality of higher education greatly influences the economic and social activities of society. Due to an enormous budget deficit, the current government tries to save money particularly in the areas of education and science. Therefore, policy is not oriented towards more cost intensive modern research: No new laboratories are founded and little is done in trendsetting areas such as energy saving technologies, nanotechnology and biotechnology. The current

Ukrainian education system rather persists as a system of teaching, lecturing and learning by heart that is underfinanced and severely limited by hierarchical and bureaucratic guidelines. It therefore does not reflect the needs of Ukrainian industry or its economy, much less can it be seen as an engine of society.

This is, amongst other things, because the Soviet Union's disintegration has, with very few exceptions, only brought about marginal changes to the curricula and university structures. The replacement, for instance, of "history of the Communist party" or other ideologically loaded subjects by philosophy and political science has not influenced university administrations, the establishment of different programmes of study or the trial and introduction of modern methods of teaching.

At the same time, the university landscape is a fairly exact representation of Ukrainian society in general: Chronic underfunding, virulent corruption, a lack of self-government and autonomy due to a high degree of centralisation, as well as often being ruled by the law of the strongest.

Therefore, it is of no surprise that the "brightest minds" often end up working outside of universities, or at least have several occupations and seize the first opportunity to escape - preferably abroad.

## **2. Current legislative initiatives for the reform of the Ukrainian system of higher education**

21 years after the independence of Ukraine, its encrusted, underfunded and ineffective tertiary education system still awaits a profound restructuring based on values such as freedom in teaching and research, the autonomy and internationalisation of universities, promotion of knowledge transfer, etc.<sup>1</sup> Strong forces of resistance within the administration of the educational sector prevent any major alterations. The latest reform project by the minister of education, Dmytro Tabachnyk, and other legislative endeavours by his fellow party members envisage merely cosmetic adjustments, restricted to the renaming of academic degrees and cost cutting through the reduction of state-financed university places and the merging of universities.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See: K uchler, F., Schwajka, O., Guttke, M. (2011) Rolle vorw arts oder r uckw arts? - Hochschulreform in der Ukraine, in: *Ukraine-Analysen*, 90, electronic document [<http://www.laender-analysen.de/ukraine/pdf/UkraineAnalysen90.pdf>] reviewed on August 18, 2012.

Bredies, I. (2008): Reformpotenziale und -bedarf im ukrainischen Hochschulwesen, in: *Ukraine-Analysen* 34, 2008, S. 2-5, electronic document [<http://www.laender-analysen.de/dlcounter/dlcounter.php?url=../ukraine/pdf/UkraineAnalysen34.pdf>] reviewed on August 18, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Draft "Law on university education" (7486) by Yuriy Myroschnytschenko, 17/12/2011, [http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb\\_n/webproc34?id=&pf3511=39285&pf35401=180599](http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb_n/webproc34?id=&pf3511=39285&pf35401=180599); Draft "Law on university education" (7486-1) by Lutskiy et al., 22/12/2010, [http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb\\_n/webproc34?id=&pf3511=39329&pf35401=181160](http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb_n/webproc34?id=&pf3511=39329&pf35401=181160).

In this context, the latest government draft law that was registered on 28/12/2011 by the Cabinet of Ministers appears particularly problematic.<sup>3</sup> It envisages the creation of a kind of supra-organisation, with 29 supervisory functions and direction in the sphere of educational policy. Amongst other things, this central organ is authorised to appoint and dismiss rectors, thus giving only select politically suitable candidates a chance. Furthermore, this organisation severely limits university autonomy and scientific mobility. Academic degrees earned abroad have to be recognised through a complicated and costly examination procedure.<sup>4</sup>

Soviet traditions such as a pronounced hierarchical system in universities, the centralisation and control as well as a focus on teaching have not been abandoned in these reform endeavours. On the contrary, adding further to the formidable and costly vertical setup, an increasing bureaucratisation is occurring in the whole educational sphere. This ties up vast human resources whilst preventing innovation and interdisciplinarity. Even the most complex quality assurance, testing and standardisation measures as well as research reports for the educational administration will not bring any of the 854 Ukrainian universities<sup>5</sup> into the top 500 of the world's best universities in the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU).

