Empirical Article

Localization of the Bologna Process in Post-Soviet Context: The Case of Kazakhstan

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Abstract

As the Bologna process emerged in the framework of European integration, its objectives are closely linked to the process of voluntary convergence of public policies of members of the European Union. In this context, it can be challenging to understand possible convergence or divergence trends in Bologna member countries that are outside the European Union. In this paper, I develop a theoretical framework based on Acharya's (2004) norm localization theory to analyze the historical and present factors of borrowing and adoption of the Bologna standards in Kazakhstan. While the findings suggest that convergence to the Bologna model will be limited, the identified short-term outcomes of the Bologna process include adopting the Bologna-driven competence-based approach. In the long term, the competence-based approach could replace knowledge-based education in Kazakhstan. The analysis reveals the importance of domestic factors for educational policy borrowing.

Keywords: Amitav Acharya, Bologna process, Kazakhstan, norm localization, policy travel, post-Soviet

Introduction: Convergence, Divergence, or Localization

In recent decades, many governments have pursued neoliberal policies out of pragmatic considerations (Tight, 2019). Neoliberalism proposes the application of the following principles in the public sector: the reduced role of the state in the management of goods and services, including educational ones; the use of the market as an instrument for the distribution of resources; and finally, "a view of individuals as economically self-interested subjects" (Tight, 2019, p. 2). These processes were facilitated by globalization and the rapid development of technologies (Marginson & van der Wende, 2009a). In this context, many researchers advocated a theory of convergence that predicted the alike development of "social

structures, political processes, and public policies" (Bennett, 1991). The theory led to studies on economic and policy convergence. However, the idea of convergence was criticized for failing to take into account the unique national contexts of individual countries (Bennett, 1991). The emergence of distinct positions on the issue of convergence among social scientists has been referred to as the convergence-divergence debate (Georgiadis, 2008).

In higher education, globalization increased interconnectedness and competition between universities all over the world, as well as the orientation of education systems towards the market (Marginson, 2006). These trends led to the proliferation of international quality assurance standards and benchmarking tools, including global university rankings, and created pressure toward convergence on education systems and universities (Steiner et al., 2013). In addition to the convergence pressures of neoliberal policies, many countries in Central and Eastern Europe became involved in the European integration processes (Georgiadis, 2008), which were directly oriented toward voluntary policy convergence (Bennett, 1991). Initially, the members of the European Economic Community had to harmonize their national tax regulations to eliminate tariffs on goods transported between national borders within the European Economic Area (Charlemagne, 2010, as cited in Woldegiorgis, 2013, p. 16). In the context of creating a common European market supported by the free movement of labor and capital, priority was given to the tasks of "quality education, employability of graduates across borders, and standardization of qualifications" to support the free movement of labor and capital in the Common European Market (Woldegiorgis, 2013, p. 13). In this case, voluntary convergence or harmonization of educational policies became a priority task for European countries (Woldegiorgis, 2013, p. 16).

In 1999, the intergovernmental Bologna Process (hereinafter – BP) was launched aimed at the convergence of higher education systems in Europe and the creation of the European Area of Higher Education (The Bologna Declaration, 1999). The Bologna Process aimed to promote the coherence of European higher education systems and cooperation between higher education institutions in Europe based on policy measures and instruments, including the two-cycle degree system and the European Credit Transfer System (BFUG, n.d.).

At first, the Bologna process was created without the direct involvement of the European Commission, based on a more voluntary and flexible approach towards the convergence of higher education (Wagenaar, 2019). In connection with its inter-governmental approach, which did not involve the European Commission directly, the Bologna process has attained great attention and influence in almost every country beyond Europe, with many non-EU countries either joining the Bologna process in harmonization efforts or adopting its instruments (BFUG, n.d.; Zgaga, 2006). Thus, the voluntary involvement of European countries in the convergence of educational policies echoed in the convergence of educational policies by non-EU countries, interested in the Bologna process.

Consequently, the theoretical problem of convergence in higher education, driven by globalization and the Bologna process, became an important research agenda (Heinze & Knill, 2008; Veiga, 2005). In higher education research, some scholars proposed the convergence thesis based on the increase of non-state forces as important actors in public policies, while others suggested the divergence thesis, which stated that harmonization of educational policies is used for national interests by states (Woldegiorgis, 2013). In connection with this, studies of the Europeanization of higher education and the external dimension of the Bologna process have grown (Zgaga, 2006). Focusing on the voluntary convergence of European and non-European countries to Bologna standards, some scholars discussed the idea of exporting the Bologna model to non-European countries (Ravinet, 2008; Zgaga, 2006).

On the one hand, the Bologna process had achieved considerable progress in the convergence of degree structures among participating countries and had introduced common frameworks in the fields of quality assurance and qualifications (Marginson & van der Wende, 2009b). The systematic literature review of the articles and policy documents on the Bologna process published between 2004 and 2013 found that convergence, at least at the macro-level, was the most important outcome of the Bologna process (Wihlborg & Teelken, 2014). Furthermore, the Bologna process has also evolved: although initially, its implementation was flexible, the use of benchmarking, and peer pressure have become successful instruments to achieve the convergence goals of the Bologna process in intergovernmental conditions (Ravinet, 2008).

