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UNIVERSITY MERGER AND SENSEMAKING AT THE THRESHOLD: UNDERSTANDING RADICAL ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BASIC RESEARCH PROGRAM

WORKING PAPERS

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UNIVERSITY MERGER AND SENSEMAKING AT THE THRESHOLD: UNDERSTANDING RADICAL ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION[2,3]

This paper discusses radical change in higher education reflecting on its deconstructive nature. While the notions of adaptive and strategic change assume strengthening the existing settings of university organization, radical change means the deconstruction of the established organizational order. Radical change creates uncertainty and demands an understanding of social relations in the implicit or informal side of the organisation. This research is based on an empirical case of university merger as an example of radical and risky change in higher education. It applies the sensemaking approach to disclosing the cultural side of organizing. We argue that radical change in higher education originates a specific regime of sensemaking at the threshold where the symbolic order becomes the source of meanings for actors to deal with ambiguity. Analysing 22 in-depth interviews taken with top-level administrators and academic employees at three merged universities we show that radical change occurs through practices of labelling, rumouring and translation. They produce a virtual structure on the implicit side of organizing and influence the interpretation of change as a rite of passage or a rite of organisational degradation.

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Introduction

Universities all around the world experience organizational changes. They originate as a reaction to an imbalance between strong external demands and weak internal responses or as a result of proactive strategic offence in order to influence institutional dynamics and the knowledge economy at on a national and global scale (Clark 1997; Deiaco, Hughes, McKelvey 2012). Universities are expected to become strategic actors, which increasingly means rationalization and strengthening the professional-administrative structure to facilitate internal and external organizational dynamics according to generic interests and patterns of actorhood (Krücken, Meier 2006; Ramirez 2006; Pinheiro, Stensaker 2014). Considered exceptional in previous decades, organizational changes are recognized today as natural because it is hard to participate in on-going competition in higher education being a slow sort of organizations. Moreover changes had a symbolic meaning. It can be argued that there is no particular way to enter the league of promising universities except by putting organizational changes on display.

Although organizational changes have become a common issue in higher education studies only a few attempts were made to differentiate their types and to find specific conceptual and methodological approaches for investigation (Kezar 2001; Stensaker, Välimaa, & Sarrico 2012; Kezar 2012). As Eckel and Kezar have noted: "The depth of the change affects those underlying assumptions that tell an institution what is important; what to do, why, and how; and what to produce" (Eckel, Kezar 2003: 33). Three degrees of organizational change intensity can be distinguished in higher education according to the cognitive approach reflecting on the relationship between organizational change and schemata, which generate shared meanings for the organization as a whole (Bartunek, Moch 1987). First-order or incremental changes occur within particular frame of reference, when the organization adopts new structures and routines without questioning its essential characteristics. For example, several studies have shown that universities react to environmental dynamics by building an adaptive capacity – they adopt flexible structures adapting to various external demands (Cameron 1984; Dutton, Dukerich 1991; Clark 1997, Gornitzka 1999; Sporn 1999). It was emphasized that greater pressure to adapt common models of good practices, lead universities to a greater degree of institutional isomorphism (Ramirez, Christensen 2013). Second-order changes are substantive modifications of shared schemata through the implementation of a new strategic vision and identity which can facilitate organizational development by providing new pathways and roadmaps. Changes in organizing frameworks are related to updating old, and constructing new, organizational identities in higher education (Gioia, Price, Hamilton, Thomas 2010, Stensaker 2014). Higher education executives that were blessed with sensemaking and sensegiving in identity issues

provide their organizations with symbolic power in a general discussion and the construction of external images, strategies and a broader identification with organization (Gioia, Chittipeddi 1991). As long as studies on strategic change in academia were widespread universities were considered more as strategic actors and manage-centred organizations (Gioia, Chittipeddi 1991, Gioia, Thomas, Clark, Chittipeddi 1994, Krücken, Meier 2006). At last, third-order or radical change denotes "acute alterations to or replacement of existing shared schemas (e.g., during traumatic events like bankruptcies or radical changes such as mergers and acquisitions)" (Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, Thomas 2010: 397). This revolutionary change became widespread over recent decades, influenced by changing political demands in higher education and response to new ideas of excellence, efficiency and competitiveness on national and global scenes. For example, mergers and acquisitions were common and popular policy agenda items and instruments in higher education across various countries (Norgård, Skodvin 2002; Pick 2003; Locke 2007; Cai 2007; Salmi 2009; Kyvik, Stensaker, 2013). Despite their progressive vision, it has been argued that different types of amalgamations in higher education can lead to different outcomes and in this sense mergers could be evaluated as more or less successful (Skodvin 1999; Goedegebuure 2012). Mergers were characterized as costly, stressful, destructive and ambiguous organizational transformations. They influenced not only a progress in achieving declared goals, but question the possibility of integration and creation of organizational wholeness (Harman 2002).

One could argue that the on-going dynamics in higher education over the last fifty years depict a shift from first-order changes to second- and third-order changes. At the same time, radical organizational transformation in higher education in general, and mergers in particular, have not become an issue for conceptual and theoretical reflection as they were studied mostly applying first-order change lens. What is the specificity of radical or revolutionary change and how it is related to other types of change in higher education? How to study third-order change in higher education and what theoretical perspectives and concepts become appropriate? This paper reflects on these questions bringing a study of one university merger as an example of radical organizational change in higher education.

