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The politics of higher education: the European Higher Education Area through the eyes of its stakeholders in France and Italy

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This article explores recent politics of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by focusing on the examination of the continuing involvement of France and Italy in it, which are two - of the EHEA's founding countries. The study reported in this article is built on a theoretical observation that higher education is political. It relies on expert interviews with representatives from key policy-making institutions in France and Italy, and key recent EHEA official communications. The thematic analysis of these data sources reveals that the EHEA is not just a forum for higher education cooperation, but a political platform for cross-country relations in the European region and a platform for generating responses to crises. Additionally, specifically, France's and Italy's continuing involvement in the EHEA has a particular political undertone dictated by the internal politics of both countries and the evolving politics of the EHEA. This study contributes to a better understanding of the political nature of the EHEA and its implications for higher education policy outcomes.

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Introduction

Recently, a considerable amount of literature has been published on the relationship between higher education (HE) and politics. In their seminal study, McLendon (2003) called for systematic research on the “politics of Higher Education” to analyse the dynamics between politics and policy outcomes in education systems (p.166). As stated by Gittell and Kleiman (2000), the politics of HE should be thoroughly examined since “Public universities are not above and apart from politics” (p.1088).

This article is a response to McLendon’s (2003) call, aiming to explore the politics of the HE sector. In particular, the article sets out to discuss the politics of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) which is the largest international cooperation platform in the area of HE (Kushnir, 2023), seeking to answer the question: *What are the perspectives of the Bologna Process (BP) stakeholders in France and Italy on the politics of the EHEA and their involvement in it?* What is meant by “stakeholders” here are the policy-making organisations in both countries which are listed on the EHEA website (EHEA, 2023a; EHEA, 2023b) as key in supporting the BP. The empirical part of the study, that underpins this article, relies on expert interviews with representatives from these key organisations in France and Italy, and key recent EHEA official communications, and a thematic analysis of these generated data.

The analysis has revealed that the EHEA is not only a forum for HE cooperation amongst its signatories but rather a political platform in the European region for the development of cross-country relations and responding to crises and threats. The analysis has also revealed that continuing involvement of France and Italy in the EHEA and their contributions to the EHEA have a specific political undertone too, dictated by both internal politics of France and Italy as well as the evolving political ethos of the EHEA.

The article proceeds with building a theoretical framework for this analysis around the idea of a political nature of HE, followed by a review of literature into the development of France’s and Italy’s positions in the EHEA and their resulting BP policies. This literature is reviewed in conjunction with the literature on wider Europeanisation trends on both countries, highlighting both pro- and anti-European attitudes there. This review of the literature highlights a gap in our understanding of a political nature of the EHEA, which is then addressed in the findings and discussion section. It presents and discusses key themes concerning: first, the views of key HE stakeholders in France and Italy regarding the inseparability of EHEA’s work from politics in general, and second, the influence of wider politics of France and Italy on Bologna stakeholders’ decisions with regard to their specific EHEA-related business.

The politics of higher education

Political nature of education. Apple (2003) argues that education at any level is by definition political. The author states that “The educational system will constantly be in the middle of crucial struggles over the meaning of democracy, over definitions of legitimate authority and culture, and over who should benefit the most from government policies and practices” (p.1).

The scholarship on HE politics encompasses different levels of analysis from international to local policy making and implementation in various contexts, such as in Europe and the US; and this literature has given attention to various issues including governance structures (Lane and Kivisto, 2008), quality assurance and accountability (Conner and Rabovsky, 2011; Houston and Paewai, 2013), educational micropolitics (Flessa, 2009; Marshall and Scribner, 1991), leadership and power in HE (Lumby, 2019).

Scholars adopted various theoretical approaches from policy streams and diffusion, and new institutionalism, to principal-agent theory and advocacy coalition framework to look at this relationship between politics and HE (Conner and Rabovsky, 2011; Kauko, 2013).

