

“Conditioned” Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Georgia: Talking the EU Talk

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Abstract: The article discusses the latest wave of the higher education quality assurance (QA) reform, implemented by the Government of Georgia in response to its obligations envisaged by the EU–Georgia Association Agreement and its consequent Association Agenda 2017–2020. We argue that EU conditionality was a major driving factor for the modernization of Georgian QA system according to the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG 2015), and even though the reform was mostly implemented in the framework of the country’s EU integration, an expected reward in the form of the membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) granted to the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) of Georgia was the major driving force for

implementing the reform successfully. While this reward-driven reform has resulted in the ENQA membership, it has not inevitably led to building a sustainable, independent and development-oriented external quality assurance system for the enhancement of Georgian higher education. Therefore, the entire QA reform was merely aimed at “talking the EU talk” (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005, p. 27) by the Georgian government instead of actually being focused on the development of internal “quality culture” in Georgian higher education institutions.

Keywords: *conditionality, Europeanization, higher education, modernization, quality assurance*

1. Introduction

The history of the development of the Georgian higher education (HE) system can be classified into Soviet, post-Soviet and modernization phases. The Soviet phase was marked by somewhat steady and stable development of the HE system in response to the Soviet planned economy, with only one university (Tbilisi State University, TSU) and up to twenty specialized professional, culture and arts and pedagogical institutes operating in Georgia (Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2018, pp. 177–178). The post-Soviet phase, which started after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and Georgia’s regaining of independence, was characterized by a largely unregulated state system, emergence of fresh entrepreneurs who saw a good opportunity to make a profit (Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2018, pp. 181–183), and thus, “mushrooming” of private higher education institutions (HEIs) (Glonti & Chitashvili, 2006, p. 215). Overall, the lack of funding and weak state regulations contributed to heavy corruption in the entire HE system, both private and public (Jibladze & Glonti, 2018, p. 2; Chitashvili, 2020, pp. 95–97).

The new governmental team that came to power after the so-called Rose Revolution, by the end of 2003, saw the HE reform as part of its country-wide reforms aiming at fighting corruption and building up new, accountable state institutions and thus, transforming the post-Soviet Georgia into a European country (Chitashvili, 2020, p. 98). In this perspective, modernization of the national HE system served as a “manifestation of the Western course of the country” (Lezhava & Amashukeli, 2015, p. 9). This phase that we classify as the modernization of the Georgian HE system is mostly linked to adoption

of the new law of HE in 2004 and joining the Bologna Process in 2005 at the Bergen Summit. In other words, becoming a member of the Bologna Process and European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was an official starting point of Europeanization of the national HE system (Jibladze & Glonti, 2018, p. 3).

The new Law on Higher Education was adopted in 2004, introducing three-tier degree systems (bachelor, master, PhD), European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), mobility programs for students and staff, internationalization possibilities for HEIs, and most importantly, quality assurance system (QA), which had never existed before and was largely unknown to Georgian HE (Lezhava & Amashukeli, 2015; Jibladze & Glonti, 2018; Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2018). The first national QA agency (formerly known as National Accreditation Center, NCEA) was introduced in 2004 under the aegis of the Ministry of Education and Science (MES),¹ as a semi-autonomous unit that aimed to grant institutional accreditation, i.e. state license to higher education institutions to legally operate on the Georgian territory (Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2018, pp. 189–191). The establishment of NCEA can be assumed as one of the first attempts to transpose the European norms of QA into the Georgian HE system. However, the new QA system was criticized for being rather formal and mainly aimed at reducing the number of HEIs (Chakhaia & Bregvadze, 2018, pp. 190–191). Thus, in 2010 a new Law on Educational Quality Enhancement was adopted, under which the NCEA was transformed into the National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE). Within this wave of reform, two new notions were introduced—institutional authorization, i.e. licensing of HEIs, and program accreditation, which was linked, and still is, to the state funding—only the accredited academic programs can receive students with state scholarships (Law of Georgia on Higher Education, Art. 66). At the same time, the NCEQE applied for the membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), an umbrella organization for the QA agencies operating throughout the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)² and became first its associate member in 2013. To summarize, after the 2010 reforms, the national QA system became more compliant with the Bologna principles relying on two main institutional actors (which still is the case): the NCEQE, an external actor for evaluating the quality of education in Georgia, and QA units in HEIs (internal actor). The latter is a mandatory structural unit for the state universities according to the Law of Georgia

¹ Currently, the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport (since 2018), MES hereafter.

