



# University autonomy in Ukraine: Higher education corruption and the state



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## ABSTRACT

Issues of university autonomy, self-governance, and centralization and decentralization are still at the forefront of higher education in Ukraine. This study of university governance suggests that the state is a major foe of university autonomy, though certainly not the only one. The system of centralized university governance is experiencing changes in its content, function, mechanisms, and approaches, while maintaining its unity and highly centralized structure. Thus, it is difficult to adapt and respond to free market forces and challenges brought to the fore by the Euromaidan political turmoil and the war that followed. Such phenomena as corruption in education and internal pressures, marketization of educational services and financial integrity, changing organizational and managerial structures of universities present challenges to university governance and force it to change. They may also facilitate strengthening of university autonomy. However, as long as the disease of corruption exists, all attempts to reform higher education are unlikely to be successful.

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## 1. Introduction

Ukraine as a state has almost never had sovereignty, and struggles with issues related to its regional divide, language issues, its slow pace of educational reform, and extremely sharp tone of political struggle (Osipian and Osipian, 2006, 2012). All of these characteristics leave their imprint on higher education. Russia's annexation of the Crimea and the on-going military conflict in Donbas further complicates already complex situation. While the quality of education has deteriorated significantly over the last twenty-five years since the Soviet Union's collapse, titles of "university" along with state licensing and accreditation are handed out generously, normally in exchange for bribes. Riddled with corruption, higher education institutions (HEIs) are largely incapable of producing professionals who would be able to serve the needs of a modern technologically advanced economy, if such economy is to be created in the country.

Ukraine's eight hundred HEIs, most of which are public and enroll most of the students, are overseen by the Ministry of Education and Science, headed by Serhiy Kvit<sup>1</sup> from 2014 to 2016 and since then by Lilia Hrynevych. Minister Kvit's rhetoric about the importance of university autonomy does not reach far beyond the proclamation of the term itself. The newly introduced 2014 Law on Higher Education risks to remain on paper and falling short of full scale implementation. So do other reforms and initiatives, promised or announced by the new government. Supplemental and new laws on education are likely to follow in the years to come, because in contrast to Dr. Kvit who was trained in philology, Minister Hrynevych has

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<sup>1</sup> Serhiy Kvit served as a Rector/President of the National University of [Kyiv-Mohyla Academy](http://www.kyiv-mohyla-academy.com) from 2007 until 2014, when he was appointed as a Minister of Education.

background in secondary education. In the meantime, the changes in the higher education sector, brought about by the war, are dramatic. Some HEIs struggle to relocate from the occupied territories, while others no longer exist. Some HEIs even learned how to benefit from the war. Being unable to attract faculty of high quality for decades they suddenly have received an opportunity to choose from the top-notch specialists who escaped the fighting zone. Nevertheless, these cases still constitute just isolated episodes. In general, the degree of adaptability is very low, and is not embedded in the university's governing culture or structure. Ukrainian HEIs, with their Soviet-style bureaucracy, institutional rigidity, clear lack of flexibility and slowness in response to emerging new challenges, remain distinct from their Western counterparts. Simply put, HEIs were caught unprepared, as well as the system overall was and still is not ready for major shifts and external impacts.

Dramatic political and military events since 2014 that have shaken the country, along with slow attempts at a radical reform of higher education that have continued since 1990, make Ukraine an interesting case, worthwhile of scholars' attention. The struggle for the country's true sovereignty goes hand-in-hand with a less-apparent struggle for university's autonomy. Drastic changes in the external environment, called to life by such dramatic events as the regime change and the war, urged HEIs and the educational authorities to turn to fundamental questions. These questions are: What is the university? What constitutes a HEI? What degree of state intrusion into educational affairs should be deemed necessary or acceptable?

In order to trace what the discussion on the topic of university autonomy or issues directly related to university autonomy, this paper uses literature existed on university autonomy and university governance. We also examine archival records of major media sources. This paper starts with an overview of changing functions of university governance and traces past events, discussions and discourse in the media in order to better understand recent developments in the sector of higher education. The period chosen, 1995 to 2012, covers Ukraine's independence and educational reforms that had to assure the departure from the old Soviet educational system. Completion of the Bologna Process (a series of ministerial meetings and agreements between European countries to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher-education qualifications) was initially planned for 2012. Thus, the media coverage was expected to address both the process and its results/impact on the national educational system. Implementation of the Bologna Declaration anticipated the development of university autonomy in Ukraine. The period chosen for the analysis allows to observe both formative (intermediary) and summative (final results) evaluation of this painstaking process. This period also precedes the political turmoil –Revolution of Dignity of 2013, and the war that followed. It is especially enlightening to analyze media accounts of a relatively stable system before it was subjected to rapid and major changes caused by the war. Nevertheless, the process of reforming higher education continues—now under the new ruling political regime—and thus most recent changes related to university governance are addressed in the paper as well. The paper then proceeds with the discussion of university autonomy, corruption and internal pressure, and concludes with some generalizations.

## 2. University governance

The nature and extent of institutional autonomy and its links with the issue of university governance has been addressed in numerous scholarly works over several decades. This on-going scholarly discussion relates to both developing and developed countries, including Australia (Christensen, 2011), China (Pan, 2007), Mexico (Ordorika, 2003), the UK (Tapper and Salter, 1995), and the US (Boone, 1991), to name just a few. Surprisingly, no scholarly work on university autonomy in Ukraine has been carried out, despite the significance of the topic to this country and the magnitude of the changes that have taken place in its higher education sector over the last two-and-a-half decades. The first question that emerges is that of defining “governance” as applied to the universities.

The definition of “governance” may vary depending on the field of research. Balderston (1995, p. 55) defines governance as the following: “A general definition of governance refers to the distribution of authority and functions among the units within a larger entity, the modes of communication and control among them, and the conduct of relations between the entity and the surrounding environment.” He writes that in a contemporary US university the conventional building blocks for governance within the university are its trustees, the executive administration, the faculty, and other groupings and units, such as student government and alumni. Balderston (1995) goes on to present the following list of functions that governance comprises: the safeguarding of institutional mission; the provision of a “buffer” between the internal world of the university and its external constituencies; oversight of the financial integrity and viability of the university; the enunciation of major policy standards and the initiation of actions of such magnitude that they could affect the viability of the institution; selection of the president and other key figures in the university hierarchy; and the balancing of interests between the contending stakeholders of the university. He underlines the importance of university autonomy in achieving its own goals. These functions appear to be similar to those found in other organizations, including both state bureaucracies and private corporations. And yet universities are much less deterministic organizations as compared to their governmental or corporate counterparts, and the nature and reasoning of their actions are more elusive.

Institutions denote both organizations and established practices.<sup>2</sup> Neave (1995) also points out that institutions would prove more efficient if they are endowed with a greater degree of autonomy. There are some success stories that are necessary

<sup>2</sup> Institution denotes a significant practice, relationship, or organization in a society or culture; also something or someone firmly associated with a place or thing; an established organization or corporation (such as a bank or university) especially of a public character. Merriam-Webster Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/institution> Accessed May 28, 2017.

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