On the other hand, in-depth studies have revealed significant country differences in the implementation of the Bologna process among the countries involved (Marginson & van der Wende, 2009b). For example, while the Netherlands replaced its old system of degrees with the two-tier Bologna system, Germany introduced the two-tier system in parallel with its old system (Lub et al., 2003). Furthermore, it is hard to focus on convergence to European educational standards when researching the Bologna process in member countries outside the European Union. The analysis of the EHEA Bologna

Process Country Reports by Soltys (2014) has shown that the convergence to the Bologna model in many post-Soviet countries did not happen. In a similar vein, Zmas (2014) noted that "it is possible that the BP will reinforce relevant regionalisms or nationalisms in other parts of the world rather than leading to a convergence of national higher education policies" (p. 720).

While the convergence of the macro-structures in frames of the Bologna process cannot be ignored by researchers (Ravinet, 2008; Wihlborg & Teelken, 2014), the studies also reveal evidence in support of the divergence thesis (Lub et al., 2003; Marginson & van der Wende, 2009b; Zmas, 2014). Thus, the studies of Europeanization and the external dimension of the Bologna process did not avoid the convergence-divergence debate in higher education.

Kazakhstan is a Central Asian country that joined the Bologna process in 2010 (The Budapest-Vienna Declaration, 2010). By contrast to the Europeanization studies, which focus on convergence towards European educational standards, existing studies suggest that Kazakhstan has used international discourse to symbolically support the establishment of a new geopolitical space (Silova, 2005). Furthermore, existing studies have reported many implementation challenges of the Bologna process in Kazakhstan (Tampayeva, 2015, 2016; Yelibay et al., 2022; Yergebekov & Temirbekova, 2012). While the Bologna process is important for Kazakhstani higher education policy, the implementation challenges in the Kazakhstani context show the necessity to study the influence of regional and local factors on the process of borrowing international policies and norms.

In connection with this, the present article suggests that a more balanced theoretical approach is needed in the study of the Bologna process, which admits the local context and its actors in the process of adopting the Bologna standards. The paper proposes to use the localization concept by the International Relations scholar Amitav Acharya (2004) to examine the Bologna Process in non-EU countries. Acharya studied the policy borrowing and travel of international norms. In the discipline of International Relations, the norm is "a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity" (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 891). Although not legally binding, participation in the Bologna process involves the voluntary convergence of educational policies to a set of European policy regulations and standards (Garben, 2010), creating international norms in higher education.

Acharya (2004) argued against the approach in which international standards would be treated as some "good global or universal" replacing "bad regional or local norms" (p. 242). Following Acharya (2004), the present paper suggests that the focus on convergence vs. divergence views the Bologna process as "teaching by transnational agents, thereby downplaying the agency role of local actors" (Acharya, 2004, p. 242). The paper suggests that the focus on convergence or divergence implies the dichotomic view on the Bologna process in non-European countries, which ignores the interplay between the Bologna influence and domestic factors, especially in regions and countries outside the European Union.

Pointing out that "local beliefs are themselves part of a legitimate normative order, which conditions the acceptance of foreign norms," Acharya (2004) argued that local agents reconstruct international norms so that they "fit with the agents' cognitive priors and identities" (Acharya, 2004, p. 239). Referring to this process as "congruence building," Acharya (2004) suggested that localization is a "key to acceptance" of international policies and norms (p. 239).

The findings of research on educational policy borrowing in post-Soviet countries echo Acharya's (2004) observations. Iveta Silova (2005), an international researcher in education, has developed a theory about educational policy borrowing in Central Asian countries. Silova (2005) suggested that:

> Local education stakeholders may 'appropriate the language of the new allies', while not necessarily agreeing with it or being willing to implement it. In other words, local education stakeholders may effectively internalize international discourses, while using them for their own needs such as legitimizing contested educational reforms domestically, objectifying value-based decisions, or 'signaling' certain reform movements internationally (p. 52).

In a similar vein, Tampayeva (2015) suggested that "It is inevitable then that borrowed patterns become a subject of "recontextualization" in a local context" (p. 83).

Some higher education scholars positively evaluated Acharya's (2004) concept. For example, Chou and Ravinet (2017) criticized the view on the Bologna process as the model for adoption in other world regions, pointing out that local context plays an important role in shaping transnational policies (p. 154). Chou and Ravinet (2017) also positively evaluated

the concept of localization in the study of the external dimension of the Bologna process, noting that "Acharya's concept of 'norm localization' captures much more accurately the processes we observed" (p. 156). However, the researcher could find only one higher education study that applied this concept: Que Anh Dang (2015) applied the concept of localization as part of a broader theoretical framework to examine regionalism in ASEAN higher education and concluded that ASEAN is actively building its own regional higher education space, while the role of the Bologna process served as an inspiration but not a template.

The present paper adapts Acharya's (2004) arguments into an analytical framework for a literature review of the Bologna process in the post-Soviet and Kazakhstani context. The paper aims to reconceptualize the Bologna process in contexts outside the European Union, by analyzing the reasons for many post-Soviet countries' joining or showing interest in the Bologna Process, as well as the factors that influence the localization of the Bologna process in Kazakhstan. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, post-Soviet countries faced similar problems (Smolentseva et al., 2018). Therefore, after presenting the conceptual framework and the research method, the factors that led to the adoption of the Bologna model or its elements in post-Soviet countries are examined. Next, the factors of localization of the Bologna model in Kazakhstani higher education are analyzed. The analysis suggests that the convergence to the Bologna model will be limited in the Kazakhstani context, but short-term and long-term outcomes of localization can be observed. It is expected that the paper will contribute to the understanding of convergence to the European higher education model in the non-European context, joining the discussion on geopolitics and governance in higher education by Shaw (2012), Oldac (2021), and Otto (2021).