However, the latest legislative endeavours also show that Ukraine maintains too many universities at accreditation levels III and IV in the face of demographic change, i.e. the falling number of school graduates.<sup>6</sup> In 2011 already, many universities were unable to fill all their state-funded study places and therefore must anticipate further cuts. Therefore, the closing or merger of individual universities seems to be a reasonable and obvious solution. However, such a reduction exercise should not exclusively focus on the number of students, as is envisaged by the Minister's draft, but rather on qualitative sets of criteria such as an empirically measured rate of success in teaching and research. Thus internationally recognised and renowned small universities such as the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv or the Mohyla Academy in Kyiv would not be at a disadvantage with the first tier universities vis-à-vis larger ones.

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<sup>3</sup> Draft "Law on university education" (9655), 28/12/2011, introduced by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine lead by Prime Minister M. Azarov, <http://zakon.gov.ua/go/4291-VI>.

<sup>4</sup> A much more progressive draft "Law on university education" (9655-1) was registered on 30/12/2011 by the members of parliament Yatsenyuk and Orobets'. Rectors are in this case freely elected by a body within the university itself (art. 43). Moreover, each university obtains full access to its own budget (item 23). [http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4\\_1?id=&pf3511=42255](http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4_1?id=&pf3511=42255)

<sup>5</sup> Source: State Statistics Service of Ukraine, [www.ukrstat.ua](http://www.ukrstat.ua).

<sup>6</sup> For the development of numbers of Ukrainian universities between 1990 and 2011 see: State Statistics Service of Ukraine, [www.ukrstat.ua](http://www.ukrstat.ua).

Furthermore, the draft law by the Ministry of Education foresees merely cosmetic reforms that concentrate heavily on relabeling rather than restructuring the content of the system of higher education. It is striking that academic degrees are adapted to the Bologna system in name only (Bachelor, Master, PhD, etc.) whilst the parallel soviet traditional “diplom” and “specialist” degrees will continue to be awarded. Another source of confusion are the periods of study within which an academic degree is awarded. Hence the draft law neither leads to a standardisation of university education on the national level, nor to a stronger integration of the Ukrainian system of higher education into its European counterpart. On the one hand, the principles and structures of Bologna are therefore implemented only on the surface and in a rather idiosyncratic way.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, universities receive little support, yet even more guidelines for the restructurings that accompany the Bologna process.

Moreover, the Ukrainian side does not promote scientific exchange through scholarship programs, special budgets, programs for the gifted, etc. and there is no talk of putting forth any greater financial efforts.<sup>8</sup> There is no arrangement for linking education expenditures to GDP for example. Even within Ukraine it is very hard for students to change universities.<sup>9</sup>

A further problem concerns the university entry procedures which are governed by article 41 of the minister’s draft law.<sup>10</sup> It should represent a competition. Besides an independent assessment of the knowledge and skills of the applicants through independent testing, the average grades from a school graduation certificate should be included into the assessment. Moreover, each university can add further criteria of assessment by itself. Independent testing procedures are clearly discredited by the draft law. The universities are regaining a voice in the admission procedure, but this procedure is deliberately formulated in an unclear way. Hence the door for corruption and nepotism is reopened by this draft law, thus undermining the independent testing procedures introduced by the former Minister of Education Vakarchuk.

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<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Ukrainian educational administration for example does not see a module as an area of research, represented by seminars and lectures, but rather simply as an examination that has to be written twice per semester in the respective subject.

<sup>8</sup> Besides, the U-turn performed by Minister Tabachnyk with regards to the 11 year school system means that Ukrainian school leavers remain hindered in enrolling at universities in EU member states.

<sup>9</sup> See: <http://eu-edu.org/news/info/238>.

<sup>10</sup> See: <http://zakon.gov.ua/go/4291-VI>.

The draft was also heavily criticised in parliament<sup>11</sup> and it was decided that a commission headed by the rector of the Kyiv Polytechnical Institute should come up with suggestions for its improvement. They came up with 60 suggestions which were then integrated into the draft. This new draft<sup>12</sup> was confirmed by the Cabinet of Ministers<sup>13</sup> and now a working group is drawing up amendments, though they are not allowed to make any fundamental changes. The draft is very prescriptive and touches upon essential questions:

- Rights related to university autonomy cannot be restricted by other laws (part I, art. 2, item 3).
- Degrees are to be awarded as “Young Specialist”, BA, MA, PhD and Doctor of Sciences (part II, art. 5, item 3).
- Universities are allowed to cooperate with foreign institutions of higher education on the basis of an agreed curricula (part V, art. 22, item 3).