The main political issues in HE addressed in this section are: a) governance and accountability, b) micropolitics and c) agency and leadership in HE systems. Whether governance structures facilitate or impede political forces that shape HE policy outcomes is crucial to answer (Nicholson-Crotty and Meier, 2003). Evidence suggests that governance structures do have such an influence (Nicholson-Crotty and Meier, 2003). For instance, non-binding international policies developed based on the so-called Open Method of Coordination, such as those related to the BP ECTS initiative, are sometimes translated into divergent policy outcomes for the signatory countries (Kushnir, 2017). Although some of such originally non-binding commitments can sometimes become more binding following their inclusion in the countries’ legislative system and executive documents (Ravinet, 2008). Various researchers adopted the principal-agent theory to examine governance, accountability and oversight in HE policy-making (e.g., Lane and Kivisto, 2008; Kivisto, 2007). What concerns quality assurance schemes, for example, Houston and Paewai (2013) take a critical viewpoint to discuss the role of knowledge, power and meaning in the design and implementation of quality assurance schemes. They argue that various educational stakeholders can shape the implementation of quality assurance policies in particular ways depending on their political ideologies.

Secondly, micropolitics refers to the “politics that takes place in and around” educational establishments (Ioannaccone 1975 cited in Marshall and Scribner, 1991, p.347). The micropolitics of HE is characterised by “strategies rather than by enacted rules... by knowledge rather than by status” (Hoyle, 1982, p.88). Power relations, conflicts and policy processes emerged as core themes of political relations within educational institutions (Marshall and Scribner, 1991) which emphasise the influence that external forces exert on particular actors at the micro-level. This leads to educational outcomes being shaped by actors’ agency and actions. Students, teaching staff, administrators and other actors can have particular preferences about the policies regarding the school (Marshall and Scribner, 1991). For instance, gender dynamics can shape relationships among educators, and between students and educators (Datnow, 2001). In that vein, Flessa (2009) calls for the need of a systematic examination of the relationship between leadership and micropolitics.

Lastly, a growing number of studies outline a critical role of agency and leadership in shaping the HE arena. Managerialism has transferred power from academic units to the centre of the government (Salter and Tapper, 2000). The scholars identify disguised ways in which agency can be exercised. Education leaders in senior positions in HE institutions expose discrete power to shape decisions, gather support and facilitate the weakening of the opposition (Lumby, 2019; O’Connor et al., 2019).

Overall, various governance structures, educational stakeholders, macro and micro factors and interests shape policy making and policy implementation in HE systems around the world.

When wider politics is reflected in higher education. Political developments play a determining role in the functioning of HE globally. There are numerous examples of wider politics finding its reflection in how HE functions.

In an example from Belarus, under Lukashenko's presidency since 1994, Belarus has been developing as an autocratic hyper-presidential system where the President has supreme power to make decisions according to his interests and suppress any opposition voice through controlling the public space (Terzyan, 2019). This suppressive politics also reflected itself in the recent protests which started as a reaction to the fraudulent 2020 elections in Belarus which, in turn, led to the arrests and expulsion of students from their universities in Belarus (Amnesty International, 2021). Belarusian authorities detained at least 466 students and expelled at least 153 students from their universities (Amnesty International, 2021).

In Russia, students who have been active in anti-government protests have faced similar consequences (Nikolayenko, 2021). In 2021, another wave of protests occurred in Russia after the arrest of its opposition leader Navalny in January 2021. In response, the government ordered university administrations to schedule extra classes and exams on the dates of the protest events. Discourse about looming expulsion from universities as a consequence of partaking in protests was also dominating social media at the time (Nikolayenko, 2021).

Another example demonstrates how wider political developments could be reflected in HE is gender apartheid under the Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Amid Taliban's consolidation of power in 2021, they started restricting women's representation in public life including preventing education for girls over the age of 12 in schools and universities (Akbari and True, 2022). Universities have become dysfunctional with many academics attempting to leave the country due to such discrimination and the curriculum turning into a propaganda tool (Akbari and True, 2022).

One more example of the impact of wider politics on HE, that cannot be overlooked, is the recent and ongoing disruption of Ukrainian HE provision in the context of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, progressing since February 2022. Since then, some Ukraine students have been relocated to universities abroad, including in Moldova and in Hungary (BUILA, 2022), some have stayed to fight in the war (BBC, 2022). After the first months of the war, education was resumed with a lot of flexibility in the curriculum and delivery methods and timings, showing a great resilience of the educators in Ukraine (Kurapov et al., 2023).

