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## Dynamic and Stability of Institutional Vocational Education in Bulgaria and Lithuania. An Empirically Verified Draft

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### 1 Analytical Model

The main emphasis in the analysis of the conducted investigation lays in determining the cause and effect of changing processes within the system of vocational education in the sense of a hypothesis generating study. With regards to the analytical model, change processes can, corresponding to their moulding and intensity, be differentiated into four structural levels (see table 1); in accordance to the thesis those change processes express themselves in changes of formal and informal regulation (institutions). These institutional changes take place either formally (changes of laws, enforcements), informally (resulting from actions of agents out of the empirical regulation) or as a result of the combination of formal and informal processes (see Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia 2005).

Table 1: **Four Structural Levels (following Bronfenbrenner 1981)**

<i>Structural level</i>	<i>Features</i>
macro level	<i>Social meta - level:</i> social patterns of norms and values, customs, political and economical order
exo level	<i>Structural level:</i> structural design of social subsystems and their processes
meso level	<i>Institutional level:</i> concrete fields of action of the individual such as family, school, etc.
micro level	<i>Situational level:</i> concrete, specific context of action of the individual

The main focus of the theoretical concept of the investigation <sup>1</sup> is the thesis that the transformation in systems of vocational education in eastern European post-socialist countries is a process which is, to a remarkable extent, marked by processes of institutions <sup>2</sup> of the past and in which the institutions of the past have had a crucial influence on the development of

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<sup>1</sup> Investigations have been conducted within the framework of the dissertation; which has been awarded the prize for remarkable research (Humboldt-Prize 2004) as well as the Europe-Prize 2004 of the VBKI.

<sup>2</sup> In the following institutions are considered as latent as well as partially documented schemes of interpretation, socialized subjects constitute their world with. Those include informal institutions in the sense of “unwritten” laws or rather regulations, which mark and rule the daily basis of every society and formal institutions – considered as institutionally written rules and organizations. According to the thesis about the features of informal institutions, they represent structures in the sense of definite regulations of a society.

new institutions. This investigation is based on the assumption that the influential powers of the post-socialist transformation are to be found overall in the institutional heritage of the investigated countries. Therefore institutional influences combined with interactions of (at least limited) rationally acting agents <sup>3</sup> cause the dimensions and forms of transforming processes within the vocational education system. The “historical heritage” is defined as one of the key factors influencing such transformation. Following the Bronfenbrenner-Model its moulding can be differentiated into four structural levels:

1. Soviet heritage on the *macro level*: A social basic consensus in the field of vocational education is the assumption that as many young people as possible should have a college or university degree. The esteem of non-academic vocational education is relatively low in the society, especially on the job market.
2. Soviet heritage on the *structural level*: The government is still in charge of non-academic vocational education. Vocational education mainly meets the demands of school as an institution and only to a limited extent the demands of the job market. Local and foreign companies are hardly ever integrated in vocational education. In the investigated countries the vocational education system can be called a school system.
3. Soviet heritage on the *institutional level*: Old bureaucratic (institutional) structures have hardly changed within the first decade after the breakdown of the socialist regime. The vocational college is still known as being the neglected school form in the educational system. In the field of trade and technology there is a high number of socially or learning handicapped young people who choose that type of fulltime school education. In those cases the vocational college can be regarded as a means of rescue for these young adults. However, in the field of administration and commerce the vocational colleges are often only an intermediate stop on the way to higher education.
4. Soviet heritage on the *micro level*: The low esteem of non-academic vocational education, which was established after the Second World War, also affects the judgement of young adults. Because of its low status, most young adults do not aim to gain a vocational college degree; it is rather considered as an alternative to general secondary education in order to meet entrance requirements to higher education.

The presented historical heritage in vocational education can especially be considered as an institutional heritage, which has a different moulding on different social levels (ideas, structures, organization and actions of agents). Consequently the question of the transformation of the vocational educational system implies the question of the *stability of institutions*. Institutional stability can be regarded, therefore, as a central key to the transformation of the vocational education system. Institutional stability depends – following the thesis – directly on decisions and actions of the relevant agents. Therefore one cannot

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<sup>3</sup> According to the thesis, the actions of players are to a high extent marked by trying to stabilize their own position in the context of transforming processes.

relinquish the perspective of individuals or groups of individuals when analysing the stability of institutions. <sup>4</sup> Figure 1 tries to illustrate what has been explained.

