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HIGHER EDUCATION IN BULGARIA IN A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: DYNAMICS OF EXPANSION AND INEQUALITIES

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The paper aims at exploring the inequalities in the access to higher education in Bulgaria in a historical perspective. It focuses on the question of how the distribution of opportunities in the access to higher education has been changing over time among diverse groups of the population. The main argument is that the expansion of higher education in Bulgaria before and especially after the collapse of socialism (1989) gives an opportunity to many people to be educated in higher education institutions, but it does not go hand in hand with the corresponding reducing of inequalities (and especially qualitative inequalities) in access to tertiary education. The paper utilizes data from the National Statistical Institute and from Gender and Generation Survey (2004) and uses descriptive statistics and logistic regression models for the data analysis. Overall, the study outlines a trend of persistence of qualitative inequalities. It also demonstrates the potential of bringing together two frameworks: one of an analysis of the routes of higher education expansion and other of the capability approach when studying inequalities in access to higher education in a dynamic perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

The present paper aims to explore the inequalities in the access to higher education in a historical perspective. It focuses on the question of how the distribution of opportunities in the access to higher education has been changing over time among diverse groups of the population.

More generally, this paper will search for an answer to this question for the period 1950-2011 using Bulgaria as a case study. Bulgaria provides a unique case for research into inequalities in educational opportunities given its historical background and the different policy instruments for their reduction. It should be noted that it is among the least explored coun-

tries with regards to this question. At the same time according to a recent report on equitable access to higher education (Bohonnek *et al.* 2010) Bulgaria is among the countries where inequity caused by socioeconomic disadvantages is most pronounced.

This paper argues that the expansion of higher education in Bulgaria before and especially after the collapse of socialism (1989) gives an opportunity to many people to be educated in higher education institutions, but it does not go hand in hand with the corresponding reducing of inequalities (and especially qualitative inequalities) in access to tertiary education.

It contributes to the ongoing debate on the dynamics of inequalities in access to higher education in two ways. First, it applies the framework proposed by Marek Kwiek in his paper for *Comparative Education Review* (2013) for analyzing higher education expansion in Poland after 1989 for Bulgaria but for an extended period of time. Second, it proposes the capability approach (CA) as a framework that could be used in the measuring of the educational inequalities over time.

The paper will proceed as follows. Next a review of the relevant literature on the dynamics of inequalities in the context of educational expansion will be made. Then the theoretical assumptions of this paper will be presented. What follows is a review of higher education expansion, highlighting the main trends and the modes through which it occurs in Bulgaria. Then the data, methodology and the main findings will be presented. Concluding remarks are put forward in the final section of the paper.

THE DEBATE ON THE DIRECTION OF INEQUALITIES

It should be noted that the educational inequalities, are not static. In this regard there is a huge number of studies, in most cases comparative, which develop theories relating overall educational expansion to the dynamics of inequalities in access to higher education. However, it seems that they are not unanimous about the direction of their change. They may be divided into two main groups. Whereas the first group of studies observes a decrease of inequalities of educational opportunity that may be due to the social origin of students (see Duncan and Blau 1967; Boudon 1974; Ganzeboom and Nieuwbeerta 1999; Breen *et al.* 2009; Ballarino *et al.* 2009), the second one suggests the stability and persistence of the effect of socioeconomic background on school success, despite schooling expansion (see Mare 1981; Blossfeld and Shavit 1993; Raftery and Hout 1993; Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Pfeffer 2008). Without aiming to exhaust this debate, we

will mention some of the main hypotheses that have been tested so far in the analysis of the dynamics of educational inequalities.

The modernization hypothesis postulates that under the influence of industrialization ascriptive rules of social mobility become weaker in favour of achievement rules (Duncan and Blau 1967). Although this hypothesis has been widely tested (Sieben and de Graaf 2001; Van Doorn *et al.* 2011) it is criticized because it does not take into account the historical, institutional and political peculiarities of nations that also influence on class differences (Müller and Karle 1993). Walter Müller and Wolfgang Karle (1993) elaborated on this criticism and formulated a new perspective of the dynamics of educational inequalities (life-course perspective) which argues that the effect of family to diminish with age, as children become less dependent on their families.

