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Higher education in the Context of the Post-Communism: the Case of the Czech Republic*

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ABSTRACT

Studies on higher education have expanded in Brazil in recent decades, occurring concurrently with the growing internationalization of the debate. Despite these advances, it is clear that there is still little literature available in Portuguese on higher education in certain latitudes, such as, for example, countries that were part of the communist bloc and its transformations after the end of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). In this article, we analyze the case of the Czech Republic, presenting the transformations experienced in the context of post-communism and its entry into the European Union. Starting from the Czech example, we seek to highlight how socio-historical experiences shape the dynamics of higher education, stressing the asymmetries of the “global community” and emphasizing, at the same time, how investment in educational policies in this field is also capable of changing this reality.

KEYWORDS

Higher education. Post-communism. Czech Republic.

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O Ensino Superior no Contexto Pós-Comunista: o Caso da República Tcheca

RESUMO

Os estudos sobre ensino superior têm se ampliado no Brasil nas últimas décadas, o que tem ocorrido de forma concomitante à crescente internacionalização do debate. Apesar desses avanços, percebe-se que ainda há pouca literatura disponível em língua portuguesa sobre o ensino superior de certas latitudes como, por exemplo, de países que integraram o bloco comunista e suas transformações após o fim da União das Repúblicas Socialistas Soviéticas (URSS). Neste artigo analisamos o caso da República Tcheca, apresentando as transformações vivenciadas no contexto do pós-comunismo e de sua entrada na União Europeia. Partindo do exemplo tcheco, buscamos destacar como as experiências sócio-históricas moldam a dinâmica do ensino superior, visibilizando as assimetrias da “comunidade global” e enfatizando, ao mesmo tempo, como o investimento em políticas educacionais nesse campo também é capaz de dinamizar essa realidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Ensino superior. Pós-comunismo. República Tcheca.

Educación Superior en el Contexto Poscomunista: el Caso de la República Checa

RESUMEN

Los estudios sobre educación superior se han expandido en Brasil en las últimas décadas, lo que ha ocurrido simultáneamente con la creciente internacionalización del debate. A pesar de estos avances, está claro que todavía hay poca literatura disponible en portugués sobre la educación superior en ciertas latitudes, como, por ejemplo, países que formaron parte del bloque comunista y sus transformaciones después del final de la Unión de Repúblicas Socialistas Soviéticas (URSS). En este artículo analizamos el caso de la República Checa, presentando las transformaciones experimentadas en el contexto del poscomunismo y su entrada en la Unión Europea. Basado en el ejemplo checo, buscamos resaltar cómo las experiencias sociohistóricas dan forma a la dinámica de la educación superior, destacando las asimetrías de la "comunidad global" y enfatizando, al mismo tiempo, cómo la inversión en políticas educativas en este campo también es capaz de impulsar esta realidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Educación superior. Poscomunismo. República Checa.

Introduction

One of the main debates in the Sociology of Education field is the analysis of education systems in modern societies, especially in the context of expanding access to formal education in primary and secondary schooling and higher education. In the Brazilian context, the analysis of the higher education reality occupies a central place in the studies agenda, as shown by recent researches (NEVES, 2002; MARTINS, WEBER, 2010; OLIVEIRA, SILVA, 2016, 2020; ALMEIDA, HEY, 2018; BARBOSA, GANDIN, 2020). However, despite the significant advance in studies on higher education in Brazil that can be observed since the 1970s, some debates are still incipient. As Neves, Sampaio, and Heringer (2018, p. 32, our translation) point out:

Although there have been efforts to broaden and diversify the subjects of study, the academic production in Brazil on higher education suggests that we are still under the impact of trying to understand the effects of the recent expansion of the national system. It is not by chance that studies on inequalities of access, hierarchies of courses and institutions, affirmative action policies, policies for the expansion of the federal system, etc. predominate - themes in which the conceptual key refers, directly and indirectly, to the relationship between educational inequality and social stratification in class societies, in particular, in Brazil. On the other hand, other themes that have established themselves as important on the international agenda of higher education studies are gradually becoming a focus of interest for Brazilian researchers.

Considering the internationalization of research in sociology and education, an increase in comparative analysis can be observed, and the development of investigations on education systems from other countries carried out by Brazilian researchers. Still, certain geographic regions have not been sufficiently explored yet, implying scarce literature available in Portuguese on such realities.