² Established on the basis of the Recommendation R98/561/EC.

on Higher Education (Art. 15, Point 2); however, all private universities also have them (Javakhishvili *et al.*, 2010).

The higher education QA system developments in Georgia in 2004–2010 were followed by a next wave of large-scale reforms. This was caused by extensive criticism of the external QA mechanisms (both institutional authorization and program accreditation) for being input-driven, rigid, mismatching the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) (Darchia *et al.*, 2019, p. 11), as well as for being used rather as “punitive measures” against HEIs (Lezhava & Amashukeli, 2015, p. 27). In short, the external QA system was assessed as non-effective and not necessarily aimed at enhancing the quality of higher education. Therefore, in 2015, MES introduced the legal changes for further transformation of the national higher education QA system in order to make it more compliant with the ESG standards. After piloting, the revised external QA standards and procedures were officially adopted by the end of 2017 and, starting from 2018, the new process of institutional authorization and program accreditation was launched. As we argue below, this endeavor was preceded by signing, in 2014, the EU–Georgia Association Agreement (AA) that has largely contributed to the initiation of the reform, as enhancing the quality of education has been underlined as one of the focal points of the AA regarding HE (Art. 359c).

Considering all the above, it can be said that within the entire modernization phase Georgia was trying to adjust the national HE system to the European model, i.e. to Europeanize it. Therefore, in this article, we will discuss the modernization process of the Georgian HE system from the perspective of Europeanization. In particular, we are analyzing the modernization process of the higher education external quality assurance system and, especially, the second wave of reforms. We are using theoretical models suggested by Radaelli (2004) and Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005) for analyzing the Europeanization of non-EU states aspiring for EU membership.

In contrast to the classical theories of European integration, which refer to the topics of formation and development of European policies and institutions, their modes of governance (inter- or supra-national), the balance of power between the states and European institutions, etc., the research agenda of Europeanization is mostly focused on studying the incorporation processes of the European policies into national politics. It explores the ways of domestic policy adjustments and relations between the state and European institutions beyond the assumptions on the balance of power (Radaelli, 2004, pp. 2–3). In other words, Europeanization shifts the research focus towards the impact of

the process of European integration on the state’s domestic political systems and the following (domestic) changes (Radaelli, 2004; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005) and identifies the mechanisms that are used in the process of aligning the national frameworks to the European one.

Thus, through the lens of Europeanization framework, we explore the process of adoption and integration of the ESG into the national higher education external quality assurance, look at the models/mechanisms through which this process took place, and try to answer the following research questions: What was the main mechanism stimulating the adoption of the European quality assurance standards? And whether or not the implemented QA reform has actually made any substantial impact on improving the quality of higher education, or it remained only on the façade without supporting the development of high-quality education in Georgia?

2. Europeanization and its logic of action

The most well-known definition of Europeanization has been proposed by Claudio M. Radaelli (2004) who defines Europeanization as a set of

processes of construction, diffusion, and institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things’ and shared beliefs and norms, which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, political structures, and public policies. (Radaelli, 2004, p. 3)

In other words, Europeanization is an interactive process between the state and European institutions, instead of being simply unidirectional reactions to “Brussels”. The notion of “impact” should not be understood as an automatic and static result of linear, top-down communications led by European institutions with the state, but rather as opportunities provided for “creative usage” of Europe by the national actors. Therefore, Europeanization explores how domestic changes happen and what are the patterns of adaptation to the European policies taking place at the national level (Radaelli, 2004, pp. 4–6).

There are certain models and mechanisms to analyze the process of Europeanization and evaluate its domestic impact (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005; Schimmelfennig, 2012). More specifically, these are the

mechanisms of adoption of EU rules that vary across the models. In this perspective, the “rules” consider a wide range of formal as well as informal structures and norms (standards) that are to be transposed from the EU into the national laws and domestic settings, and while analyzing the “rule adoption”, one should focus on the process of institutionalization of EU rules in the national domains (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005, pp. 10–11).