The conceptual framework

Explaining the deconstructive nature of radical organizational change

A general definition of merger as the construction of 'one single institution from previously separated ones' overlooks the deconstructive nature of radical organizational change (Skodvin 1999: 65). Considered as frame shifting, radical change questions two basic assumptions of formal organizations. Firstly, it reconsiders the idea of formal organizations being a source of mobilization and control in achieving curtain goals. Secondly, it questions formal organizational boundaries as demarcation lines between a fully integrated organization and the external environment. According to a wider sociological theory, formal structure provides organizations and their employees with several important outcomes: the sense of stability and predictability as an outcome of structural involvement and embeddedness in informational flows. Formal structure provides an organization with legitimacy as an outcome of rationalized patterns received from the external environment (Meyer, Rowan 1977). Organizational structure predicts employee's involvement. It means that any individual or person should act according to his or her role in a certain (usually institutionally defined) structure. In this respect, organizational culture is a toolkit as it provides leaders with the idea of manageable wholeness. But radical change starts not from creating the imagined wholeness but from organizational dying. As Gioia and colleagues have noted, third-order change transcends the boundaries of a single organization and questions its basic assumptions about organizational identity (Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, Thomas 2010). It does not mean that the image of a united organization loses its creative power, but an integrative state is achieved through a more complex process of deconstruction. Pre-existing structures and organizational identities should be decoupled from their holders in each organization and put on the altar of the newly emerged one. At the same time mergers may imply discontinuity as they are carried with the suggestion that the newly merged organization becomes a continuation of the other organization (Knippenberg, Knippenberg, Monden, de Lima 2002).

Radical change is easier to cope with at a university which is traditionally defined as a loosely coupled system where formal organization is not as empowered as in other types of organizations (Weick 1976). "Subunits are almost autonomous, and where there is little coordination and control by central management" (Fumasoli, Stensaker 2013: 491). Nevertheless, it has been already shown that revolutionary change influences not only formal structural but also the human side of the university organization responsible for its distinctiveness or identity formation (Stensaker 2014). Two basic propositions on mergers can be found in the literature which are conceptualized using different vocabularies and then are verified using different

examples of organizations, including universities. The first assumption is that "the greater the differences between merging organizations the more likely that implementation will be problematic". And the second is, "the greater the hostility of employees within either of the merging organizations towards the merger, the more difficult it is to secure integration within the new organization" (Greenwood, Hinings, Brown 1994: 239-240). Differences between merged organizations and causes of hostility are manifest through culture and identity differences that are considered to be key organizational variables while managing a merger process (Skodvin 1999, Greenwood, Hinings, Brown 1994, Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, Thomas 2010). It was suggested, for example, that that "organizational identification after a merger is contingent on a sense of continuity of identity" (Knippenberg, Knippenberg, Monden, de Lima 2002: 233) and it depends on whether the individual's identity is dominated by the pre-merger organization or by the post-merger one.

Universities and colleges participating in amalgamation lose their structural, institutional and even symbolic power as long as they are expected to take new or alien organizational forms, templates and identity labels. This process does not occur automatically and is instigated through the transitional period when all counterparts collide and negotiate their values, visions and schemas of the future organizational identity (Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, Thomas 2010). Managing radical organizational change becomes a challenge as it occurs not only through formal procedures and rules but is embedded in informal and even intimate relations that are hardly objectified and consist of many intangible elements (Blau 1957). They are considered as empty spaces for governance where group identities, personal networks, double talk, implicit negotiations and symbolic rituals get their organizing power. Taking it in a more practical way, managing a radical change means managing the relationship between formal and informal or structure and identity in fluid organizational circumstances. Radical change is a process where symbols and various signs can reveal more than formal regulations and procedures, as they work as sources of meanings and interpretations of what is displayed formally.

How to study mergers: Sensemaking at the threshold of university organizing

Perhaps the biggest debt that organizational studies in higher education owe to Weick is caused by the fact that he introduced the sensemaking perspective on organizing under ambiguity and beyond borders. Weick (1995) considered that among various conceptualizations of organizations, as rational, natural and open systems, the last one is most concerned with sensemaking, as greater openness to input from the environment means organizations have more diverse information to deal with and their loser structure means that the entity doing the sensemaking is itself something of a puzzle (Weick 1995: 70). This imagery shifts our attention

from structure to process and makes our view of an organization less dependent on formal boundaries but more on social activities that come from mediating between identity (at the inter-subjective level) and social structure (at the generic-subjective level). It does not mean that formal borders do not matter but merger study begins with questioning a single organization and reflects on organizing as ordering through various forms of communication, events and symbolic expressions.

