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The Re-Institutionalization of Higher Education in the Western Balkans

**The Interplay between European
Ideas, Domestic Policies,
and Institutional Practices**

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Chapter 1

Introduction

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The background and rationale for the book

Change has been a key characteristic of European higher education the last three decades. During this period higher education systems and institutions have witnessed dramatically changing socio-economic, technological and political environments, general public sector reforms aimed at modernizing public sector governance and management, and increasing demands for positive social and economic impacts of their education and research activities. However, as part of this process, one should underline that some countries and regions have been more exposed to various change dynamics than others. The countries often described as “the Western Balkans” (former Yugoslavia, minus Slovenia, plus Albania) during the last couple of decades have faced two interrelated sets of challenges. First, they had to re-establish their own national higher education systems following the institutional upheaval of the break-down of former Yugoslavia or the fall of the autocratic regime of Enver Hoxha in Albania. This required the development of new laws and regulations, the establishment of new governance and funding systems, and the adequate handling of problems with respect to the quality, efficiency and relevance of higher education institutions. Second, the countries had to adjust these newly developed systems to European developments, not least the Bologna Process and more internationally oriented higher education institutions while maintaining national and regional relevance.

The countries of the Western Balkans form a particularly interesting region to study since in-depth studies can shed lights on several theoretical and policy related problems in higher education. Theoretically, the Western Balkan countries make up a natural laboratory for comparative studies enabling a testing of a number of theoretical assumptions and hypotheses about policy choices and policy change. Since most of these countries used to be part of a unified, albeit federal system of higher education it is of interest to understand to what extent such structural path-dependency influenced the formations and developments of the new systems. At the same time, the new countries can be argued to have very different political and socio-economic

challenges. Their populations differ in size, and they have different economies and labour markets. Hence, one would expect that such factors may have paved the way for unique national solutions and emphases. As such, comparative analysis may identify the relative importance of factors that have been influential in the formation of the new higher education systems. Theoretically, it is also of interest to study more closely how broader European developments in higher education may impact the further developments of the higher education systems in these countries. The latter dimension is also important in the sense that Croatia recently became a member of the EU, while other countries have status of candidates or potential candidates.

Against this background several research questions arise. Will the higher education systems in the Western Balkan region converge as part of this process, or will European developments have different impacts on the countries? How are European policy initiatives understood and translated in the region? Both regarding the deconstruction and the reconstruction of national systems of higher education, the Western Balkan countries make up quite unique cases that have thus far received relatively little attention from higher education researchers.

Politically, a comparative study on the Western Balkan countries may also have high relevance. First, comparative analysis may provide information about the functioning and effects of different political initiatives and measures, and may provide governments and policy-makers within the region with practical advice and potential good practises across the borders. Second, a study on the Western Balkans would also be highly relevant beyond this region as quite little systematic research has been undertaken on the development of higher education in transition countries. Improved knowledge on the situation in the Western Balkan region may be of value to those that conduct policy making at the European level where new knowledge is acquired as to how European initiatives and measures are received in various regions and settings. Given the recent history of the region and the fact that Western Balkan countries are lagging behind their Western European counterparts in various economic, social and political aspects, the contribution of higher education and research to economic, social and political development is very important but also severely understudied.

The need for more systematic empirical data and knowledge

The current book is the result of a large research project undertaken in the Western Balkan region. The project “European integration in higher edu-

cation and research in the Western Balkans” had the aim of strengthening the capacity of higher education institutions in the Western Balkan countries (WBC) in the area of educational research in general, and higher education and research policy analysis in particular. The project was based on a belief that reliable data and solid analysis of systems of higher education and research are crucial for the on-going processes of reform and change that are taking place in a number of policy areas.

