

Universities and Public Contestation during Social and Political Crises: Belgrade University in the 1990s

Martina Vukasovic, *Ghent University*

Universities play a crucial role in world politics. They socialize political elites, serve as sites of political dissent, and form and disseminate dominant ideology. However, these important university functions have not been adequately researched. Furthermore, unlike the development of the state or state-owned companies in times of political and social transition, what happens to universities in similar conditions is underexamined. This article addresses this gap by exploring the political agency of universities in situations of profound environmental change. It discusses Olsen's question—"What kind of university for what kind of society?"—in the context of the institutional upheaval that accompanied the fall of communism (Newman 2000; Olsen 2007). In particular, the article examines the case of Belgrade University (BU) during the turbulent 1990s in Serbia, drawing on policy documents, secondary sources (Kuzmanović and Pavlović 1993; Lazić 1999), and independent media archives. The case illuminates two points. First, the various university visions resonate differently in situations of institutional upheaval than in consolidated democracies. Second, BU demonstrated its political agency not as an organization but rather through students and academic staff, who actively engaged in public contestation, provoking the regime to treat the university as a political agent that must be repressed. The BU case is a useful reminder that scholars should study the university not as a single, coherent actor but rather as an institution being pushed and pulled by a number of conflicting internal and external actors. These tensions become particularly visible during times of profound social upheaval.

INSTITUTIONAL UPHEAVAL, POLITICS, AND UNIVERSITY VISIONS

According to Newman, institutional upheaval is the "rapid and pervasive change" of an institutional environment (Newman 2000, 603)—that is, fundamental changes in the political system and the basis for legitimation of different aspects of social life. The fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe—and the political, social, and economic transition that ensued—represents a prime example of institutional upheaval. The nation-states that emerged from the breakup of Yugoslavia experienced additional upheaval due to civil war.

Situations of institutional upheaval provide powerful opportunities to reconsider the role of the state vis-à-vis social institutions and, more generally, the overall distribution of power across states and institutions. In the context of higher education, this

can include reshaping the vision of the university and reexamining questions including: What kind of an organization is a university? What is its purpose? What are the conditions under which it operates? Who can make decisions about this?

This article builds on the work of Olsen (2007) who, based on studies of formal organizations developed four stylized visions of a university: (1) a rule-governed community of scholars, (2) an instrument for national political agendas, (3) a representative democracy, and (4) a provider of services in a market economy. Each vision occupies a distinct position within the nexus of autonomy (i.e., internal versus environmental factors of university governance) and conflict (i.e., whether norms and objectives are shared or not).

The university as a rule-governed community of scholars is essentially an embodiment of the Humboldtian principle of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Universities—although funded and protected by the government—are nevertheless autonomous from it. The authority to make decisions is awarded to those deemed to possess the most expertise (i.e., the academic staff), and they are seen to have shared norms and objectives. In this vision, the university is not expected to be a political actor; on the contrary, it is to remain an "ivory tower," isolated from political life.

The vision of the university as an instrument for national political agendas gives primacy to environmental factors—namely, "democratically elected leaders" (Olsen 2007, 31). The university is expected to contribute to the wealth of the country, and its autonomy is conditioned by how efficiently it fulfills the prescribed role. It is assumed that the state and the academic staff are not in conflict and that the university is governed by external actors. In this vision, the university is not so much a political actor as a political instrument.

The university as a representative democracy expands the number of groups involved in decision making to include administrative and academic staff of all ranks as well as students. Although all of these groups can be considered internal to the university (i.e., dynamics determined by internal factors), they are assumed to not have shared norms and objectives. In this vision, the focus is not so much on teaching, learning, and research but rather on how decisions are made and how the balance of power shifts among the different groups. The birth of this vision can be linked to the political activism of students in the 1960s, who sought internal democratization (i.e., democratization of the university) as well as external democratization (i.e., democratization of the society).

Finally, when research and education are perceived as commodities and the focus of institutional activity is on competition and achieving profit, then the university is envisioned as an economic (i.e., service) enterprise that operates under market conditions. Thus, the university is expected to satisfy its customers in an environment (i.e., internal dynamics determined by environmental factors) in which demands and expectations may conflict. In this vision, an economic rationale and a focus on short-term gains are a substitute for politics.

Finally, when research and education are perceived as commodities and the focus of institutional activity is on competition and achieving profit, then the university is envisioned as an economic (i.e., service) enterprise that operates under market conditions.

These four visions imply rather different views on the relationship between the university and politics. Essentially, perceiving the university as a rule-governed community of scholars or as a service enterprise puts politics very much in the background (albeit for different reasons). In the remaining two visions—the university as an instrument for national political agendas or as a representative democracy—politics is very much in the forefront. These different answers to the question, “What is the university for?” can remain well hidden during times of political stability; however, in situations of profound political and social upheaval, the interplay between the two visions becomes particularly salient, which is explored in the case of BU.

