

Uncorrected preprint. Please cite as:

Brankovic, J. (2018). Between world culture and local context: The university as an empowered actor in national higher education governance. *Acta Sociologica*, 61(4), 374–388.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699317739951>

# Between world culture and local context

## The university as an empowered actor in national higher education governance

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### Abstract

World society theory argues that actor empowerment in local contexts is driven primarily by the expanding world culture, rendering alternative explanations weaker in comparison. This article explores one such alternative explanation and offers an account of actor empowerment which highlights the role of identity constructed in local interaction. The article imports insights from identity theory to show how identities constructed in interaction may complement those derived from the world culture. To explore the phenomenon of theoretical interest, the case of a historical empowerment of Serbian universities in the post-2000 period, as an actor in the national higher education governance, is considered.

**Keywords:** Actor empowerment, actors, identity theory, Serbia, sociological neo-institutionalism, university, world society theory

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## Introduction

Actor empowerment has been one of the central ideas of the neo-institutional world society theory (Drori, Meyer, et al. 2006a; Meyer 2010): it refers to the notion that since the beginning of modernity entities such as individuals, organizations and states have been increasingly seen as legitimate social actors (Meyer and Jepperson 2000). Mobilised by the expanding world society, these actors are granted authority, responsibility and capacity to act on behalf of various culturally legitimated principals (Drori, Meyer, et al. 2006b; Meyer 2010). As a result, commercial businesses, hospitals, universities and governments are now reimagined as rational, purposeful and strategic organizational actors. Such ‘world culture’ is, therefore, seen as the primary driver of actor empowerment in local contexts, rendering local, or ‘bottom-up’ explanations weaker in comparison (Bromley and Meyer 2015; Drori, Jang, et al. 2006; Frank et al. 2000).

Although the world society theory is primarily interested in accounting for similarity across different and distant contexts, scholars have continuously offered new ways to explain variety, also with respect to different kinds of actors or forms of actorhood. For instance, to address the duality of similarity and variation, or that of universalism and particularism, scholars have used concepts such as ‘translation’ and ‘editing’ (Czarniawska-Joerges and Sevón 2005; Sahlin-Andersson 1996), ‘glocalisation’ (Drori et al. 2014) and ‘domestication’ (Alasuutari and Qadir 2013a), all highlighting the interplay between the global and the local, which may or may not lead to the ‘reshuffling’ of power relationships in the local context. Protagonists of translation and editing actively ascribe new, locally inspired meanings to the ‘prototypes’ they imitate (Sahlin-Andersson 1996). Glocalisation’s protagonists, or ‘glocalisers’, are ‘simultaneously charged with interpreting similarities, so to form the basis for the transfer of ideas, structures, and practices, while at the same time charged with establishing uniqueness, so as not to appear redundant’ (Drori et al. 2014, p. 92). Domestication’s protagonists, in contrast, are actors in local political battles who vie for advantage by defending their own views of the country’s ‘best’ interests (Alasuutari and Qadir 2013b). These concepts are helpful in elucidating institutional processes and change in local contexts, and ultimately in explaining the variety that persists despite the isomorphic pressures exerted by the world culture. However, they are not as concerned with exposing genuinely local sources of actor legitimacy, identity and ultimately empowerment within the local context.

In this article I want to offer an extension to the neo-institutionalist concept of actor empowerment by highlighting the actor identity emerging from the local context and being enacted along the globally-scripted one(s). To this end I complement the sociological neo-institutionalism with insights from identity theory, which allows us to conceive of actors as enactors of not only identities scripted in the world culture, but also of role-based identities constructed in interaction (Stryker and Burke 2000; Tajfel 1982). I take the historical empowerment of the university as an actor in governing the higher education field in post-2000 Serbia as offering an apt illustration of how interaction and local dynamics can play a crucial role in this process. I argue that this case is a good fit for the theoretical problem, because it allows us to highlight aspects of actor empowerment which have not been much explored in sociological neo-institutionalism.

## **Sociological neo-institutionalism and its empowered actors**

Sociological neo-institutionalism conceives of actors as socially constructed and thus firmly embedded in their environment, of which they are legitimate, responsible and empowered agents (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Meyer 2010). These actors are occupants of institutionally constructed social roles and carriers of formal organizational models, various cultural practices or international norms and standards. This model of the actor is rooted in the phenomenological understanding that both identity and actorhood are scripted and it is 'the cultural meanings that write and rewrite the scripts', rather than the 'hard-wired reality' (Meyer 2010, pp. 4, 14).