In contrast to the idea that educational inequalities decrease over time, the hypothesis for “Maximally Maintained Inequality (MMI)” postulates that “transition rates and odds ratios between social origins and educational transitions remain the same from cohort to cohort unless they are forced to change by increasing enrolments” (Raftery and Hout 1993: 56).

The socialist transformation hypothesis also adheres to the position of the persistence of inequalities. According to it the socialist reforms of educational systems, and the corresponding policies (particularly the implementation of the so-called quota system) initially reduced the effects of social origin on educational attainment. Despite that as soon as the new elite secured privileges for themselves and took control of the educational system, they ensured educational advantages for their own children. It resulted in the growing of the effect of social origin in the later years of the socialist regimes (Matějů *et al.* 2003). Based on a study on the developments in the recent structure of higher education in Czech Republic this hypothesis is further extended, postulating that the period of persisting inequality under socialism was followed by a period of growing inequalities in the post-communist transformation (Matějů *et al.* 2007).

By focusing on the processes of differentiation and private versus public allocation logics in higher education a recent comparative research explores inequalities in the context of higher education expansion in 15 countries (Arum *et al.* 2007). The results of this study are consistent with the view that the inequality is maximally maintained and the inequalities persist¹ over time. But at the same time it provides stronger evidence to support the claim that higher education expansion leads rather to inclusion than to di-

¹ The only exceptions from this trend are post-Soviet Russia and the Czech Republic, where an increase in inequality was observed.

version. This study found out that expansion and differentiation are related and the diversified systems of higher education are the most inclusive ones. It also revealed that privatization is not among the factors that have an influence on the level of educational inequalities.

Although it is developed in the case of secondary education, the effectively maintained inequality perspective (EMI) (Lucas 2001) goes a step further and takes into account the qualitative side of educational inequalities on a micro level. It postulates that the effects of social background determine on the one hand who completes a level of education if the completion of that level is not nearly universal and on the other the kind of education persons will receive within levels of education that are nearly universal. Thus, EMI's implications differ from MMI ones which suggest that background-related inequality will go to zero when a level of education is nearly universal. Furthermore, a recent study provides solid evidence that in contrast to EMI, MMI is not-falsifiable (Lucas 2009).

The importance of the horizontal stratification of school types within levels of schooling when one analyzes the inequalities is also justified by Martin Kreidl (2006). However, he provides evidence for a decrease of inequalities in secondary education in some post-communist countries (incl. Bulgaria) after WWII. He nonetheless concludes that, as regards access to higher education, the results are less conclusive and robust.

A study on educational inequalities in Finland in the period between the 1980s and 1990s is among the few that explores the qualitative inequalities in higher education over time (Kivinen *et al.* 2001). Their persistence is illustrated with a metaphor from bicycle racing: "even if the tail-end cyclists reach the main pack, the front-runners widen their gap between the main pack" (Kivinen *et al.* 2001: 171). It comes to show that the real competition for gaining access to higher education is among the well-off which always try to make a distance between themselves and the rest.

Within the overview of the current debate on the dynamics of inequalities a huge gap of the research on the qualitative side of inequalities in the context of higher education expansion was identified. Moreover, no study has so far been conducted which has analyzed the inequalities in access to higher education in Bulgarian settings before and after 1989 at the same time.

THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

In order to fill the above-mentioned gap this paper relies on theoretical assumptions on the CA. It seems very appropriate for this research since on the one hand it provides a social justice framework which allows conceptu-

alizing, measuring and evaluating on such phenomena like well-being, development and inequalities. On the other hand it is very sensitive to diverse groups and settings. All this allows us to broaden our understanding of how inequalities may be evaluated over time.