Attempts have been made to safeguard HE from such wider politics by advocating for university autonomy. For instance, in 1988, the Magna Charta Universitatum was signed by 388 heads of universities from various countries, with the first fundamental principle of this document stating that "The university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies differently organised because of geography and historical heritage... To meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually *independent* of all political authority and economic power" (Magna Charta Universitatum, 1988, p.1, added emphasis). 2020 s marked an important period in the advancement of university autonomy. In particular, the commitment to the original principles of the above mentioned document was reconfirmed in 2020 (Magna Charta Universitatum, 2020), and specifically in Europe, the European University Association developed, setting the goal by 2030 to develop "universities without walls... open and engaged in society while retaining their core values. All of Europe's universities will be responsible, *autonomous*, and free, with different institutional profiles, but united in their missions of learning and teaching, research, innovation, and culture in service to society" (EUA, 2021, p.5, added emphasis). While such autonomy presupposes freedom from governmental influences (including the minimising of reliance on their funding), such developments have not and cannot make HE politics-free, as the emphasis on becoming more

autonomous from centralised governmental influence, arguably, carries a political weight in itself, too. Given this, HE politicisation is evident not only in the negative examples from Afghanistan, Belarus, etc. cited above.

The line between HE mirroring wider contextual phenomena and HE being instrumentalised to achieve particular agendas for these wider phenomena is not clear-cut. Even though the examples cited above are presented in the scholarship as mirroring wider politics, they may also, arguably, be seen as instruments to impose and/or sustain certain societal norms. Examples below illustrate specifically this point; however, they are explicitly linked in the literature to facilitating positive societal change.

When HE is instrumentalised for wider politics. Since HE as a field is political (Marshall and Scribner, 1991), the process of instrumentalising HE for advancing countries' and regions' agendas will, arguably, always have a political nature too.

A body of scholarship has been developing since the early 1990s to review ways in which different countries have been utilising HE as a tool for promoting societal change. Examples of this comprise HE being a tool for instigating "social integration" in Tanzania (Mkude, 2011, p.366), facilitating "social mobility and societal integration" in South Africa (Badat, 2017, p.125), promoting "social inclusion for displaced students and refugees" in Belgium, Germany, Norway, Romania, Australia and the USA (Kochhar-Bryant, 2019, p.41), aiding "economic growth" in Kenya and Greece (Nyangau, 2014, p.7; Gouvias, 2012: 65), as well as "national development" in so-called third world countries (Van Den Bor, Shute (1991)p.11). HE also serves an instrument for facilitating the development of "fair societies" worldwide (Goastellec and Välimaa, 2019, p.1). Aside from the focus on these societal changes, which do bare a political undertone, there are sources appealing predominantly to the idea of cross-country political influence that may be sought using HE as an instrument in this process, such as in the case of China's soft power exertion in Pakistan (Nitza-Makowska, 2022).

In European politics, education, and particularly HE, have historically played an important role. Writing over a decade ago, Grek (2008) stated that education was "slowly moving from the margins of European governance to the very centre of its policy making" (p.208). More recently, Kushnir (2022) has highlighted a similar trend, emphasising how the European Education Area (a related but distinct EHEA initiative built for all levels of education in the EU countries) has been utilised by EU policy-makers to aid EU deepening in the context of various interlocking crises (e.g., the rise of populism, economic crises). Robertson et al. (2016) suggest that HE in particular has played a key role in crafting the European project through the facilitation of academic mobility, aiding the creation of a European single market and a European citizen.

What concerns the EHEA specifically, earlier studies about Central-Eastern Europe emphasise that their EHEA memberships were a means to address the countries' socio-economic interests and contribute to their journey to join the EU by showcasing their willingness to participate in European projects (Huisman and Van Der Wende, 2004; Zgaga, 2009). For the post-Soviet countries, "it was not the EU accession that encouraged them; it was rather a strong 'getting together' with (West) European HE and an awareness that keeping outside this movement can't contribute to the progress of a national system" (Zgaga, 2009 p.90).