These cultural meanings are universal and global in character. They penetrate local contexts and are adopted by local entities, while remaining firmly anchored in the global culture: 'they are objectively true, and true everywhere' (Meyer et al. 2006, p. 26). Even when local actors are very much engaged in defending their local interests, these are legitimised by virtue of being 'instances of more universal rules' pertaining to the world culture (Meyer et al. 1997, p. 170). The identity and authority of these actors flow from 'roots that would once have been considered religious' (Meyer 2010, p. 6), enabling them to act as an 'other' to themselves, as with Mead's 'generalised other' (1934). Thus conceived modern actorhood has two essential cultural ingredients: one is a result of the rationalisation of the natural world and its laws, while the other of the devolution of the rationalised spiritual authority (Meyer and Jepperson 2000). The resulting actor's authority, responsibility and capacity to act is, therefore, derived from 'a single imagined natural-and-spiritual entity', which is then its main source of identity and empowerment (Meyer and Jepperson 2000, p. 106).

One of the arguments of the world society literature is that globalisation weakens the authority of the state, while empowering both supra-state entities, such as international organisations and institutions, and sub-state entities, such as governmental agencies, organisations and individuals (Drori, Meyer, et al. 2006b). Thus, while international organisations have the role of 'legitimated theorists' or carriers of cultural frames of actorhood and empowerment, transferring them from one context to another (Strang and Meyer 1993), national and local entities are seen as enactors of these globally diffused cultural frames – the process which leads to their empowerment (Meyer and Jepperson 2000).

This literature has offered ample evidence on the proliferation and empowerment of actors across national contexts. For instance, Hwang (2006) showed how the locus of planning has shifted downwards from the state – the main 'organiser' of the post-WWII period – to sub-state actors, such as agencies, organisations and individuals. Across national contexts, not only modern individuals and their associations, but also corporations and other organisational forms, are increasingly seen as having capacity, information and resources to plan and to contribute to collective development. The spread of 'human resources' culture is another example of empowerment: employees around the world are increasingly perceived as empowered individuals, worthy of investment through training (Luo 2006). Universities are yet another example. Globalisation is said to have propelled the transformation of universities into organisational actors, now more than ever expected to act strategically and position themselves with regard to their competitors, nationally and globally (Krücken and Meier 2006). As a thus-empowered organisational actor, a 'proper' modern university is goal-oriented, managed by professional managers, has elaborated formal structures and is accountable to a variety of also-empowered 'stakeholders', such as students and employers.

In addition to the empowerment through enactment of globally diffused scripts, sub-state actors may also draw on other, context-related sources of empowerment, a process which may also lead to the weakening of the state through downward shift. As it will be argued in the remainder of this article, role-based identities, emerging from the local, can act in parallel as sources of actor empowerment in a given context, much like globally driven ones.

Scholarly work on contentious politics and social movements offers evidence on how identity is constructed in interaction (e.g. Stryker et al. 2000). In this literature, actors articulate their own beliefs and preferences by invoking cultural scripts inscribed in social categories with which they identify. Cultural categories such as 'state', 'university', 'academic', 'student', 'African-American' or 'woman' imbue their members not only with a sense of self but also with legitimacy, a sense of belonging and purpose and understanding of appropriate behaviour (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Although in principle the meanings of these categories are universal or trans-contextual, the meaning they carry in a local setting will be very much shaped by individuals' experiences of themselves and of their roles, as well as of those others with whom they relate. In essence, this understanding does not run counter to that found in the literatures on translation, glocalisation and domestication.

When confronted with an issue, actors engage in a dialectical political contestation by espousing conflicting views (della Porta and Diani 2006; Hargrave and Ven 2006). Identity theory argues that it is in this interaction with others that we learn how to assign meaning to and classify phenomena, including those others, and how to behave in relation to them (Stryker 2002). These experiences, in turn, shape our perceptions and eventually mould our identities (Thoits and Virshup 1997). As soon as we are confident enough about those identities, we 'work to confirm them and strive to refute information that disconfirms them' (Pinel and Swann Jr. 2000, p. 133). Some scholars link this to one's need for their identity to be verified by others – a need particularly acute when identity is under threat (Pinel and Swann Jr. 2000; Woehrle and Coy 2000).

When interaction between two parties involves contention, both draw from available cultural resources to construct the other as a threat or even an enemy (Petronito 2000). They may employ rhetorical tools to discredit the other and impose themselves and their views as superior, or claim themselves to be the victims and the others, offenders (Polkinghorn 2000). Such contention is expected to amplify the social identity of the actor by strengthening boundaries of category membership and improving within-category cohesion. However, more importantly here, a shared appreciation of the situation among the parties involved may offer an actor a higher ground for claiming legitimacy, credibility and authority with regards to the issue at stake. Thus understood, local actor identity and empowerment can be viewed as context- and path-dependent, in addition to having their origins in the expanding world society.