Theoretical Framework

The Concept of Localization

The present section presents the concept of localization by Acharya (2004), which serves as the analytical lens of the current literature review. Acharya (2004) has criticized the perspective which presumed that "'good' global norms prevail over the 'bad' local beliefs and practices" (p. 239). He pointed out that "local beliefs are themselves part of a legitimate normative order, which conditions the acceptance of foreign norms" (p. 239). He further argued that local agents reconstruct international norms so that they "fit with the agents' cognitive priors and identities" (p. 239). Referring to this process as "congruence building," Acharya suggested that it is a "key to acceptance" (p. 239). To illustrate the effectiveness of certain international norms at the regional level, Acharya studied a case from the field of ASEAN security policy. Inspired by the European experience, Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans proposed the idea of "common security" for the ASEAN organization. The idea of "common security" suggested the complete abandoning of established ASEAN norms, including non-interference in the domestic issues of ASEAN members and preference for a non-formal style of cooperation (Acharya, 2004, pp. 256, 265). However, members of ASEAN countries rejected this idea. Specifically, Ali Alatas, the former Indonesian Foreign Minister, criticized this proposal: "You cannot just take European institutions and plant them in Asia because the two situations are totally different" (as cited in Acharya, 2004, p. 257).

In connection with this, Evans modified the initial idea into the idea of "cooperative security" (Acharya, 2004, p. 257). This approach was more flexible, respecting the non-interference principle of ASEAN members (Acharya, 2004). Due to this respect towards one of the major principles of ASEAN, the idea was accepted by the ASEAN members (Acharya, 2004).

Acharya (2004) suggested that borrowed policies and norms face several factors in the local context (Table 1). First, he introduced a concept of "norm hierarchy" suggesting that a norm that threatens the established norms will be rejected by the receiving side (Acharya, 2004, p. 251). He further suggested that if the foreign norm does not threaten any of the established main norms on the receiving side, it may occupy the spot of a less significant norm in the hierarchy. Thus, while the idea of cooperative security was compatible with the ASEAN principle of non-interference, it replaces the less significant prior norm – the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality framework (ZOPFAN) (Acharya, 2004, p. 256). Furthermore, other factors of successful localization of an international norm include the existence of influential insider proponents and prior similar norms, as well as an international prestige of a norm (Acharya, 2004, p. 265).

Table 1

Reasons and outcomes behind norm and policy borrowing and localization.

Reasons	
Why borrow	Economic crisis, war, or depression
	Change of global powers
	Change of domestic powers
	International regional demonstration effect
Why localize	Borrowed norm enhances the legitimacy and authority of existing institutions and practices
	Strong local norms prevent wholesale borrowing (norm hierarchy)
	Credible local actors
	Strong local identity
	Similarity with a prior norm
Outcomes	
Short-term outcome: institutional change	Task expansion
	Development of a new policy instrument
Long-term outcome (may or may not occur)	Fundamental change or norm displacement

Note. Source: Adapted from Acharya (2004)

It is suggested that Acharya's (2004) concept of localization can contribute to the convergence-divergence debate in social science. Furthermore, this theoretical perspective can help explain the success and failure of borrowed policies in different local contexts (Table 1). Therefore, this perspective is proposed for analyzing the Bologna process outside the European Union.

Research Method

The Bologna Process is a mature and established topic, which makes it difficult for junior scholars to bring new perspectives to the process. This paper applies the analysis of literature to reconceptualize the Bologna process in post-Soviet countries as a localization of Bologna policies and standards. Among different types of literature review, Torraco (2016) identifies a distinct type of literature review: the reconceptualization literature review. According to Torraco (2016),

> Reconceptualization offers a new way of thinking about the topic addressed in the literature. Reconceptualization is undertaken when the current conception of the topic is found to be outdated or otherwise problematic and a critique and reconceptualization of the topic is needed (p. 64).

Following Torraco (2016), the relevance of the literature in the present review was assessed considering the research objective, which is to identify domestic factors behind joining the Bologna Process. While there is a plethora of studies on the implementation of the Bologna Process in post-Soviet countries, the present literature review focused on the studies describing the initial phase of the adoption of the Bologna process in the post-Soviet context.

Data Collection and Analysis

At the beginning of the work, the researcher identified the existing literature on the Bologna Process. The researcher was able to identify seven systematic and two analytical literature reviews dealing with specific aspects of the Bologna Process (Table 2).

In addition, the researcher read the meta-review of studies on internationalization by Kehm and Teichler (2007). Overall, none of the identified reviews of the literature were dedicated to the Bologna process in the post-Soviet context (Table 2). The initial literature search was performed in the ERIC database using the "Bologna process" and "post-Soviet" keywords. This search identified 44 articles, published since 2003. However, by reading the titles and the abstracts of the

articles, the researcher identified only three relevant articles (Silova & Niyozov, 2020; Soltys, 2014; Tampayeva, 2015). A further search of the literature was performed based on the careful reading of the identified articles, in which the abovementioned authors cited other researchers in the field of post-Soviet education and the Bologna process in Kazakhstan. Some authors cited their previous works (Silova & Niyozov, 2020). Furthermore, an in-depth compendium titled *25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in post-Soviet Countries: Reform and Continuity* was published by Huisman et al. (2018). The compendium provided an in-depth analysis of the reform history of post-Soviet higher education systems. The researcher used several articles from the abovementioned compendium (Clement & Kataeva, 2018; Shadymanova & Amsler, 2018; Smolentseva et al., 2018). Finally, the researcher flexibly used search engines to identify additional reports, relevant to the aim of the study (BFUG, 2004; Zgaga, 2006, 2019).

Table 2
Existing literature reviews, dedicated to the Bologna process.

