

INTERNATIONALIZATION OF UNIVERSITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF BULGARIAN FOREIGN POLICY

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Abstract

The internationalization of universities is part of the process of globalization and the transformation of the world into a "global village," a theory introduced by Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s. With the entry of the information age and the development of mass communications, the distance between the individual and the rapid dissemination of information decreased.

Universities quickly had to make their online presence through websites, social media profiles and even applications. This gave them access to a larger number of potential students. On the other hand, the student receives feedback on access to education, its quality and opportunities for realization. This trend will progress as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

The goal of Bulgarian higher education should be to increase its recognition - firstly, among the Bulgarian communities abroad, secondly, through the rapid entry of new student markets. The tasks to be set are investments in quality, enhanced entry into the information society and the implementation of the higher education roadmap, which will provide an opportunity for orientation of potential students. It is also crucial to build strong "alumni" clubs and the real subsequent connection with them.

With the implementation of such a policy in the universities in Bulgaria, the process of internationalization will begin, which is a function of the prestige of the higher education institution. A process necessary for Bulgarian foreign policy to achieve better convergence, coherence and in-depth knowledge of partner countries. This, in turn, would allow for the implementation of policies in various sectors through the exercise of "soft power" in international relations.

Keywords: *university, higher education, science, globalization, internationalization, quality, foreign policy, geopolitical influence, historical communities, alumni clubs*

1. GLOBALIZATION PROCESSES AND THEIR IMPACT ON UNIVERSITIES

Globalization is a process associated primarily with economic and political changes that occurred in the period after World War II. The need for a rapid recovery of the world's countries began the creation of trade and customs unions, the main purpose of which was to create a single market that would remove borders and stimulate the growth of production and consumption. The operation of which was carried out outside the scope of nation-states. The process of commitment and cooperation has faced states with a number of problems and reforms that have shaken the traditional foundations of nations.

Economic and political disparities must be regulated and integrated into common mechanisms for overcoming imbalances in relations. Supranational institutions have been established, whose main task is to administer geopolitical and geoeconomic processes. Institutions of this type are the UN, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization.

In addition to the process of globalization, a process of regionalization is taking place in parallel, and this process does not exclude the other. Regional unions are the European Union, the Eurasian Union, the Visegrad Four and others. Many studies equate the two processes because they both use the same mechanisms.

As Assoc. Prof. Dr. Valentin Mihailov points out: *"The American sociologist Chase-Dunn (1999, pp. 190–193) concludes that there are at least five clearly identifiable aspects of globalization: 1) general environmental constraints, to which the author refers "global environmental threats posed by ecosystem vulnerability and the globalization of environmental risk", with only nowadays environmental*

degradation beginning to be taken into account at global level'; 2) cultural globalization, associated with two types of cultural phenomena: the spread of individual values of Western origin to all major groups of the world population; recognition of individual rights and identities, as well as transnational efforts to protect "human rights"; 3) globalization of communications, related to the new era of information technology - "the infrastructure of global communication has the power to move visible and invisible things from one part of the world to another, whether countries like it or not"; 4) economic globalization, which "encompasses economic relations covering the entire earth. The most significant developments are the interconnections between markets, finance, goods and services and the networks established by transnational corporations."; 5) political globalization, the essence of which is in the "institutionalization of international political structures".

In the context of cultural globalization and the new era of information technology, new paradigms of social relations have been created. They are mainly related to the transformation, massification and modification of human consciousness and the creation of an algorithm of behavior, regardless of geographical location.

The information age has expanded and exceeded Marshall McLoughlin's expectations and his theory of the "global village," in which electronic technology, media, and new communication opportunities will influence culture. The Internet community is strengthening its position to disseminate, comment on and analyze world news. Users who send materials to social media (radio, websites, online television, social networks, etc.), authors of documentaries and other films, experts, publicists and bloggers are becoming more active. The culture of sharing and new ways to get involved are coming to power.

The behavior of everyone on the Internet is the same, regardless of race, nationality, religion and others. Mass communications, the Internet and social networks reduce distance between individuals. Today, more than ever, a person can have complete, detailed and systematized information about a person, organization, institution and others. In this environment of dynamic development of communications and public information, Bulgarian universities must adapt to the cultural characteristics of the information age. They need to establish an online presence through sites, portals, even social media profiles, apps and more. This will give them access to more potential students. On the other hand, the potential student receives feedback on access to education, its quality and opportunities for realization. The comprehensiveness of the behavior of universities on the Internet will give them a tool for their internationalization. In this global information world, proper targeting, digitalization and increasing the prestige of universities are key to their development.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF BULGARIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

The system of higher education in Bulgaria includes 51 higher schools (37 public and 14 private), including 44 universities and specialized higher schools and 7 independent colleges.