The CA was first introduced as such by the Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen and then developed by the political philosopher Martha Nussbaum and by a number of scholars (Robeyns, Unterhalter, Walker, etc.). The CA conceives a person's life as a combination of various 'doings' and 'beings' (called 'functionings') and his or her freedom to choose among these functionings (capability). Sen (2009) argues that the concept of capability is linked with the opportunity aspect of freedom. In this sense capability is not concerned with the process of choice itself, but with the human ability to achieve what she values. He points out that more freedom gives people more opportunity to pursue their objectives and also to influence the world.

With regards to the space of evaluations of inequalities Sen gives priority to the capability instead of functionings, but at the same time he underlines that there is no difference as far as the space is concerned between focusing on functionings or on capabilities. As Sen (1992: 50) simply puts it: "a functioning combination is a point in such a space, whereas capability is a set of such points".

In other words Sen's particular approach to equality involves judging individual advantage by the freedom to achieve, incorporating (but going beyond) actual achievements (Sen 1992). Before proceeding with its application we will make an overview of the expansion of higher education in Bulgaria and of the particular routes that it occurs.

EXPANSION OF BULGARIAN HIGHER EDUCATION (1944-2011)

Bulgarian higher education experienced a post-WWII expansion following the trend of expansion in Western countries. Although this expansion was to a great extent similar to the route of all post-communist countries, undoubtedly it had its own particularities. One of them is that despite the common model of using higher education for social engineering in all countries in the socialist zone, in Bulgaria this model was completed in the largest extent and the common characteristics of the model are represented "in the purest" mode in it (Boyadjieva 2010: 281).

The development of the higher education in the period between 1944 and 2011 can be divided into two main periods - a socialist and a democratic one. The line between them is 1989 when socialism collapsed. Both

periods are marked by expansion during which the number of students, higher schools and teaching staff increased. Despite that, if we follow Martin's Trow framework, the massification of higher education begins in the second period.

The most significant changes in the higher education system, implemented in Bulgaria in the period after 1989 as compared to the higher education system that existed in the socialist period are associated with: the restoration of the autonomy of Bulgarian higher education institutions (1990); abolishment of the social criteria in selection processes; the introduction of structural elements and practices transferred from other educational systems, such as the two-level model of higher education (Bachelor's and Master's degrees) and university quality assurance systems and the freedom of speech and access to western literature. Furthermore, in this period the specialized higher schools, established in the socialist period, developed in the direction of incorporating the university model of higher education and the private sector emerged (see Boyadjieva 2007). Whereas the number of higher education institutions in the socialist period increased from 7 in 1944/45 to 30 in 1989/90, the number of higher schools in 2010/2011 is 53, from which 44 are universities and 9 colleges. From these 44 universities only 8 are private (NSI 2012). The number of higher education institutions is relatively stable after 2002/2003.

Following the framework developed by Kwiek (2013b) as a model for an analysis of higher education expansion after 1989 (in his case, linked to the analysis of the contraction processes ongoing and envisaged for the future in Polish higher education), this paper tries to shed light on the particular routes of expansion of higher education in another post-communist country - Bulgaria. The analysis of the routes of expansion is especially relevant since:

... to a large extent, these routes determine the routes of future contraction and major policy strategies to combat it.
(Kwiek 2013b: 6)

In this sense the application of this framework seems even more appropriate given that higher education expansion in Bulgaria after 1989 was accompanied by a demographic crisis. This crisis occurred in the presence of two parallel processes - an early dropping out from school and massification of higher education. In this regard there are claims that the expansion on the top after 1989 led to an increase on the percentage of people from one birth cohort that achieve the highest educational level, but also to a widening of the educational variations among the population (Stoilova 2010).