This theoretical approach allows for an analytical distinction between two sources of actor identity, namely, world culture and interaction. The former is global in character and has its origins in the world-cultural categories whose authority and legitimacy are derived from imagined natural and spiritual authorities. The latter is localised and constructed in interaction with other (local) entities, whereby authority and legitimacy are derived from the local meaning systems rooted in the shared appreciation of the other and of the local context, which may as well be – albeit indirectly, through local interaction – informed by the world-cultural. Both, as it will be argued, can be sources of actor empowerment, and not in a mutually exclusive way.

## Research design

A qualitative single case study is used here as an apt illustration of the phenomenon in question (Gluckman 1961) and it employs ethnomethodology as a way to document the social reality construction (Holstein and Gubrium 2012). The study covers the period of the historical disempowerment of the state in governing the national higher education field in post-2000 Serbia, and the parallel empowerment of universities as an actor in governing the national field of higher education. As it will be shown, these developments resulted in, inter alia, a relative ‘deviance’ of Serbian higher education governance from the dominant model being introduced across Europe at the time, despite its formal commitment to a European course (Vukasovic 2014a). The idiosyncratic nature of the case, it is argued here, renders the object of the theoretical interest – local sources of actor empowerment – more transparently observable (Pettigrew 1990).

The study relies on archival data and ten semi-structured interviews. The archival data were organised into following categories: meeting reports (agendas, minutes and briefings); regulation (laws and draft laws); policy positions (government and other instances of authority); media articles and reports produced by authorities; and miscellanea (speeches, correspondence, event descriptions, etc.). In total, approximately 1100 pages of archival data were collected.

The interviews were conducted with individuals who were directly involved in the events during the period under study, as officially mandated to represent the state (i.e. the ministry), universities and students. The interviewees were asked to reflect on the key events related to changes in higher education governance, the rationales for the positions they and their institutions assumed, as well as on other actors involved and their respective actions. The interviews were conducted in 2010, lasted on average one hour and were transcribed verbatim. Excerpts presented here were translated from Serbian by the author.

The data have been used with two aims in mind. The first aim was to reconstruct the chronology of events, especially those surrounding the formal/legal changes in governance of higher education in Serbia, and to identify the processes behind these events and changes. The second aim was to gain insight into the identity claims of the participants involved, as representatives of their institutions/organisations in the events studied, and their appreciation of the developments. Altogether, this meant that pieces of the story needed to be put together meticulously, while simultaneously conducting data and methodological triangulation to ensure reliability and validity of findings (Denzin 2006). The author’s interpretations were cross-checked with two individuals closely familiar with the Serbian higher education context.

Based on the theoretical distinction between the world-cultural and local-interactional sources of identity and empowerment, I put forward the following analysis of the case which takes into account both, while highlighting the latter.

## **Historical empowerment of Serbian universities as an actor in national higher education field governance**

Historically, universities in Serbia were not involved in overseeing compliance with national higher education field rules. Governance was an affair of the state, and academic institutions were in principle little concerned with what was happening outside their faculties or institutes. This started to change with the economic crisis of the 1980s, when the government decided to subject universities to the economic imperative, effectively diminishing their autonomy. In parallel with the broader crisis which Yugoslavia faced, these developments brought universities closer together and increasingly challenging the state's higher education policy. As a consequence, academics became more active in raising issues related to the overall functioning of higher education, thus questioning the authority of the state.

During the 1990s, Serbia underwent major political turbulences, starting with the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, the ensuing war, political and economic sanctions, economic downturn, civil unrest and other forms of internal political conflicts. Because of these developments, higher education was marked by relative isolation from international processes, as well as by internal political divisions, with the tension between the state and the university increasing. Throughout the decade, numerous university figures were active in opposing the regime in power, either through their academic work or through more active forms of dissent, such as street demonstrations (Vukasovic 2014b). After a series of student protests in 1991, 1992, 1996 and 1997, in which many of the academic staff also participated, primarily from the country's largest, capital-based University of Belgrade, the government decided to put an end to the recurrent unrests. In 1998 the parliament passed a law which, inter alia, enabled the government to suspend and dismiss university staff on political grounds, and to appoint university leadership of their liking. The law was, in effect, seen as a backlash against the university's political dissent throughout the 1990s and it is remembered even today as the most extreme case of a state's infringement on university autonomy. This added further to the distrust universities had towards the state.