The WBC are not members of the OECD, and just of one of the countries is an EU member, so education in general, or higher education and research in particular, are not subject to regular monitoring and analysis by international organizations. Some data is available from the ministries or other stakeholder organisations (e.g. rectors’ conferences), but data are often incomplete and their reliability can be questioned, given that such data serves for external purposes, such as demonstrating the implementation of the Bologna Declaration for the purposes of the Bologna stocktaking reports. Cross-country studies that focus on such issues (for example Kehm et al. 2009) seldom focus on national or regional case studies, and even when they do (see Pabian 2009), the WBC are not in the focus of analysis. Some exceptions to this rule are: the study “Creating the European Area of Higher Education: Voices from the Periphery” (Tomusk 2006) which included a case study of Macedonia, the recently completed “Independent Assessment of Bologna” (Westerheijden et al. 2010) that focused on Serbia as an example of “across-the-board high performance”, as well as the recent publications from the so-called DEP project of the Center for Education Policy Studies in Ljubljana, namely Zgaga et al. (2013a, 2013b).

This lack of data and analysis of higher education and research in WBC means that it is rather difficult at the moment to include these countries in comparative educational analyses. So far, this has resulted in the lack of a solid evidence basis for policy development on the national or regional level. Thus, the aim of the project has been to stimulate the development of a more systematic knowledge base, and in this respect two central contributions of the project has been the creation of a webpage accessible for both researchers and other stakeholders that need information on the different higher education and research systems in the region, and a survey targeting public and private universities in the region, especially on their views on the current and future challenges regarding governance and organization of their activities. The current book contains a number of chapters drawing on the empirical basis from the survey and the webpage.

Theoretical foundations and points-of-departure

Higher education institutions are currently, not least as a result of the political emphasis on creating stronger links between research, education and innovation, expected to play an instrumental role in the broad process of development (economic, cultural and political) at a wide variety of levels; local, national and supranational (Hölttä 2000). However, insufficient attention has been paid to the inherent complexity associated with higher education institutions as distinct organisational entities (Musselin 2007; Krücken et al. 2007), and/or social institutions (Meyer et al. 2007; Olsen 2007), and, consequently, the sets of tensions and volitions directly linked to their role (mission) in society (Krücken et al. 2007; Olsen 2007).

Hence, analysis of higher education and research in the WBC can be conducted from different perspectives and the contributions found in the current book have a clear multidisciplinary character. While the base is educational research, or rather research of higher education systems, the contributions also employ analytical tools from European studies, comparative policy analysis, sociology, political science and economy. The underlying aim of this approach is to address the double isolation (Olsen and Maassen 2007) of research on higher education. The first type of isolation refers to higher education being treated as a phenomenon isolated from other public subsectors of from society in general, will be overcome by the focus on the link between higher education and society, i.e. the contribution of higher education and research to economic, social and political development. The second type of isolation which refers to analyses of higher education being isolated from mainstream social sciences will be addressed through a conscious attempt to link the contributions in the book to two more established research areas: one focusing on contribution of higher education and research to societal development in general and the other focusing on Europeanization, European integration and the *Europe of Knowledge*.

Given the current interest in the region to strengthen the European links, relevant perspectives to apply include those that focus on European integration and Europeanization perspectives. While Europeanization, as domestic impact of EU (Radaelli 2003), has been to some extent analysed for other Central and Eastern European countries (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005), it has not yet been the focus of extensive studies for the WBC. In this respect and especially given the commonalities in historical development as well as somewhat different effects of economic and political transition in these countries, the WBC constitute exceptional grounds for case studies as

well as comparative research, which may further strengthen the theoretical foundations of Europeanization studies in general.