The *external incentives model* envisaging *conditionality* as the core mechanism of Europeanization is most commonly used in the states beyond the EU longing for the EU membership (Schimmelfennig, 2010; 2012). The external incentives model goes in line with the “logic of consequences”. This is the institutional “logic of action” in frames of which the process of rule adoption is performed by the actors who are mostly guided by rational and strategic aspirations in order to maximize their benefits. This model is driven by the system of external rewards (assistance and institutional ties) and sanctions: the EU sets the conditions for the rule transfer and adoption, and the state, on its part, calculates the cost-benefit (not necessarily only financial but political as well) of the rule adoption process.³ However, it is in the rule-adopting state’s best interest to fulfill them in order to gain the promised rewards. Therefore, the external incentives model is considered a rationalist bargaining model. The results of the bargaining process greatly depend on the bargaining power of the international and domestic actors, which is asymmetrically distributed among them. Generally, the rule-setting actor (in this case, the EU) holds superior bargaining power over the other (the non-EU country) and thus makes its promises as well as threats credible enough (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005, pp. 15–18).

According to the scholarly literature, the forms of the rule adoption and their institutionalization differ according to the explanatory models of Europeanization as well. There are formal (or normative), discursive (or communicative) and behavioral forms of the rule adoption distinguished in the literature (Hasenclever, Mayer & Rittberger; Raymond, cited in Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). While the first (formal) form assumes the transposition of EU rules into national legislation or adjustment of national formal institutions according to EU standards, the second (discursive) is specified by the integration and diffusion of EU rules as a positive reference among the domestic actors, who can either use this reference strategically to “talk the talk” and perform the “rhetorical action” or be truly influenced by the norms. Finally, the third (behavioral) form of the rule adoption can

³ According to the 2017 and 2018 budget reports of the NCEQE, the cost of the reform amounted to approximately 387,825 US dollars.

be assessed according to the conformity level of actual behavior with the adopted rules (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005, pp. 11–12).

According to prior research, the discursive adoption of the rules is expected when the external incentives model of Europeanization takes place. Generally, in contrast to two other forms of the rule adoption (formal and behavioral), the discursive one is the least expensive option for the states, and all it takes is the rhetorical “talking the EU talk”. Formal adoption is a substantially more costly option, nevertheless, it can still be expected to happen in the form of the so-called ‘Potemkin harmonization’ (Jacoby, cited in Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2005, p. 27): the state establishes or transforms the national legal framework and institutions according to EU requirements but rather for “external consumption without or with little impact on actual inner-state politics and outcomes” (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005, p. 28). The most expensive form of rule adoption is the behavioral one as it takes to bear the full cost of compliance (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005, pp. 26–27).

In addition to the forms of institutionalization, the literature suggests different possible outcomes of Europeanization. According to Radaelli’s (2003) classification, there are four types of outcomes: inertia, when no actual changes happen in the domestic politics as the EU policies and practices are perceived as entirely different and incompatible; absorption, when non-fundamental changes do happen on the basis of “accommodation of the policy requirements”, however, without substantial changes in domestic political settings and overall “logic of actions” (behavior) of the state;⁴ transformation, when a fundamental, or as it is called, “paradigmatic” change happens in the state’s political actions; and retrenchment, when already existing similarities with the EU model decrease, instead of approximation (Radaelli, 2003, pp. 37–38).

Both the forms of institutionalization of the EU rules and its possible outcomes are important issues for analyzing Georgia’s quest (including its HE system) for the EU approximation, considering that conditionality is the main mechanism in Georgia’s Europeanization, especially after signing the EU–Georgia AA in 2014 (Tsuladze *et al.*, 2016). The AA, in turn, can be discussed as the external reward that Georgia has received on its way to

⁴ At some point, this term ‘absorption’ connotatively resembles the term ‘Potemkin harmonization’ used above, as both of them refer to the façade-type action. However, we should pay attention that ‘Potemkin harmonization’ is used when describing the forms of rule adoption, while ‘absorption’ refers to the actual outcomes of the rule adoption. Hereinafter, we use the two terms to distinguish between these two processes—form and outcome.