Universities would also obtain more rights, depending on their status: “National” universities (those with level IV accreditation), have the rights to distribute the prescribed number of students per teacher according to the research results of the lecturers (part V, art. 24, item 4, subitem 3), to move the state-funded places at university autonomously in the framework of a subject (subitem 5), to educate students according to their own educational programmes and curricula (subitem 6) and to recognise foreign diplomas and consider them in the distribution of workplaces (subitem 7). The status of “Research University” is envisioned for universities that, amongst other things, have publications abroad (part V, art. 25, item 4, subitem 2) and are involved in international research projects (part V, art. 25, item 4, subitem 4). Each research university also makes the final decisions related to the awarding of academic titles and recognising foreign qualifications (part V, art. 25, item 5, subitem 5) as well as convening academic councils for the defence of thesis that would comprise of no less than 5 people, out of which 2 should be from the university in question (subitem 6).

Basically universities obtain more rights. They operate on the foundation of autonomy and self-administration (part V, art. 29, item 1, subitem 1). They can freely chose the form of teaching (part V,

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<sup>11</sup> „В Верховной раде не пропустили закон Табачника о высшем образовании.”, 11/01/2012, <http://podrobnosti.ua/power/2012/01/11/813984.html>

<sup>12</sup> “ПРОЕКТ, редакція РГ після врахування зауважень міністерств і відомств. 10-11 травня 2012 р. ЗАКОН УКРАЇНИ. Про вищу освіту”, <http://kpi.ua/attention>

<sup>13</sup> “Азаров остаточно сказав “Так!” законопроекту “Про вищу освіту”, розробленого робочою групою Згуровського”, 25/04/2012, <http://maidan.org.ua/2012/04/azarov-ostatochno-skazav-tak-zakonoproektu-pro-vyschu-osvitu-rozroblenoho-robochoyu-hrupoyu-zhurovskoho/>

art. 29, item 2, subitem 1) as well as the study programmes for BA und MA according to international standard classifications of education (subitem 2), and even develop and introduce their own programmes (subitem 7), specialisations (subitem 8) and create or dissolve department structures (subitem 9). They can take part in the activities of international organisations (subitem 14), conduct independent economic activities (subitem 19), and decide about incomes as well as the self-generated special funds (subitem 20). The rector is to be elected by the highest collegial organ of the university's administration and the candidate with more than 50% of votes should be confirmed by the ministry.

Of particular interest are those passages relating to university admissions: The ministry defines admission criteria (part VII, art. 42, item 1, subitem 4). However, details such as the number of subjects of examination are decided by the universities (item 4). Each certificate of the independent testing centres shall not weigh less than 20% of the total mark (subitem 1). The sum of the marks of these certificates, the average mark of the school leavers certificate as well as the mark for an entrance competition – if one is conducted – are to be taken in account in the overall mark. Additional points could be earned in technical and natural sciences for completing a preparation course at the university (typical for example at the Kyiv Polytechnical Institute) or winning prizes in olympiads (item 6).

Additionally, scientific titles are awarded by the universities and confirmed by the ministry (part XI, art. 52). In part XI, article 55 guarantees university lecturers the right to academic freedom (an absolute first in Ukrainian higher education) and academic mobility in the exercise of their professional activities. Article 60 furthermore grants students the right to academic mobility, including internationally.

Further, the document outlines that the state shall facilitate cooperation between universities and the private sector (part X, art. 65, item 6) and emphasises that state and community universities should dispose of their income through chargeable services, including the acquisition of property, excluding cases stipulated by the law (part XI, art. 68, item 2). The whole of section XII is dedicated to international collaboration. Article 72 item 4 subitem 1 foresees the integration of the costs for such collaboration into the budget, while Article 73 outlines the main trajectories of international collaboration, including the promotion of academic exchange and the creation of common international educational and scientific programmes (item 2, subitem 7), and the attraction of foreign lecturers and researchers to Ukrainian universities and research institutions (subitem 9) as well as the assignment of Ukrainian students to study abroad and the facilitation of academic mobility (subitem 11). Further on, in part XV item 5 the „Specialist“ degree is equated with that of masters.

On balance it can be said that this draft law is very progressive and offers a much more modern model of administration in controversial areas such as the election of rectors, the administration of self-generated funds, admission exams and academic mobility than the other drafts discussed so far.

### **3. Educational Policy under Minister Tabachnyk: Developments of the previous 2 years**

1. Minister Tabachnyk began his term in office by reverting to the 11-year school system, copying neighbouring Russia and thus contradicting to the Bologna Process.