A number of contributions in this book build upon the work already done on issues such as: building of European governance structures and development of EU policies (Corbett 2005), impact of European processes on higher education systems and institutions and building of *Europe of knowledge* (Amaral et al. 2009; Maassen and Olsen. 2007; Kehm et al. 2009) and re-nationalisation and side effects of Europeanization (Musselin 2009). Of particular interest is the domestic impact of EU policies and processes (Radaelli 2003) in EU candidate and pre-accession countries. To accommodate the specificities of higher education and research as well as the supranational and intergovernmental processes that affect them, our understanding of Europeanization to be used as guidance in the book is the one inspired by Musselin (2009:184) who focuses on the “... *process of construction, diffusion, and institutionalization of formal and informal rules ... first defined and consolidated in the making of intergovernmental public policy and politics and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourses, identities, political structures and public policies of EU and other European countries*”. Thus, in many of the contributions of the book the analysis will focus on national and regional factors that can account for (lack of) Europeanization, such as low density of veto players in the higher education and research policy arena, internationalisation of the higher education and research policy sectors, strength of institutional legacies, normative resonance between European and domestic rules and existence of cross-national epistemic networks (Sedelmeier 2011). In line with the research agenda proposed in Maassen and Olsen (2007:183), contributions also (1) seek to focus on the search for a new pact between university and society, (2) address the issue legitimacy of higher education institutions more than the issue of their performance, (3) see the process of change as processes of contestation, (4) take into account inter-institutional tensions and collisions and (5) maintain an understanding that a more complex ecology of processes and determinants, instead of simplistic environmental determinism or strategic choice, is at play.

However, higher education is also expected to play an important role in developing the WBC irrespectively of what European links and relations that might be developed. Although the role of higher education as a motor for economic development these days might be taken for granted politically, our point of departure is that a number of tensions may arise from the increasing expectation about contribution of higher education and research to development and to the society in general (Maassen and Olsen 2007). These tensions

can be found at a variety of levels: *macro-tensions* (normative ideas and policies); *meso-tensions* (field level dynamics; local, national and international); and *micro-tensions* (individual units). These include, but are not limited to, finding an adequate balance between: (a) responsiveness and autonomy; (b) local versus global postures and aspirations; (c) change and continuity; (d) the need to secure resources without being seduced or abandoned; etc. In this respect, the book addresses a classic tension in higher education research, the connectedness to shifting policy agenda and ambitions.

The themes covered in the book

To allow for in-depth and comparative analyses across a number of countries, one has to choose what elements to focus on. In the current book, we have concentrated our analysis on three dimensions: governance, quality, and the regional role of higher education. Our choice is based on how these dimensions relate to the overall rationale of the book.

Governance

The governance dimension in higher education usually refers to the formal relationship in a specific country between the state and the higher education institutions. In addition, the concept of governance can also incorporate the intra institutional governance models and structures. Recently a key ambition in many countries around the world when reforming higher education governance systems has been to strengthen institutional autonomy, and formally shift authority from the government to the universities and colleges. However, the ambition of stimulating institutional autonomy should not be taken for granted. Governments usually grant more autonomy in exchange for other things, and in-depth studies of national systems of governance may shed light on what deals have been cut regarding the autonomy of universities and colleges. As part of this picture, it is also interesting to study to what extent private sector solutions have been allowed into higher education as in many countries public resources have been too scarce to develop higher education in line with political ambitions. Thus, studies of governance systems can shed light on both path-dependencies in the systems, but also on new sources of inspiration for how to regulate, fund and govern the system.

Quality

Quality is perhaps the dimension where European developments have been most visible. The establishment of European Standards and Guidelines and the build-up of national systems of quality assurance have impacted higher education in many ways – from increased attention towards quality issues at the national level to changes in the ways universities and colleges conduct their evaluation of teaching and learning, and R&D activities. The ‘new’ ways of assuring and improving quality may at the same time challenge existing conceptions of how quality should be checked, and can lead to contestations between the European, the national and the institutional level. Hence, quality assurance is an area where one can study political and academic disputes both between the European level and the nation state, and between national governments and the higher education sector.

The regional role of higher education

For economies in transition, creating good links between higher education and the labour market is one of the key areas of political attention. Issues related to the employability of candidates from higher education, the matching between educational provisions and labour market needs, and the creation of study programmes that may stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship are high on the political agenda, not only in the Western Balkan countries, but also elsewhere in Europe. Here, identifying innovative practises either related to policy instruments at the national level, or to the development of innovative education practices that provide graduates with experiences or practical knowledge of relevance to employment, are keys to the strengthening of the economy in the countries. However, to create such links higher education institutions must break or at least challenge existing traditions concerning the nature and purpose of higher education.