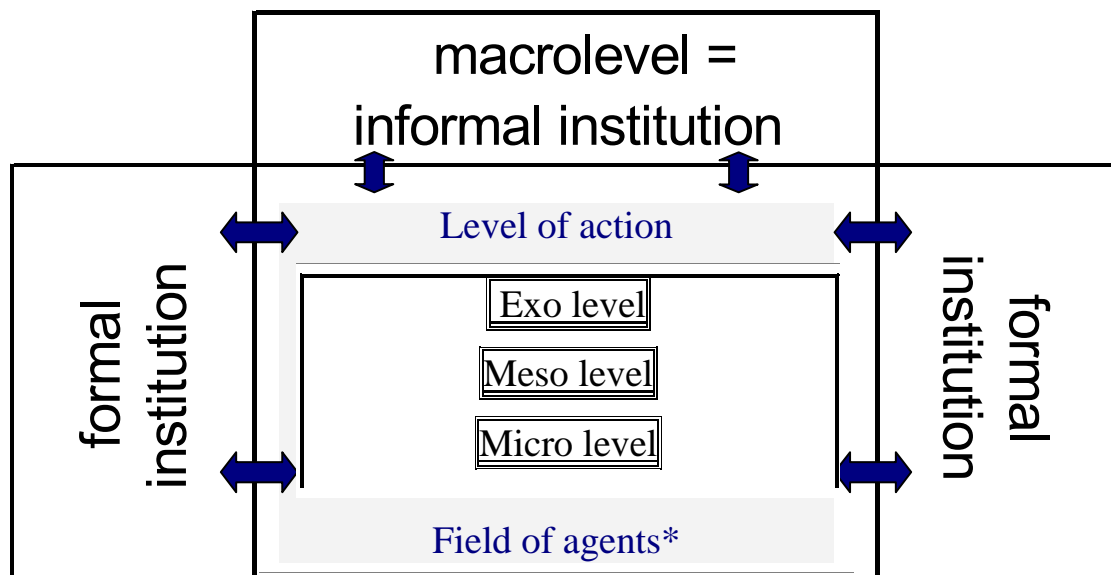


Figure 1: The Analytical Model

(\* people in charge of educational policy, of governmental administration; companies, leaders of institutions of vocational education)

Simplified, yet sufficiently complex, a social system (here the educational system) is regarded and illustrated as a matrix. The vertical perspective shows the social – ecological model (following Bronfenbrenner 1981) as an analytical model. This illustrates a social system by the means of 4 levels (from macro to micro level) systematically and sufficiently differentiated. In horizontal perspective the system is to be regarded by combining the level of institution and action (level of agents) (following the concept of institutionalism focused on agents of Mayntz & Scharf 1995).

In this setting it is obvious: investigating, how change processes in the system of vocational education in different countries took place and still take place, or rather to what extent they have an influence (also if only partial), one must check whether the structures – which are considered as a combination of formal rules and latent regulations – in the social order have changed within the time between 1991 and 2003. At least three forms of changes have to be differentiated:

- in the field of formal institutions as the lawful rules;
- in the field of informal institutions as social norms and values;
- in the field of individual (subjective) interpretation and action (level of action).

<sup>4</sup> First, the level of collective action rather than the level of individual action is focused on (e.g. agents of governmental administrative departments as a central group of agents).

The latter are – following the thesis – to a big extent marked by decisions depending on the functional position of the agents, as well as by the institution within which this functional position is put into practice.

With regard to the analytical model the following is true for both countries of investigation:

- the moulding of changes in informal institutions are to be expected on the social macro – level and
- the effects of formal institutions should mainly be recorded on the exo and meso level).

The progress, or rather the intensity, of the change processes can therefore be measured by analysing to what extent changes have forced their way through social levels. That means up to which structural level the formal and informal institutionalised effects have been accepted. Consequently the change processes can only be considered as finished when they have affected all four social levels.