Aiming to contribute to this debate, we propose carrying out a succinct analysis of the Czech Republic's higher education, providing Brazilian readers (and those of other nationalities) access to a summary of the transformations of Czech higher education.

Even though it is not the aim of this article to provide a comparative analysis between the realities of higher education in the Czech Republic and Brazil and/or Latin America, we understand that the analysis of the Czech context might bring interesting elements to reflect on the socio-historical development of the higher education in countries that experienced authoritarian political regimes throughout the twentieth century.

To better understand the data here brought to our readers, we will first briefly contextualize historically the higher education system of the Czech Republic. Following this part, we will present three more sections corresponding to three different periods. The first one covers the largest part of the twentieth century, focusing on the communist project for the Czech higher education system and its implementation. The second section is dedicated to the first post-communism reforms, and it discusses the new challenges of academic restructuring

in the period of 1990 to 2010. The third and last one provides an analysis of the Czech higher education in the last decade, covering the years 2010 to 2019 and the new global academic configuration¹.

Higher Education in the Czech Republic: Brief Contextualization

The history of higher education in Czech lands is ancient and marked by both peaks of greater development and valleys of suppression of its freedom and scientific production. Founded in 1348, Charles University (*Univerzita Karlova*) was the first university in the Central European region, and it is still one of the most relevant Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the Czech Republic (STASTNA, 2001). It is beyond the range of this work to go back the analysis into the 14th century to focus on the 20th and 21st centuries. Notwithstanding, it is worth emphasizing that the tradition of Higher Education in the region is by no means incipient.

The development of HEIs in the 20th century is marked by political and social events that followed in the region. In general lines, they consist of the two World Wars, the period between wars, the establishment of the communist regime, the Soviet invasion, the reform movements, the normalizing movements, the Velvet Revolution, and the independence of the Czech Republic². Universities and other research and higher education institutions had their structures, values, objectives, and identities changed during these periods.

In the 21st century, even with a relatively more stable internal and external policy, universities and HEIs in the region have gone and are still going through severe challenges for their development. Among those, we can cite the insertion into the western capitalist world in the post-communist period, incorporating international education parameters and regulations, the internationalization of undergraduate and graduate courses, the increased competitiveness in the academic sphere, compliance with the demands of the labor market, etc.

The Development of HEIs in Czechoslovakia in the 20th Century: the Communist Project for Higher Education (1948 – 1989)

For almost the entire twentieth century, the numerous higher education institutions in Czechoslovakia were marked mostly by the lack of freedom and autonomy in their teaching and research due to state control during periods of war and authoritarian regimes. Still, it should be noted that teaching and research institutions experienced many expansion and fortification movements throughout the century, with the creation of new universities, the

¹ The empirical data in this article originate from the research “A formação de sociólogas e sociólogos no sul global: um estudo de caso da Universidade de Hradec Králové na República Tcheca” (NASCIMENTO, 2020).

² It would be beyond the focus and scope of this article to contextualize the myriad of historical events in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, if the reader feels the demand to have a deeper understanding on this theme, we recommend the work of Sheperd (2000).

foundation of the Academy of Sciences, the increase in the flow of investments, the increase in the number of courses, professors and students, and many other measures that made the Czech academic scene a complex field of analysis.

During the First and Second Republics of Czechoslovakia (1918 – 1939), basic and higher education systems had exponential quantitative and qualitative growth. Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia, invested in the creation of universities, structured new faculties, seminars (departments), and courses, increasing the number of university students and professors. However, with the Nazi invasion during World War II (1939 - 1945), Central European HEIs experienced much more attack and repression than expansion and development. These were years in which universities and the intelligentsia were persecuted, marginalized, and finally ceased to exist.

It is only in the post-war context that universities start to develop again but in a distinctive way. It is interesting to observe that most scientific production on the development of HEIs in Central Europe tends to circumscribe the analysis based on the takeover of power by the communist party. This tendency of studies to focus their analysis after the war is not by chance. Indeed, the communist regime, established in Czechoslovakia in 1948, marks the beginning of a unique phase in terms of identity, ideology, and structure of Czechoslovak higher education, which lasted for forty years. Thus, on this topic, we will focus more emphatically on the period of the communist regime.

The Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSČ) took power in 1948. Whereas the opposition condemned the rise of KSČ, stating that it was a coup, supporters defended their taking power, affirming that it was the only possible way to rebuild the country after the war. The action plan was to mimic the Soviet political model, which consisted of the withdrawal of power from the bourgeois and fascist elites and the rise of the working class and the rural people. Commonly, in order to achieve a social restructuring of this magnitude, it was urgent to reform all institutions, which reflected in a series of changes in the organization of the most diverse spheres of social life (industry, agriculture, trading, education, health, etc.) (SIMONOVÁ; ANTONOWICZ, 2006; CONNELLY, 1997).

Since education was seen as a fundamental instrument to achieve the desired social restructuring and equity, the educational system was deeply affected by the reforms. Understanding that schools, universities, and other educational spaces should reflect in social mobility and reduction of social stratification, the process of "Sovietization" of the educational system in Czechoslovakia aimed to guarantee the previously limited access of the working and rural classes to educational institutions. In this sense, these institutions ought to represent, proportionally, the share of each social class, which led to the creation of quotas and the scrutiny of the social origin of each incoming student. Moreover, other measures of permanence and adaptation to the new order were adopted, such as the nationalization of the (few) private educational institutions and any fee or tuition that was charged. The State became entirely responsible for financing the institutions, including the free distribution of books and materials (KWIEK, 2012; SIMONOVÁ; ANTONOWICZ, 2006; CONNELLY, 1997).

Thus, in the communist model, higher education would focus on forming a new intelligentsia that was not bourgeois but made up of workers and peasants, which, consequently, would help in the construction and structuring of the new social order imposed at the time, serving the interests of the State. In this sense, the communist educational system had as its pillars the vocational and technical writing, which not only would guarantee practical training for the labor market of the socialist society but also political and ideological training, based on Marxist-Leninist theories, guaranteeing popular support in the maintenance of the communist regime (SIMONOVÁ; ANTONOWICZ, 2006).

The post-war transformation process of the educational system did not occur, evidently, without difficulties or resistance. A first practical difficulty faced was the lack of clear and precise information on how to implement the Soviet model in the educational system, since no satellite country of the USSR received formal instructions, in terms of laws and decrees, to guide the formation of the new universities (CONNELLY, 2000). Therefore, the mimicry of the Soviet model was not perfectly executed. Assuredly, it would be impossible to do it so, not only for the lack of precise information on the educational project of the USSR but because the Czechoslovak society differed significantly in terms of culture and identity from the Russian society, having its internal logic that demanded its arrangements.

The Party experienced strong resistance within the HEIs, as most professors and students were conservative and did not agree with the changes imposed by the KSČ. Seeing the new policies as limiting and threatening to the national cultural and academic traditions, students and professors stood against the new order and were eventually purged. Communist students loyal to the regime but with little training took over the administration of the universities. At Charles University, for example, the dean, dozens of professors, and a quarter of the student body were expelled for political reasons in the first year of the regime. In Faculties of Humanities, such as Law School, the number of expelled students reached 50%, as Connelly explains (1997, p. 309):

In February 1948, the KSC unleashed "action committees" to seize power throughout Czech society. At universities, the action committees were placed in the hands of communist students, who had been particularly numerous in the faculty of arts (*Filosofická fakulta*), and they promptly dismissed dozens of professors, especially from the law and arts faculties. The rector of Charles University, Karel Engli's, was forced to resign. One year later, verification commissions, again led by communist students, dismissed one-fourth of all students, mostly for political reasons. In ideologically sensitive faculties, like law, the figure was as high as one-half.

Nevertheless, even with the planning and implementation of the changes according to the Soviet model, the main goal of guaranteeing the representativeness and the majority presence of workers and peasants in higher education was not achieved. Universities still followed the unitary system, offering only a master's degree, and remained small and elitist. As Simonová and Antonowicz (2006, p. 520) explain, "[i]n the lower social strata, educational choices are guided by occupational choices. These are in turn negatively affected by the poor awareness of the range of occupations that exist, which results in lower educational attainment".

