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Shaping Higher Education through Policy: The Moldovan case between domestic governance and international commitments

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Abstract: This paper examines the role of public policy in shaping the transformation of higher education in the Republic of Moldova, with a particular focus on the interplay between domestic governance structures and international obligations, such as those arising from the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the Bologna Process. It explores how central government decisions, reforms, and strategic priorities have influenced institutional autonomy, quality assurance, and the modernization of university governance. The research adopts a qualitative policy analysis approach, drawing on national legislation, strategic documents, and comparative studies. While Moldova has made significant progress in aligning with European standards, persistent challenges – such as policy fragmentation, limited administrative capacity, and inconsistent implementation – continue to impact reform outcomes. The article argues that a more coherent and participatory governance model is essential for advancing Moldova's integration into the European education space. Recommendations are proposed to enhance coordination between national authorities and higher education institutions, and to strengthen Moldova's position as an emerging academic partner in the region.

Keywords: higher education; reform; governance; Republic of Moldova; policy

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1. Introduction

In the last two decades, higher education in the Republic of Moldova has gone through a complex transformation process, marked by a double pressure: on the one hand, the need to meet the demands of internal modernization and, on the other hand, the commitments assumed in relation to the European framework for cooperation in education. The accession of the Republic of Moldova to the Bologna Process in 2005 represented a turning point in the direction of alignment with the principles and values of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), such as university autonomy, academic mobility, recognition of qualifications and quality assurance (Eurydice, 2020; Kehm & Teichler, 2007).

Although the adaptation of the European regulatory framework provided a clear strategic direction, the implementation of reforms at the national level was often affected by institutional constraints, policy fragmentation and the volatility of the domestic political context (Nicolaescu, 2019; Horga & Ivan, 2014). Thus, the process of modernizing university governance took place in an environment marked by tensions between the imperatives of compliance with European standards and the realities of an administrative system in transition. In addition, educational policies developed at the central level oscillated between declarative priorities and limited implementation capacity, which led, in many cases, to the inconsistent application of the reforms undertaken (Cenusa, 2020; Crudu, 2022).

In this context, this article aims to investigate the role of the public policies in shaping the higher education system in the Republic of Moldova, with a focus on the interaction between national governance and international commitments. The analysis aims to highlight how the reforms, promoted by central authorities, have influenced fundamental aspects of university governance, such as institutional autonomy, quality assessment, internationalization and strategic management. The proposed approach is part of the logic comparative policy and educational governance studies, starting from the premise that public policies are not just the reflection of technical decisions, but the result of negotiation processes between diverse actors, each with their own interests and constraints (Jongbloed, Enders & Salerno, 2008). Thus, the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the EHEA is analyzed not only as a process of formal convergence, but also as an institutional dynamic influenced by the internal political context, governance priorities and the adaptive capacity of universities.

Through this research, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between educational policies and structural transformations of Moldovan higher education, as well as to formulate recommendations, regarding the consolidation of a participatory governance model, capable of supporting a sustainable and credible European path.

2. Research Methodology

The present research is part of the paradigm of qualitative public policy analysis, studying the process of transforming higher education governance in the Republic of Moldova in the context of pressures to comply with the requirements of the European Higher Education Area. The choice of this approach is justified by the need to understand in depth the institutional dynamics and decision-making process that underlie reforms in the education sector, beyond the simple normative description of policy documents (Parsons, 1995; Hill & Varone, 2017).

The method used is documentary analysis, applied to a corpus of official, strategic and legislative sources, relevant for the period 2005-2024. Among the main documents analyzed are: The Education Code of the Republic of Moldova (2014, with subsequent amendments), the Reference Framework for Higher Education (Ministry of Education and Research, 2021), the National Action Plan for the implementation of the Bologna Process, national reports on the implementation of the EHEA commitments (Eurydice, 2020), as well as the “Education 2030” Development Strategy and its Implementation Program for 2023-2025 (Government Decision nr. 114 of 07.03.2023). The analysis also was completed by consulting independent reports, developed by international organizations and national think-tanks, as well as academic studies relevant to the field of university governance (Kehm & Teichler, 2007; Jongbloed et al., 2008).