Although the sensemaking perspective has been widely applied to various organizational cases, less attention was paid to the analysis of existing conditions and conceptualizing the regimes of sensemaking. According to Weick, sensemaking in organizations occurs as a shift from inter-subjective to generic-subjective level (Weick 1995). Inter-subjective is a level of social interaction between communicative selves when "I" gets transformed into "we". Generic subjectivity assumes that no subjects are present (they are something abstract and categorical) but social structure that consists of roles and followers of rules. Generic subjectivity is a mainstay of organizational analysis as it consists of scripts or standard plots that "constitute the setting's interaction order" (Weick 1995: 71). Nevertheless, sensemaking is needed when various gaps and tensions can be observed between the two levels, when old scripts do not work and where the uncertainty of the meanings of change are in focus. Although, Weick defined organizations more as adaptive systems and was more focused on modification of generic subjectivity than on its deconstruction, this general logic of change and sensemaking can be applied to a radical change as well (Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, Thomas 2010). Perhaps, the difference lies in specific regimes and conditions of sensemaking that catch the eye and influence our understanding of the change process. We have mentioned before that three specific features become crucially important for the study of radical change in general and mergers in particular. Organizational merger in higher education as a process of decoupling occurs then through inter-organizational communication between the various parts involved in the transition period of radical change. Inter-organizational communication takes place not only on the official or protocol side, but also on the unofficial, informal and intimate side of change process. As long as the official side is more on the generic subjective level and the informal side on the inter-subjective level they can be provided with different tools of sensemaking. Both sides assume their own means and mechanisms of information transmission, social networking, labelling and the translation of ideas into practice. Managing a radical change means managing the transition period as a locus of tension between the inter-subjective and generic subjective levels. The locus of tension consists of collisions of values, local identities and interests, power struggles, reinterpretations of actions and symbolic manifestations.

Potentially, the most problematic point of the sensemaking perspective lies in the understanding of a transition period of transformative change. Sensemaking is useful for ambiguous situations that are simultaneously considered to be causes and consequences of ordered change. Working with the concept of enactment sensemaking also assumes bracketing and punctuating as pauses of change when people create breaks to reflect on and to punctuate what the change is worth. But still the transition period is not presented as a state in itself, but as a shift or quiet period, although previous studies on mergers and sensemaking (Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, Thomas 2010) claim the importance of transition identity as a mediating tool in the embryonic stage of the process. Bringing this concept inside transformative change also objectifies the existence of time and space of being and living in transition. We argue that the deeper the degree of change, the higher the degree of tension that can be observed at the transition or threshold period of change. The transition state becomes a locus of emotional and cultural manifestations that are hard to manage, although this does not mean it is totally a disordered situation. The transition period, as shown in previous studies is full of specific rituals and negotiations that can be considered as the glue between the preparation or pre-merged stage and implementation or post-merger stage (Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, Thomas 2010).

Three concepts are applied to demonstrate how organizing occurs at the state of transition, which work as tools for sensemaking at the threshold.

First concept is labelling which distinguishes the process of local identification and marks the existence of the virtual structure of social rallying during the transition period of radical change. Local identification has been studied in relation to university identity change (Gioia, Schultz, Corley, 2000). Labels were defined as tools that "are used by organization members to express who or what they believe the organization to be" (Gioia, Schultz, Corley, 2000: 64). People use labels to identify themselves within organizations. Moreover they use labels to recognize others (Blake, Ronald 1997). Of course labels are more stable than identities as identities can change rapidly but they also can be constrained by existing labels. Labels are important sources of meanings which signify and help to objectify social networking as identification process. People identify who they are and who others are using symbolic tools and this process can occur beyond the formal organizational structure.

The second concept is rumouring or gossiping. Gossip and rumours are characterized as communication which is constitutive of the organization being under uncertainty (Shibutani 1966, Waddington 2012). Rumour was regarded as "a recurrent form of communication through which men caught together in an ambiguous situation attempted to construct a meaningful interpretation of it by pooling their intellectual resources" (Shibutani, 1966: 17). They were

described as: a) not individual but a collective and collaborative enterprise; b) considering individuals as not independent but participating in larger transactions; c) becoming a solution for groups under stress. Rumours and gossips go hand in hand with sensemaking as both work with novel contexts and storytelling in organizational settings (Sutcliffe, Brown & Putnam, 2006). So, gossips and rumours can be presented as moments of sensemaking that scholars should scratch and scrutinize as they affect how the flux gets tamed (Weick et al. 2005: 419). They originate as a response to organizational distrust - where distrust grows rumour flows. The act of rumour transfer also marks social bonding but it can be also important to recognize social bridging as rumours make connections not only inside a single clique but can become a connecting thread between antagonist parties during organizational change. They do not occur in isolation and "the boundaries between formal and informal communication, gossip and rumours are blurred" (Waddington 2012: 130). What is more important to our study is that rumours work as a supportive mechanism for virtual structures and are used as forms of actionable organizational knowledge and management information rather than a problem or pejorative talk (Waddington 2012).