More specifically, the chosen framework requires that the expansion to be segregated into several components: by age, by gender, by sector, by status and by field of study. The routes of expansion of higher education in Poland in the period between 1995 and 2010 can be summarized to the following ones:

... new students were mostly of a traditional age (70%), female (60%), studying slightly more often in part-time mode (52%), and slightly more often in the public (54%) than in the private sector.
(Kwiek 2013b: 9)

The analysis of the expansion of Bulgarian higher education, based mainly on data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI)², revealed that the overall enrollments of students in the period 1950-2011 increased 5.25 times for the period 1950/51-1990/1991 (from 34,926 to 183,453) and 1.53 times between 1990/91 to 2010/11 (from 183,453 to 281,170). As regards to gender dimension the increase for these reference years are respectively 5.46 and 1.64 times. Despite that the enrollment of women surpasses that of men at the end of the socialist period, this is a constant trend in the period after the fall of socialism.

As regards to the public/private sectoral perspective, there is a difficulty for this distinction to be fully assessed because of the emergence of the private sector and within public universities. If we rely on the divide on public/private universities only, it can be said that half of the increase in enrollment in higher education in the period 2001/02 - 2010/11 is due to the increase in the private sector. The enrollments at this time increase from 28,678 to 57,344.

With regard to the status of students, several trends can be identified. Opportunities for extra-mural training and evening courses are offered in both types of higher education institutions - universities and semi-higher schools, in the socialist period. The enrollments in extra-mural training and evening classes increased in the period 1970/71-1990/91 almost 2 times (from 23,112 in 1970/71 to 40,272 in 1990/91).

In contrast, after 1989 a new mode of attendance emerged - distance-learning. The regular training, extra-mural training and evening classes and distance-learning are offered in both, in the public and private sector. In both cases extra-mural training and evening classes and distance-learning are fee-based. In the period between 2000/01 and 2010/11 the enrollments

² There have been used data from the Statistical Yearbooks and Statistical Reference Books that are available on the site of the Institute: www.nsi.bg.

in regular training increased only by 10% in public universities and by 1.64 times in private universities.

It seems that the expansion by mode of attendance led to the most significant restructuring in enrollments in the last decade. While in public universities more than 70% of the students are currently enrolled in regular training, in the private sector slightly more than 40% prefer this mode of attendance. Most likely the private sector searched for opportunities to reduce the regular training and to allow students to combine their studies with work given the high fees which students less and less could afford to pay especially due to the global economic crisis conditions.

Last but not least the expansion occurred in specific fields of study in both periods. In the socialist period it took place in studies such as engineering, education and pedagogy and economics. The level of enrollments in the arts was relatively stable over the period. In the case of agriculture enrollments increased at the beginning of the first decades and then decreased and are keeping at stable levels. Enrollments in medical studies increased significantly but they reduced in the period between 1980/81 and 1990/91. In the post-socialist period expansion took place in fields of study such as social and behavioral science, engineering, teacher and training and education science, humanities, law, different service studies and especially in business and administration. Nevertheless, there is a trend of a decrease in enrollments in some areas of study, in the last decade, such as the humanities, engineering, teacher training and education science and law. However, these data should be treated with caution because of the changes in the classifications over time.

To sum up, the analysis of the expansion of the studied period (1950-2011) revealed that despite the differences in the socialist and democratic period in terms of the criteria for admission, funding and etc. some common trends were identified. It seems that the expansion was implemented by the gradual inclusion of women in higher education; by offering students part-time modes of studying and it took place in particular fields of studies.

Although Bulgarian higher education system is much smaller than the Polish one, to a great extent, the routes of expansion in Bulgaria reflect the situation described by Kwiek (2013b) in Poland. Furthermore, he concludes that despite the expansion of higher education in Poland in the period between 1995 and 2010, the upward educational social mobility is still limited and the level of inheritance of both educational status and occupational status is quite high, compared with other European countries (Kwiek 2013b).

Based on the analysis of the routes of higher education expansion in Bulgaria and on previous literature several hypotheses were formulated,

which will be tested via descriptive statistics and logistic regressions in the following section:

- Despite the expansion of higher education inequalities in the chances that people with different social background have to access to higher education persist over time.
- The chances of women to access higher education increase over time.
- The chances of Bulgarians from Turkish and other ethnic groups to access higher education decrease over time in comparison to those of Bulgarians.
- There are qualitative inequalities in access to higher education that persist over time.