The Party realized that in addition to implementing access and permanence measures, it was urgent to think of ways to encourage workers and peasants to leave their social milieu and enroll in universities; that is, it was necessary to change how the former mentioned social classes conceived education. To achieve this goal, "workers' courses" were created – or, in Czech, *Dělnické Kursy* (hereafter DKs) - something close to the Brazilian technical secondary education. The purpose of the DKs was to function as a motivational and preparatory course for workers to enter higher education. As early as January 1949, 826 factory workers were selected to participate in the first phase of the DKs. Connelly (1997, p. 324) explains the functioning of the course:

Instruction began in January 1949 in five small towns (...). These places were as remote from university milieus as one could imagine. Instruction was slanted heavily toward math and science, but students also received a general education in history, Czech, and social sciences. There were 40 hours of instruction plus 19 hours of exercises weekly. In addition, an evaluatory session was held every evening, and cultural or political activities were scheduled four evenings a week.

Interestingly, the DKs followed the same pillars designed for higher education in the communist model. The workers mostly received vocational and technical education - math, science, and weekly exercises - but they also had political training through history and social science classes and militant activities. We emphasize here the instrumental character of sociology in the period, which was used to disseminate the precepts of the Marxist-Leninist theories.

One of the main criticisms of vocational education is that it is limiting since it contributes to the reproduction of the more stereotyped occupational choices of the lower classes, failing to move their social positions. Among the problems of this educational model pointed out by Simonová and Antonowicz (2006, p. 519-520) are "limited awareness among vocational school students of possible occupational choices and their limited ability to assess their potential inadequately formulated interests and their highly stereotyped occupational choices."

Another problem faced by this training model was the physical and mental health of students. With an exhausting workload and a curriculum that demanded much dedication, it was common for students to manifest depression and anxiety, and early in the course, two suicide attempts were recorded. Other physiological diseases were also frequently registered, such as tuberculosis and orthopedic problems (CONNELLY, 1997).

Even so, between the years of 1948 to 1950, approximately 5,000 student-workers attended the DKs. Of these, around 2,600 entered the country's universities (CONNELLY, 1997). Over the years, however, regular high school was strengthened, and the DKs weakened. Although the number of university students of peasant and/or working-class origin was increased, this growth was lower than expected and did not reflect in a qualitative change in their professional performance or quality of life. The HEIs, heteronomous, did not develop at the same speed and depth as the universities of the West that were moving forward. Furthermore, forming a new intelligentsia composed of the communist working-class aspired by the Soviet project never took place. Universities continued to reproduce social stratification, being a space occupied mainly by elites.

To summarizing, although the "Sovietization" of higher education in Czechoslovakia indeed restructured the educational order, these changes did not bring practical and significant results in combating inequality and social stratification, as aimed. Completing higher education during the communist period did not result in better wages or quality of life (FÓNADOVÁ; KATRŇÁK; SIMONOVÁ, 2019). Nevertheless, it is necessary to stress the relevance of the legacy of the Soviet model in higher education, since the transformations implemented during the forty years of the communist regime resulted in a change in the *ethos* of educational institutions, professors, students, researchers, and of the production of knowledge as a whole in Czechoslovakia (KWIEK, 2012).

Thus, after the Velvet Revolution (1989) and the country's re-democratization, a new structural transformation of Czech higher education began, but with deep marks of the legacy of the Soviet model, as we will see in the next topic.

HEIs in the Post-Communism: Autonomy, Europeanization and the Bologna Process

After the fall of the Communist Party, the end of the Cold War, and the opening to the West, the modernization and re-democratization of institutions entered the agenda of the former Soviet countries with top priority. The academic community, still driven by the events of 1989, utterly demanded the restructuring of the educational model and demanded changes that would mirror Western European and the US higher education systems. Such changes, however, did not occur at the speed or easiness that was believed to be possible, as it would be necessary to change not only regulations and laws but also the *ethos* of academia and society (KWIEK, 2012).

The first decade of the transition to capitalism brought significant changes in diverse social institutions and Czechoslovak society, and higher education was no exception. As early as 1990, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports of Czechoslovakia signed the Higher Education Act, which consisted of restructuring the legal apparatus of higher education based on the principles of liberalism. The main goal of the Act was to guarantee autonomy and freedom for universities by reducing the administrative role of the State and establishing self-governance mechanisms, such as the creation of academic bodies, which became responsible for all the decision-making and organization processes of the universities.