The third concept is translation. Radical change as an ambitious and high value project assumes the circulation of various competing ideas and notions which are charged with energy but far away abstractions. The ideas of "flagship" and "world-class" universities are recognized as widespread examples. In this respect the process of change can be observed "when, out of the myriads of ideas floating in the translocal organizational thought-worlds, certain ideas catch and are subsequently translated into substance in a given organization, often barely touching the bureaucratic apparatus of planned change" (Czarniawska-Joerges, Sevón 1996:16). Translation was generally defined as mediating the process between local and global where and when various and contradictory cultural codes or frames are used in case of power dominance. A history of local setting, for example, is presented as a continuous organizational saga with its own heroic events, actors and local beliefs which form strong cultural and knowledge boundaries which restrict the translation of foreign ideas into the local context and lead to imitations or abruption. Competing parts at the transition period of change take the roles of translators or sense-givers who work not as automats but as an authoritative jury which create filters and make selections from various ideas and resist or modify the others. It is a crucial issue for radical change how this mediating process of idea-translation occurs and results through various discontinuities, linkages, reinterpretations and imitations that create collective image of action and then materializes into practice.

These concepts are related to each other as labelling and gossiping are responsible for local identification and embeddedness in virtual structures can be operationalized and used as strong middle-range variables to explain the process and consequences of translation and the gap between what has been provided by the official side and what has been adopted and materialized. Gossip generates trusted information and appropriate knowledge which function as supportive mechanisms for networking and the satiation of distinct labels with more images and meanings. Working in such a way they can affect the increasing distance between counterparts of the merger process in their vision of a united organization and confuse the translation process by the multiple interpretations of actions. For example, various implementation activities can be interpreted as acts of discrimination, power dominance or defective management or organizational degradation.

In the following part of the paper we demonstrate who these features relate to the study of radical organizational change.

Data collection and analysis

This paper builds upon a series of in-depth interviews with top-level administrators and academic employees gathered during the transition period of the merger process in one of the regions at eastern part of Russia. Besides, official documents (strategies and reports) were used in order to construct an image of the changes and the future university.

Interviews were taken with two groups of employees. The first group consisted of university administrative leaders: rectors, vice-rectors and directors from three of pre-merged institutions. This group was not homogeneous, although it consisted of administrators that were elected or appointed to their positions between 15 and 20 years ago. There were several administrators with less experience and less personal and structural embeddedness in their universities mainly due to their young age. Inside this group we also divide rectors from other administrators. Rectors were elected and re-elected several times and had been ruling their universities for decades.

The second group consisted of the academic staff that represented different disciplinary fields: natural sciences, engineering, law, theology, social sciences, humanities. They also worked at different universities and in different positions. Respondents were uncertain about their future but they seemed less involved in the whole discussion about the future university. They were nervous about simple things (workload, contracts) and besides they looked more interested in their academic activities and their ties with other organizations, especially the Academy of Science, which could be broken because of the merger. One of the preliminary findings from the interviews was about less distance between top level administrators and

academic staff inside their own universities but more distance between the merging universities. To some extent previous executives and academic representatives of each university could be attributed to one clique, although ordinary teachers and scholars were less interested and involved in high level marriage.

Interviews were semi-structured and respondents could digress for their own reasons. They lasted between 50 and 100 minutes. 22 interviews were taken and used in the analysis. They were identically guided and consisted of three main parts: biographical questions on life and work, questions about the merger and working conditions, and questions on their vision of new university.

The question about the cultural side of radical change was put as the central one, but the answer could be given based on different theoretical and methodological perspectives. It was important to understand and to explain not only about which cultural factors were more important, or what their impact was in comparison with structural conditions. The issue to reflect on was how culture matters, how it works and how it could be objectified in the process of change. That is why while making the analysis of the interviews we focused firstly on how our respondents identified themselves and their social groups. What categories did they use? Secondly, what were the distinctions they provided between them and the others? Thirdly, how did they interpreted the merger with respect to the relationship between formal and informal, and formal and personal. For example, how did they think people were networking and why? How did they get information about the situation and why? What was more important to know about in the process of merger?

Case study of radical organizational change

University merger context

The first wave of university mergers and acquisitions in Russia arose in 2006 when the Ministry of Education and Science announced a special programme "On Federal Universities". The declared goal was to optimize the number of higher education institutions in relation to the demographic decline and to create large universities as strong centres of education, science and innovation. According to this programme in all federal districts of Russia new "flagship universities" should be founded through the amalgamation of leading universities in the region. Since that time nine Federal universities were created through organizational mergers of more than 30 existing regional institutions of higher education. In 2013 three of these universities were involved in the programme on Global Competitiveness Enhancement of Russian Universities (5 universities in top-100 of global rankings).

Our findings and reflections are based on an empirical study of one organizational merger which created a new flagship university in one the regions. Four universities were merged for that purpose. First we present the pre-merger situation, describing the context and starting conditions.

Merger was characterized as an expected event but not from each of participating institutions. For several years, there was a long discussion about the possibility of a merger. It was prepared in advance but was characterized later by uncertainty. In spite of the defined goals and formulated strategy the merger process started as an unforeseen scenario.