Authors (in alphabetical order)	Type of review	Topic of review
Collins & Hewer, I. 2014	Systematic	The Bologna process and nursing higher education
Diogo et al., 2019	Systematic	The implementation of the Bologna process
Heinz & Maasen, 2020	Systematic	Bologna process and the social sciences
Kroher et al., 2021	Systematic	Bologna process and student enrollment
Mngo, 2019	Analytical	The Bologna process and the external dimension
Palese et al., 2014	Systematic	The Bologna process and nursing education
Pereira et al., 2016	Systematic	Assessment studies in the Bologna process
Vucaj, 2015	Analytical	Bologna process and vocational education and training (VET)
Wihlborg & Teelken, 2014	Systematic	Critical studies on the Bologna process

The present literature review has a conceptual structure, organized around the main elements, identified by Acharya (2004) (Table 1). Analytical tables are included to visualize the conceptual framework of Acharya (2004) and the main findings of the literature review. The literature review provides a novel perspective that highlights the role of domestic factors in the Bologna process.

Findings

Reasons for Joining the Bologna Process in the Post-Soviet Context

As it was mentioned above, Acharya (2004) criticized the dichotomic view of "good global" standards versus "bad regional or local" standards (p. 242). In his paper, Acharya (2004) suggested several factors that would lead the countries to borrow international policies or standards (Table 1). The purpose of the present section is to show several historical changes that influenced the interest of the post-Soviet countries in the Bologna process. Overall, in the Soviet Union, all the countries were subject to one uniform system of higher education, which was centrally controlled from Moscow (Froumin & Kouzminov, 2018). Thus, the post-Soviet education systems in European and Asian parts of the ex-Soviet Union faced similar problems after its collapse. Overall, the analysis below suggests that post-Soviet universities were pushed towards the Bologna process by exogenous factors. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the economic crisis caused a drastic lack of financing in the higher education sectors of ex-Soviet countries. While the discussion of the quality of Soviet education or comparison of Western and Soviet education models is beyond the scope of the article, the main point about the challenges with which post-Soviet universities met is the following: the lack of funding and the new, marketized environment, in which post-Soviet universities could not operate, were the major reasons for the deterioration in education quality. Furthermore, international organizations have been active in promoting neoliberal policies in post-Soviet higher education systems. Finally, the interest of some post-Soviet countries in the Bologna process influenced the interest of their neighbors in it, including Central Asian countries.

Economic Crisis after the Collapse of the Soviet Union

The first years of the post-Soviet era were characterized by an elevated level of turbulence. First, the social context was incredibly challenging for the development of education systems: unemployment, low wages, poverty, and armed

conflicts in certain regions (Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008). Many economic ties between ex-members of the Soviet Union were broken and centralized funding from Moscow was cut (Silova, 2009). During this period, the adoption of neo-liberal policies in higher education in post-Soviet countries was not driven by a strategic choice, but by a lack of government funds, and the weak ability of the government to ensure proper management (Smolentseva et al., 2018).

The international competitiveness of HEIs fell dramatically after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Specifically, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Soviet higher education ensured certain achievements: the government provided free higher education for all citizens based on entrance examination results, and higher education focused on the needs of a society guided by government policy (Kuraev, 2015).

In the Soviet Union, the government system defined and dictated certain beliefs to citizens through the system of communist ideology. Studies of Marxism and Leninism, dialectical materialism, and the history of the Communist Party were instead of the social sciences (Heyneman, 2010). To put it simply, all the views on history, literature, law, and society were taught through a single framework of communist ideology. As it was strictly defined what was proper to believe in and what was not, there was no need for the development of social sciences, the process which was taking place in the West during the same period. Consequently, higher education developed a strong vocational orientation. In the last decades of the Soviet Union's existence, education policy prioritized the professional training of youth at school and college levels (Kuraev, 2015). Academic freedoms or individual rights were ignored in Soviet HEIs, while communal values were placed as a priority (Kuraev, 2015). As noted by Kuraev (2015),

> Soviet higher education opposed the western university model on a fundamental level: The pragmatism of practical training contradicted the ideology of academic liberal knowledge and institutional self-governance. Decision-making in higher education was transformed from a personal matter to a communal one in the USSR." (p. 181).

Institutions were not able to define their budgets (Heyneman, 2010). Kuraev (2015) compared the role of Soviet higher education with a conveyor belt, that provided a professional workforce under the state order.

Consequently, the quality of education fell below the level that was achieved during Soviet times (Silova, 2009), so it was a big step back for universities. Curriculum got outdated, university and school infrastructure got old, education funding was at an extremely low level, lack of qualified teachers, and corruption became widespread issues across post-Soviet countries (Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008). According to Froumin and Leshukov (2016),

> The collapse of the Soviet system and the shift to a new, more market-oriented economic model forced a significant transformation of the Russian higher education system, including the mission, organization, and behaviors of institutions themselves (p. 174).

It was noted that the level of professionalization in education was low in the 1990s, which could be a barrier to the reform process (Johnson, 1996). Employability became a significant challenge for universities in their new role (Heyneman & Skinner, 2014).

Consequently, not all HEIs managed to survive in new conditions: "At one time, they had been leaders in specific areas of training determined by the state; now they had lost their sense of identity and purpose" (Froumin & Leshukov, 2016, p. 183). The quality of higher education went down, resulting in cheap educational programs, oriented on mass demand (Froumin & Leshukov, 2016). Enrollment rates decreased; many high-quality specialized programs were closed, and even the mass-produced new education programs did not satisfy student demands in terms of poor and narrowly focused curricula (Froumin & Leshukov, 2016). All these problems created an internal demand for education reform.