This network significantly exceeds the average indicators of a number of comparable in terms of population and territory countries of the European Union countries, which adversely affects the quality of education.

Bulgarian higher education operates in accordance with the Higher Education Act, the Academic Community Development Act of the Republic of Bulgaria, the European Education Area Project, the Higher Education Development Strategy 2014 - 2020 and others. These documents determine the structure and functionality of the entire system. The higher education strategy identifies some of the significant problems facing the system. Most of them are related to the low quality of the educational service. The drastic discrepancy in the acquisition of knowledge and functional skills for the needs of the labor market.

The growing trend of acquiring education abroad and the growing competition in the European educational space. Poor recognition of universities as a means of professional realization and early departure from the system. Lack of promotion of research by young researchers. The deteriorating material base, etc. The analysis of the problems, challenges and achievements defines the new goals and the future development of higher education.

In order to overcome these inequalities, amendments to the Higher Education Act were adopted by the National Assembly last year, which enabled the state to exercise direct control over the system and to prepare a “road map” regulating the profile and territorial structure of higher education in the country by professional fields and specialties.

Universities enjoy academic autonomy, but their activities are carried out for the benefit of society, which allocates significant funds for their development. For the last year with the Law on the state budget all universities have received a subsidy in the amount of BGN 682 956 million. With the changes in the Higher Education Act, the Strategies for Development of HE 2014. - 2020 and 2021. - 2031 aims to optimize the university network and achieve a model of institutional accountability and transparent management of public funds. The Council of Ministers, represented by the Minister of Education and Science, has a guiding and supporting role in approving the development policies of state higher education institutions. Another goal is integration with European requirements and criteria. The changes made will lead to the construction of a stable system of higher education, which will respond to the dynamic social processes and increase the quality.

3. GOALS OF BULGARIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

3.1. Improving the quality

The main task for Bulgarian higher education should be to increase the quality, which is measured by the final result. The means to achieve better education are:

- High motivation of the learner;
- Professionalism of the teaching staff;
- Partnership between all stakeholders - trainee, trainer and the labor market;
- Modernization of the material base;
- Increasing the recognition and prestige of higher education institutions abroad;

The adopted "Strategy for Development of Higher Education 2014. - 2020 "covered all the components needed to achieve better education. Significant progress has been made in this process over the same period. Despite great efforts, there is a serious lack of progress on some criteria.

Student motivation is one of the main criteria for better education. The educational system should place the student at the center of the educational process, not as it is now - the teachers. The key to achieving better motivation is the involvement of students in self-development and specialization within the specialty, what is meant: Currently in a specialty a student can study certain disciplines, structured in order and chronology of the department. In the current system, self-construction, specialization and structuring, according to the student's scientific interests, are excluded. If the student has the opportunity to choose disciplines that go beyond those provided by the department, but are accredited at the university, this will contribute to the professional growth and individualization of student knowledge. Another positive point will be the increase of students' motivation to search, study and self-develop.

One of the main tools of the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) for monitoring universities, and the education they provide, is linking funding to the quality ratio. At present, approximately 60% of the state subsidy to higher education institutions is determined by quality criteria.

Funds for continuing qualification of the teaching staff were provided through the operational program "Science and Education for Smart Growth". In this way, the teachers are stimulated and encouraged to develop professionally, improve their language skills and participate in international projects. Increasing the potential of teachers and improving their language skills is a starting point for the internationalization of higher education. Unfortunately, there is little interest from lecturers, especially in universities outside the capital.

Another tool is to increase the role of the National Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation (NEAA), which evaluates and controls the system. The inclusion of NEAA in 2018 in the European Association

for Quality Assurance (EACC) makes legitimate any assessment of universities in the European educational area. The change in standards and criteria reflects the European quality in education.

Serious attention should be paid to the Rating System, which provides annual information on the status of each professional field in order to improve the quality. Here, the relationship between student, teacher and the labor market is most pronounced, as this system provides a benchmark, on a competitive basis, for the level of development of universities. On the other hand, it allows students to receive information about the quality of education, and employers to assess the weight of the diploma and the quality of the potential employee. The annuality of this system outlines the trends and the overall picture in higher education.

Building a sustainable link between the labor market and universities, and matching the supply and demand of specialties will increase the quality of education. Several projects are being implemented to that purpose, such as "European practices", whose main task is the accumulation of practical knowledge in a real work environment. The Operational Program "Science and Education for Intellectual Growth", with a total budget of BGN 1,271 billion, provides targeted subsidies to students in priority professional fields for the economy.

The modernization of universities is strictly dependent on the vision of the governing bodies of the university. The opportunities provided by various operational programs, partnerships and others are key in creating a better environment for students.