First of all, the list of institutions that were required to merge had been changed, so that the emerging university was not based on the acquisition of two universities by the largest and the leading one, but on the amalgamation of four universities. Two of them were presented by our respondents as the leading and most competitive universities in the region. Leaders from both of these universities at the pre-merger phase were not sure how it would proceed. The idea of involving more than one leading university in a merger process was explained by the necessity of introducing teaching and research programs in engineering sciences. This step was would make it a fully-fledged flagship university. Although the technical university specialized in engineering, it had opened several programs in the humanities and social sciences over the previous 20 years and had became one of the main competitors for the university which planned to be the foundation of the newly merged university. Further, there was a symbolic competition for the status of the oldest which meant the core university in the region. It was also characterized as a personal competition between two university leaders and to some extent

between their teams as they had been running their organizations for more than 20 years. Those universities were personal projects and provided their leaders with special historical roles in organizational sagas. The changed composition of the merger made the process more stressful and nervous for all sides as it was hard for their leaders to be aware of dying universities and to reflect on their identities in a new one.

Second, in spite of the more or less defined candidate for the position of rector from one of the existing universities, in a short period of time a new rector was appointed by the Ministry of Education and Science. One of the respondents' explanations, although there were many of them, concerned the negative experience of previous mergers in other regions of Russia. It was recognized based on previous cases that the appointment of the rector from the one of the merging institutions could lead to negative consequences as it is framed the merger as an annexation that could provide a formally united university with various discrimination practices and even lead to sabotage. The appointment of the new rector from the outside was not judged only in negative terms as he was expected to prevent potential discrimination, bring more resources from the federal government and to improve the working conditions of the academic and administrative staff. The rector introduced a new management team during the period of the merger which was composed from current administrators and new managers from Moscow. The team became responsible for the process of reorganization and the development of a strategy for the newly merged university. The main strategic goal was to create the leading institution in the whole region and become a world-class university in the 10-year period after the merger. A large amount of additional resources was available for that strategic purpose.

Third, according to the plan in a very short time the newly merged university (i.e. all the participating universities) would move to a new campus at another territory. The idea was to build a single campus for the main academic and administrative units. Before the university reorganization an international forum was announced with the president of Russia on the territory of 'future campus' where political and economic leaders could discuss the developmental issues of the whole region. This event provided a large amount of resources from the federal government to build a new campus for the event, a new bridge that will connect the university campus with the city and provide all the infrastructure from scratch. One of the respondents claimed that people living in this region could not remember such a large-scale project. Three of four united institutions were located in one city but their buildings were scattered in different areas. The fourth institution was located in another city more than 100 km away, and it was not clear at that time whether it should stay or move to the new campus.

Moving to a single campus would provide students, teachers and administrators of the newly merged university with the feeling of unity and which would not be provided at separated areas.

Fourth, as soon as the new developmental program was presented it included several strategic steps of reorganization. This reorganization started from the consolidation of organizational structure. Nine schools were created inside a single structure from more than 50 faculty divisions and 300 faculty units (kafedras). This was done through a merger of duplicated academic and administrative units and through the replacement of units that were presented in each of the merging universities to one administrative location. It was recognized at the pre-merger stage so that there were potential conflicts as several schools would keep their status, structure and personnel but other schools would be seriously reorganized. They would be constructed through the units and staff combined from three previously separate universities. Most of them were from Social Sciences and Humanities. It was clear for the new team from the beginning that the new university needed a single administrative apparatus that would penetrate all the organizational and logistic processes. A private consulting agency was invited to evaluate all these processes and to implement a new model of governance that would look more business-like. The university was allowed to implement a new salary model (an effective contract model) for academic staff. According to its basic principles it would stimulate employees to become more result-oriented and realize the publish or perish ideology.

Finally, concerning world-class status, creating a flagship university should be oriented towards the internationalization of its teaching and research activities and becoming competitive on a global scale. According to its strategic vision the university should attract more international students and researchers from other countries; organize special programs to improve the language and academic skills of its academic staff according to international (i.e. English-speaking countries) standards; create international research programs and laboratories in determined strategic fields through inviting academic stars from the international labour market; to create a more competitive environment inside the university through grant competitions for resources, research positions and so on. These activities would lead the university to academic excellence and affect its progress in international academic rankings.

The pre-merger stage was completed when all the official documents were signed, and a new developmental program was announced which provided for the implementation. Although, formally the implementation process had begun it was clear for the interviewed respondents that there were a lot of hard questions and problems concerning the reorganization process. Not all of these questions were publicly discussed but were implicitly implied because of the unforeseen scenario. Moreover the new formal organizational structure was not enforced but introduced

only on paper; job contracts with most of the faculty and administration were not signed; more than 200 top and middle level administrators lost their previous status and for some period became "threshold people"; there was an uncertainty concerning the composition of the management team of the merged university.

University administrators noted that the merger blocked the current life processes associated with their current activities. Respondents gave examples of the issuance of diplomas and certificates, external agreements with partners on cooperation, providing payments for activities which were begun before the merger, designing staff lists and workloads, and teaching curricula.

> There was a task to make a staff list in […]School with a deadline in May. The Dean of the School asked me to draw it up and I thought that I was authorized by the principal to solve this problem. I started to make a staff list, but could not... This is a big problem because the structure is still not approved, and I don't know how to make this list, if there is no approved structure. (Interview 3)

The administrative staff of the new University, especially those who were assigned to current tasks of the merger procedure, the creation of new units and paperwork tried (not always successfully) to take on the new regime of governance, management style and the underlying processes. One of them has claimed it was hard to get on:

> If we are talking about the corporate culture of the new university, I can say that it looks radically different from the corporate culture of any institution of higher education which was previously involved in a merger. Moreover, it differs in general from the representations of how the things should be done. (Interview 2)

At the next step we are going to present three findings from the case study that could explain how liminars are sensemaking at the threshold through labelling, rumouring and translating.