Change of Global and Domestic Powers

The collapse of the USSR created a necessity to develop independent education systems, which corresponded to the needs of post-Soviet states. Furthermore, international organizations emerged as new players in the region, which was previously closed to international influences. International organizations supported the process of policy borrowing in post-Soviet countries, which was needed to build independent educational systems (Silova, 2005). Many post-Soviet countries relied on assistance aid from international organizations, including Word Bank, Asian Development Bank, US Agency for

International Development (USAID), the Open Society Foundation, Aga Khan Foundation, and others (Silova, 2005). The European Union became one of the influential players in the post-Soviet region. Furthermore, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) proposed to act as a broker in bringing the Bologna process to non-Bologna countries (Zgaga, 2006)

Under the influence of international organizations, post-Soviet and Central Asian countries were introduced to outcome-based education (hereinafter - OBE) (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2006). By the time it arrived in Central Asia, OBE was already an internationally widespread reform, whose footprint could be found in many national education systems (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2006). In addition, Central Asian countries were accustomed to the practices of benchmarking and planning since the Soviet times, which made the use of competences and learning outcomes attractive for Central Asian policymakers (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2006). Finally, Central Asian countries dealt with domestic issues in education, which made policymakers interested in outcome-based education. According to Steiner-Khamsi et al. (2006), in Kyrgyzstan, policymakers used outcome-based education to reduce corruption in the education sector. Kazakhstan used the same approach to pursue its wish to develop an economy like that of Western countries (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2006).

International Regional Demonstration Effect

Many post-Soviet countries submitted their application for Bologna membership at the same time: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (BFUG, 2004). Now, the Bologna process includes all the countries from the European sub-group of post-Soviet countries (Smolentseva et al., 2018). Similarly, to the Eastern European countries, Kazakhstan joined the Bologna process in 2010 (The Budapest-Vienna Declaration, 2010). Coming from a similar post-Soviet context, these countries could have influenced each other in their interest in the Bologna Process. This can be described as the "regional demonstration effect" by Acharya (2004, p. 247).

While Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian member country of the Bologna process (at the moment of writing this paper), all other Central Asian countries have shown great interest in the Bologna model of higher education reform. Kyrgyzstan applied for membership in the Bologna process. However, the application was rejected in 2007 due to Kyrgyzstan not being a signatory of the European Cultural Convention of the Council of Europe, which is a precondition of the Bologna membership (Shadymanova & Amsler, 2018). Specifically, Bologna's two-tier degree system has been introduced in all Central Asian countries, although in many cases it coexists with the Soviet 5-year specialist degree and Soviet doctorate system (Smolentseva et al., 2018). In 2014, Turkmenistan established the International University of Humanities and Development (IUHD), with the teaching process being experimentally based on the Bologna model (Clement & Kataeva, 2018). The university mostly recruited local faculty with foreign degrees and two international faculty members (as of spring 2016) (Clement & Kataeva, 2018). Some leading universities in Turkmenistan host guest lecturers in cooperation with the Erasmus program (Clement & Kataeva, 2018). According to Clement and Kataeva (2018), "The philosophy behind IUHD's founding was to create a Turkmen HEI that would meet international standards and compete with the internationally recognized Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan" (p. 397). The interest of the CA countries in the Bologna model shows the importance of developing a strong higher education system for the elites of these countries. In addition, the case of IUHD in Turkmenistan shows the wish to build universities that are competitive in comparison with neighboring countries.

In the context of the external dimension of the Bologna process (Figueroa, 2008; Petkutė, 2016; Zgaga, 2006; Zmas, 2014), the European Union supported the initiative called Tuning in Central Asian countries to facilitate regional curriculum convergence based on the Bologna standards (Isaacs, 2014; Isaacs et al., 2016). The Tuning initiative applies methodology based on the use of the Competence-Based approach for the creation of educational programs at universities, and for connecting the educational programs with the European credit transfer system (González & Wagenaar, 2005).

To sum up, the Bologna process responded to two important internal demands of post-Soviet education systems: the necessity to build independent education systems and the need for reform in the context of economic crisis, and the deteriorating quality of university services. Furthermore, the post-Soviet region was open to the influence of international organizations, including the European Union. Thus, the description of the post-Soviet context reveals all the factors of borrowing the foreign norm by Acharya (2004). The economic crisis led to the problem of reduced education quality, and the collapse of the USSR led to the change of global and domestic powers. All the post-Soviet countries faced the necessity to rebuild education systems. Furthermore, the already established Bologna process caused the international regional demonstration effect in the post-Soviet space (Table 3).

In the context of the historical challenges, decentralization and the emergence of the free market attacked the central pillars of Soviet higher education (Froumin & Leshukov, 2016). Johnson (2008) claimed that the adoption of the neoliberal approach had exacerbated the crisis in higher education that happened after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, this context created good soil for the adoption of the principles of the Bologna Process as a European model of higher education reform, in which state regulation plays a vital role (Johnson, 2008).

Table 3
Bologna Process in the post-Soviet context.

Theoretical framework by Acharya (2004)	Domestic factors
Economic crisis, war, or depression	Underfunding of universities and issues of education quality
Change of global powers	The collapse of the USSR
Change of domestic powers	The necessity to build independent higher education systems
International regional demonstration effect	Neighbouring countries joined the Bologna process

Like many other countries, post-Soviet states have adopted a neoliberal approach to higher education policy, which reinforces the orientation of higher education to the demands of the market and the importance of global and national rankings (Smolentseva et al., 2018). The European Union has actively supported the Bologna model in post-Soviet countries. Thus, neoliberal policies and the Bologna standards became significant sources of the convergence of post-Soviet higher education systems.

