

(251–300), Bordeaux (301–350), Grenoble Alpes (301–350), Côte d’Azur (351–400), and Strasbourg (351–400) follow suit. Their ranking will no doubt still disappoint French civil servants and institutional leaders. Nonetheless, there is evidence that the IDEX are, slowly but surely, on the move.

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Conflict of Interest in Eastern Europe: “Academic Capture”

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Lobbying public officials is a common and legitimate practice. However, it may also become an integrity concern, for instance when officials have a financial interest in the sector that lobbies them and for which they are responsible. In such cases, lobbying may amount to undue influence, promote conflicts of interest, and “capture” the decision-making process in ways that create undue advantage for specific individuals, institutions, or the sector at large.

In Eastern Europe, higher education providers, especially in the public sector, depend on the state in pivotal aspects of their operations such as funding, accreditation, closures and mergers, enrollment quotas, etc. The stakes are high and universities have good reasons for trying to influence the decisions of authorities through lobbying. They are also in a good position to do so, as they mostly work in proximity to national governments: universities have a mission to serve the public interest and supply the public sector

with the graduate workforce that it needs, and many have government representatives on their boards.

The research presented here reveals that in most countries of Eastern Europe, the close relationship between academia and the state is permeated by conflicts of interest, which manifest themselves in high-ranking public officials responsible for (higher) education being widely affiliated with universities on a for-profit basis. We call such affiliations “academic capture.” Both academia and the public sector are exposed to a risk of corruption every time academic institutions lobby for their legitimate interests and corresponding policy decisions are being taken.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST THROUGH “ACADEMIC CAPTURE”

Our data sets are based on publicly available evidence from the Western Balkans (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia) and the former Soviet Union (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine). We looked at the affiliation of public officials responsible for higher education with universities, which seemed to be profit-seeking in nature; this included ministers and deputy ministers of (higher) education or the

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equivalent; heads and members of cabinets or the equivalent; heads of departments for higher education; heads of external agencies operating on behalf of the ministries of (higher) education; and chairs and/or regular members of parliamentary committees on education.

An ongoing analysis of evidence from these countries is gradually revealing a situation in which a remarkably high share of these public officers have a profit-seeking affiliation with at least one university in their respective countries, or are expected to engage in one. Among officials caught up in a conflict of interest during data collection (the second and third quarters of 2016) were the ministers of education of Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Russia, and Ukraine. This is also true for some (Ukraine) or all the deputy ministers of education (in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Croatia, Moldova, and Serbia), as well as for some members of the minister’s cabinets in Armenia and Ka-

zakhstan. Some deputy ministers in Russia and Ukraine, and the minister of education in Kazakhstan, did not have an active for-profit affiliation at the time of data collection, but based on employment history and national expert assessments, are expected to go through the “revolving door” into a salaried or shareholder position at a university immediately after completing their mandate in the public sector. To the extent evidence is available, for-profit affiliations with universities are also common at a lower level of decision-making: among the heads of departments for higher education in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Russia, and Serbia, and among legislators in charge of education in Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Moldova, Serbia, and Ukraine.

The most common form of for-profit affiliation with universities by target group members is practiced by salaried staff in public universities. In the region of the Western Balkans, the benefit of being on the payroll of a higher education institution is usually combined with the provision of fee-based expertise. In some countries (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Serbia, and Ukraine), holders of public office are also owners of (private) higher education institutions, or are expected to resume ownership upon completion of their tenure. In addition, in Azerbaijan, the for-profit affiliation of some deputy ministers includes the provision of procurement services to universities, and, in Croatia, the benefit of affiliation of a high-level civil servant in the ministry is expected to be an academic credential (a Ph.D degree) from a public university.

WHY IT MATTERS

The threat of “academic capture” has manifold and detri-

mental implications. Thanks to “captured” individuals with regulatory responsibilities, the higher education sector may secure channels of influence on policy decisions and achieve favorable policy outcomes—where many of these outcomes would have been detrimental to the sector, and/or come at the expense of other education and public policy priorities. Consider, for example, the hypothetical case of a smaller, regional higher education institution that expects a fair approach to the accreditation of its new study programs, only to discover that the accreditation authority has rejected them, while applying a double standard in favor of the alma mater of the minister of education. Or imagine a discussion about public budget allocations, which year after year concludes with a decision to increase investments in an already oversized university network instead of addressing a persistent and acute shortage of kindergarten places. Finally, consider all the ways in which a tertiary educational institution that has influence over its regulators can harm itself by exercising its influence to prevent the very changes it might need in order to improve. As a sector-specific risk of regulatory “capture,” “academic capture” deserves to be treated with the same urgency and attention as any other form of conflict of interest in the public sector. The alternative—leaving distortions in higher education policy-making unexplored and their harmful, long-term side effects unaddressed—means accepting that certain groups among educational actors are wrongfully and systematically put at a disadvantage, that trust in public education policy is undermined, and resistance to change encouraged.

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