European integration starting since 1999 when the country became the 41st Member State of the Council of Europe and later on the member of European Neighborhood Policy (2006) and Eastern Partnership (2009).

The same can be said about the HE system. As mentioned above, the entire modernization process of the Georgian HE system, as well as that of the QA system, is a substantial part of and somewhat conditioned itself by the country's overall Europeanization. Therefore, we deploy the conceptual framework of Europeanization, and namely, the external incentives model and conditionality to explain the development of the national system of external quality assurance, which is a significant part of the HE system reforms in the recent years. More precisely, the research will address the second wave of reforms targeting the higher education external quality assurance due to two main reasons: first, the initiation of these reforms took place after Georgia signed the EU AA in 2014 (which means that Georgia's European integration has entered a more intensive phase), and secondly, the alignment of the national standards of institutional authorization and program accreditation with ESG 2015 which preceded Georgia's full membership of ENQA. We assume these are the main political circumstances we should consider to address our research questions in this work.

3. Methodology

To address the main research questions, we analyzed a series of strategic documents related to Georgia's European integration (EU–Georgia AA and its subsequent Association Agenda 2017) and the Georgian HE system (Law on Higher Education, Law on Educational Quality Enhancement, Joint Strategy of Education and Science of Georgia 2017–2020). The analysis is also enriched by different academic literature, policy documents and research reports discussing the Georgian higher education system, including the topics related to quality assurance.

Furthermore, our analysis is based on the qualitative research data retrieved from 30 in-depth interviews with representatives of Georgian higher education institutions from Tbilisi and regions (rectors, vice rectors, heads of internal quality assurance units), education experts (Erasmus+ National Team of Higher Education Reform Experts) and scholars, as well as former educational policymakers (former deputy ministers of HE and other representatives of MES responsible for higher education reform,

representatives of NCEQE involved in the implementation of different waves of the QA reform). In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide with the respondents selected through the purposive sampling method. The interview transcripts were coded, categorized and processed through a content analysis method.

4. “Conditioned” quality assurance in higher education

Modernization, that is Europeanization of the external quality assurance system of the Georgian higher education, and especially, the second wave of the reforms, is well-explained by the external incentives model considering conditionality as the main driving mechanism to foster changes in the domestic political systems. In fact, Chapter 16 on ‘Education, training and youth’ of the EU–Georgia AA sets a clear condition for “promoting quality in higher education in a manner which is consistent with the EU Modernization Agenda for Higher Education and the Bologna process” (Association Agreement, 2014, p. 121), while in Annex XXXII it provides special recommendations as references according to which “Georgia will conduct and develop policy consistent with the framework of EU policies and practices [...]” (Association Agreement, 2014, pp. 122, 609). Subsequently, “strengthening an independent and development-oriented quality assurance system [...]” has been one of the main requirements for Georgia’s further integration into the EHEA/ENQA reflected in the EU–Georgia Association Agenda 2017–2020 (Association Agenda Between the European Union and Georgia, 2017–2020, p. 54) as well as in the National Strategy on Education and Science 2017–2021 in the form of strategic objective that should have been achieved in 2018.

Herewith, it is noteworthy that the underpinning conditionality of higher education quality assurance system reform is also mentioned in the special report on Analysis of Development and Implementation of the Authorization Mechanism for Higher Education Institutions (Darchia *et al.*, 2019).⁵ According to the authors, meeting the requirements set by the EU–Georgia AA as well as the EHEA, was one of the main purposes of the quality assurance system reform (Darchia *et al.*, 2019, p. 12).

⁵ This is the only comprehensive report reviewing the recent quality assurance reform developments with a special emphasis on the authorization of Georgian HEIs and is prepared by the Erasmus + National Team of Higher Education Reform Experts.