INEQUALITIES IN ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION: DATA, VARIABLES AND RESULTS

It turned out that providing suitable data for an analysis of educational inequalities over time is not an easy task. It is due to the fact that neither NSI, nor the Universities collect data on the social background of students. In order to fill part of this gap data from the first wave of cross-national survey "Gender and Generation Survey" (GGS)³ will be used. The GGS was carried out in 2004 by the Institute of Sociology on the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and was funded by the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research. It is representative for the Bulgarian population of 18-79 and is appropriate for our analysis given the richness of data it consists of: for the highest educational level of respondents and their social background, year of birth, gender, fields or subjects of study and year of graduation. The analytical data file contains 12,858 cases.

This paper uses birth cohorts as a baseline for historical comparisons. In order to be sure that almost all respondents had finished their educational careers, we left only those aged between 24 and 63. The respondents are split into four birth cohorts, each of them of around 10 years. It also means that the analysis of inequalities covers a shorter period than the one that was covered in the analysis of the expansion.

The analysis of the descriptive statistics revealed that almost one fourth of the respondents (24-63) have higher education degrees (N=2,189). This

³ Data from the GGS (2004) are obtained from the GGP Data Archive and are created by the organizations and individuals listed for each particular data set at <http://www.unece.org/pau/ggp/acknowledge.htm>

The model survey instruments may be found in: United Nations 2005. Generations & Gender Programme: Survey Instruments. New York and Geneva: UN, 2005.

share varies between 19.13% in the oldest cohort to 25.98% in the youngest cohort.

Whereas a half of the graduates born in the cohort 1941-1950 had a low educated father or mother, in the youngest cohort this share is respectively 7.39% and 6.49%. On the other spectrum the share of graduates with highly educated fathers increased gradually from 15.96% in the oldest cohort to 33.95% for people born between 1971 and 1980. In the case of the mother's education this share increases almost four times from 10.48% to 38.78% for the oldest to the youngest cohort.

As regards to the gender dimension the share of females among graduates surpasses the share of males in all of the study cohorts. In terms of ethnicity the graduates from Turkish and other ethnic groups seem to be underrepresented in higher education for all cohorts despite the quotas based on ethnic indicator in the socialist period and despite the elimination of social criteria and the widened access to higher education after 1989. Furthermore, there are no graduates from the Roma ethnic group in the sample. It is justifiable since their share among graduates in the population is very low (below 0.5%). However, the problems that Roma people have with access to education are still unresolved with regards to lower levels of education.

All these differences in the distributions of tertiary education attainment among diverse groups and over time speak for inequalities in the chances they have in access to higher education. In order to assess the odds of attaining higher education that people have over time logistic regression was applied. The information for the graduates will be used as a proxy for the inequalities in the access. The dependent variable is if a person attained higher education or not. It has two values:

- 0 - not attaining a degree (ISCED 0-4);
- 1 - attaining a degree (ISCED 5-6);

Two models are estimated. The first one includes variables for both parents' education and the second one a variable indicating whether at least one of the parents has higher education. These variables are used as independent variables in both models as a proxy for social background. The categories for parents' education are recoded to three groups: low - ISCED 0-2; medium - ISCED 3-4 and high - ISCED 5-6. The results from the regressions are controlled for gender and ethnic group. All variables are included in the models as dummy variables. Both models are estimated separately for each birth cohort⁴ (Table 1).

⁴ The results from the postestimation analysis are available on request.

The results from the first model reveal that the odds of attaining a degree for people with highly educated fathers, when compared to the reference group, are relatively stable for the first three cohorts and increase in the last birth cohort. The odds of attaining a degree for a person who has a father with higher education from the most recent cohort are estimated to be 7.48 times higher than the odds of a person with a low educated father. In contrast, these odds for the first birth cohort are only 4.73 larger.