### ***Europe and Bologna: a new recipe for a 'modernised' Serbian university***

In 2001 the authoritarian regime was overthrown, making way for the first democratic government. With the state higher education policy also changed, the political tensions between the universities and the government seemed over. Much as in other post-socialist countries in Eastern Europe a decade earlier, major reforms were in preparation. The ministry responsible for higher education (hereinafter referred to as 'the ministry') sought to align national higher education with international developments, which meant steering the system in the direction of European trends, at the time revolving around the then news Bologna Process.<sup>1</sup> Notably, some of the leading positions in the ministry, including that of the minister and minister's assistant for higher education, were now occupied by university professors, themselves prominent figures in opposing the regime in the previous decade.

At the end of 2001 the ministry released a document titled 'Higher Education Reform in Serbia'. The goal now, as the document said, was to establish 'a modern higher education system in accordance with the Bologna Process', and specifically to: (a) 'Increase the efficiency of higher education in terms of the drop-out rate and the length of studies'; (b) 'Introduce quality control mechanisms with regard

to curricula and teaching delivery'; (c) 'Establish the relevance of curricula with respect to the national needs and the market demand'; and (d) 'Incorporate students as partners in the educational process'. It was expected that achieving these would contribute '...to the democratic development, economic recovery and European integration' of the country. The document further described the system, naming inter alia its strengths and threats, the challenges it faced and ways of taking it forward. The content of the document, much like the subsequent ones produced by the ministry, resonated with discussions on higher education in Europe at the time, and not least with the discourse of international organisations. Mentions of terms such as 'accountability', 'quality control', 'efficiency', (economic) 'relevance', 'stakeholders', 'management', 'mission and goals' and 'student participation' – rather new for Serbian universities – were abundant. Serbian universities were now expected to envision themselves in the light of these new internationally legitimised practices.

In addition to producing a number of documents of this kind, for various purposes and with a similar message, the ministry also took a more active part in international events such as conferences and round tables, and organised events at home. The latter typically brought together university leadership and other academic community members, student activists, civil society organisations, and international experts. In its efforts to 'modernise' higher education in Serbia, the ministry had support, in expertise or funding, from a number of international organisations such as the Council of Europe, European Commission, UNESCO, OECD, World Bank, European University Association, as well as national higher education organisations and authorities abroad, such as the German Rectors' Conference and the Austrian Ministry of Education. At the time, these organisations were present in the country, promoting a new recipe for 'proper' ways of 'doing higher education' to the government and universities.

The ministry's agenda appeared to be clear: to 'modernise' and 'Europeanise' Serbian higher education and to create conditions for its universities to become proper organisations: goal-oriented, rationalised, managed and accountable to various 'stakeholders'. Backed by the international organisations and institutions, the Serbian government acted as a local carrier of the new script into the Serbian context, promoting it to the 'outdated', 'inefficient' and 'corrupt' Serbian universities as the sine qua non of modernised higher education.<sup>2</sup> However, university leaderships, especially that of the University of Belgrade, were not particularly enthusiastic about such prospects, often accusing the ministry of being non-transparent in its policy work and of putting forward an unrealistic agenda which also violated university autonomy.

### ***Constructing a local-specific identity***

The activity which occupied the centre of the field's attention between 2002 and 2005 was the work on the new legislative framework, which was intended to bring a radically new (legal) environment for Serbian higher education institutions. It was expected to facilitate the implementation of 'Bologna', to make universities not only more integrated,<sup>3</sup> better managed, more autonomous and more international, but also more accountable and more transparent, as well as to set an institutional framework for student participation in decision making. In order to ensure a participatory and inclusive process, in early 2003 the ministry convened a working group for drafting the framework, bringing together government, representatives of higher education institutions and those of students. However, what was supposed to be a dialogue became an open contestation, virtually polarising the field. In the words of an interviewee:

There were both sceptics and those who wanted reforms at all cost, that is, those who were extreme reformists and those who wanted to stick to the tradition and perhaps change at a slower pace. (University representative A)<sup>4</sup>

On the ‘pro-reforms’ side stood the ministry, the University of Novi Sad and students, while the University of Belgrade was the leader of the ‘anti-reforms’ side. Other universities would support one or the other side, depending on the issue, albeit reluctant to openly confront either. However, for both pro- or anti-reform camps, one issue was important enough to bring all universities together: university (and faculty) autonomy in general and their autonomy from the state in particular.