## 2 Conducting the Studies

The investigation consists of 2 studies in Lithuania and Bulgaria. During the investigation four sets of empirical data were collected over different expenditure time periods<sup>5</sup> using traditional qualitative and quantitative methods of empirical social science (see Lamneck 1995; Mayring 2002). The design of the investigation follows the method of triangulation as suggested by, for example, Denzin (1977). For this study three linked sets of data were collected and analysed in an integrated manner:

1. *Analysis of documents:* The documentation of relevant lawful enforcements as well as the secondarily gathered statistical data of both countries are evaluated analytically in terms of context.<sup>6</sup> On the basis of this analysis first hypotheses about cause-and-effect were generated for the countries involved in the investigation (see Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia 2005).
2. *Qualitative studies:* In Lithuania and Bulgaria partial qualitative studies were conducted, which primarily served to explore the hypothesis concerning potential key factors influencing the transformation processes as well as the gathering of hints about cause-and-effect at the different social structural levels. These partial qualitative studies are made in a way that record the structures of perception of different groups of agents and link them together. These included agents of the state – principals and teachers of vocational colleges as well as persons responsible for vocational education in the Education Ministry - and representatives of employees (unions) and employers (chamber of commerce, employers' associations and companies). For the interviews the author created a specific instrument in the form of an interview guide (schedule) to collect data.

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of all partial studies, see Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia (2005).

<sup>6</sup> For results of the analysis of the documents, see Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia (2005).

*The first qualitative study* (Sofia, Bulgaria) was primarily used for exploratory purposes because the subject matter of the investigation had so far been neither theoretically nor empirically founded (for reasons, see Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia 2005). Consequently, the use of qualitative methods is considered as a mean of exploration in the framework of this partial study: The questioning tries to modify or rather to state the hypothesis more precisely by analysing secondary data material as well as developing further the thesis. A focused, partially standardized form of an interview was chosen in order to achieve maximum comparability regarding results. Overall the author conducted 19 interviews.

*The second qualitative study* (Kaunas and Vilnius, Lithuania) aimed – in addition to the targets which have already been mentioned – to identify in particular the specific aspects of the change processes in the Lithuanian system of vocational education and the reasons for such change against the setting of the results of the partial study in Bulgaria. Overall the author conducted 14 focused interviews by the means of standardized interview schedule.

3. *Quantitative studies*: In order to examine the thesis of effects of change processes a quantitative survey of students in vocational colleges was using a standardized questionnaire, specifically constructed for this study.

In the first phase of evaluation, the data from both studies was examined analytically in terms of text. The results give hints whether the agents who were questioned have the same understanding of central “everyday“ terms (see Lamneck 1995). The next phase of analysis involved identifying terms of themes or rather contexts, as well as how often and how intense they were mentioned by the groups of agents in the two countries. Based on these outcomes it was determined whether it was possible to draw cause-and-effect conclusions from these results. The empirical findings of the quantitative research served primarily to validate the results of the qualitative research methods.

By the means of this multi-methodical, multi-perspective analytical design of, *where qualitative and quantitative data are used simultaneously and results triangulated against each other*, it was determined how social transformation processes in general, and especially in the vocational education system, are perceived and evaluated by different institutional agents. This method makes it possible to identify country specific cause-and-effect-connections which will be described in detail in the following section.

### **3 Empirical Results**

#### **3.1 Bulgaria – a Governmental Controlled Change of the System**

*The quantitatively orientated research shows* that the structures of the vocational education system are totally integrated into the governmental system of leadership (app. 90% of those questioned) and that the “old”, rigid, bureaucratic structures of control have hardly changed. Furthermore, two third of the controlling agents claim that historical traditions have had an influence on the institutional structures of the vocational education system. Those

comments make clear that they refer almost without exceptions to traditions from socialist times. Therefore, the data supports the results of the *document analysis* (see Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia 2005). *All* interviewees claimed:

- The Bulgarian vocational education system *de facto* still represents a “school system“.
- Companies are hardly integrated into vocational education.
- General education is still a dominant part of vocational education.

Disregarding one case, those questioned stated: The Bulgarian vocational education system is a “resort“ of governmental administration. Besides that, more than three quarters of the questioned agents criticize the following:

- The implementation of new ideas is difficult on the institutional and personnel level because of significant trends of rigidity.
- The didactical methods and means are “outdated“.
- Non-academic vocational education is “second choice“.

*All of those* questioned stress that this is still the “socialist heritage“. The current consensus of policy of education in Bulgaria in terms of “education“ is regarding to the questioned agents “general education“ (app. 50% of the answers).

*With regard to changes* in the system of vocational education the questioned agents state: A radical transformation has not yet started, hardly anything encouraging is going on, everything is going very slowly, not purposeful, very conservative and linked to private interests. The change can therefore not be considered as a positive one. Those questioned stress explicitly that this kind of slow adjustment *is wished for by society*.