Full membership of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) was the external reward Georgia received in April 2019 as a result of the successful adoption and implementation of ESG 2015 and, thus, for fulfilling the set conditions. In fact, the ENQA full membership was a stated purpose in the scope of the QA reform (Darchia *et al.*, 2019, p. 12) and reflected in the National Strategy on Education and Science 2017–2021 as well. Georgia and, namely, the NCEQE started the ENQA membership application process in March 2018, right after the beginning of the full-scale implementation of the revised external quality assurance standards and procedures at Georgian HEIs in February 2018 (Darchia *et al.*, 2019, p. 13). It should also be mentioned that along with the ENQA membership, Georgia (NCEQE) registered in European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) as well (Darchia *et al.*, 2019, p. 9).

The QA system development being driven by the external incentives model is also reflected in our empirical data. Namely, according to our respondents, even though joining the Bologna Process in 2005 was a deliberate act to manifest the country's European path, in the course of development, certain reforms became part of the EU's conditionality. For instance, the development of the entire QA system is perceived as a condition set forth by the EU. More precisely, the majority of our respondents believe that the development of an external QA system (including the very last wave of reforms) was initiated because of the EU requirements and their inclusion in the EU–Georgia AA, and not necessarily by the understanding of its essential need. This indicates that the mechanism of conditionality is required in order to ensure the implementation of certain reforms and the sustainability of their outcomes.

The Bologna Process did not start in 2005 in Georgia... there always was a gaze towards this [Western-style education] before, we always looked at the West and thought about it... now we have certain obligations within the Association Agreement that do not only include quality assurance, but also closer unification of the entire system to the European one. [Former Educational Policymaker]

[W]hen you do not have an internal state policy, the Bologna requirements are a certain basis for sustainability. We need to use this leverage to do something internally... We would not be able to do even half of it... We need it [the Bologna Process] to align to. For instance, when the implementation of the new authorization mechanism required to amend the law, the argument was not about the fact that this is needed for the

country to improve quality, but about the Association Agreement and the Bologna requirements. [Higher Education Expert]

However, these “requirements” from the EU, as well as the Bologna Process, are perceived as a rather positive push factor that has a somewhat double effect: first, the current system is more structured, much more effective than its predecessor for setting forth high standards for higher education; and on the other hand, universities see certain benefits they can gain from this process in terms of internal development.

I think now they [universities] have started to work in this direction [quality assurance] more rigorously, while before the evaluation of quality assurance was perceived as a much more bureaucratic mechanism by higher education institutions. This time, people made sense of these regulations and the process went beyond the formality of submitting documentation to the quality assurance center. [Higher Education Reform Expert]

As research on Europeanization suggests, when it comes to the external incentives model and conditionality, the likelihood of the EU-rule adoption increases if costs are low, conditional promises are high and certain, possible sanctions are credible and veto players (those among the domestic actors who reject the conditions) are few (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005, pp. 15–28; Schimmelfennig, 2012, pp. 7–8). First, we would like to mention that the cost (both financial and political) for implementing the higher education quality assurance reform in 2017–2018 was definitely outweighed by the promised reward Georgia received in the form of the ENQA full membership in 2019 and thus, gaining additional prospects for its further European integration. Besides, we assume that the high likelihood of implementing this reform in such a highly productive way was defined by tangible results it could provide in quite a short run (like the ENQA full membership in two years) compared to, for example, improving research and innovation capacities, and developing of innovation policy and STI system (that are also envisaged by the Association Agenda 2017–2020 and National Strategy 2017–2021), which require more funding, as well as greater human resources, and are more likely to reveal its actual benefits in a much longer perspective.