Within the analysis, the following analytical dimensions were identified and correlated: a) institutional architecture of educational governance; b) degree of university autonomy; c) public policy instruments used to implement reforms (laws, decisions, funding mechanisms); compatibility of national policies with the principles of the EHEA; d) institutional obstacles to effective implementation.

The methodological approach is exploratory – interpretative and does not aim to test rigid hypotheses, but to understand the process of structural change through the prism of the political-institutional framework, specific to the Republic of Moldova. Given the complexity and interdependence of the factors involved, the research was

guided by the principles of the theory of multi-level governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2001) and the transfer of educational policies in transitional contexts (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000).

This approach allows not only to highlight the gaps between the normative discourse and institutional practice, but also to formulate conclusions, regarding the sustainable and coherent nature of Moldova's European path in the field of higher education.

3. Research Results

Recent developments in Moldovan higher education, especially those, generated by the commitments undertaken within the European Higher Education Area, have led to significant reconfigurations in the mode of university governance. Beyond the formal alignment with European standards, the reform process has involved a series of political and institutional decisions, the impact of which deserves to be analyzed from a critical and contextualized perspective.

The introduced changes have not always followed a linear path, but have been influenced by multiple variables – from the strategic orientations of the central authorities to the institutional capacity for implementation and the reactions of the actors involved. In this context, a careful examination of the relationships between decision-makers, university structures and the international reference framework becomes essential, in order to understand how the policies adopted have translated (or not) into effective transformations of the system.

In line with the contemporary approaches to the educational governance (Huisman & Westerheijden, 2010; Bezes et al., 2011), the recorded results cannot be interpreted exclusively as a reflection of European prescriptions, but rather as the product of a delicate balance between external pressures, internal political interests and institutional resilience. Such a reading allows the identification not only of the progress made, but also of persistent dysfunctions and opportunities for strengthening participatory governance, oriented towards quality and autonomy.

A careful analysis of the reforms in Moldovan higher education highlights the fact that the directions of change were strongly influenced by internal political configurations and government priorities, formulated in an electoral context or within the framework of European integration agendas. Political factors – especially the Parliament, the Government and the Ministry of Education and Research – acted

as the main promoters of the normative framework, but often with fragmented visions and subject to partisan of coalition fluctuations. Thus, although the reformist rhetoric was constantly present in the programmatic documents, their implementation was marked by discontinuities and inconsistencies (Nicolaescu, 2019; Crudu, 2022).

The Ministry of Education and Research, as a key institution in the reform process, developed strategies and action plans, aimed at modernizing university governance, but its administrative and technical capacity to monitor and evaluate results, was limited. In many cases, Ministry interventions were reactive rather than proactive, trying to respond to external requests, especially from the European Commission and the Council of Europe, without building a sustainable dialogue with local actors (Cenusa, 2020; Horga & Ivan, 2014).

Universities, as entities directly targeted by the reforms, had an ambivalent position: on the one hand, they were called upon to apply the new regulations on autonomy, quality assurance or participatory governance; on the other hand, they did not always benefit from the methodological or financial support necessary to meet these requirements. Moreover, university autonomy was, in practice, often formal, being restricted by rigid budgetary regulations, bureaucratic procedures imposed by central authorities and the lack of a tradition of strategic institutional governance (Horga & Ivan, 2014; Kehm & Teichler, 2007).

Another important actor, although often ignored in the political analysis of education, is the political parties, whose programs and ideological positions have directly influenced the continuity or discontinuity of reforms. Studies show that educational reforms in the Republic of Moldova have rarely been included in a long-term vision, but have treated as secondary topics on the party agendas, which has favored sudden changes of direction with the change of governance (Jongbloed et al., 2008; Nicolaescu, 2019).