The results of the *textual analysis* with regard to the four social structural levels give hints to a *decreasing number of processes* from the lower meso level to the upper exo level. Therefore, only little change in the structures of the macro level are, empirically verified, to be expected; the micro level is mentioned seldom.

The results of the textual analysis show, that with regard to the macro level, the following terms are mentioned the most frequently: “general education“, “*traditions*“, “conservatism“, “*socialist*“, “old“. By trying to link those findings with the results of the analysis of themes, it is obvious, that some terms are used in similar or rather identical contexts by those questioned:

- The key word “conservatism“ is generally used in contextual connection with “high conservatism of the vocational education system“. It is referred to the conservatism of the system’s comprehensive structures and single governmental vocational education institutions. In addition, the thematic courses (the sequence of the contexts of the interviews) support the thesis that strong conservatism is the informal institution in the society, which is present in all structural levels.

- The term “general education“ is used in two contextual connections: First, it is understood as “dominance of general education“ in the structures of vocational education. Second, there is a social consensus, that general education is “good“. Consequently, this can be understood as a further informal institution.

In conclusion, the following endogenous key factors for changing processes can be identified as independent variables, which were named by the majority of the questioned controlling agents. These factors refer to single variables as well as to the bundles of variables:

- Strong conservatism,
- High esteem of general education,
- Dominance of general education,
- “Academization” of the society,
- Lack of open dialog between government and corporate agents,
- Low esteem of practically orientated vocational education.

Against this setting, the relatively positive evaluation of vocational education policy on the part of the questioned controlling agents can also be explained: the previous thoughts can support a thesis that the informal institutions are on the part of the vocational education policy “taken care of” and made stronger because of political structures of power (elections). It is especially remarkable that many representatives of the economy “believe” in the competence of the national educational institutions. Some companies “realized” that the national school system cannot meet the demands of vocational education on the part of other social subsystems and use that insight as market niche for their own profit.

The multi methodical *analysis of themes* supports that finding and demonstrates: The problems of slow changing processes in vocational education systems are primarily founded in old sociological-cultural norms and values in the society (macro level). In particular, one can state:

1. The representatives of all groups of agents agree that the institutional changing processes have only partially reached the norms and values of the society in terms of vocational education. The findings of the thematic courses make clear that all those informal institutions listed remained from socialist times. Therefore, one can conclude that the changing processes have yet to reach the social meta level.
2. All these results suggest that the changing processes at the exo level are still in making: The questioned controlling agents hardly talked about changing processes on the structural level. Following the empirical findings they are rather partial changes, which seldom have a comprehensive character.
3. Most of the interviewees mentioned changes on the meso level, particularly in the vocational education organization, such as taking part in international projects, development of new programmes for schools, further education as well as structural-organizational changes. The results point to the assumption that changing processes



on the meso level take place in a very different moulding and general trends are hardly recognizable. The data gives many hints that there are big regional and sectional differences. Furthermore, it is possible to see that the controlling agents in the national vocational education organizations have particular (even if limited) room for manoeuvre and decision making. In connection to that, the role of the controlling agents is stressed by those questioned who stated that the success of such changes depends on the initiatives and competences of the leading personnel of the institutions of vocational education.

*Conclusion:* The actions of agents are still mainly regulated by “old“ informal institutions on the macro level as well as on the exo level. The “top-down“- implemented formal institutions are hardly put to use whereas on the institutional meso level the establishment of new formal and partially informal (e.g. in the sense of “culture of organizations”) institutions can be confirmed. Those processes do generally not have a comprehensive character.

### **3.2 Lithuania – Collapse of the Systems and New Founding of Structures of Vocational Education?**

The specific aspects of change processes in the Lithuanian vocational education system primarily result from the particularities of the comprehensive social transformation process.<sup>7</sup> In connection with the sociological-cultural norms “inherited” from socialist times and values from socialist times the particular mouldings at the systemic and institutional level are made even stronger. With regard to the question, in how far the change processes of the Lithuanian vocational education system have proceeded, one can establish on the basis of the data:

1. The representatives of all groups of agents evaluate social phenomena such as “academization“ of the society or “low participation of corporative agents“ with regard to the social meta level. Those questioned state implicitly or explicitly, that it is a structure of norms and values “inherited” from socialist times. These findings allow the conclusion that the institutional change processes in the Lithuanian vocational education system have yet to reach the social meta level.
2. According to the answers of the majority of the interviewees, the Lithuanian vocational education system was mainly been reconstructed after the breakdown of the Soviet Union: “*After the collapse of the socialist regime in Lithuania there was de facto no system of vocational education because it was to a big extent organized and controlled centrally via Moscow. The independent system of vocational education did not exist in the soviet republic Lithuania. Among others this was an expression of no confidence on the part of the Russian elite of the party against the ‘western’ Baltic republics*“ (interview no. 13). After the reconstruction of the Lithuanian nation state the vocational education system was reconstructed on the basis of existing general education structures. As the comments of the questioned agents in terms of current structures of institutionalised vocational education make clear, the current vocational

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<sup>7</sup> According to the answers of the majority of those questioned, the historical traditions (post World War II) are hardly reflected in the institutional structure of the Lithuanian vocational education system.



education system is constructed differently from the one of the soviet republic of Lithuania. Therefore the change processes at the systemic level are already completed.

3. Many interviewees also mention social phenomena, which according to their descriptions have a partial processuality. Themes like “Development of vocational colleges to local competence centres“, the “development of quality standards for institutions of vocational education“, and the formal institutionalisation of “external and internal evaluation of all organizations of vocational education“ are on the part of the questioned agents interesting as a part of development of quality in the system of vocational education. Everything points to the change processes remaining on the systemic level. In this setting one can assume that the change processes on the structural level have partially already started to reach the level but this process is not finished yet.
4. The answers of the questioned agents gave hints that change processes currently mainly take place on the organisational level: They claim that local administrative structures in the field of vocational education have a relatively high degree of freedom of manoeuvre and decision making. All interviewees agreed that particularly the freedom of leaders of administration were rather large. As a result of the strong decentralization, the single government vocational college plays a central role in each region. A lot of those questioned stressed that the quality of vocational education that meets the demands of the job market is the responsibility of the actual school. Some agents remark critically that autonomy in the government organizations of vocational education is not always used sufficiently and adequately. So the initiative and competence of the teachers in the institutions of vocational education are the key factors for success.

On the basis of the thematic sequences of selected interviews and in the setting of the results of the study in Bulgaria the following is obvious: The changing processes are, on the part of the questioned agents, generally regarded as resulting from a perceived interaction between the formal and informal institutions on the different social structural levels. Overall, one can state that new formal institutions can only be established on all levels of the social system if they go along with, to a large extent, existing informal institutions.

Furthermore the findings support the thesis that informal institutions in a social order represent definite regulations and are historically relatively stable. The data gives hints that informal institutions are on a short and long term historical perspective hardly or rather only under special circumstances changeable. The newly established controlling principle of local self-administration of the Lithuanian vocational education system has effects on formal as well as partially on informal institutions on the systemic and organizational structural level (such as autonomy in the single school, development of vocational colleges to local centres of competence etc.). The informal institutions which at least partially diverge with these newly created structures on the social meta level such as “academization“ or “low participation of corporative partners“ continue to exist.

Concluding the results of the partial study on “Lithuania“, a relatively precise chain of cause and effect can be constructed with regard to changing processes in the Lithuanian vocational education system. This leads to the following comparison (the number of naming is put in brackets):

Table 2: “Chain of Cause - and – Effect” of Changing Processes in the Lithuanian Vocational Education System

Macro level	Exo level	Meso level
<i>The following are regarded as part of the socialist heritage:</i>		
“Academization“ of the society (10)	Lack of experts in the field of vocational education (7)	Lack of teaching material for non-academic vocational education (10)
Low esteem of non-academic vocational education (11)		
<i>The following social phenomenon are regarded (partial implicitly) as effects:</i>		
Low participation of corporate agents in vocational education (6)	Government investments in vocational education (8)	Autonomy in the national institutions of vocational education (10)
	Lack of experts in some fields of business (10)	Competition between academic and non-academic vocational education (4)
	Leading role of single vocational colleges (10)	Development of new educational structures in local vocational colleges (9)
		Vocational colleges become local centres of competence (4)

The hypothetical chain of cause and effect (table 2) can be described as follows: The socialist heritage as a social consensus with regard to education, which is mainly represented in the dominance of academic vocational education and in the low esteem of non-academic vocational education, has its key effects on the structural level in the lack of experts (teachers, politicians, scientists) in the sector of non-academic vocational education. This again resulted in a poor development of teaching material for the sector of non-academic vocational education - in terms of quantity and quality. The following social phenomena of the vocational education system are regarded on the part of the questioned agents (even if rather indicated than in detail) as forms of the social heritage and therefore as deficits: On the social meta level it is mainly the low participation in vocational education of corporate agents named. *Government investments in institutional vocational education, the lack of experts in certain fields of business* as well as *the central role of the single vocational college* are in that context named as processes shaping on the systemic level. These result in issues such as the *autonomy in government institutions of vocational education, competition between academic*

*and non-academic vocational education, the development of new structures in local vocational colleges“ and the development of vocational education system to local competence centres* which are discussed with regard to the meso level.