2. University autonomy is severely restricted by the minister. Some rectors (Donetsk National University, Odessa National University, Vinnytsya University) lost their positions, because they were not loyal to the minister. The President of the Kyiv Mohyla Academy is fighting with the Ministry for the academy's rights and status.<sup>14</sup> Presently new rectors are elected under the firm control of the ministry and the rights of student self-government and trade unions are also ignored.

3. Of the international three-tiered degree system – BA, MA and PhD – only the former two have been implemented. Instead of the PhD, traditional “Candidate of Sciences” and “Doctor of Science” degrees remain. The amount of the state-financed places at the Bachelor level was reduced by 40 per cent, thus endangering equal access to higher education which cannot be guaranteed by the free market without state interference.

4. With regards to the Minister's proposal to cut the number of Universities it has to be noted that the majority of the 900 Universities appeared under administrations that were lead by his own party, and often in the financial interests of party members.

5. University admissions are becoming less transparent every year: The 2011 round of admissions was not well organized, electronic applications were introduced spontaneously and the diminished role of independent tests lead to new corruption schemes. The following components played a role in the admissions process: results of the independent tests and entrance examinations, badly calculated grade point averages of school graduation certificates, results of “creative examinations”, benefits for socially deprived segments of society, extra points for attending preparatory courses at universities, special conditions for winners of “olympiad” contests, electronic registration of candidates, etc. It seemed that everything was

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<sup>14</sup> Serhiy Kvit, “Tabachnyk an obstacle to improving education”, Kyiv Post, 12/08/2011, [http://www.kyivpost.com/news/opinion/op\\_ed/detail/110659/](http://www.kyivpost.com/news/opinion/op_ed/detail/110659/).

done to bring confusion to the admission process, even though the President of Ukraine asked the Parliament to make unified tests the only standard for gaining admission to a university.

6. A serious obstacle to Ukraine's European integration in the educational sphere is the insufficient knowledge of officials of the current government regarding the latest developments in European education as well as of the Bologna process. Nothing is done by the Ministry to alleviate this problem.<sup>15</sup>

7. Universities have been asked to designate persons in charge of „information“ for the Security Service of Ukraine. Only a few rectors resisted whilst the others cooperated in the hope to maintain their positions.<sup>16</sup>

8. In 2011 Tabachnyk introduced a new department for the inspection of universities that is being used as a mechanism to put pressure on universities. The first victim was Kyiv Slavistic University whose building was declared out-of-repair.<sup>17</sup>

9. Medical and agricultural universities, which became subordinate to the Ministry of Education only at the end of November 2011, were handed back to the Ministries of Health and Agriculture respectively in the beginning of 2012.<sup>18</sup>

10. The National Academy of Science has its working week reduced to 4 days as of 01/04/2012 with corresponding cuts to the salaries due to a budget deficit. Whilst reforms of the Academy are long overdue, the current cuts are being applied according to rank rather than the quality of its employees, thus hitting the lower ranks and “disloyal” colleagues disproportionately.<sup>19</sup>

11. There are various hidden motives behind the draft education laws. The two proposals for the Law on the Higher Education represent two different routes for the education system: Tabachnyk's proposal does not allow universities to elect their rectors but allows them to manage so-called “special funds” – or income derived from the commercial services of the university. The Myroshnychenko proposal allows universities to elect the rector according to its statute, but does not allow him to manage any “special funds”. Thus Tabachnyk's draft would

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<sup>15</sup> „Колапс освітньої системи в Україні: основні причини“, Дзеркало тижня, 02/03/2011, [http://news.dt.ua/SOCIETY/kolaps\\_osvitnoyi\\_sistemi\\_v\\_ukrayini\\_osnovni\\_prichini-76599.html](http://news.dt.ua/SOCIETY/kolaps_osvitnoyi_sistemi_v_ukrayini_osnovni_prichini-76599.html).

<sup>16</sup> „Ректор Українського католицького університету заявив про тиск з боку СБУ“, 25/05/2010, <http://www.ostro.org/important/article-103712/print.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Лідія Суржик, „...А міністерство позбавить ліцензії“, Дзеркало тижня, 27/01/2012, [http://dt.ua/EDUCATION/a\\_ministerstvo\\_\\_pozbavit\\_litsenziyi\\_protse\\_optimizatsiyi\\_merezhi\\_navchalnih\\_zakladiv\\_\\_nasampered\\_ch-96347.html](http://dt.ua/EDUCATION/a_ministerstvo__pozbavit_litsenziyi_protse_optimizatsiyi_merezhi_navchalnih_zakladiv__nasampered_ch-96347.html).