Higher education fora as political platforms. While most of the international HE fora do not bind their signatories to anything, some memberships are more binding (such as some EU initiatives). Examples of voluntary and unbinding HE intergovernmental

cooperation fora include the EHEA as well as some initiatives of the OECD and the UN (Klemencic and Brennan, 2013). They are governed through soft governance techniques such as the so-called Open Method of Coordination (OMC). In the OMC, countries are not subjected to any laws to comply (Zeng et al., 2013). The OMC offers a decentralised approach to governance which is based on specifying mutual goals and frameworks for implementation, agreeing on benchmarks and indicators for progress assessment, considering national/local differences when conducting peer review and monitoring (Gornitzka, 2006). The OMC is useful to provide policy learning within the signatory countries (Orr and Mishra, 2015). Nevertheless, although the OMC is a flexible governance method in terms of allowing autonomy to its signatories, they still follow similar values and practices in line with the overall objectives of the forum.

Since HE is a political domain (Marshall and Scribner, 1991), the nature of international HE fora and membership in them, arguably, have a political undertone too. Being a member of such HE fora is, in part, a politically strategic statement which, in turn, can have consequences for its members. As mentioned earlier, countries often have particular objectives and interests in joining such fora, whether as a Europeanisation attempt or to have economic benefits or acquire a certain societal change. Examples from Central-Eastern Europe and post-Soviet countries with regard to their involvement in the EHEA, cited in sub-Section 2.3 above, illustrate the politics behind countries' engagement with this forum. It is also important to point out that most of relevant examples in the literature focus on the political undertone of countries' membership in such fora. However, there is also analysis of political motivations of the creation of fora like this. For instance, Kushnir (2021; 2022) explains how the European Education Area (where HE forms an important aspect of international cooperation) has been developed by the EU to serve as an important tool for deepening its integration.

Clearly, there is a mutually shaping relationship between HE policies and a wider political context in which they operate (Fig. 1). This is a key idea informing our analysis in this article.

Prior research on the Bologna Process and European trends in France and Italy

The following literature review on France and Italy maps the field of the available research on their involvement in the EHEA in the context of wider political trends in both countries.

Italy

BP and EHEA trends in Italy. A number of authors have examined the adoption of the BP and the implementation of EHEA reforms in Italy (Aittola et al., 2009; Ballarino and Perotti, 2012; Cammelli et al., 2011; Chies et al., 2019; Di Pietro, 2012; Guccio

et al., 2016; Jakobi and Rusconi, 2009; Moscati, 2009; Ursin et al., 2008). Various factors are associated with the adoption of BP reforms in the Italian context which was reluctant to policy change, and it only became possible through a series of events that mitigated the imbalance of the powers in the Italian HE system (Ballarino and Perotti, 2012). Several researchers investigate BP's implementation successes and challenges in Italy: a country which was among the first ones to adopt the BP (e.g., Cammelli et al., 2011; Ballarino and Perotti, 2012; Di Pietro, 2012; Moscati, 2009; Guccio et al., 2016).

Of course, the critics have been vocal about multiple drawbacks in the implementation of the BP in Italy. Jakobi and Rusconi (2009) evaluate lifelong learning opportunities in Italy and argue that the BP has not led to major improvements in this area. Similarly, quality assurance practices have also been criticised in Italy (Ursin et al., 2008), and Chies et al. (2019) are concerned with student performance at university as well as social inequalities in graduation rates despite the BP reforms.

Despite these examples of points of criticism in the implementation of the BP in Italy, the consequences of the BP reform in Italy are far more positive than what is often the focus of critics' comments (Cammelli et al., 2011). This view is also supported by Di Pietro (2012) who acknowledges a positive impact of the BP reforms on university enrolment rates in Italy. Moreover, Guccio et al. (2016) suggest teaching efficiency in Italian HE system has improved significantly but transformational changes took place only at the initial stages of the implementation of the BP.