BELGRADE UNIVERSITY: A LAYERED INSTITUTION

BU was founded in 1905, but a line of predecessor institutions can be followed back to 1808 (Uvalić 1952). Initially, it consisted of three faculties: philosophy, law, and engineering. In the late 1930s, it was expanded to include seven faculties in Belgrade, as well as several branch campuses in other parts of the then–Kingdom of Yugoslavia. After World War II, the new Socialist government established universities in all of the former republics and provinces of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). Before the war, there had been only three universities in the region (i.e., Belgrade, Ljubljana in Slovenia, and Zagreb in Croatia).

BU is a product of the layering of political contexts and a multitude of influences during this period, including (1) the use of French, Austrian, and German examples as models before World War II; (2) the specific Yugoslav approach to socialism that prioritized the self-management of workers (i.e., decision making at the grassroots level by all employees of an organization) (Uvalić 1952); and (3) the root-and-branch reform from the early 1980s that strongly pushed the university (and secondary education) toward the labor market. First, this established a foundational link to universities in Western and Central Europe and, by extension, the ideas of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and the “community-of-scholars” vision. Second, the universities in SFRY operated in somewhat different circumstances than universities in the former Soviet bloc, and “despite periodic repression, universities remained centres of critical thought, social protest and political activism”

(Zgaga 2011, 3), as evinced by the student movements of 1968 and the so-called Praxis School.² Although this indicates that the vision of the “university as a representative democracy” may not have been alien at BU, university demands for the democratization of society came with a cost. In response to events of the late 1960s, legislative changes introduced in the 1970s essentially disintegrated the university (Zgaga 2011) by turning constituent faculties into separate legal entities, thereby effectively stripping the central administration from decision-making power.

Together with the push toward labor-market relevance in the early 1980s, these changes influenced BU to be an instrument for national political agendas and affected its potential to be a strong organizational actor.

Toward the end of the 1980s, on the eve of the breakup of SFRY and faced with the negative effects of previous reforms, the academic community seemed poised for change that would bring BU closer to the community-of-scholars vision. This particularly permeates the writings of authors in the early 1990s (Šoljan 1991; Uvalić-Trumbić 1990); however, their expectations of possible scenarios for Yugoslav universities and society in general stands in stark contrast with what ensued.

THE 1990s

Parallel to the breakup of Yugoslavia, the first multiparty elections in Serbia were held in 1990. In part because of his party's control of the media, Slobodan Milošević won a landslide victory against a fragmented opposition. Thus started a decade of autocracy, severe economic crisis, international isolation, war and war crimes, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombing, election fraud, corruption, repression of the media, and human rights violations. Yet, of particular importance for this article, it was also a decade marked by high levels of student activism.

On March 10, 1991, in response to the brutal suppression of an opposition rally and the closing of independent media outlets, students publicly contested the politics of the regime. Several thousand students gathered in downtown Belgrade and demanded the resignations of the leadership of the public broadcasting network and the minister of police, as well as the release of arrested opposition leaders. Although the students were joined by many citizens who took part in the initial opposition rally, it was explicitly framed as a student protest, not connected to a specific political party. For five days and nights, students and their sympathizers blocked one of the main crossroads in downtown Belgrade, situating their resistance to the regime outside campus. The protest ended after their demands were met on March 14, 1991.

The second instance of student contestation was triggered by the United Nations decision on May 30, 1992, to introduce

sanctions toward the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY).³ After several smaller meetings, the first big rally took place on June 15, when students announced their intent to go on strike and to occupy several university buildings. Their demands included the resignation of Milošević, the dissolution of Parliament, the scheduling of new elections, and the formation of a coalition government. Partly in response to the forced drafting of students for the wars in Bosnia and Croatia, the protest also had a clear anti-war message. During one month alone, protest activities included concerts, public lectures, and performances on university premises. Students also led two marches outside campus: to Milošević's neighborhood and to support an opposition-party rally in June 1992. This protest cycle ended on July 10, 1992, after Milošević announced early presidential elections that he later won. Again, the protest was clearly focused on crucial political issues and explicitly signaled resistance to both Milošević's autocracy and his politics of war.

In August 1992, in what proved to be a prelude to the subsequent annulment of any features of representative democracy or community-of-scholars visions of the university, the Serbian Parliament adopted the amendments to the Law on University. Although the principle of institutional autonomy was explicitly defined in the new legislation, half of the membership of the various governing bodies at BU was now to be appointed by the government. In addition, the law also set limits on student activism, reducing student participation in decision making to teaching and learning issues.

In November 1996, after the regime committed local election fraud, student activists initiated the longest high-intensity protest in Serbian history. It lasted approximately four months during the winter of 1996–1997 and took place in tandem with protests organized by opposition parties that had won the

demands (i.e., resignations of the rector and student vice-rector) at the end of March. It was only then that official academic activities resumed.