<sup>18</sup> „Аграрні виші у Табачника теж забрали“, 07/02/2012, <http://education.unian.net/ukr/detail/192153>

<sup>19</sup> „Ukrainska Pravda“, <http://forum.pravda.com.ua/read.php?2,211831692>.

increase his own power and that of the people around him. The last edition of Tabachnyk's draft law also allows universities to increase fees according to inflation.

12. Another peculiarity is the system of distributing state scholarships for study abroad<sup>20</sup>, leading for example to a single student from Kharkiv receiving 90,000 USD for a year in the Netherlands.<sup>21</sup>

The current problems with the system of higher education can be broken down into the following 3 key components: an old system of management in the education sphere, an absence of effective financial management, and a pronounced lag in the system of education that is well behind the realities of general public life and the economy. Whilst the whole world tries to decentralize the management of higher education institutions, Ukraine does the opposite. The Ministry of Education wants to control the educational sphere alone, without any involvement of the public or employers, thus producing a system where nobody is taking care of university graduates. The distribution of costs are very ineffective in the sphere of education: the state finances the educational institutions rather than the education of individual students or scholars.

Another key obstacle for Ukrainian university graduates is the fact that they have a limited command of foreign languages, and yet nothing is done in this area. On the contrary, modern foreign languages other than English are increasingly being cut back. Another area of concern is that Ukrainian scientists publish relatively few articles in international journals and they are rarely engaged in research abroad, with the latter being the result of their having difficulty obtaining periods of leave for more than 15 days.

#### 4. Ideological patterns in Ukrainian higher education policy

One reason for the poor performance and the low quality of the Ukrainian education system is the old Soviet concept of the polymath human – having knowledge in a broad variety of subject areas – that is still popular amongst politicians. Therefore, previous reform efforts completely ignored the requirements of today's job market which are diametrically opposed to this concept, since everything now depends on top performance in research, highly specialised experts and strongly differentiated university locations. Instead, the educational administration promotes a kind of *studium generale*,

<sup>20</sup> “Наказ Міністерства № 1154”, 05/10/2011, <http://www.mon.gov.ua/index.php/ua/pro-ministerstvo/normativno-pravova-baza/normativno-pravova-baza-diyalnosti-ministerstva/nakazi/5953-nakaz-ministerstva-1127-vid-29092011>

<sup>21</sup> „Річне навчання харківської студентки-юристки в Голландії коштуватиме \$90 тисяч.“, 22/12/2011, <http://nashigroshi.org/2011/12/22/riche-navchannya-harkivskoji-studentky-yurystky-v-hollandiji-koshtuvatyme-90-tysyach/>

confronting students with a bloated and senseless list of subjects. Thus, subjects like history, philosophy and economics that had primarily served as a means of ideological indoctrination and consolidation in Soviet times are still compulsory for all students. These are frequently taught by the kind of people who would have most likely lost their rights to teach if a similar lustration to that in the former GDR had been carried out in Ukraine.

In the Soviet Union, a strong vertical system with barely existent horizontal links that was characterized by bloated hierarchical levels within the educational administration and institutions originated from a deep mistrust of the ruling elites vis-à-vis those whom they governed. This was reflected by the extensive control efforts that everybody involved in the educational process was subject to. These structures of ruling through top-down command structure are still present today and shape the entire educational landscape in Ukraine. Teaching staff, for example, need the signatures of all their superiors on handwritten applications for such insignificant things as reserving classrooms, from the dean up to the rector himself. As a result of this way of organising education, horizontal cooperation or common interdisciplinary projects between institutes, professors and faculties occur only rarely.

## **5. Conclusion**

The question that presents itself, particularly with regards to the demographic situation, is how long Ukraine can still afford to carry out its unsuccessful educational policies based on (post-) Soviet structures and patterns. It is simply not enough to keep affirming – as has been the case in the last 20 years – that Ukraine wants categorically to adopt the Western model of education without recognising that this also implies obligatory alterations to the system of values as well. Otherwise Ukraine's educational reform efforts remain mired in the mere relabeling of academic degrees whilst missing out on an imperative restructuring of contents.

In this respect, the current draft law under discussion by Minister Tabachnyk, Members of Parliament Yatsenyuk and Orobets' as well as Myroshnychenko are inadequate and can only serve as a rough basis for a discussion and negotiation of a new "Law on university education" – not more, not less. The latest revisions of the ministerial draft, whilst not perfect, look more promising. One can only hope that the draft law does not get watered – or voted – down and is implemented accordingly.