Labelling: 'We' and the 'Others'

Radical organizational change proceeds through generating cultural distinctions and labelling. The interviewed executives from each side of merger declared their local identification and marked others with various labels. They described their previous organizations using categories of local and terms like "the local public", "native institutions", "motherland departments". These labels expressed historical ties and social roots to some organizational units. Labelling gave them not only emotional but social stability in their current situations. For example, one of the administrators described his shifting position before the merger started.

So, I moved to the position of a vice-rector, but it was stipulated that I should also retain the position of director at my native institute. I didn't want to tear my ties with them because this gave me a more stable position at the university than the position of vice-rector.

[What do you mean by a "stable position"?]

I mean that the vice-rector is appointed for the term of the rector's office and when the rector is replaced all vice-rectors are also. At the same time a director can command indefinitely, until his very old age. I know the directors of the institutes, who are older than 70 and if they have the capacity to manage properly, they continue working.

[Is the director appointed by rector or elected at your university?]

The director is appointed by the Rector.

[Ok, but if another Rector comes, who can appoint another director, will he?]

Well, there has been such a ... precedent ... but in practice there was no such precedent during my stay at the University". (Interview 12)

The loss of structural wholeness and the introduction of new organizational gatekeepers lead to social fragmentation when people have bonded according to their locality and previous relations, which were influenced by their personal experience. The ambiguous situation of change strengthened ties even between former top-administrators and ordinary staff as if they were belonging to some native space and against the outsiders. As long as it was clear how they defined "we", it was also clear for respondents who "they" were. Providing this distinction denoted the potential for social tensions and conflicts.

The labelling of locals and outsiders occurred while discussing the on going relations first of all between the new rector's office and the local public and secondly, between different cliques from universities involved in the merger. These distinctions signified the existence of causes that prevent various cliques from being united and coupling between the emerging structure and the previous organizational identities. Respondents were talking in categories of interests about the key symbols of the new university. For example, it was pointed that while preparing the developmental program the new executive were not interested in and did not take in to account interests of the local public.

If we are talking about the new program, I participated in several meetings devoted to its design and conceptualization. Briefly, what I was told by the locals, the old-timers, involved in these activities, was about their field of interest and in their direction. They sent signals to be mentioned in a strategy and not to be forgotten. If now we are discussing the results of these negotiations, the document as a whole, it does not represent the specifics of local audience…

[Can you please tell me what does "not represent" mean? What are the basic things?]

> If I was the boss, I would have tried to define the key points of growth that actually exist and try to strengthen and develop them.
>
> [This is not presented in a program?]
>
> I think that the local public in general is not a subject of interest for the current leaders at the university.
>
> [Why do you think so?]
>
> Well, they should focus on certain people who are the local leaders of these points of growth. Or they should focus on groups who you can rely on for the start ... but there was no communication with those people. (Interview 6)

'They' or current leaders were labelled as 'Vikings' or 'invaders' who came to rule the 'locals'. Respondents described their bureaucratic style of leadership, their abstract vision and unreal ambitions while talking about the development and design of the new university. In spite of that locals did not vote against the organizing of the new university. They were negotiating their own interests in this process. Locals described themselves as "men of business", "people embedded in real processes who understand the specific of local things". They claimed that their local knowledge was lost in the process of reorganization.

> To my mind there were no attempts to identify, designate and maintain new points of growth. They are not interested in what is going on in real departments, in who are engaged in educational and research activities. Their interest is limited by the formation of certain figures. I can say that there is only a system of paper handling between those who sit in the rector's office and those who are engaged in real processes. Personal contacts are practically absent. There is no time for this. All the activities are oriented towards creating a paper trail … (Interview 12)

Besides the distinctions between the pre-merger universities, 'tribes' were also identified. They were marked according to their historical labels or nicknames given to each university members ('hucksters', 'mattress', 'techies'). As one of the university professors noticed:

> Look at the regular meetings of Academic council! Even while walking people from different universities were following each other and their leaders. They are implicitly united in coalitions with their [previous] rectors at the head. Of course they are allowed to work at the new university but they are still in strong relations because of the uncertainty about the future. (Interview 7)

In spite of the deep reorganization many social ties and identification process in general were related to the structure of pre-merger universities even when most of them had lost their status and power in the new formal structure. As long as there was an ambiguity about the power

balance, equality and discrimination issues, interests accounting and even culturally explained differences people were bonding relying on their native universities and local leaders.

Summarizing these findings the period of change in our case brought examples of structure–identity mediation. As long as our respondents lost their structural positions at the pre-merger stage they demonstrated that the process of bundling still occurred through the labelling of their local identification. Labels brought a sense of continuity in a discontinuous change and became a source of internal stability and external predictability for those involved in merger. Practices of labelling facilitated the creation of virtual structures inside new university. Respondents expressed the differences in values, interests and working styles between the formally united but really separated universities. It does not mean that these differences prevent the post-merger implementation but it could be argued that these cultural codes are strong variables in the interpretation of the process of organizational structure and the formation of a new identity translated into the local context. As long as these manifestations of separateness became controlling elements during the process, it could be reflected in the rituals of merger as tools for managing the transition period and accelerating the process not through tight structural coupling, but through the process of acculturation.