More recent studies on the BP in Italy highlight the so-called evolution of Italian HE institutions in the context of its EHEA membership. In particular, Beine et al. (2020) look at quality-price trade off at Italian HE institutions and claim that those charging higher fees have had fewer international students compared to others, which, in turn, results in lower income through tuition fees. Another aspect of Italian HE that has gradually developed in the context of Italy's involvement in the EHEA is an increasing role of Italian HE institutions in promoting sustainability and social change through building an "intellectual capital maturity model" (Fronzizi et al., 2019, p.1). Additionally, the entrepreneurial role of Italian universities and the necessity of their differentiation through knowledge capitalisation have also been growing (Vesperi, Gagnidze (2021)). HE digitalisation has also been an important development, particularly recently, after the experiences of the pandemic-related lockdowns. Piromalli (2023) examines the governance of the process of digitalisation at Sapienza University over three decades stemming from the notion of universities as entrepreneurial agencies. The evidence reviewed here seems to suggest a pertinent role for BP reforms in Italy despite the challenges in the implementation and evolution of the Italian HE system in line with global demands.

Europeanisation trends in Italy. A recent growing body of literature has investigated the rise of populism in Italy (Albertazzi and Zulianello, 2021; Conti et al. 2020; D'Alimonte, 2019; Pasquinucci, 2022). The roots of Italian modern populism go back to the 1990s and the devolution of the Italian two-party system (D'Alimonte, 2019). Several recent studies (Albertazzi and Zulianello, 2021; D'Alimonte, 2019) have shown that the rise of populism in Italy cannot be explained without considering the economic and institutional malaise of the country. Some authors specifically emphasise the consolidation of the populist right wing political party called the League and the populist Five Star Movement (M5s) in Italy (Albertazzi and Zulianello, 2021; Conti et al., 2020). Albertazzi and Zulianello (2021) examine regional cleavages in populist consolidation by comparing the League and

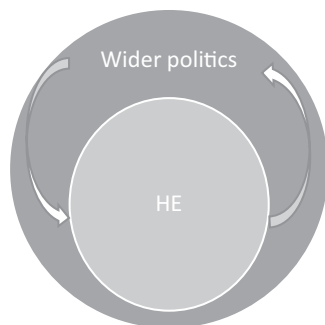


Fig. 1 Relationship between politics and HE.

M5s which are different in their populist ideologies and agendas. The League became successful through cultural cleavages, whereas M5s consolidated its votes through focusing on economic and institutional woes (Albertazzi and Zulianello, 2021). Consequently, M5s concentrated on a Eurosceptic electoral campaign (Conti et al., 2020). The Italian elections of 2018 resulted in a historic victory of the populist forces (D'Alimonte, 2019). Pasquinucci (2022) looks at how Eurosceptic populist forces have become successful in adopting the notion of “European constraint” (p.39). A growing gap between the Italian elite and the general population has led the anti-establishment parties like the League and M5s to increase their attractiveness by promising radical change in Italy (D'Alimonte, 2019). Similar phenomena have been evident in other EU countries (Pasquinucci, 2022).

France

BP and EHEA trends in France. Over the past two decades, various scholars have examined the adoption of the BP and the implementation of relevant reforms in France (e.g., Castin, 2009; Jakobi & Rusconi, 2009; Malan, 2004; Musselin, 2009; Pilkington, 2012; Witte et al., 2008). This literature has highlighted several important aspects of the BP in France, such as the implementation process and implications of the BP in France; challenges in implementing the BP; and BP reforms serving in France as a platform of the Europeanisation of its HE.

Prior research has highlighted several important transformations that have taken place on the French HE arena. For instance, like other EHEA signatories, France's efforts aimed to improve its cooperation with other countries in the domain of HE, enhance academic mobility across the continent (Malan, 2004) and promote competitiveness and, quality in HE, mobility against global trends (Castin, 2009; Musselin, 2009). The introduction of the LMD (Licence/Master's/Doctorate – or otherwise known as Bachelor's/Master's/Doctorate) framework is another example of major reforms that come with the BP. More recent studies (e.g., Mai, 2022; Sánchez-Chaparro et al., 2020) investigate the competitiveness of the HE institutions in France as an important transformation that has recently gained momentum in France. While Sánchez-Chaparro et al. (2020) explore the role of quality assurance policies in these competitiveness strategies, Mai (2022) scrutinises the relationship between university autonomy and university rankings.

Yet, the implementation process has not been free from challenges. Musselin (2009) suggests that French institutional settings, resistant to change, and a cautious attitude on the part of certain domestic actors prevented faster convergence and automatic implementation of the LMD across the programmes of study in France. The LMD reform has also been subjected to considerable criticism by the academics who highlight a lack of its consideration taken on the demands of students and the labour market (Castin, 2009 p. 87).