To sum up, due to the exogenous factors many post-Soviet countries have shown significant interest in the Bologna Process. However, the interest of these countries was forced by the economic crisis, so the transfer to European standards was involuntary, especially on behalf of universities. Universities were forced to switch from the Soviet to the Bologna model of higher education.

However, neo-liberal higher education governance ideas faced an unprepared context of post-Soviet higher education, which was built on the principles opposite to Western ideas. Furthermore, certain developments in the context created barriers to the Bologna process in the region. Following the early period after the collapse of the Soviet Union, several political trends emerged that reduced the influence of Western educational models, including the Bologna process (Johnson, 2008). By contrast to early scholarly expectations, a trend towards the "state capitalism" model emerged in the recent decade across leading ex-Soviet countries (Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine) (Johnson, 2008, p. 170). The distinctive feature of the "state capitalism" model suggested that oligarchic groups and military people regulated the system of those countries (Johnson, 2008). In this context, countries achieved certain stability while not developing into democratic regimes (Johnson, 2008). While some elements of New Public Management were introduced in post-Soviet higher education systems, increasing higher education orientation to market demands and the importance of global and national rankings (Smolentseva et al., 2018), politics in the higher education sector were more conscious since the mid-2000s (Johnson, 2008). A report on educational transformation in post-Soviet countries by Huisman and colleagues (2018) revealed that most post-Soviet countries have maintained a division between research institutions engaged in scientific work and higher education institutions focused on teaching. This was in opposition to the neo-liberal democratic reforms suggested by international organizations and the European Union in post-Soviet countries.

These findings confirm the observation of the main factors behind policy borrowing by Acharya (2004) (Table 3). Furthermore, these findings explain why the Soviet model of education has not given place to the Bologna model creating a coexistence of post-Soviet heritage and European standards in post-Soviet universities. The next section will focus on the factors of localization of the Bologna model in Kazakhstan. Specifically, it will consider the interplay between factors supporting the Bologna process such as its prestige, and the factors challenging the Bologna process such as Soviet legacy.

Localization of the Bologna Process in Kazakhstan
The purpose of the present section is to show local conditions that influence the implementation of the Bologna process in the Kazakhstani context. The literature reveals that similar to other Bologna members, Kazakhstan joined the Bologna process to strengthen the legitimacy and authority of their government reforms and policies. There were a few credible local actors that supported the Bologna process in the face of education ministries and some university leaders.

However, the Soviet model of education retained its powerful reputation among the majority of Kazakhstani academia. As a result, the Bologna model was localized in Kazakhstan, having the biggest influence on quality assurance practices, and promoting the use of a competence-based approach at Kazakhstani universities.

The Prestige of the Bologna Membership

Many countries, ex-members of the Socialist Bloc, and ex-member countries of the Soviet Union were interested in joining the Bologna process. In its application, both Armenia and Georgia proclaimed their commitment to the "Europe of Knowledge" (BFUG, 2004, pp. 1, 5). Azerbaijan stressed the importance of international cooperation; Moldova stressed the necessity of reforming its higher education system and the need for change (BFUG, 2004). Ukraine focused on measures already taken in the field of higher education and did not present its motivation clearly (BFUG, 2004).

In the application letter for becoming a Bologna member, then Minister of Education of Kazakhstan, Zhaksybek Kulekeyev stated that "integration into global educational space is considered to be of primary objective" for the national education system (BFUG, 2004, p. 13). It can be concluded that Bologna membership was considered as being part of Europe for countries from Eastern Europe, and for Kazakhstan, the important motivation was joining the international community. This motivation worked, as the United Nations National Human Development Report assessed positively the efforts of Kazakhstan to join the Bologna process (UNDP in Kazakhstan, 2004, pp. 19, 53).

The Role of Local Actors

International organizations like the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) interacted with Kazakhstani policymakers in promoting the Bologna process, which could open the way for the Bologna reform in Kazakhstan. Pavel Zgaga described a purposeful advertisement of the Bologna process to members of post-Soviet academic communities: "It was at the 12th OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) Economic Forum where Per Nyborg, head of the Bologna Secretariat under Norway's coordination (2003-2005), was invited to present the Bologna opportunities to a broad range of countries, broader than the circle of signatories" (Zgaga, 2006, p. 37). According to Zgaga (2006), conference participants consensually agreed on the cooperative nature of the Bologna process (p. 38). According to Zgaga (2006), Per Nyborg started his speech with the claim that "the principles and objectives of the Bologna Process may be used for reforms in any country, and they may be a very good basis for international cooperation in higher educations also outside the European Region" (Nyborg, 2004).

In his speech, Per Nyborg specifically addressed a representative from Kazakhstan: "I shall be very interested in what the next speaker, Rector Kuznetsova from Kazakhstan, is going to say about university reforms in the light of the Bologna Process" (as cited in Zgaga, 2006, p. 37), which is a sign that Kazakhstan was already being considered as a potential member of the Bologna process. This conference was named "New Challenges for Building up Institutional and Human Capacity for Economic Development and Cooperation" and the Bologna process was introduced as a potential framework for "educational reform […]in transition countries" (Zgaga, 2006, p. 37).

The initial flexibility of the Bologna process could have increased its attractiveness for Kazakhstani policymakers and university leadership.