Given the still fresh memory of the previous decades, universities and the ministry both agreed that higher education needed to be shielded from the partisan politics of the state. Serbian universities were distrustful of the state and were seeking ways in which its role could now be changed and what the consequences would be for the university. For the universities, preserving autonomy was a prerogative. Here is how the problem was described by the ministry:

University autonomy has always been, and rightly so, considered a shield from the political interfering of the state – the ruling party. It is for this reason that it will be very difficult to distinguish between the rights and responsibilities of the state in supervising the higher education system from the university autonomy, as a precondition of an efficient academic system in modern society. The problem becomes more complex with the need to introduce accountability mechanisms. (Ministry policy document, 2003)

Explaining why the academic community saw the state as a threat to these values, a university leader remarked:

The [working] group, consisting of people who remembered Milošević’s days very well, feared [these days could repeat], and regardless of the intentions of the government in place at the time, it was needed to set institutional guarantees that would prevent the state from interfering with academic autonomy. (University Representative B)

In defending their interests, Serbian universities behaved as if they were acting purely on behalf of a moral law or, as Meyer and Jepperson (2000) described it, as ‘agents for principle’. The moral law invoked here was the one carried in the shared recollection of the local past, which was reinforced by the historical legacy of the university as an institution and the importance autonomy had in it. Together with the integrity of the academic profession, university autonomy is a universally held principle, having the status of a constitutional right in many countries. In general, any perceived threat to such a principle is expected to be resisted by the academics and their institutions, because they commonly identify themselves as the institutions’ guardians:

‘As if it were a birthright, they struggle for self-government, invoking powerful doctrines – academic freedom, community of scholars, freedom of research – which serve both as guild ideologies and as justification of unusual personal liberties’ (Clark 1987, p. 372).

It is therefore not surprising that the subject of autonomy was raised so often by the interviewees when reflecting on the relationship between the state and universities in the years leading to the legislative changes. Autonomy was understood as something highly valued by all parties involved, as well as something in need of protection, in particular in this context where, at the time, negative experiences dated only few years back and where standing up for the autonomy, even in the face of violence, was



not alien to local actors. Thus, at the turn of the century Serbian universities had already constructed the identity of the guardians of university autonomy against the volatile nature of the state in the local context. With the state now being perceived by universities as ‘aggressive’ and ‘reckless’ (University Representative C) in its reform agenda, this identification was only amplified. The fact that the key ‘ministry people’ were also ‘university people’ did not seem to make the state look less threatening:

No matter where they come from, when they are part of the ministry they represent a political option with an agenda in higher education. (University Representative C)

Being ‘political’ somehow seemed irreconcilable with being ‘academic’:

There was a shared understanding that ‘Bologna’ was a political move, not an academic one, and that it, in fact, was a threat to academic freedoms. (Ministry representative A)

The cultural material from which universities constructed this local-specific identity came from the moral high ground of being the antithesis to a totalitarian state – one they had earned themselves in the past and carried into the present. The legitimacy of this identity was further strengthened by the authority that the university has in society in the most universal sense. The actorhood thus constructed had its roots both in the high truths of the rationalised moral universe, in which the university stood as a cultural authority, and in the locally rooted construction of the state as a threat to those high truths.

### ***From identity to empowerment***

The negotiations on the legal framework continued until summer 2003, when the first version of the law was drafted by the ministry, incorporating the decisions reached by the working group. However, because the parliamentary elections were announced for the end of the year, the process was put on hold. Meanwhile, the University of Belgrade, itself not entirely satisfied with the content of the document, decided to form an internal group which would amend the draft as it thought fit and then, once the new government was in office, advocate its own solutions.

In the autumn of 2004 the new minister, having realised the importance of having a new law in advance of the next Bologna Process ministerial summit, took the matter forward. Notably, this minister had no academic background, nor did he seem particularly keen on interfering in higher education, let alone on confronting universities. Rather, he was perceived as ‘very considerate’ (University Representative A) and ‘respectful of university professors’ (Ministry Representative A). Contrary to the minister from the previous government, who was ‘pro-change’ to the point of openly confronting the university, this new minister could be described as ‘pro-consensus’ or, as a former student representative described the role – ‘a facilitator’ (Student Representative A). His approach to the matter was to officially grant the mandate to the Rector of the University of Belgrade to proceed with the work on the draft law, while also involving other universities and student representatives.

Although there were some disagreements on different elements in the law, either between universities or between universities and students, the final version was drafted reasonably quickly. In the summer of 2005, four years after it was first announced, the new, ‘reform law’ was passed by the parliament.