## **4 Conclusion**

The focus of investigation of this draft lays on the transformation processes in the national vocational education system of the post socialist eastern European countries Bulgaria and Lithuania. In the setting of the findings of self-created quality studies it is shown that the specific structural form of the vocational education system, as well as its functional task in a modern society, lead to strong “conservatism“ of the system which results in structural and institutional stability or rather continuity. The established change processes of the national systems of vocational education primarily take place by functional adjustment on the change conditions of other social systems such as economy and politics. These change processes take place rather reactively because of their functional connection between the institutional general education on the one hand and the structures and demand of the job market on the other hand. It is a retarded adaptation of changes in the neighbouring social systems.

The structures of the systemic and organizational level of the vocational education system are to a big extent marked by the “strong government centralization of Bulgaria“ and also the “strong local self-administration of Lithuania“. Those findings also support the thesis that the transformation processes of the vocational education systems in the post socialist countries are processes remarkably influenced by the institutions of the past. That means that the institutional heritage has a significant influence on the development of new institutions – some institutional arrangements from socialist times remained in both countries. The institutions of the “old“, mainly bureaucratic institutions are partially extremely resistant. Furthermore, one can state that the theoretically investigated features of informal institutions are also supported by the empirical data. So, for example, the “academization“ of all social segments as an informal institution (inherited from socialist times) is significant for both countries

The findings suggest that the structure of the local administration and the data of local structure are the key factors on changes in the professional actions of agents. Additionally, there can be seen a strong tendency of the vocational education systems of the countries of investigation to hold on to ,previous‘ functions as well as norms, values and attitudes which were typical for the “old“ system. Consequently, actions and attitudes which are relevant for the solving of problems remain under changing conditions, so that fast and significant changes of ,former‘ agents in important positions can be expected only conditionally and singularly.

Despite partially enormous differences in the evaluation of the questioned controlling agents two reactions of the agents on the meso level in the countries of investigation can be identified:

- “Rigid conservatism“: All of the controlling agents in Bulgaria state implicitly and explicitly that in order to secure their current positions they try to stabilize this status quo. One can stress that important positions in the Bulgarian structures of economy are still, at least when it comes to important key positions but also in terms of quantity, are taken by the “former“ elite of economic policy. That is why the interests of the controlling agents in terms of government organization and planning of the institutional vocational education are convergent or even identical.
- “Positive tendency towards a willingness to change in Lithuania“: The empirical findings point to that in case of decreasing institutional stability – e.g. by the means of establishing new formal institutions which again induces a partial instability of structures – the identified interpretations of the institutional controlling agents can be interpreted as progressive attitudes in terms of happiness towards change. According to those questioned space for autonomy is created on the organizational level by the comprehensive decentralization towards local self-administration. These again result in a significant increase in social effectiveness of institutional agents at the realising level and therefore support the positive tendency towards a willingness to change. Exemplary, on the part of those questioned, the increasing commitment and the initiative of the teachers in the government organizations of vocational education are named in the sense of “bottom-up“. Overall, one can expect increasing individual expectations of self – effectiveness when it comes to professional actions.

Findings from the qualitative interviews, in particular, indicate up to which level of the system a structural or rather functional adjustment in the bounds of the systemic changing process has effects. The empirical findings point to far-reaching, significant differences in terms of the *structural depth* or rather the intensity of changing processes in terms of quality and quantity in the countries of investigation despite an at least partially similar historical background (after the Second World War) and despite similar conditions of the social transformation processes.

The above-mentioned central findings lead to the assumption that the thesis, investigated in the framework of this draft, with regard to transformation processes, describes at least partially generalizable mechanisms of cause and effect of change processes which are also valid for other post socialist countries. This assumption requires testing by the means of the “typologically” different cases of social transformation processes of Hungary or Poland.

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