In response to these three waves of student protest, the Milošević regime introduced additional changes to the legislation in May 1998. Without a public debate and despite the protest of students and the more visible participation of academic staff—both on the university premises and in other public spaces, including a busy street in front the Serbian Parliament—the Milošević regime pushed these reforms through Parliament. Although the changes were framed as progressive reforms to adopt institutional policies from Western European countries (e.g., France), it was widely understood by both the Serbian academic community and the international community as the annulment of the basic principles of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Key changes included the direct appointment of the highest academic leadership positions (i.e., rectors and deans) by the government and the introduction of managing boards, members of which also were appointed by the government. These actions represented an attempt to transform the university from a community of scholars into an instrument of national political agendas. Following adoption of the law and appointment of the new leadership, the academic staff was required to sign new employment contracts. Approximately 200 individuals viewed the new contracts as a statement of obedience to the regime and refused to sign, which resulted in many being fired or moved into peripheral research centers.

During the summer of 1998, students protesting the repressive Law on University formed a movement called “Otpor!” (Serbian for “resistance”). Although it began as a student movement, it became a wider civic movement after the NATO bombing in the

... whether on campus or in general public places, situations of institutional upheaval open a space for universities to demonstrate political agency and resistance to government politics. This demonstrates that during times of upheaval, the idea of the university disconnected from the public life has little resonance within the academic community.

local elections. Students' initial demand was to appoint an independent commission to objectively assess the election results, but this was later changed to the demand for the state to recognize the opposition victory. Protestors called for the resignation of the rector and student vice-rector for not supporting the student-led movement. As in previous student protests, there were no formal connections between student actors and nonstudent opposition leaders, although many students participated in both movements. The student rallies began every day in the square adjacent to the rectorate building and were followed by a protest walk through the main streets of downtown Belgrade. On February 11, 1997, after significant pressure from the international community, Milošević admitted the victory of the opposition in the local elections. This decision ended the civic protests, but the student protests continued until fulfillment of the remaining

spring of 1999. Compared to previous student protests, “Otpor!” activities were of lower intensity, but “Otpor!” protesters always targeted the general public. Throughout the second half of 1999 and into 2000, “Otpor!” continued to gain strength by drawing nonstudent activists and civil-society organizations into its fold. Faced with mounting popular resistance and the severe economic crisis brought on by the NATO bombing campaign, Milošević lost the presidential elections in September 2000. In December 2000, the opposition won a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections.

CONCLUSION

As illustrated in this article, whether on campus or in general public places, situations of institutional upheaval open a space for universities to demonstrate political agency and resistance to government politics. This demonstrates that during times

of upheaval, the idea of the university disconnected from public life has little resonance within the academic community. This does not mean that the community of scholars is not a desirable vision but rather that it must be contextualized and examined in relation to other visions—specifically, the vision of the university as representative democracy. Moreover, attempts to advance a vision of the university as a political instrument may spark considerable resistance when pushed by autocratic governments. In summary, the four university visions resonate differently during institutional upheaval than in times of political stability.

Furthermore, upheaval triggers intense and visible manifestations of public contestation. Although an autocratic regime may perceive the university as a political agent to be repressed and controlled, political agency is exhibited not through the explicit organizational actorhood of the university but rather through the aggregated political agency of the academic community—students and staff. Thus, any analysis of the university as a political actor also must consider the dynamics of the discrete groups within the institution rather than simply assume that the university acts as a single entity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks the members of the Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent and the editors of this symposium for useful comments on earlier drafts. The author retains responsibility for any errors or omissions. ■

NOTES

1. "Faculty" here signifies an organizational unit of the university (in the US context, these are schools or departments).
2. This was a Marxist humanist movement originating with the philosophy faculties in Zagreb and Belgrade, active particularly in the 1960s and 1970s.
3. The FRY was a federation formed by Serbia and Montenegro after the dissolution of SFRY.

REFERENCES

- Kuzmanović, Bora, and Dragica Pavlović, eds. 1993. *Studentski protest 1992: Socijalno-psihološka studija jednog društvenog događaja*. Beograd: Institut za psihologiju, Plato.
- Lazić, Mladen, ed. 1999. *Protest in Belgrade: Winter of Discontent*. Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Newman, Karen L. 2000. "Organizational Transformation during Institutional Upheaval." *The Academy of Management Review* 25 (3): 602–19.
- Olsen, Johan P. 2007. "The Institutional Dynamics of the European University." In *University Dynamics and European Integration*, ed. P. Maassen and J. P. Olsen, 25–54. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- Šoljan, Nikša Nikola. 1991. "The Saga of Higher Education in Yugoslavia: Beyond the Myths of a Self-Management Socialist Society." *Comparative Education Review* 35 (1): 131–53.
- Uvalić, Radivoj. 1952. "The Organization of Higher Education in Yugoslavia." Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).
- Uvalić-Trumbić, Stamenka. 1990. "New Trends in Higher Education in Yugoslavia." *European Journal of Education* 25 (4): 399–407.
- Zgaga, Pavel. 2011. "The Role of Higher Education in National Development: South-Eastern Europe and Reconstruction of the Western Balkans." *Europa World of Learning Online*. Available at <http://www.educationarena.com/pdf/sample/sample-essay-zgaga.pdf>. Accessed on March 31, 2014.