Five years later, a ministry official from the first post-2000 government reflected on these events in the following way:

We [the ministry] as a team, and me personally, lost that battle and the battle was won by the University of Belgrade. I was amazed at how passive other universities were, allowing Belgrade to ruin a relatively modern conception of the law. [...] It is quite certain that the draft which we wrote could not have won the support of the majority of the academic community in Serbia. And if it had won it, that would have been a miracle because in no European country in which a similar law had been passed, this came with the support of the academic community. Because no academic community was happy with these [Bologna] reforms. (Ministry Representative B)

The 2005 law was a compromise of sorts: it incorporated both some of the elements aiming at more transparency and accountability, originally put forward by the first ministry and largely endorsed by international organisations, and the need of universities to shield themselves from the volatile nature of the state. However, this need appeared to be so tenacious that the ‘shield’ was, in effect, turned into a set of new governing structures colonised by university representatives having considerable competences in decision making with regard to Serbian higher education, and extending beyond purely academic affairs.

One such structure was the National Council for Higher Education, originally proposed by the first ministry. The original idea was for the body to be independent both from the state and from universities, whilst sharing policy-making competences of the highest level with the ministry. The first ministry initially conceived of it as an independent expert body on all matters concerning higher education, appointed by the government. As thus conceived, the National Council would act as both a ‘buffer’ between higher education and the state, and as a body which would cater for the quality of higher education. However, such a proposal was not seen as a sufficient guarantee of autonomy and was considered by universities as being generally unfit for that purpose. As a ministry official responsible for the matter at the time put it some years later:

When the idea of the National Council was proposed, the academic community was strongly resisting it because they seemed to have thought that no one but the professoriate could govern higher education. (Ministry Representative B)

In fact, what universities sought was for the National Council to comprise prominent university figures chosen by the universities through their own decision-making procedures, by majority vote at least, rather than ‘independent’ individuals, regardless of their expertise. Instead of having it formally approved by the government, they preferred to entrust this task to the parliament. In the end, the law required that 10 of the 16 members of the National Council would be university representatives, two would be from polytechnics, and the remaining four would be nominated by the government ‘from among prominent scientists or scholars, cultural figures, educators, artists or businessmen’ (Article 10 of the 2005 law).<sup>5</sup>

In line with European trends, the first ministry also planned to introduce accreditation of universities and their curricula – a practice which had not been in place in Serbia until then – to be conducted by an independent agency run by professionals. At that time, accreditation was spreading rapidly across Europe, as a new accountability and quality control practice for higher education, often under the ‘Bologna’ flag. Accreditation thus seemed non-negotiable for Serbia although, to stress its non-state character, the body was officially called ‘commission’, rather than ‘agency’. All of its members were to be academics from the country, appointed by the university-dominated National Council, which ran contrary to the idea of it being an independent body.<sup>6</sup> As explained by a ministry representative:

There was a lack of willingness to form an independent accreditation body. Somehow people thought that all had to be controlled either by the university or by the state. (Ministry Representative B)

Two more structures were introduced with this law: university and polytechnic conferences (associations of the respective types of institutions), which were to nominate the 12 members to the National Council and all 15 members of the accreditation body. The National Council was to consult these two conferences on issues related to quality standards, disciplinary areas, as well as on funding policy for higher education.

Finally, internal university bodies were organised according to the same rationale, thus ensuring at least a majority of academic staff in all structures. Even here, minimising the presence of the state seems to have been a goal: ‘He that has been bitten by a serpent, is afraid of a rope’, explained an interviewee (University Representative B). In all previous arrangements, the government would have appointed a share of the board members. Although their role was never completely clear, they were generally seen as catering for the interests of the state. With the exception of the 1998 law, according to which all members of the board were appointed by the government, throughout the 1990s the regulation prescribed that half of the board was to be appointed by the government. However, even such a solution was considered potentially problematic for universities. Eventually, the 2005 law stipulated only one-sixth of the board members to be appointed by the government, with another sixth appointed by the student parliament, and two-thirds to be members of the university’s academic staff and appointed by the university senate. With such arrangements the presence of any external voice in the internal university decision making, including that of the state, was brought to its historical minimum.

Meanwhile, the ministry retained the competence to propose policy to the government, only now this competence was shared with the universities-dominated National Council. The ministry’s other competences included planning of student enrolment for state universities and a number of responsibilities of an administrative or technical nature, including those for providing administrative support to the National Council and the Accreditation Commission. In effect, compared to the set of competences given to the newly introduced National Council, those of the ministry were more limited.