While the recent higher education quality assurance reform made such quick success, in the course of its actual implementation, certain hindrances came across that were closely related to political interventions. The thing is that leadership in the MES of Georgia and, hence, the leadership of the NCEQE

had changed several times during the reform implementation process (Darchia *et al.*, 2019). In September 2018, when the revised QA procedures and mechanisms were completely operational, and the ENQA application process was in full progress, the Minister of MES (Mr. Mikheil Batiashvili, the third minister appointed during the implementation process of the QA reform in July 2018) introduced a new political narrative regarding the external evaluation of Georgian HEIs. Namely, he publicly declared that the mission of the quality assurance system had to be reconsidered and the system itself transformed into a rather “helpful” institution to HEIs instead of being a system aiming at their “control” through the vast and comprehensive evaluation procedures, thus giving a hint that previously the aim of the process was somewhat different.⁶ While in reality, his change of rhetoric was followed by the lobbying of legal amendments initiated by the former Head of the Parliamentary Committee for Education and Science in order to suspend the authorization process of the HEIs for two years (Darchia *et al.*, 2019, pp. 61–62), which seemed to be focused on “saving” from closure some private universities that fell under the patronage of certain politicians (Tabula, 2018). No doubt, such a radical shift would have changed the entire idea of employing a comprehensive and consistent external evaluation of education quality at Georgian HEIs.

However, all these changes lobbied by the internal “veto players” in the Georgian government in 2018 had been deterred with a great effort made by the academic society and educational experts. With an open letter concerning threats for system-level QA reforms, the Higher Education Reforms Experts (HEREs) of the Erasmus National Office approached the Parliament of Georgia as well as the MES in September 2018 (several days after the Minister’s public speech). The authors of this public letter emphasized that the adoption of the abovementioned legislative changes would lead to the infringement of the EU–Georgia AA commitments, threaten the receipt of ENQA membership and thus, Georgia’s further integration in the EHEA (Darchia *et al.*, 2019, p. 25). Therefore, as the possible sanctions for taking the “wrong side of the

⁶ Prior to this statement, on September 10, 2018, Mr. Batiashvili made a public announcement about the resignation of Tamar Sanikidze (among the other executive directors of several state agencies, e.g., National Center for Teachers Professional Development, Rustaveli National Science Foundation, National Assessment and Examinations Center) who was leading the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) since 2016 and was in charge of the higher education quality assurance system reforms in 2016–2018. As it was explained by Mr. Batiashvili, this decision was made due to the upcoming series of reforms that aimed at building the competitive education system in Georgia adapted to the modern requirements. Therefore, as Mr. Batiashvili mentioned, “this process requires new energy, new visions and new personnel” (*ImediNews*, 2018).

track” were quite credible and the price for mismatching the conditions was substantially high, the Parliament of Georgia did not approve of the initiated legislative changes by the committee and the authorization process of HEIs and the overall quality assurance reform continued as it was planned from the beginning. In this context, it is also important to mention that the ENQA special review to the NCEQE made a significant emphasis on taking measures to make the latter entirely independent from the government (and the MES, respectively). Moreover, the ENQA Board expressed deep concerns about frequent changes in the NCEQE management and its negative influence on the agency’s further work and development. Therefore, despite granting Georgia with the membership of ENQA, the latter set a two-year deadline (April 2021) for NCEQE to address the concerns and fulfill respective recommendations outlined in the ENQA agency report in April 2019 (Frederiks *et al.*, 2019).

No doubt, more time should pass before the full-scale evaluation of the actual impact of the recent QA reform as to whether it has improved the overall higher education quality in the country. However, there are a number of institutional-level outcomes received as an immediate result of implementing the new external evaluation procedures at the Georgian HEIs, such as reduced number of higher education institutions as well as academic programs, increased accountability within the HEIs, improved student services, etc. (Darchia *et al.*, 2019, p. 59). The development of “quality culture” at Georgian HEIs is emphasized as one of the most important positive outcomes that the recent changes have provided. The latter is described as an implication of internal preparatory work (shared responsibility within the higher education institutions for the preparation of self-evaluation report, revision and development of internal regulations, missions and strategies, financial and human resources, academic programs, etc.) that the Georgian HEIs had to undertake prior to the authorization procedure (Darchia *et al.*, 2019, pp. 58–59).

On the other hand, further clarification is required to understand whether the abovementioned “quality culture” is merely a result of strategic and temporal decisions made by the university leadership to demonstrate joint preparation for the authorization/accreditation processes, or rather an internalized motivation of administrative and academic staff to care for ensuring quality education (even without external requirements). According to our respondents, the development of quality culture can be considered a combination of both factors, but ideally, it should be driven by the internally self-regulating and “bottom-up” attitude to provide high-quality education that does not necessarily depend on external evaluation procedures. Even

though the latter is not yet very tangible in case of Georgian HEIs, the fact that the external quality evaluation is no longer regarded as “sole responsibility of HEI quality assurance unit” [Higher Education Reform Expert] is perceived as a positive step towards development of institutionalized quality culture by some of our respondents.