One of the main changes of the 1990 Act was the creation of the Academic Senate, which, composed of students and teachers, came to control the curriculum, the hiring of professors, the selection of students, the election of the dean, the allocation of resources, and all other decisions related to the functioning of the HEIs (MATĚJŮ, SIMONOVÁ, 2003). Dobbins (2011, p. 68) points out that, in this new hierarchical framework, the State abandoned the control of the processes and products of Czech higher education, and "[i]t not only lost its capacity to shape the content of teaching and research and influence matters of strategic orientation of institutions, but also had few instruments at hand to assess, promote,

and control the quality of teaching and research." This reveals the radical nature of the first alternative model to the Soviet higher education since any State intervention – even if positive – was seen as an affront to the universities' autonomy.

In this context, the organizational autonomy of higher education in the 1990s also meant the distancing and negligence of the State in the maintenance and development of universities. If HEIs used to be seen as strategic and bureaucratic elements, during the 1990s, they ceased to be a part of the government's agenda that, in austerity measures, significantly reduced the resources transferred to them. It is important to emphasize that the 1990 Act did not establish any other form of financing complementary to the state-owned one. So, although Czech higher education in post-communism had an autonomous structure, it remained dependent on the State, which no longer transferred sufficient resources. Bourdieu (2004) had already pointed out that this dependence on independence is the paradox of the scientific field. Indeed, having the State as the main financier of higher education is a way of sustaining the university autonomy, for it does not depend on the market to develop (as we will see more directly in the next sections). On the other hand, having the State as the only source of funding can lead to some obstacles, such as the lack of resources (in situations of budgetary contingency, for example) or the heteronomous condition of science itself (which becomes at the service of the State, as experienced during the period of the communist regime). As the author explains:

One of the great paradoxes of scientific fields is that they owe, in large part, their autonomy to the fact that the State finances them, therefore placed in a relationship of dependence of a particular type, concerning an instance capable of sustaining and making possible a production that is not subject to immediate sanction by the market (...). This dependence on independence (or the reverse) is not unambiguous, since the State that ensures the minimum conditions of autonomy can also impose constraints that generate heteronomy and act as an expression or a transmitter of the pressures of economic forces (for example, agricultural organizations) from which he supposedly liberates (BOURDIEU, 2004, p. 55, our translation).

Considering the limited budget, universities continued to engage much more in teaching than in research, leaving the production of knowledge itself to other institutions. The university and the academic career deepened the identity and prestige crisis that highlighted the problems of their development and functioning. The consequences can be seen in the progress of the labor market, which absorbed the workforce normally linked to academia (research, innovation, and science). As Kwiek (2012, p. 115) analyzes:

The identity crisis of the academic profession, caused, among other things, by severe institutional underfunding and low academic salaries, led to a decade of weak, cosmetic reforms; this caused the public to lose interest in universities as knowledge-generating institutions, and, consequently, caused policymakers to lose interest in the university research mission.

The autonomy granted to universities in the first phase of the post-communist era hid a liberal project of minimum state participation and austerity measures that implemented the desired reforms impractical or utopian (SCOTT, 2002). One of the issues that the Higher Education Act (1990) failed to resolve, for example, was the case of private educational institutions, which remained until the end of the century without a legal regiment to make

their actions official. Another example is the issue of unified higher education that, contrary to Western countries, continued throughout the 1990s without offering the option of a bachelor's degree. Some of these issues only began to be tackled on the second Act on Higher Education in 1998, which brought the State and HEIs closer together, centralizing some processes of the academic environment in the government, such as quality control and accreditation of courses. Furthermore, the Act of 1998 authorized the institutionalization of private colleges and implemented the binary undergraduate/graduate system. Still, it did not provide legal parameters for new forms of funding, making universities remain dependent on the State budget that continued to practice austerity measures (DOBBINS, 2011).

As Zgaga (2009) warns, it is important to consider that the transition experienced by former Soviet countries was not limited to the local social and political issues. As Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) point out, at the turn of the 21st century, the global knowledge and information society emerged, demanding a new higher education arrangement. In this sense, Western Europe and the US were also experiencing a transition in the 1990s, the transition to the knowledge economy³, taking a path of rapid and profound transformations that Central and Eastern Europe were pursuing but could not keep up within the same way.

