

The Contexts of Governing Universities in the Former Soviet Countries

Peter D. Eckel

Institutional level governance is the mechanism by which policy intentions are translated into action. Governance structures dictate which stakeholders come together and how, including who has access to what information and how decisions are made and transmitted. Governance structures created by universities and governments vary with no single model fitting every situation. As universities in various countries reconsider governance, often adopting Western-style (and consultant-driven) models, how should they think about structuring governance? What model is appropriate for the context in which they operate?

For the past three decades a unique experiment has been taking place across former Soviet states. In 1991 universities in these 15 countries had a common state-mandated governance model. 30 years later, these countries' approaches evolved in response to a variety of situations. Four models emerged. First, the *academic-focused model* with an elected rector from within the university, and members predominantly from the academic and staff. Second, the *state-extended model* in which the government appoints the rector and head of the governing body, and plays a direct and heavy role in governance and management decisions. Third, the *internal/external model* in which the governing body's membership consists of individuals from within the university and individuals external to the university. Finally, the *external civic model* with its members and its leadership coming from outside the university and representing various stakeholder groups. There are also variations within each model by country.

While the four models are interesting in and of themselves, an important question is: how well do they work? Does this variation matter? To answer these questions, one should remember that governance cannot be considered in isolation but rather in its operating context. Governance effectiveness is notoriously challenging to determine, thus the next best question may focus on the appropriateness of structures to the governance contexts.

The Governing Context: Pairing Autonomy and Competition

Despite a common start, those 15 former Soviet countries now operate in a variety of contexts, from the West-facing Baltic countries to inward-looking Turkmenistan and Belarus, as well as Kazakhstan and Russia. Two elements can be helpful to illustrate the governance context. The first is autonomy. Variations in autonomy will impact what governing bodies do, the types of decisions they must make, and what they can offer their universities. The second element is competition. Depending on its breadth and depth, competition imposes different demands on universities and their governing bodies. In what ways are universities competing for students, research, and funding? The latter focuses on what universities need to do to thrive, the former on the degree to which they have permissions to act. Economist Philippe Aghion and colleagues argue that competition and autonomy are linked: too much competition without autonomy means universities cannot act, while too much autonomy without competition means that universities may pursue their own directives and not what their societies need.

Our aim was to generate a sense of autonomy and competition. Most are aware of the European Universities Association (EUA) autonomy scorecard. It made the previously abstract notion of autonomy in higher education concrete. We use this framework to understand some aspects of the governance context. For the second component, we considered four factors to create a parallel competition index. The first competition factor

Abstract

From a common Soviet governance approach four different university governance models emerged in former Soviet states after 1991. The models, while interesting in their evolution, might best be considered in light of the operating contexts. Determining governance effectiveness is notoriously challenging, but a contextual understanding through the dual lens of competition and autonomy may help policy makers, university leaders, and academic researchers pursue aligned and appropriate governance structures.

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Peter D. Eckel, PhD, is senior fellow in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, United States, and academic head of a new global program in higher education management. E-mail: eckelpd@upenn.edu.

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is scholarly research. The act of gaining acceptance in international journals requires scholars to conduct research that competes with other submissions, making successfully published research an indicator of competitive success. We used country-level research productivity scores (h-index scores obtained from Scimago). Two other dimensions focused on competition for students. One was the extent to which public universities compete domestically with private universities. The greater share of students enrolled in private universities indicated a greater level of competition within the system. The second focused on international student competition, both to keep domestic students at home and to compete for international ones. For the latter dimension we used international mobility data (from UNESCO) to create a student competition ratio. The final element is funding via competition for student-paid tuition fees. For each of these dimensions we created comparison rankings within the set of countries.

Appropriate Models (or Not)

These aforementioned dimensions provide the framework in which governance modules were situated. The following impressions emerged.

First of all, there seemed to be mismatches between competition and autonomy in some countries. In several states the level of autonomy corresponded with that of competition. Both were low in Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Moldova and Ukraine had moderate competition and autonomy, and Latvia exhibited moderately high levels of both. However, in other countries (such as Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia) competition seemed to surpass autonomy levels, while in countries like Estonia, Kazakhstan, and Lithuania autonomy surpassed competition levels. This means the policy context is asking for two different things from universities and their governance structures.

Thus, some of the governance structures were suited for context, but not all. Some of the countries with low autonomy and competition had the *state-extended* model of governance. The state directs higher education, provides the needed resources, and limits competition. But a more complicated picture emerged in other countries where governance models seem not aligned with context. Russian governance uses the *state-extended* model, yet it operates in a moderately competitive context and one with low autonomy. This governance model may handcuff universities when they need to compete. Both Georgia and Kyrgyzstan have *academic-focused* models in which university-level governance is focused inward given its members and leadership. Yet, Georgia is in a high competition/low autonomy context, and Kyrgyzstan in a moderate competition/low autonomy context, so they might be better served by different models that would allow more external focus, such as the *internal/external model* seen in Ukraine and Moldova. The three Baltic countries all had moderate to high autonomy. Latvia had correspondingly high competition. The other two, namely Estonia and Lithuania, have less competition. They all had *internal/external* bodies, where governance involves both internal and external stakeholders, which might well reflect their needs. However, compared to Kazakhstan, which had the most externally focused governance model composed of outside stakeholders (including government officials), Latvian universities, for instance, might benefit from a more externally driven governance structure to be able to compete and to take advantage of their high competition and autonomy. The ambitiousness of this model for Kazakhstan may be ahead of its time given its context.

Implications

Three implications emerged. On the academic side, competition would benefit from a more rigorous index akin to the EUA Autonomy Scorecard. Second, policy makers should look at implementing policies that intentionally align competition and autonomy. Finally, university leaders should advocate for a structure that would allow them to advance their governance needs in ways consistent with the demands of the context in which they operate. Better context–structure consistency will allow governing bodies to operate in ways most beneficial, effective, and efficient. Some structures that reflect too much centralized control are insufficient when universities need to compete. Other structures that reflect autonomy without adequate guard rails of competition risks inefficiency, mission drift, and—in extreme cases—possibilities of corruption. ▲