Rumouring: "People now believe in rumours and gossip"

The radical change that took place in one of the Russian regions was accompanied by inviting an external management team in spite of the existing ones, and new ambitious world-class ideas and the building of a single campus. At the same time, this process was accompanied by lots of rumours, which multiplied. Since the university became one of the largest employers in the city these rumours were flowing far beyond its organizational boarders.

> Our city is not so big and people are discussing this merger as they have families or friendship ties with students or teachers. There are a lot of rumours and gossip and they diverge rapidly. People say that universities will lose their buildings. And that they have been already sold. So, they are afraid of being fired. People say that new rector will leave and that all these big events will actually happen here. At the end they would be moved to another city. So there is a lot of gossip. Besides, nobody knows how the student recruitment campaign will happen next year and our families wonder if they should send their kids to this new university or not, because everything is uncertain. (Interview 4)

The sense of these public rumours and the message they expressed could be reduced to a simple proposition: "We do not believe that anything will happen". This expression could be interpreted in different ways. It can express that people are not motivated to anything that deals

with the university merger or it can also express their pessimism about whether it will happen at all or in the proper way. It can also express that they trust only their own eyes and demand certain facts. All positions could be found in the interviews with "threshold people" during the transition period.

This was a problem for the new management team to deal with this asymmetric information flow and distortion. Moreover, from the beginning of university reorganization, they put it as a main point to provide transparency of all decisions and information about significant changes. The new rector made his personal public blog where everyone could ask questions and give comments on decisions. The idea was to make the process of change more transparent and to provide employees with more information on key decisions. But still the process was nerve-wracking and the information disseminated was usually interpreted in various ways. Rumours were perceived to have much more reality than official news. One of the respondents pointed out that "people now trust rumours more than official information". It could be argued that during the period of ambiguity the more information you provided as an official the less you were trusted.

Rumours and gossip emphasized key issues of the transition period. People exchanged information about salaries, moving to a new campus, new regularities and, of course, new people that appeared during the merger. The rumours were about not only to the situation in general but also to its key players.

"Have you heard a rumour about the salary of new rector and his assistants?" (Interview 3)

"Of course people discuss different rumours about the new rector and also about previous rectors. They have a lot of unanswered questions." (Interview 11)

Rumours spread in response to uncertainty and the paradox was that they work as strong variables on the implicit side of organizing.

Several examples of discussions could be observed where rumours were used as arguments in the exchange of meaningful information or background knowledge. General communication under radical change occurred along with many "If it is true … then …" statements that looked like something in between prophecies and strategic calculations about the future composition of the university organization in general and the power balance in particular.

I think you know that there is a big project now concerning the construction of this new bridge. It should link our city with a new campus. So, people say that it will not be finished and we should stay here. But you could hear also that all our buildings were already sold.

> Of course nobody knows exactly, rumours are rumours, but if it is true, it would destroy all our universities. (Interview 7)

For example, at one discussion a former executive talked about one of the current leaders. If it was true then it could change the future organizational dominance.

> There is rumour, (although I don't like them) that one local investigation began on some activities of one of the previous rectors. Maybe they have found something illegal in one of the contracts. I don't think that we need it now but new information is coming… And I heard that maybe he will leave the new university. (Interview 10)

Another example expressed concerned about the whole configuration of the organizational change and future image of new university.

> Nobody can tell you with authority that the new team headed by the new rector will stay here for more than a year. People say that rector will leave the university in a short period of time. People say he will be appointed to a higher position after this big international forum. (Interview 17)

Rumours played an important role in the merger process as they became a mechanism to maintain social ties during the period of uncertainty. The people who spread them and those who listened could be considered of being in one social clique and they who were not allowed or did not want to discuss rumours were not. People trusted those who were in a single clique with them through rumours and gossip. Moreover, rumours were used as an instrument for the image construction of those who represented another camp at transition period of merger. They were applied to various interpretations of the actions and decisions made by the new executives and influenced the framing of the social reality of change process.

Translation: 'Merger as a rite of passage or rite degradation'

Radical change is a process of translation from global to local, abstract to grounded and back. The merger process and the creation of the new flagship university was accompanied by global ideas of being world-class, working on a single campus as if it was a true university, the new organizational model and governance structure corresponding to modern needs. These ideas were put into strategies and external presentations to show the progressive movement to future excellence. At the same time, interviewed executives were not allowed to talk about the future in terms of strategic planning. They were attuned to discuss the past and less willing to talk about the current situation. An expression like "You know, I am an optimist, but there is much pessimism about what is going on" was a typical answer about the future. Stories about their previous universities were much more emotional and enthusiastic. It seemed unusual to some

extent as they were still considered as key players who were invited to manage the process of developing a new strategy for the university.