Overview of the chapters

After this introduction we proceed with a discussion on the relationship between the European initiatives in higher education and the Western Balkan higher education, both from theoretical and empirical perspectives (Chapter 2). In offering an answer to the question “How can and how does Europe matter?” Vukasović unpacks the European initiatives in higher education and explores in more detail whether and how the Western Balkan countries shape and are being shaped by these initiatives. Along with the review of the studies on

change at different levels (macro, meso and micro), the author also discusses a number of research challenges and suggests possible ways to address these.

In Chapter 3 which focuses on the process of Europeanizing higher education and research systems of the Western Balkans, Dolenec, Baketa and Maassen analyse the implementation of Bologna reforms, Lisbon Strategy objectives for higher education and research, as well as Tempus and Erasmus Mundus funding programmes of the European Commission, all of which are believed to be contributing to a single objective – advancing Europe's competitiveness globally.

The following chapter (Chapter 4) addresses governance capacity of the Western Balkan universities. In this chapter Papadimitriou and Stensaker analyse perceptions of the institutional leadership on the current governance capacity of their institutions, as well as the future needs of their institutions with regards to governance capacity. The analysis is based on a survey conducted among public and private universities in the region focusing on whether the institutional leadership perceived their own university to have implemented four governance routines – strategic planning, stakeholder focus, results oriented management, and benchmarking activities, and how important they found these routines.

In Chapter 5, Branković looks into the dynamics of private higher education in the Western Balkan countries which is a relatively recent phenomenon in the region, given the long tradition public institutions have. The author analyses the public-private dynamics through the analytical framework which brings together the concepts of positioning, emulation, differentiation and legitimacy building, while also reflecting on the role of the state in higher education privatisation in the region.

The role of the state is specifically addressed by Galevski in his chapter on higher education governance in Macedonia (Chapter 6). The chapter provides an analysis of different higher education governance dimensions in Macedonia through the lens of Olsen's four different models of state governance – the sovereign, rationality-bounded state model, the institutional state model, the corporate-pluralist state model and the supermarket state model.

Quality in higher education, a theme that has been in the spotlight of higher education reforms both in the region and in Europe in the past decade, has been addressed by Kanazir, Papadimitriou and Stensaker in Chapter 7. The authors analyse the national responses to the European trends in the domain of quality in higher education and look into how the Western Balkan countries have balanced European standards and domestic needs when it comes to the setting up and the operation of quality assurance agencies in these countries.

Quality, both at the system and organisational levels and the linkages between the two is the central theme of Chapter 8. In this chapter, Vukasović looks into the roles of European initiatives in higher education with regards to the change in national contexts in higher education and provides insights related to the normative and cultural-cognitive aspects of institutionalization and institutional work. In specific, the chapter looks into the quality assurance policies and internal organisational practices in Croatia and Serbia, focusing on two faculties belonging to flagship universities in Croatia and Serbia – University of Zagreb and University of Belgrade.

In Chapter 9, Papadimitriou, Branković, and Đorđević analyse the links between universities and their regions. The authors explore regionalisation efforts based on the knowledge triangle idea in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia. They further discuss the coordination between university outcomes and regional needs, as well as the manner in which universities in the Western Balkan countries manage multiple and often contradictory expectations coming from the environment.

Continuing on the discussion on the links between the universities and their regions, in Chapter 10 Miço and Papadhopulli focus on the differentiation of the mission of higher education institutions through developing and establishing the regional development centres in each regional university in Albania. Their chapter analyses recent developments in Albanian higher education policy and presents the rationales behind steering the higher education system towards the differentiation of missions of universities, following the objectives of European higher education policies, as well as national higher education strategies.

Finally, the closing chapter of the book provides the reader with an overview of the discussions and conclusions offered by the contributors, focusing on the instances of change and continuation with regards to the higher education policy and policy implementation in the Western Balkan region. Building on this, this chapter recognises the importance of strengthening capacities for higher education research in the region and identifies key areas in which this may be done.

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