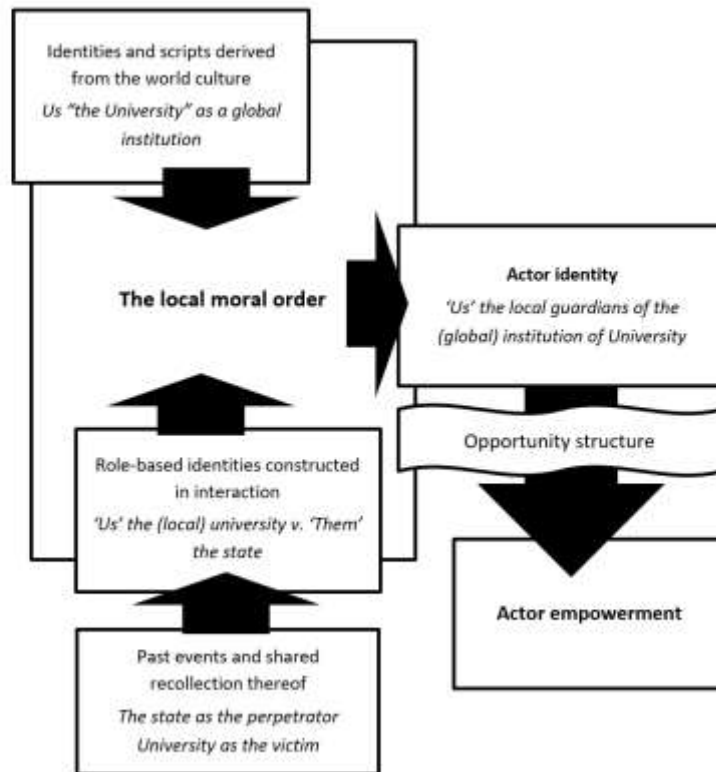
Interestingly enough, the law itself was more elaborate than previous ones. There were two key reasons for this. First, it also covered the non-university (polytechnic) sector, which was previously regulated separately. Second, there was at that time a widely shared idea that the law needed to provide the legal basis for implementing ‘Bologna’ – understood as a comprehensive reform process. As a result, the law – especially if paired with internationally standardised and now mandatory accreditation procedures – ended up being somewhat prescriptive in the areas of, among others, curriculum, quality, recognition of foreign degrees, student representative bodies and rights of students with disabilities. All of these had in the past been, to a lesser extent, if at all, subject to national regulation, yet now they stood triumphantly as beacons of higher education modernisation. Seen in this light, this law was no more than a springboard for the further diffusion of ‘a world of standards’ into the Serbian context and a locally flavoured salute to ritualised isomorphism (Brunsson and Jacobsson 2002; Strang and Meyer 1993). It may even be regarded as a paradox of sorts that universities – de facto authors of the law – fought so much for the autonomy, only to come up with a set of legal solutions which regulated and standardised their work to an ever greater degree.

## Discussion and conclusion

The case presented demonstrates how Serbian universities expanded their role in the field of national higher education, leading to their empowerment as an actor in field-level governance. This expansion is particularly striking given the starting point: at least with regard to formal rules, Serbian universities historically had played a very limited role in national-level governing and policy making, and, at one point, even in the decision making taking place within their own ‘walls’. The expansion was a result of context-specific circumstances which propelled the university to embrace the identity of the ultimate guardian of the university institution in the national context and, when given the opportunity, to extend its governing competences beyond the issues of a purely academic nature and beyond the organisational level. By doing this, Serbian universities successfully challenged not only the decades-long state domination in higher education, but also some of the global trends promoted by the state at the time, such as the spread of independent accountability mechanisms. However, as it turned out, accountability mechanisms, as well as a number of other internationally-driven policy ideas, did find their way into the local context, largely as a result of their no longer being thought of as optional in the broader European context, especially for a country aspiring to be seen as a part of that same Europe.

This conclusion suggests that resisting state-led reforms inspired by international trends does not necessarily lead to resisting those same trends. Tempting as it may be to accept the world society argument and say that resistance to such sweeping global processes is ultimately futile – especially for small non-Western countries which typically do not get to write the scripts of the world culture – this case encourages one to at least imagine alternatives. However, although it may be argued that Serbian universities could afford to reject some elements of the ‘modernisation package’ offered to them, their empowered actorhood eventually had little to do with resisting global processes. It seems to be the case that when an actor is empowered in a dialectical process such as this, the diffusion seems to be resisted only to the extent that the actor deliberately defies the pressing cultural script. Rather, the actorhood of Serbian universities – even when they pose as a modern incarnation of one of the few medieval institutions still in existence – had much more to do with fighting the local ‘ghosts from the past’.