Table 1. Odds ratios and confidence intervals (in brackets) from the logistic regressions

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Birth cohorts</i>			
	1941/50	1951/60	1961/70	1971/80
<i>Model 1</i>				
Female	1.33 (1.01-1.77)	1.63 (1.24-2.14)	2.14 (1.73-2.66)	4.05 (3.21-5.11)
Bulgarian	4.26 (1.75-10.37)	7.91 (3.05-20.46)	3.90 (2.18-6.95)	3.02 (1.64-5.55)
Other	2.28 n.s.	7.32 (1.82-29.37)	3.58 (1.63-7.89)	6.33 (2.24-17.87)
Medium edu F	3.34 (2.19-5.10)	2.30 (1.58-3.33)	2.23 (1.65-3.00)	2.38 (1.61-3.52)
High edu F	4.73 (2.30-9.71)	4.97 (2.88-8.59)	4.96 (3.22-7.62)	7.48 (4.63-12.08)
Medium edu M	2.14 (1.35-3.40)	3.23 (2.23-4.69)	2.39 (1.77-3.23)	3.19 (2.07-4.93)
High edu M	8.83 (3.04-25.59)	8.44 (4.36-16.34)	6.62 (4.24-10.32)	8.95 (5.40-14.82)
<i>N</i>	1,532	1,622	2,750	2,598
Reference categories: male, Turkish, Low edu F, Low edu M				
<i>Model 2</i>				
Female	1.33 (1.02-1.74)	1.73 (1.34-2.23)	2.20 (1.79-2.70)	3.79 (3.05-4.72)
Bulgarian	6.13 (2.47-15.19)	14.18 (5.22-38.60)	8.51 (4.82-15.03)	10.25 (5.91-17.77)
Other	2.26 n.s.	8.43 (2.37-30.04)	5.29 (2.30-12.17)	7.96 (3.35-18.93)
Parent with a degree	9.58 (5.96-15.40)	9.97 (6.93-14.35)	7.20 (5.62-9.23)	6.78 (5.43-8.48)
<i>N</i>	1,536	1,631	2,764	2,641
Reference categories: male, Turkish, none of the parents has a degree in higher education				

Source: Author calculations based on GGS 2004 (unweighted data)

Note: all results are significant at $p < 0.10$, n.s. (not significant)

It seems that despite the variations over time the most decisive factor in determining the chances if one will get a degree in tertiary education in all birth cohorts is that if one has a highly qualified mother. The odds of attaining a degree for a person born in the most recent cohort and whose mother is highly qualified are estimated to be 8.95 times larger than the odds of

a person born in the same birth cohort but whose mother is with a low education.

There is a clear trend for an increase of the chances of women to attain a degree, and respectively to access higher education, over time. Despite the quota on ethnic the indicator in the socialist period and the widened access to higher education after 1989, there is an increase in the odds of attaining tertiary education that representatives of the Bulgarian ethnic group have in comparison to representatives of the Turkish ethnic group for the second cohort. This increase is followed by a decrease in the difference in the odds between these two ethnic groups. As regards to the difference in the odds between the Turkish ethnic group and those who reported that were from a different ethnic group, it is not significant for people born in the first cohort. It was very high in the second cohort, then reduced in the third and increased again in the most recent cohort.

The results from the second model are consistent with these results. The effect of the presence of at least one of the parents with higher education decreases slightly over time, but the difference in the chances of people with or without a parent with higher education to graduate from a higher education institution are still very high. The odds of attaining tertiary education for a person born in the most recent cohort who has at least one parent with higher education are estimated to be 6.78 times larger than the odds of a person born in the same birth cohort but with no parent with higher education. These odds are estimated to be between 5.43 and 8.48 (with 95% confidence).

As it has already been mentioned the expansion took place and in different fields of study. The argument of the paper is that despite the decrease of quantitative inequalities in access to higher education over time the qualitative inequalities persist. To a great extent this argument was suggested by the literature (Lucas 2001; Kivinen *et al.* 2001; Kreidl 2006) but which is not tested in the case of Bulgaria. In line with these studies and in contrast to prior research that measure institutional variations at the macro-level by classifying the countries in different ideal types (Arum *et al.* 2007) the qualitative inequalities will be analyzed on micro-level in terms of fields of study. The proposed in the beginning CA allows us to look at fields and studies in their opportunity aspect. It opens an additional space for assessment of the disadvantages of people to access the same range of opportunities, in terms of fields of study that goes beyond the binary perception for access to higher education in the assessment of educational disparities.