Against this background, the lack of a cooperation platform between political actors and the academic community was noted, which generated a vertical governance, centered on ministerial decision-making, to the detriment of a real participation of universities in policy development. Although some consultative structures have been created in recent years (such as the National Council for Higher Education Reform), their influence on major decisions has remained modest, and the transparency of decision-making processes is often limited (Ministry of Education and Research, 2021; Cenusa, 2020).

Despite the declarative efforts to modernize and align with the standards of the European Higher Education Area, the process of reforming university governance in the Republic of Moldova has been accompanied by a series of structural and systemic challenges that have prevented sustainable results. Among these challenges, the lack of strategic coherence and continuity in educational policies is particularly notable. Frequent changes of government have led to the interruption or redirection of reforms, and the absence of a long-term vision has created an unstable framework for both decision-makers and institutional actors (Nicolaescu, 2019; Curaj et al., 2012).

Another major difficulty is the limited administrative capacity of central authorities. Although the Ministry of Education and Research has developed relevant strategic documents, such as Reference Framework for Higher Education (2021), their implementation has frequently encountered financial constraints, a lack of qualified staff, and an institutional culture resistant to change (Cenusa, 2020; Ministry of Education and Research, 2021; Neave & van Vught, 1994). This situation has been aggravated by poor inter-institutional coordination and the existence of overlaps or gaps between the responsibilities of the involved actors.

The quality assurance process has also encountered numerous obstacles, especially regarding the institutional independence of the evaluation agencies and their capacity to formulate credible and applicable recommendations. The National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (ANACEC), although functional, has often been criticized for bureaucratization, lack of transparency in procedures and political influence in the accreditation process (Crudu, 2022; Eurydice, 2020; Vlasceanu & Dima, 2000). In this sense, the trust of the public and the academic community in the evaluation mechanisms has remained low, which has limited the real impact of the reforms on the quality of the educational process.

At the institutional level, university autonomy – one of the fundamental principles, promote by the EHEA – continues to be constrained by centralized budget allocation mechanisms, state control over the appointment of university management, and political interference in decision-making processes. This limited autonomy has translated into excessive dependence on ministerial decisions, instead of strengthening the capacity for strategic self-governance at the level of each institution (Kehm & Teichler, 2007; Horga & Ivan, 2014; Neave & van Vught, 1994).

At the same time, the low level of involvement of stakeholders – such as students, teachers, the private sector or civil society organizations – in the processes of developing and evaluating educational policies has led to a deficit of legitimacy and anchoring of reforms in the realities on the ground (Jongbloed, Enders & Salerno, 2008; Kwiek, 2017). The lack of clear and functional mechanisms for consulting relevant actors has reinforced a vertical governance model, with few feedback channels from the grassroots to the decision-making level.

Last but not least, the reforms were affected by a constant tension between documentary formalism and the reality of implementation. Although numerous strategies and action plans mention modern concepts, such as “participatory governance”, “strategic management” or “public accountability”, their application in practice was often superficial or symbolic, without real commitment from the management of the institutions (Cenus, 2020; Nicolaescu, 2019; Curaj et al., 2012).

Despite persistent challenges and the often-fragmented nature of reforms, a number of initiatives and practices have been reordered in the Republic of Moldova, that can be considered positive examples in the process of modernizing university governance. They reflect, on the one hand, an emerging capacity for institutional adaptation, and, on the other hand, the existence of nuclei of administrative innovation and international cooperation, which contribute to increasing the resilience of the system.

A notable first example is the strengthening of the quality assurance framework, through the development and operationalization of the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research, which has benefited from European expertise in the development of external evaluation methodologies, including through participation in international networks, such as ENQA and EQAR (Eurydice, 2020; ANACEC, 2023). Although challenges remain, the agency has contributed to the creation of an institutional culture of self-evaluation and the introduction of minimum standards of academic performance. In comparison, ANACEC’s experience is similar to that of quality agencies in countries, such as Romanian or Lithuania, which have used European integration as a catalyst for profound reforms (Curaj et al., 2012; Vlasceanu & Dima, 2000).