Agendas of Quality Assurance and International Cooperation in Higher Education

Influential international organizations have introduced the Bologna reform in connection with the topics of quality assurance and higher education internationalization. The use of these pre-existing norms could have helped to connect the model of Bologna reform with the post-Soviet political context in higher education because Kazakhstani policymakers were strongly interested in improving higher education quality. The importance of comparable degrees was obvious and could inspire the Kazakhstani government to seek membership in the Bologna process. For example, the Minister of Education of Kazakhstan participated in a Ministerial Round Table on the Quality of Education conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in October 2003 in Paris (Zgaga, 2006). During this round table, the Bologna process was presented to the participants with emphasis on its "principle of comparative and transparent certificates across borders, which can equally apply to other levels of education" (Zgaga, 2006, p. 204). Along with this, the importance of international cooperation and studying the best foreign practices was stressed (Zgaga, 2006).

In subsequent years, a lot of effort was made by the EU Council and EU agencies to introduce the quality assurance agenda in Kazakhstan. Before the country applied for Bologna membership in 2010, the EU supported various dissemination events on the topic of quality assurance in higher education. Specifically, as part of inter-regional cooperation with the

European Higher Education Area, the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) organized a Eurasian conference named "Central Asian Symposium on Quality Assurance Seen from three perspectives – Governments, Higher Education Institutions and their students, Enterprises," in Almaty (Kazakhstan) in October 2007, and organized a Seminar on "QA on an institutional level" in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) in May 2008 (Rauhvargers et al., 2009, p. 16). Within inter-regional cooperation, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) signed agreements with regional accreditation networks and accreditation bodies in several countries, including Kazakhstan (Rauhvargers et al., 2009). These joint efforts of the EU and Kazakhstan were welcomed by the international agencies of UNESCO and OECD. The review of Kazakhstani higher education by OECD & World Bank (2007) also noticed the country's efforts to align its education system with Bologna principles. Thus, the topics of international cooperation and quality assurance could have paved the way for the Bologna model in non-EU countries.

So far, most factors have supported the introduction of the Bologna process in Kazakhstan: the prestige of the Bologna membership and the promotion of the Bologna process, and the outcome-based education in the post-Soviet context by international organizations. These processes fit well within the agendas of quality assurance and international cooperation. However, some other factors stood in the way of the Bologna reform. According to Silova (2005), traveling policies were met with resistance in Central Asian countries due to the wish of the latter to keep Soviet traditions in education.

Strong Soviet Traditions in Higher Education

Overall, the adoption of neoliberal practices during the period of this turbulence led to the perception that Soviet education was a good old standard of reference (according to Belkanov, 2000, as cited in Silova & Steiner-Khamsi, 2008). This perception is strong among post-Soviet academia until today. Several power struggles were noticed in higher education systems during the process of reform adoption (Silova, 2009). In the case of the Bologna process, joining it turned out to be faster than the process of aligning with Bologna's goals and principles (Silova, 2009). It was observed by Kuraev (2015), that Soviet approaches and practices have remained in Russian academia. In a similar vein, traveling policies were met with resistance in Central Asian countries due to the wish of the last to keep Soviet traditions in education (Silova, 2005). These developments have created a challenging context for the development of research universities based on post-Soviet HEIs.

The study of the Kazakhstani higher education context by Tampayeva (2016) identified that members of the Kazakhstani academic community responded with the discourse of "nostalgia and loss" towards the Bologna reforms in Kazakhstani higher education (p. 2). However, the discourse of nostalgia over Soviet education was simultaneously expressed with the discourse of progress (Tampayeva, 2016). Thus, the Soviet approaches to education were still strong in the post-Soviet period because everyone was accustomed to them. In connection with this, Tampayeva (2016) noted: "The specific post-Soviet context should be considered in studies of education in the 'Second World'. These 'context models' are influential on how Western standards are implemented in the reality of post-Soviet education" (p. 2).

Consequently, Kazakhstani higher education policies have been characterized by opposing trends: on the one hand, the elites of the countries have been interested in building their research universities, competitive in the international higher education space (Hartley et al., 2016). On the other hand, implementation challenges were revealed by Tampayeva (2015), who applied the Critical Discourse Analysis of the interviews with Kazakhstani university teachers about the implementation of European educational standards. Tampayeva (2015) revealed that the implementation of new standards was conducted without consideration of the disciplinary peculiarities of the subjects and relevant support to teachers. This evidence suggests that the adoption of the neo-liberal approach in Kazakhstani higher education went hand in hand with the strict top-down relationship between the government and universities, in which universities have been marginalized or dominated (Tampayeva, 2016). This contradiction created chaos in the policy implementation process, and diminished the influence of Western standards and models, leading to the co-existence of Western-oriented practices with Soviet legacies (Tampayeva, 2016).

While acknowledging the major changes in Kazakhstani higher education in the recent period, Ibatov and Pak (2020) note the major problems in the implementation of the Bologna-driven standards in the Kazakhstani context, including the insufficient motivation of universities to reform their practices and the underdeveloped labor market. Furthermore, the strong nostalgia of Kazakhstani academics, which was like the feelings expressed in academic circles of Russian and other post-Soviet countries, suggested that the Soviet identity remained strong after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

However, the ideas of outcome-based education and competence-based adoption of the neo-liberal approach fitted well with the Soviet-inherited planning practices and were not rejected in the post-Soviet context.