Looking at the state’s original and much-resisted agenda – to ‘modernise’ and ‘Europeanise’ Serbian higher education – we could conclude that the 2005 law marked some movement in that direction. Weakening of the state and the downward shift in the locus of planning also took place here, albeit in a somewhat different fashion to that in other countries. The state was weakened both by globalisation and by its own past actions, allowing its main challenger – the university – to construct itself as the state’s antithesis and claim authority over national higher education as its moral and natural right. The university’s identity in this specific context, therefore, was essentially constructed from the symbolic material derived from the locally shared understanding of a common past, its protagonists and the nature of their relationship. The global-cultural origin of the university as an institution did play a role, but this seems to have been only to the extent that it helped local universities legitimise themselves as rightful claimants to a greater say in national field governance. This, however, does not entail they did not act from a moral law; yet the moral law they enacted was much informed by the local ‘material’. Finally, the local opportunity structures – particularly the 2001 regime change and the 2004 change in the ministry – were crucial in the empowerment process, given that it would be hard to imagine Serbian universities with such competences in field governance had the state maintained its historical role. Figure 1 sketches how these processes relate to each other.



**Figure 1.** The interplay between global and local in local actor empowerment

The empowered actors, in the sense of this article, do not translate global-cultural phenomena by ascribing local meanings to them, as much as they act from their own meaning and role systems. They neither seek ways to be unique, as ‘glocalisers’ do; and although, as ‘domesticators’, they engage in local political battles, their actorhood is concerned not so much with domesticating global scripts and identities thereof as it is with constructing and enacting local ones, alongside the global. By highlighting the interaction of roles and identities, the article speaks somewhat to Delmestri’s (2006) metaphor of ‘intersecting streams’ of institutional influence, only here the focus is on organizations, rather than on individuals.

The world society literature highlights the strengthening of organisational actorhood as the main global process affecting the character of modern university (Krücken and Meier 2006; Meyer et al. 2008). In this conception, the university is an ‘agent for its self’ – an organisational actor whose purpose is to manage autonomously, rationally and responsibly, its legitimated interests (Meyer and Jepperson 2000, p. 106). However, whether the organisational dimension of Serbian universities has been strengthened remains beyond the scope of this study. The empowerment of Serbian universities, as argued here, had little to do with universities’ intra-organisational properties, such as the elaboration of formal structures and the introduction of managerial practices, often taken as some of the main signs of a stronger organisational dimension (Krücken and Meier 2006; Seeber et al. 2015). It had, in effect, much more to do with their empowerment in matters of governance and policy at the national field level, and particularly vis-à-vis the state. In this sense, the university empowerment could be interpreted not only as an extension of the university’s role in the national higher education field, but also as an extension of its organisational identity to incorporate new – perhaps less academic

and more political – roles and responsibilities in the broader field environment. It is for this reason that the actorhood in this case lies with the university – the institution and the organisation – rather than with the professoriate and their guilds.

In closing, this article does not claim that the local necessarily defies the global, nor does it offer a criticism of the world society theory in this sense. Rather, it builds on it by focusing in particular on one of its core concepts – actor empowerment – and offers a way to unpack the concept and to theoretically consider its various local manifestations. The findings presented here are in accord with the general argument of the theory that globally available models inform the local construction of social arrangements, but they also highlight how, amidst all the global drama, a local context may inform a local construction.

**Acknowledgments** I wish to thank Jana Bačević, Julie Birkholz, Bojana Čulum, Marija Filipović-Ožegović, David Frank, Meta Gorup, Simon Hecke, Jeroen Huisman, Hokyu Hwang, Markus Höllner, Georg Krücken, Melissa Laufer, Frank Meier, Henk Roose, Marco Seeber and Martina Vukasović for their valuable comments on previous versions of the paper. I would particularly like to thank the four anonymous reviewers for challenging my arguments and helping me in finding a better way of framing my thinking. Any errors are my own.

**Funding information** The author acknowledges the financial support from the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO), grant number G.OC42.13N

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A Europe-wide higher education reform process, launched in 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Attributes in quotations were taken from the European University Association's report on five universities in Serbia, *Institutional Evaluations of Universities in Serbia 2001–2002*: see EUA (2002).

<sup>3</sup> University integration was by far the most contested issue in the process. For decades back, Serbian state universities had operated as loose associations of legally and financially independent faculties. The first post-2000 ministry strongly advocated for integration (also advised by international organisations), which was then strongly resisted by universities.

<sup>4</sup> Letters of the alphabet are used to distinguish between interviewees in this article, to preserve their anonymity.

<sup>5</sup> Curiously enough, when the first National Council was constituted in 2006, even those four government appointees were academics.

<sup>6</sup> This was one of the main reasons why the Serbian Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance was not granted full membership in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education until 2013.

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