Second, there is an increased openness towards participatory governance in some public universities, which have implemented transparent procedures for electing academic leadership, established advisory boards with students’ participation, and developed partnerships with the business community and civil society. For example:

the Moldovan State University and the Technical University of Moldova have developed their own institutional governance strategies that include components of strategic planning, internal audit, and the involvement of internal stakeholders in the decision-making process (Nicolaescu, 2019; Crudu, 2022).

At the same time, in recent years, Erasmus+ projects have provided a concrete framework for the transfer of European good practices, especially in the field of university leadership, internationalization and administrative digitalization. Moldova's participation in projects, such as "Reforming Undergraduate Education for Green and Sustainable Development in Armenia and Moldova" (RE-GRAD, nr. 101128817) or "Enhancement of Quality Assurance in Higher Education System in Moldova" (QFORTE, nr. 618742-EPP-1-2020-1-MD-EPPKA2-CBHE-SP) have contributed to the strengthening of institutional capacities through exchanges of experience, mobilities and the creation of operational governance guides (Kweik, 2017; Curaj et al., 2012). Such initiatives highlight the potential of European integration not only as a political objective, but also as a tool for organizational transformation.

Another area, where the progress is being made, is the digitalization of university management processes, accelerated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Several institutions have introduced integrated IT platforms for academic management, human resources and student relations. These steps, supported also by international partnerships, contribute to the transparency of administrative decisions and the creation of efficient performance monitoring mechanisms (Ministry of Education and Research, 2021; Neave & van Vught, 1994).

Finally, it is important to mention the emergence of local academic leadership initiatives, developed at the level of faculties or centers of excellence, which promote managerial autonomy and a culture of quality. Even if they are not yet generalized, these practices demonstrate the existence of a critical mass of actors, committed to transforming the system from within, which is a fundamental premise for the sustainability of reforms (Jongbloed, Enders & Salerno, 2008; Kehm & Teichler, 2007).

Conclusions

The transformations, recorded in the higher education system of the Republic of Moldova, analyzed through the interaction between internal governance and commitments undertaken within the European Higher Education Area, reveal a complex reality, in which the dynamics of reforms are deeply conditioned by the political and institutional context. Although Moldova has made important steps towards harmonizing the regulatory framework and aligning with the EHEA principles, a significant gap persists between European rhetoric and the effective implementation of reforms.

The research results highlight the fact, that, in the absence of a coherent strategic vision and participatory governance, reforms risk remaining at a formal level, without structural impact on university quality and autonomy. Political and institutional actors play an essential role in this process, but governmental instability, decision-making fragmentation and insufficient consultation of stakeholders limit the sustainability of educational policies. The lack of a functional platform for cooperation between central authorities and universities has consolidated a vertical governance model, centered on ministerial decision-making, to the detriment of real decentralization and institutional ownership.

At the same time, the analysis demonstrates that European integration, despite the challenges, has also generated positive premises: the development of quality assurance structures, the digitalization of management processes, involvement in international projects and the emergence of local academic leadership initiatives. These elements indicate the potential for strengthening modern academic governance, if supported by coherent policies, adequate resources and inter-institutional dialogue.

In conclusion, for the Republic of Moldova to credibly advance on the path of integration into the EHEA, it is necessary to adopt a strategic framework that combines political stability, administrative capacity and active participation of educational actors. Reforms must be anchored in a clear national vision, be supported by transparent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and allow adaptation to institutional specifics. Strengthening university autonomy, guaranteeing the independence of quality agencies and developing a genuine partnership between the state and universities are essential conditions for a sustainable and competitive educational system at the European level.

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