The Short-Term and Long-Term Outcomes

Several quality assurance agencies were established in Kazakhstan since the country joined the Bologna process. The most prominent quality assurance agencies in Kazakhstan are the Independent Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (IQAA) and the Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating (IAAR). Both IQAA and IAAR are members of the big European associations of quality assurance agencies: the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA, 2021) and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR, 2022). To be members of ENQA and EQAR, any quality assurance agency must be compliant in their activities with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (ENQA, 2021; EQAR, 2021). Through these mechanisms, it is ensured that the Bologna standards are being followed by universities in member countries of the Bologna process. At the national level, these agencies provide both institutional and program accreditation for Kazakhstani universities. Per the report of IQAA (2020), many universities in Kazakhstan that went through the accreditation process by IQAA, practice the system of credit allocation and transfer, based on the ESG standards and the competence-based approach. The emergence of quality assurance agencies is the task expansion caused by the country's membership in the Bologna process, and the direct short-term outcome of the localization of the Bologna process in Kazakhstan. In the process of obtaining institutional and program accreditation from IQAA and IAAR, Kazakhstani universities adopt the Bologna-driven ESG standards, which leads to the development of a new policy instrument in Kazakhstani higher education, based on the Bologna standards and the use of the competence-based approach.

To sum up, the crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union drove Kazakhstan, along with other post-Soviet countries, towards the Bologna membership. Along with other Central Asian countries, Kazakhstani policymakers were accustomed to the practices of benchmarking and planning since the Soviet times, which made the use of competences and learning outcomes attractive to them (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2006). However, the post-Soviet model of higher education remained strong, so elements of the Bologna process had to be connected with the norms of quality assurance and international cooperation to find their place within the already existing norm hierarchy of Kazakhstani higher education system (Table 4). These findings reveal the interplay between external influences and local conditions in the process of localization of the Bologna process in the Kazakhstani context.

Table 4

Bologna Process in the Kazakhstani Context

Element from Acharya theoretical framework	Why localize the Bologna process in Kazakhstan
Borrowed norm enhances the legitimacy and authority of existing institutions and practices	The prestige of the Bologna membership
Strong local norms prevent wholesale borrowing	Soviet approaches
Credible local actors	Ministries of education
Strong local identity	Nostalgy over Soviet education
Similarity with a prior norm	Focus on quality assurance
Short-term outcome	
Task expansion	Quality assurance agencies (IQAA, IAAR)
Development of a new policy instrument	Adoption of the Bologna standards (ESG) and the competence-based approach
Possible long-term outcome	
Fundamental change or norm displacement	Displacement of the knowledge-based approach

Note. Source: The theoretical framework based on Acharya (2004)

Discussion

The present study aimed to reconceptualize the Bologna process from the perspective of localization by Acharya (2004). The study fulfilled its aim by providing a fruitful description of the regional factors that drove post-Soviet states' interest in the Bologna process and by identifying the factors of localization of the Bologna process in Kazakhstan.

Overall, the findings of the paper confirm the importance of local factors in the process of borrowing and adopting international policies as observed by Acharya (2004). All the factors of policy borrowing, suggested by Acharya (2004) (Table 1), could be revealed in the literature on the Bologna process in the post-Soviet context (Table 3). These were exogenous factors: following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the economic crisis caused a drastic lack of financing in the higher education sectors of ex-Soviet countries (Table 3). This was followed by the involvement of international organizations in the promotion of neoliberal policies in higher education. Finally, the interest of some post-Soviet countries caused their neighbors to apply to the Bologna process, including Central Asian countries. However, the case study revealed the contradictions among the domestic factors, for example, between the wish of the elites of the countries to build competitive research universities and the strict top-down relationship between government and universities, such contradictions can decrease the efficiency of the policy localization. Consequently, this led to the co-existence of Bologna elements with Soviet-inherited practices in higher education.

The case study suggests that the concept of localization by Acharya (2004) provides a better account of the interplay of domestic factors that influence the implementation of the Bologna process in Kazakhstan (Table 4). Joining the Bologna process for reasons of prestige would not necessarily mean the adoption of the Bologna model in practice. In the Kazakhstani context, the Bologna process was associated with the narrow task of higher education quality assurance. The analysis of the domestic factors helps to identify the emergence of quality assurance agencies and the application of the competence-based approaches in the Kazakhstani context as the short-term outcome of the localization of the Bologna process. Kazakhstan joined the quality assurance initiatives within the framework of the Bologna process and under the umbrella of Kazakhstani quality assurance agencies, universities apply the Bologna-driven ESG standards. In the long term, the competence-based approach might displace the knowledge-based approach in Kazakhstani higher education.

The concept of localization suggests that the context of higher education systems can constrain or support the influence of international models and standards. The case of Kazakhstan demonstrates that international education discourses can be used for justifying certain policies and advertising their political activities internationally, as suggested by Silova (2005) and Tampayeva (2015). Furthermore, the use of the localization framework suggests that at least in the non-EU context, convergence towards the Bologna model of higher education will be limited despite its immense popularity outside Europe.

If the revealed contradictions will be overcome, the likely long-term outcome of localization of the Bologna process in Kazakhstan will be the replacement of the knowledge-based education with the Bologna-inspired competence-based approach in Kazakhstani universities.

Conclusion

The present literature review aimed to reconceptualize the Bologna process from the perspective of localization by Acharya (2004). The literature review suggests that domestic factors can play a role in the convergence to or divergence from international trends. The support of key local actors can influence the long-term outcome of policy borrowing. The selection of articles for the analytical review was not carried out in a systematic way, which is a significant limitation of the study.

The findings imply that local factors are important for the adaptation of international norms in the national education systems. These findings echo the concept of translation by Chen (2010; see also Zhang et al., 2015). Thus, understanding domestic factors is crucial for research on international policy borrowing. In connection with this, further studies are recommended based on the concept of localization by Acharya (2004), which could encompass a wider range of articles. For example, the localization framework could be applied to the study of the Bologna reform in other post-Soviet countries.

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