Kwiek's (2012, p. 112) research can be used to elucidate this context, as he argues that there is "(...) an ongoing East/West divide in knowledge production resulting from historical differences between the economy, society, and higher education and research and development systems in both parts of Europe". The gap between the production of knowledge in the North and the Global South derives precisely from the historical differences of economies, societies, and the development of higher education in each region, which was in different phases of transition.

While the Global North was concerned about the new dynamics and challenges of the knowledge-economy labor market, the South agenda had other structural questions to answer. At the beginning of post-communism, the newly independent Czech Republic still had basic issues to address, issues that central countries had already experienced and overcome. Regarding this matter, Scott (2007, p. 435-436) writes that.

Higher Education in the region has had to be reconstructed on a scale, and at a speed, never attempted in Western Europe. Adjustments that have required long gestation in the West have had to be accomplished within four or five years. For example, in the West complex issues such as the relationship between universities and other higher education institutions and between higher education and research have been managed by a lengthy process of reform and negotiation stretching over several decades; in Central and Eastern Europe, such issues had to be immediately resolved after 1989.

³ This work will not discuss the particularities of the knowledge economy. Notwithstanding, for conceptual clarity, a knowledge economy is defined as one in which the major proportion of jobs requires a high degree of knowledge, the economic weight of the information technology sectors is decisive and the inflow and participation of intangible capital is greater than the stock of tangible capital. For more information, see Kwiek (2012).

Nevertheless, to achieve the goal of "reaching" the capitalist nations, and also by the hegemonic imposition of the North that intensified as the former Soviet countries opened up to international politics, the reforms of Czech higher education, mainly from the second decade of transition (2000), were oriented by the Western agenda. This, however, happened at a much greater speed and dimension than to the ones central countries had experienced.

In 1999, the Czech Republic, along with 28 other countries, signed the Bologna Declaration, which was the biggest step⁴ towards the process of Europeanization of higher education. This Declaration had as its main objective the creation of a common area of higher education, the European Higher Educational Area (EHEA), in which the national higher education systems, through common structural reforms, would guarantee the mutual transferability of courses. For this purpose, the Bologna Process countries were ought to adopt measures and sign common commitments, such as the adoption of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS); adequacy of the higher education system in order to offer bachelor's, master's, and doctoral options; implementation of a quality assurance system and guarantee of recognition of qualifications and education carried out in countries of the agreement; among others (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2020). Notwithstanding, it is important to mention that the Bologna Process was not intended to homogenize the cultural traditions of higher education, as much of its normative framework was not mandatory, being the legal adequacy of each country optional (DOBBINS, 2011).

On the other hand, by signing this international agreement, entities such as the Council of Europe (European Union), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) began to scrutinize the development of the educational system in the Czech Republic and in the other countries covered by the Bologna Process (which now numbers 48). One way or another, these countries had to adopt rapid measures to meet certain demands of the agreement. Czechia's strategy to enter the Bologna Process as early as 1999 was, *among other things*, to facilitate the county's entrance into the European Union, which was implemented in 2004. In practice, the Bologna Process ensured back the European identity to Central and Eastern Europe countries, resulting in far-reaching achievements beyond the educational sphere (SCOTT, 2007)⁵.

Therefore, after the Bologna Process, the Czech Republic strengthened the adopted measures guided by the center and the market's logic, intensifying the transformations in higher education. In order to synthesize what was presented here, we structured a comparative table (table 1) about the organization and arrangements of the Czech higher education in each phase analyzed so far.

⁴ Since 1997, the Czech Republic has started to sign cooperation agreements with the European Union. In the area of education, even before the Bologna Process, the country had already signed other agreements, such as the programs Tempus, Erasmus and Sócrates and Leonardo da Vinci. Still, the Bologna Process was the one with the greatest magnitude and relevance. For further information, see Stastna (2001) and Zgaga (2009).

⁵ The Bologna Process was a central study object of many academic productions. This article, however, does not approach the specificities of the treaty. We suggest for further readings the work of Stastna (2001), Zgaga (2009) and Zahavi & Friedman (2019).