Increasing the visibility of universities should be based on the rating system and advertised by the state inside and outside the country.

3.2. Establishment of higher education among the Bulgarian historical communities

The preservation of the national identity of the young generation of Bulgarians abroad is extremely important for the future of the country and the Bulgarian nation. The state policy in this area is normatively determined by the "National Strategy for the Bulgarian Citizens and the Historical Bulgarian Communities in the World", Decree of the Council of Ministers №103 for carrying out educational activity among the Bulgarians abroad. Unfortunately, this remains the only normative document together with the Council of Ministers №228, which determine the state policy in the field of education for Bulgarians abroad.

The main task for the country is to create sustainable policies in order to preserve the Bulgarian self-consciousness. The mechanisms for this are the creation of a strategy for inclusive education and the accustoming of the historical ethnic community. Strengthening the role of the state through foreign representations, in the construction of Bulgarian schools for the study of Bulgarian language, history, folk dances, way of life, culture, etc.

Recognition of Bulgarian language to maturity in the EU is part of mechanisms to increase the attractiveness of Bulgarian higher education. The grade from the state matriculation exams, valid on an equal footing with other grades, would give a chance to this category of students to graduate successfully and continue their education, including in Bulgaria. Countries from the European Union should not provide the training itself in all 24 official languages, but find a way to conduct final examinations in them, or to recognize examinations by certified organizations competent to assess the level of language proficiency according to the European framework. The solution to this issue turns out to be within the competence of the Bulgarian state, not the EU, and the conclusion of bilateral agreements with each of the member states, as this issue concerns the domestic legislation of each of them. The active role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in resolving this key issue for national security must be the basis for a new, detailed strategy for action in the historical ethnic community.

Last year, a proposal was submitted to the National Assembly to introduce the so-called "Bulgarian Card", whose main task is to introduce a specific category for people of Bulgarian origin who were born abroad. The documents will have a certifying and authorizing function. All people of proven Bulgarian origin will have the opportunity to receive such a card. The card provides the right of permanent residence in the country, as well as the right to education, work and life. The easing of the administrative and documentary burden will allow for greater accessibility of higher education.

3.3. Internationalization of higher education

The main goal of European internationalization is *"Europe of knowledge, as a factor of human and social development and as a necessary element for strengthening and enriching European self-awareness. Self-awareness, which is able to give its citizens the necessary knowledge to meet the challenges of the new millennium while believing in the need to share common values, to belong to a common social and cultural space. The importance of education and educational cooperation is widely recognized as supporting the development of peaceful and democratic societies."*

The 1998 Sorbonne Declaration and the 1999 Bologna Declaration can be seen as the beginning of the internationalization of higher education. This process has created the European Higher Education Area, which aims at greater comparability and comparability of higher education systems. This process has created the European Higher Education Area, which aims at greater comparability and comparability of higher education systems. These declarations set out the principles of a three-level structure of higher education with bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees. A European system for the portability of educational credits has been introduced. Funds have been provided to increase and promote student and teacher mobility. Measures have been taken to improve internal systems for the recognition of academic degrees and qualifications and to strengthen cooperation in the field of quality assessment.

In 2017, in the Rome Declaration, European leaders agreed to work for a *"Union in which young people receive the best education and training, and where they can study and work across the continent. A union that represents our historical heritage and promotes cultural differences"*. One of the basic principles adopted by the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Council of the European Union is the establishment of the right to equal education and training throughout the EU. The goals set by the European Commission for a stronger Europe are:

- promoting cross-border mobility and cooperation in education and training;
- overcoming barriers to starting an education and working in the EU;
- assisting Member States in integrating education, innovation and developing new education systems;

Bulgarian universities are permanently outside the rankings of the international higher education area. There are no Bulgarian universities in the first 500 most prestigious universities. Although there is a tendency of increasing the number of visiting students under the Erasmus + program, the presence of Bulgarian universities in the European network of universities is missing. A positive trend is the entry of five Bulgarian universities in one of the consortiums of "European universities", but the low participation of other universities is indicative that Bulgarian higher education is still absent from European trends.

4. OPPORTUNITIES AND ROLE OF BULGARIAN FOREIGN POLICY

One of the goals of the Bulgarian foreign policy is to provide a favorable environment for the development of the educational policy of Bulgaria outside the borders of the country. The need for cooperation between the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in the field of internationalization of universities, increasing the visibility and solving the problems of Bulgarian communities abroad, presuppose the creation of a unified strategy for Bulgarian foreign policy educational integration.

The Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs work in the context of the "National Strategy for Bulgarian Citizens and Historical Communities around the World" adopted in 2014 by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria. This document is 30 pages long and does not represent a specific and comprehensive position of the Bulgarian state on the key topic of higher education in this study. There are some specific proposals related to education in this strategy, but they do not correspond to the expectations and dynamics of the international education system. One of these proposals is for the establishment of an institute for the Bulgarian language within the EU. This would be a good step in solving the problem of making the Bulgarian language a final exam language within

the EU. There is a lack of internationalization of universities, opportunities for the educational system to enter the European educational area, the Erasmus + program and other policies that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Science can actively use in their work in this field.

One of the main shortcomings of this strategy is the lack of comprehensiveness, in-depth analysis, specificity and knowledge of international processes. It includes the new emigration and the historical communities in a single document, which presupposes the misunderstanding and the lack of a structured foreign policy approach in solving the problems of these diverse communities, whose historical genesis is different. The distinction must be made on a historical basis. The chronogram of the historical diaspora presupposes the understanding of the Bulgarian presence in some countries bordering Bulgaria as an element of national security, and the Bulgarian emigration after 1989 as a social phenomenon, economic opportunities and others.

Legislative initiative can happen through the active actions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Science. It should be based on the knowledge of the characteristics of the different Bulgarian communities and to specify each of their needs. This is extremely important for the formation of targeted policies, the implementation of which will lead to increased integration of Bulgarian communities abroad.

On the other hand, the EU supports the inclusion of education and the creation of a single European educational area. Bulgaria can use the expertise of the European Commission and the experience gained to create a Bulgarian educational space that includes all Bulgarian communities. This educational space should create a system of universities, branches and research institutes abroad. Bulgaria has some capital in this regard. The only Bulgarian university outside the country is located in the Republic of Moldova, namely Taraclia State University "Grigoriy Tsamblak". The Bulgarian Foreign Ministry must look for options to expand the opportunities for Bulgarian communities to obtain higher education where they are. This presupposes a serious expertise of the legislation of each country.

A similar experience has been gained in recent years in the Republic of Turkey. Although the country is not a member of the EU that does not have the scope of European opportunities, it has adapted to the new global realities and has begun to create a Turkish educational space that will increase its influence in the world in the future. It began funding its communities abroad by pursuing an educational policy by sending teachers, Turkish textbooks, internship opportunities at Turkish universities, and so on. The main goal of Turkish foreign policy is to keep Turkish communities abroad in their native places, which in the future will bring them influence at the local, state and international levels. By preserving the Turkish identity, culture and community, a long-term strategy is created with a series of stages that ensure the successful development of political processes.

The role of the system does not end with the construction of the Bulgarian educational space, on the contrary! Every university must build a concept for postgraduate engagement of its students. Building student clubs that work for their Alma Mater on the principles of volunteering and advocacy. The main activity of these clubs is donations, but also lobbying to some extent. In the strategic, tactical and operational planning of alumni activities it is important to take into account the presence or absence of tradition of the respective institution for work with students, as well as to prepare a clear segmentation of the student membership. Only after these two steps can the organizers start targeting. This process is long and presupposes a serious involvement of the governing bodies, but the activity here will determine the prestige of each university. Student clubs are a possible policy, which is poorly developed in Bulgaria, but which gives a lot of opportunities to Bulgarian foreign policy to build influential societies abroad, based on the principle of Bulgarian, relations with Alma Mater and its commitment to future students.

The preparation of a long-term strategy to implement the concept of "soft power" implies the creation of strong Bulgarian communities. Distinguishing the participants in educational programs from those who have acquired education in Bulgaria and those who receive their education from Bulgaria, but outside the country. In one case, they may be complete foreigners who do not belong to the Bulgarian culture and ethnic group. These participants gradually become involved in the culture of the country of residence and its values. Returning to their homeland, they use the experience gained abroad and

participate in the decision-making process based on the acquired foreign values. Graduates continue to maintain close links within professional communities and various research centers.

The students from the historical ethnic community, who receive their education in their native places, feel part of the Bulgarian nation, but foreign influences can have a negative impact and reverse these feelings. Bulgaria's active policy will allow the state to maintain its influence on Bulgarian communities by using their intellectual resources in its own interest to exert "soft power" on foreign elites.

5. CONCLUSION

The internationalization of universities must take place by increasing quality, visibility and mobility. The occurrence of the European educational space, which will enable more students to visit Bulgaria, is of key importance for Bulgarian foreign policy. The mobility of students and their commitment to Bulgarian culture will benefit their association with it. This will create a wider community with which the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through our foreign representation, will continue contacts. The establishment of Alumni Clubs and the constant communication with its members is also of key importance.

On the other hand, Bulgaria will gain expertise in the formation of bilateral relations. This process is necessary for Bulgarian foreign policy to achieve better convergence, coherence and in-depth knowledge of the partner countries. This would enable the implementation of policies in various sectors through the exercise of "soft power" in international relations.

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