

# Responding to Major Institutional Change: The Fall of the Soviet Union and Higher Education in Central Asia

by

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## Abstract

With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly independent Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan inherited a shared legacy of higher education, institutionalized during the twentieth century under Soviet rule. All three countries were struck by the same fundamental challenges in the wake of the Soviet collapse, and all three brought forward the same normative models of government and governance. Yet in the space of just a few years, each of the three higher education systems had diverged, often extensively.

By examining the immediate period following the major institutional change of 1991, this study advances our understanding of how organizations respond to such dramatic moments, moving beyond a simplistic binary of transformation or stagnation. Where higher education in Central Asia experienced some major shifts, in other areas it adjusted more incrementally, and in many respects higher education continued to be organized and structured just as it had been in the Soviet era. Theoretically, the study compares the extent to which the rational choice, sociological and historical strands of new institutionalism can be used to analyse these responses to major (as opposed to minor or incremental) institutional change.

Yet more than this, being able to explain both the differences and the similarities in the way higher education in these three countries shifted as a result of the fall of the Soviet Union also tells us about how actors grapple with the legacies of previous organizing templates.

Understanding how higher education changed – or did not change – despite or because of this inheritance also deepens our understanding of the value placed on higher education, which, given the criticality of higher education across countries, helps us understand how states envision their future.

Drawing extensively from 36 interviews with experienced faculty members and supplemented by descriptive statistics, this study makes an important contribution to comparative studies and to filling the gap in theory-driven explanations of organizational responses to major change. As the first study to set higher education in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan into comparative perspective, it directly addresses the clear disparity between research on contemporary Central Asia as compared to other world regions.