More specifically, the qualitative inequalities will be analyzed by using information about the distribution of graduates with high social background within different fields of study. In an ideal situation the CA should

take note of the full extent of freedom to choose between different functioning bundles, but limits of practicality may often force the analysis to be confined to examining the achieved functioning bundles only (Sen 1992: 53). In this sense, the information of the diversity of the functionings that a particular group could achieve in our case will be used as a proxy for defining the set of capabilities which was available for this group in a time perspective.

In order to capture the dynamics of inequalities this time information for the year that respondents reported that they attained their highest level of qualification will be used. Three periods of graduation are selected: 1950/74, 1975/89 and 1990/2004. Information if at least one of the parents has higher education will be used as a proxy for social background.

A clear pattern of gradual increase of the share of graduates with high social background over time in almost all areas of study can be seen. However, this trend is more tangible for some fields and not so much for others. It shows that the ability of graduates with medium and low social background to have a degree is highly constrained in a particular range of possibilities to them. This is a trend which is present before and after 1989.

These results suggest that there are gaps in the chances that groups with different social background have to access the same range of fields of study that should be further explored. Actually the graduates with high social background still have access to more prestigious subjects and have more capabilities to choose what to study than their peers with lower social background.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of higher education expansion revealed that it occurred by the gradual inclusion of women in higher education; by offering students part-time modes of studying and it took place in particular fields of study. Despite this expansion and the progress in reducing inequalities achieved in access to higher education in the periods before and after 1989, the inequalities are still very visible, especially when studied via the differences in the chances that people with different social background, ethnic group and gender have to attain a degree.

In general, the results of the study suggest that the efforts around taking into account the diversity of students' candidates in the selection policies in the socialist period and the elimination of social criteria in the access to higher education and its widened access after 1989 gave an opportunity to more and diverse people to have access to higher education via different routes. But at the same time we did not find evidence that the capabilities of all student candidates were expanded when we look at the range of fields of

study that groups with different social background were really able to access and complete. It clearly reveals a trend of persistence of qualitative inequalities which require new policy solutions for their reduction. These findings are in line with the assumptions based on EMI hypothesis according to which the effects of social background determine “who completes a level of education if completion of that level is not nearly universal” and “the kind of education persons will receive within levels of education that are nearly universal” (Lucas 2001: 1681).

Our findings are also consistent with the socialist transformation hypothesis and the trends observed in access to tertiary education in the Czech Republic - that the received autonomy and the abolishment of social privileges after the collapse of socialism did not go hand in hand with the reduction of inequalities in access to higher education (Matějů *et al.* 2003).

This paper has demonstrated the potential of bringing together two frameworks: one of an analysis of the routes of higher education expansion and other of the CA when studying inequalities in access to higher education over time. The combination of both is especially relevant for the Bulgarian case given the high levels of inequalities and the fact that it is a potential country that could experience a future contraction of higher education. Despite that future work on this issue should include and an analysis of the mechanisms that stay behind the existence and the persistence of inequalities which are beyond the scope of this paper. At the same time the micro analysis of qualitative inequalities may be expanded and to the type of higher education programs as well as to using multiple logistic regression that would allow better estimation of this type of inequalities. The necessity of a further extension of this analysis is also relevant since Bulgaria is among the few countries in the EHEA which does not monitor the social dimension of higher education as a policy instrument (Eurydice 2012: 82). Last but not least the results for the Bulgarian case can be discussed in a comparative perspective via including an analysis with more countries which participated in the GGS (Australia, Austria, Belgium, Estonia, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania and the Russian Federation) or by using other comparative surveys which cover a wider range of countries.⁵

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