My colleague once said, quality is when you teach well, do research well and you cannot do otherwise... quality culture means an inner feeling that you cannot do otherwise... when we get there, whatever is written on the paper won't mean anything. [Higher Education Reform Expert, Former Policymaker]

We only remember quality assurance when dealing with authorization and accreditation. And this harmful culture of doing things is triggered by external challenges. It works differently when you really care and this needs to be worked on. [Professor at a Private University, Accreditation Expert]

Quality culture means to involve academic society from the beginning to the end, if we really need to achieve high quality. This is supported by the new standards but the process is not finished yet. [Higher Education Reform Expert]

It should also be mentioned that some of the higher education experts and representatives of the academic community we interviewed are quite critical about the implemented quality assurance reform. Their comments mostly indicate a lack of system-level improvements, though there are certain positive institutional-level outcomes provided by the QA reform. The respondents assume that the reform had more of a formal character and in order to translate the normative changes into the actual enhancement of educational quality, the service providers (HEIs, academic personnel, etc.) and also students should internalize the importance of quality education (which is currently regulated externally by the authorized state agency) and make it operational in everyday life. Nevertheless, this cannot be achieved in a short time.

Formally, we have accomplished a lot: regulations, rules, formal institutions have been created. The thing that the Bologna Process cannot do and that requires a lot of time is a mental shift that has happened neither in case of university professors and administrators nor in case of students and their parents. Not to the extent we expected it to happen. [Higher Education Reform Expert]

Those universities that gave no or little thought to it [quality of education], started to actively discuss it. However, I cannot say something has improved drastically, I don't think so. Maybe, it did on the normative level but by submitting the documents one cannot improve teaching in two days. [Higher Education Reform Expert, Former Policymaker]

The very essence of formality of changes mentioned in the interviews resembles the so-called ‘Potemkin harmonization’ (Jacoby, cited in Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005), meaning that although the reforms are factually implemented and acknowledged by the “external reviewers”, i.e., the ENQA Board, there are no tangible and sustainable improvements achieved internally, i.e., no real enhancement of education quality. Thus, the reforms serve as a façade for the “external consumption” (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005) and their outcomes are of the absorption-type (Radaelli, 2003): while the European policy requirements are successfully accommodated in place, there are no essential transformations in domestic logic of “doing things”.

This not only touches upon the general teaching and learning ecosystem in universities but the actions of the responsible state agencies as well. According to some of the respondents’ narratives, after receiving the ENQA membership as a reward for meeting the EU and Bologna Process conditions successfully, the authorization procedures at the HEIs have become milder and somewhat even biased, showing preferential treatment to certain universities. Some of our respondents explain this fluctuation of the QA system and certain drawbacks by the fact that the sustainability of quality evaluation still depends not on the coherent institutional approach but rather on individuals’ preferences that are in charge.

This [the way the quality assurance system works] is still formal and it is called façade-driven in theories. It's quite strange that we still get international rewards, e.g. the ENQA membership. Getting the membership was followed by certain changes in NCEQE. In the period of institutional development, one should support things by action and be more consistent with what you do; and if not, you simply go back to the old story. [Higher Education Expert, Former Policymaker]

Several times the experts prepared the evaluation report and the [authorization] Council⁷ changed it. In some cases, the report was

⁷ Both accreditation and authorization councils are elected for one-year period. The candidates are nominated by the Minister of Education, while an official appointment (or dismissal) is made by the Prime Minister of Georgia (Law of Georgia on Education Quality Improvement,

improved without any ground, while in case of some universities, on the contrary, it was downgraded. This kind of practice raises questions on the impartiality of the process. [Representative of a Public University, Authorization Expert]