Frame 1. Higher education arrangements in the Czech Republic

	COMMUNISM	PRE-BOLOGNA PROCESS	POST-BOLOGNA PROCESS
Hiring of the faculty	State	Academic Senate	Academic Senate
Selection of students	State	Academic Senate	Academic Senate
Selection of the Dean	State	Academic Senate Appointed by the President	Academic Senate Appointed by the President
Curriculum development	State	Academic Senate	Academic Senate State Accreditation Body
Organization of the university structure	State	Academic Senate	State-University partnership
Who controls and evaluates teaching and research?	State	Academic Senate Peer evaluation	Academic Senate State Accreditation Body Scrutiny of International Organizations
Main funding base	State	State	State (main fraction) Private Institutions
What does the state control?	Responsible for the universities' processes and products	Only responsible for the funding	Responsible for the funding, accreditation and the quality control of the courses
Orientation of researches and teaching	The State determines it.	Oriented for the scientific advance	Oriented for the scientific advance and market demands

Source: based on Dobbins (2011), created by the authors (2020).

Finally, we can categorize the most transformative reforms in Czech higher education in three phases: the communist regime, the pre-Bologna Process (or first decade of transition - 1990), and the post-Bologna Process (or second decade of transition – 2000). Each period has its characteristics, but it is undeniable the impact of the forty years of communism on the reforms of higher education in the period of re-democratization - whether by adopting measures that were opposed to the Soviet framework (for example, the weight given to the autonomy of universities) or by maintaining certain paradigms (free education, the State being the responsible for funding) in both transition decades.

The Last Decade: Global Job Market and the International Rankings

Following a contemporary analysis, *i. e.*, an analysis of the development of the field in the last ten years (2010-2019), it is possible to observe that HEIs in the Czech Republic are still the reflection of and marked by their social and political history. Due to the multiple ruptures and interventions, Czech HEIs did not manage to consolidate themselves with the same prestige and status that universities normally have in countries of the Global North, either nationally or internationally (BOYADJIEVA, 2017). Considering this issue, it is of utmost importance to understand and reflect upon the current global criteria used in the quality control process and rankings of HEIs. Specifically, it is relevant to this article to understand how the Czech Republic has faced these criteria by explaining how the communist legacy might still affect the little prominence of Czech universities within the global capitalist system.

As already mentioned, since the 1990s, the social function of universities has been questioned and reformed towards the global labor market, which, in turn, has increasingly demanded training based on capitalistic and liberal precepts of knowledge production. In this context, the competitiveness, productivity, and quality of universities worldwide have been placed in check and special scrutiny. The creation of global rankings that classify the world's universities, for example, highlights the fierce disputes in the intellectual field that are always ruled by the criteria of excellence established in the global North (CONNELL, 2012). Among the elements most demanded by this contemporary global logic is the composition of a highly qualified workforce; the emphasis on research, innovation, and technology; the internationalization of institutions; and developing a curriculum that provides specific training directed to attend the economy of the knowledge labor market.

In the European Union (EU) context, this translates particularly into the EHEA's objective of establishing the compatibility of higher education based on academic **Quality Assurance**. This happens both through the imposition of public policies with mandatory implementation and thorough guidelines for improving higher education whose implementation is optional. Considering that the educational system is taken up by idiosyncratic issues that circumscribe each national reality, the EU uses the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) to structure the normative guidelines. The OMC consists of formulating intergovernmental public policies that may or may not be incorporated by countries, which means that the adequacy of national legal structures is not mandatory (KOUHOTEK *et al.*, 2017). That said, Kouhotek *et al.* (2017) point out that the Czech Republic has been particularly alien to implementing these soft policies in higher education, which is directly linked to its political and social history.

The quality assurance process of the Czech educational system is moving at a different pace than the one proposed by the EU. As mentioned, the gravitational shift towards the autonomy of universities has severely restricted the role of the State and other partner institutions. In this sense, courses' accreditation and quality control fall with much more weight and responsibility on the Academic Senates and university rectors and deans. They have a high degree of autonomy to adapt the university to the standards proposed by international organizations. In this vein, it is clear that the Czech Republic has not fully incorporated the EU's quality assurance policies but has chosen those that best fit its national reality, focusing on the policies that orient teaching, curriculum, and learning activities (ALZAFARI; URSIN, 2019).