The global idea of a flagship university along with many others was considered necessary and well-timed although they were sceptical about the realization as previous leaders also had their own visions that were blocked during the transition period. They faced situations where offers were rejected, or they were not heard in the general discussion of future. Respondents did not look like active and fully involved participants who were working toward the new ideas, but as translators of their own visions and interests embedded in local knowledge of organizing.

Expressions of general pessimism were not empty words. It was the process of the (re)interpretation and (re)framing of the current situation where global ideas, relying on a new organizational language, were put into a local context to be materialized in the development of the university. One example concerns the notion of project enhancement which was used as tool for strategic planning but was not adopted by local leaders and blocked the strategic feedback. The following quote also shows that in spite of the proposed organizational tools such as enhancement, the administrator expressed that practical knowledge on organizing allows him to categorize it as useless.

> I know that today one person makes decisions on all the proposals. Everything else, to my mind is the rewriting of needless papers. I have banned my co-workers from rewriting them and to make the so called enhancement. (Interview 3)

There is another citation that demonstrates the existence of local knowledge of organizing which explains why ideas cannot be adopted as authentic.

> I don't have much enthusiasm and prefer waiting. I know this place. Life will flow as it flowed before (Interview 7).

> We worked in a predictable situation before. All paths were trailed. Every system is ineffective in its own way. But if most people understand what the right path is and how to circumvent [the wrong one], the system works. So, I was accustomed to walk through familiar paths, and now I can't understand whether are there any paths? (Interview 10)

What does all that mean? Former leaders from the pre-merged universities were still presented as key agents of change. Moreover, they were recognized as social leaders in their cliques and as translators that were gifted with local support and grounded knowledge about organizing. Executives had their own plans, visions, strategies on how their university should develop. Moreover these strategies were considered their personal projects. Respondents were

recognized as gatekeepers and powerful sensegivers for previous strategies and had made progress in challenging and heroic events. Stories looked like organizational sagas performing their sacred functions of organizing. Universities experienced Post-Soviet transition, the challenges of economic crises during the realization of their ambitious ideas. Former leaders pronounced a trajectory of progressive going to the top. The radical change that they faced changed the frame of reality. Since that time organizational dynamics were hard to interpret in categories of linear growth. It means that progress had stopped on the top of a concave parabola and organizational decline would be experienced after the rise. Radical change brought questions about the awareness of organizational development that could be considered as a rite of passage or rite degradation. Giving the answer means making a choice not only about their personal roles as major or minor but about the consequences and outcomes of translating the global ideas into the authentic context. This was the last chance to realize the power of organizing at the threshold of new way of being.

Conclusions

Universities are no longer viewed as stable organizational entities since the new standards of excellence were put on the national and global scene. This means that they will face more and more radical but isomorphic changes and participate in a race. The drama of such changes is in questioning the essential characteristics of organizational identities which should be reframed as internal and external images of who we are as an organization (Stensaker 2014).

In our paper we characterized a merger as an ambitious radical and risky change that should be studied using adequate theoretical tools. It also means that we should reflect on the deconstructive and discontinuous nature of transformative change as it is hard to work with objects as if they were single and functioning institutions. Although previous studies have shown the significant role of the cultural or human side of mergers, most of them framed culture according to functional lens as manageable and structurally governed. "Mergers need culture because it provides the 'newly emerged organization' with some possibilities of getting to structural wholeness" (Smircich 1983). Our study reflects on this statement in a critical way. Smircich has identified two perspectives on the culture study of organizations. The first relies on the notion of 'organizations that have cultures' and the second on 'organizations that are cultures'. The difference is crucial when it comes to understanding radical organizational change in higher education as it questions well-functioning and structured cultural variables. Of course organizations consist of cultural variables such as values, identities, perceptions and etc. but the question rises – how culture works during deconstructive change? This is also the question on how to observe 'culture at work' during frame bending change?

We made several attempts to answer these questions through investigation on sensemaking at the threshold or organizing. An organizational merger is a process of decoupling which occurs through inter-oganizational communication on formal and informal levels during the transition period of radical change. It can be studied as ongoing communication through sensemaking tools used by its participants. Managing a radical change means managing tensions between inter-subjective and generic subjective levels. Culture can be observed at the locus of tensions through collisions and different interpretations of values, identities, symbols, information, and global ideas with local contexts. People exchange symbols through labelling and rumouring during the ambiguous and dramatic period of transition that can be observed on the explicit and implicit sides of process. We found that they worked as sources of local identification and supportive mechanisms in building virtual structures non-isomorphic to the image of the formal organization. A strong identification with and trust of local structures mark the cultural differences between the parties in a merger process which work against the idea of the structural wholeness of newly emerged university. Moreover they mark the existence of the grounded knowledge of organizing which effects the process of translating new ideas and abstract notions into the authentic local context. Radical change is a game of translations where knowledge of organizing becomes a powerful instrument for framing the change as success or failure.

Radical change as deconstructive change questions basic assumptions of formal organization and its key elements such as borders, formal structure and a single identity. These concepts are influential tools while thinking about trust, wholeness, power, control, adoption, diffusion etc. The concepts of labels, rumours and translation can bring another way of thinking to these key elements of university organization which becomes more fluid in the face of the radical transformations in higher education.

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