It is interesting to mention that the tendency of “softening” the comprehensive and solid character of the overall external evaluation system of higher education goes in line with the agenda of transforming the latter into a “comforting” institution for HEIs as it was mentioned by Minister Batiashvili in September 2018, prior to the ENQA’s official visit to Georgia in October to evaluate compliance of the revised quality assurance standards with the ESG 2015. Nevertheless, it is obvious that this new agenda (softening of rhetoric and approach to authorization/accreditation) has been temporarily terminated in 2018 and was activated again after receiving the ENQA membership—a promised prize for aligning the national quality assurance system to the ESG model. This was most probably caused by the potential threat of not getting any rewards in case of Georgia’s failure to fulfil the commitments envisaged by the AA. In fact, as the literature suggests, conditionality works at its best before receiving the rewards, as it serves as a reinforcement mechanism to keep up with the set commitments (Maniokas, cited in Tsuladze *et al.*, 2016). Hence, it seems to be the same case with respect to the recent higher education quality assurance reform in Georgia. Furthermore, as our research data suggest, the Europeanization of the national QA system has mostly happened in formal and discursive forms through aligning the legislative norms to the European ones (in the manner of ‘Potemkin harmonization’) and setting up the positive narrative on the great importance of institutionalizing the European QA standards into the everyday life of the Georgian HEIs (in the mold of “rhetorical action”). Consequently, it has not resulted in system-level changes (in the form of behavioral compliance with the institutionalized norms) that would guarantee the consistency of reforms and actions and lead to what Radaelli (2003) calls the *transformation* of the system instead of *absorption* that refers to a superficial modification of outlook, while the substance remains the same.

2010).

5. Conclusion

Conditionality has served as the main driving factor for further modernization, i.e., the Europeanization of Georgia’s higher education quality assurance system. To meet the conditions set in the framework of the EU–Georgia AA (2014) requiring to make the country’s HE quality policy consistent with the EU Modernization Agenda for Higher Education and the Bologna Process, was an important political step forward Georgia had to make on its way to further European integration.

In fact, the series of legal and structural changes preceded the adoption of the ESG 2015 and the final institutionalization of the revised higher education quality assurance system. However, after receiving the promised rewards (i.e., the ENQA membership), there are noteworthy inconsistencies observed in the system, which threaten its sustainability and further development to provide a solid and comprehensive impact on quality education in the country. Put differently, the recent higher education quality assurance reform resonates with the idea of ‘Potemkin harmonization’ (Jacoby, cited in Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier ,2005) quite well: although formally all is set (amended legal framework, revised and implemented quality assurance standards, acknowledged success), it is less likely that Georgian government has been driven by a keen interest and motivation to employ the EU leverages as real solutions to the domestic HE quality problems, build the independent and development-oriented quality assurance system in the country (as it is mentioned in the Association Agenda 2017–2020) and strengthen the internal “quality culture” at the Georgian HEIs.

The recent quality assurance reform was mostly “rhetorical action” and as much as it aimed at “talking the EU talk” (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005, p. 27), it can be interpreted as the discursive form of institutionalization of the European higher education quality assurance policy—gaining a big reward at a low cost (such as the ENQA full membership and thus, meeting the EU conditions).

Considering the developments mentioned above, it is less expected that the QA reform will have a substantial system-level impact in terms of the actual enhancement of higher education quality in the country. However, it would be quite a good “test” for the Government of Georgia whether it decides to fulfill the recommendation received from the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) to make

the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) completely independent of the government. Otherwise it might lose its reward in the form of the ENQA membership. Thus, it would be an interesting issue for future research to explore. But what is obvious now, the recent QA modernization process has fit in the external incentives model of Europeanization and its “logic of consequences”, where conditionality is the main driving mechanism to foster domestic changes, however, not necessarily leading to actual and sustainable improvements in the national settings. Instead, it frequently results in façade-type adjustments and outcomes for receiving instant benefits.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia (SRNSFG) [grant number FR 18-13966]. The authors would like to thank Dr. Lia Tsuladze for comments on an earlier draft, as well as Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation for financially supporting the project ‘Challenges to Bologna: High-Productive Labor Force and Higher Education in Georgia’.

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