An issue that explains the difference between the organizational structure of Czechia's and the global North's higher education is the teaching-research arrangement of the country. Even though Czech universities have adopted the three-phase system (bachelor, master, and doctorate) and have started to carry out research activities within the universities, it is still possible to observe that the teaching and research processes are marked by the institutional separation of universities (that are dedicated mainly to teaching) and Academies of Science (responsible for most of the scientific production). In addition, most quality-assurance

policies are related to the teaching field, revealing the lack of a normative organization for the development of research, going against the logic of contemporary global higher education (KOUHOTEK *et al.*, 2018; BOYADJIEVA, 2017). This can be seen in the development of the country's educational plan for the years of 2016-2020 (MŠMT, 2020), in which the priority goals emphasize teaching much more than research. It is possible to conclude that the educational model of the communist period still influences the current national scenario, as it has always neglected research concerning education and vocational training.

On the other hand, one of the criteria most incorporated by Czech higher education has been the universities' internationalization projects. The Czech Republic is one of the countries with the highest number of international students in the OECD, with 13% of its student body coming from other countries. However, a negative effect of internationalization, which also influences the low prestige of Czech HEIs in the global context, is the "brain drain." With academic mobility facilitated by international agreements, researchers and academics have increasingly moved to countries in the Global North to study and work in central universities with greater prestige and more available resources. It is noteworthy that the Czech Republic is one of the OECD countries that allocate fewer resources to education proportionally. In 2016, the Czech government spent 3.5% of its GDP on the entire education system, which contrasts with 5% of the other countries (OECD, 2019). It is important to mention that the State is still responsible for the greatest part of educational funding. This scenario of low investments in higher education resulting in brain drain contributes to the (relative) periphery position that the Czech Republic occupies within the global geopolitics. Peripheral countries demonstrate difficulty structuring the resources needed for the contemporary economy – the market economy and, more specifically, the knowledge economy. Consequently, the lack of specialized local labor maintains and deepens the center-periphery inequalities.

Furthermore, according to data from the OECD (2019), only 24% of the Czech population aged between 20 and 64 have a higher education degree, which contrasts with the average of 37% in other OECD countries. Of those who attended higher education, approximately 71% have a master's degree, 25% a bachelor's degree, and 4% a doctorate. It can be stated that these data are consistent with the history of Czech higher education during the communist period since the Soviet model did not offer the option of a bachelor's degree, but rather a unitary system that granted the equivalent title of a master at the end of the course.

On the one hand, the data reveal the little tradition that academia has in Czech society, as many still choose to enter the labor market without going through higher education. On the other hand, this may be directly related to the specific economic situation that the Czech Republic is currently experiencing - the country's unemployment rate is one of the lowest in the world, closed at 2.1% in 2019 (OECD, 2020).

Final Considerations

Although the difficulties faced in attempting to synthesize a long historical period, marked by intense transformations in the studied higher education system, our main objective with this article was to present the reality of higher education in the Czech Republic and highlight its current main challenges. The issues on the agenda for Czech universities are substantially different from those posed for Latin American universities, for example. Nonetheless, it is possible to stress pulsating issues that are also present in other countries located in the Global South, and that is inserted in the current globalized scenario of higher education (SCHOFER, MEYER, 2005).

The educational policies implemented in the communist period had profound implications for Czech higher education and, despite its entry into the EU, this small country in Central Europe still has remarkable singularities concerning its peers that are part of the same trading bloc. This draws our attention to the global asymmetries of higher education, which are replicated even in contexts in which there is a considerable effort to integrate the local education system into a "global community," revealing that the *sui generis* development of each system must be considered in these processes.

Researching on the development of sociology in the Czech Republic, our attention was drawn to the fact that sociology departments were persecuted by the communist regime, as sociology was considered a bourgeois subject. The emphasis on building public sociology affected the development of the discipline at a particular distance from the academic career, focusing on preparing the students for the labor market (OLIVEIRA; NASCIMENTO, 2020). If we consider the Argentinian context – to take a Latin American example – we find a close reality in which sociology was also persecuted by an authoritarian State (the Argentine military dictatorship). This unfolded in the development of sociology that tended to privilege strictly academic formation (BLOIS, 2018). This implies recognizing that educational systems that have experienced "near" socio-historical experiences can follow multiple paths, which are conditioned by the public policies implemented and the socioeconomic reality in which each of them is inserted.

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