BP reforms have been seen in France as a quest for Europeanisation. A number of studies examine the evolution of the French HE in the context of Europeanisation trends (Dakowska, 2019; Dobbins, 2017; Musselin, 2009; Pilkington, 2012; Sacilotto-Vasylenko, 2013). This evolution has a major impact on French HE institutions, degree structures, their content and curricula (Musselin, 2009). Yet, there is a consensus among scholars that the BP should be analysed as a Europeanisation process (Dakowska, 2019; Dobbins, 2017; Musselin, 2009; Pilkington, 2012; Sacilotto-Vasylenko, 2013).

Specifically, Dakowska (2019) looks at the role of the European Commission in the BP and the EHEA countries. The influence of the European Commission is reinforced via its experts. These

experts act as policy brokers to enhance a wider EU agenda at the EHEA signatories' domestic levels. In this way, EU's clientele can interact with domestic actors, such as in France, to push for European policies. For instance, Europeanisation is evident in teacher education reforms in France. Since 2005, there have been changes in the teaching training system in line with the BP converging reforms by introducing Master's programmes for teachers (Sacilotto-Vasylenko, 2013). In the same vein, Pilkington (2012) discusses the evolution of French HE system and argues that HE Europeanisation has increased the autonomy and performance of French universities, making them stronger to cope with the challenges of the global education economy. This evolution has taken place through: “the interpretation of the international context, the active role of ministries in organising and guiding national discussions, and the path-dependent dynamics resulting from the complexity of the multilevel multifactor process” (Witte et al., 2008, p.229). These three elements have created an ideal environment for policy change in HE system in France (Witte et al., 2008).

Europeanisation trends in France. The review of literature on Europeanisation in France has revealed a couple of pertinent themes. First, considerable attention is given to the Franco-German relationship and their core role in facilitating European integration in the European region (Krotz and Schild, 2013; Sutton, 2007). France and Germany were the main driving forces behind creating a unified Europe after World War II (Sutton, 2007). Embedded bilateralism in the Franco-German relationship has enabled a joint impact of the two on shaping Europe (Krotz and Schild, 2013). Krotz and Schild (2013) highlighted factors including France's and Germany's adaptability that are associated with their close relationship, despite some core differences in political objectives such as their stances on international developments and relevant domestic pressures from policy stakeholders.

Second, in the process of the development of France's relationship with Germany in orchestrating European integration in Europe, France itself has been subjected to Europeanisation with the evolving nature of European integration since 1950s. Ladrech (1994) defined Europeanisation as “an incremental process re-orienting the direction and shape of politics to the degree that political and economic dynamics of the EU become part of the organisational logic of national politics and policy-making” (p.69). In 1980s, European integration was seen as strongly related to undesired institutional changes by domestic actors in the Fifth Republic (Ladrech, 1994). In the process of establishing the EU, France remained a key player but not as strong of a player as in the case of Germany that emerged as a supreme leader of the EU. One example to demonstrate France's lukewarm leadership role is considering the rejection vote in the referendum on the EU's constitutional treaty in 2005 (Sutton, 2007). This proves a level of rising Euroscepticism albeit not as strong as in the cases of such countries as Hungary and the UK. These developments can be understood by looking at the discourses of French political actors on Europe and European integration. In this vein, Schmidt (2020) examines narratives of the French political elites from de Gaulle to Mitterrand to Chirac. She suggests that the social issues, which emerged as a concern of the citizens who rejected the Constitutional Treaty in 2005, might have been the main culprit of preventing France from strengthening its unwritten commitment to a strong leadership role in European integration in the region (Schmidt, 2020). Despite some Euro-sceptic sentiments, there are plenty of strong voices in France that remains loyal to sustaining France's leadership in Europe and support for Germany's efforts in this domain (Schild, 2013; Degner and Leuffen, 2019).

Methodology

This study addresses the aforementioned overlapping gaps in the scholarship about the EHEA in general and specifically in France and Italy, as well as the scholarship about meaning-making regarding Europeanisation in both founders of the EHEA. As a result, it was set out to explore the perspectives of the BP stakeholders in France and Italy on the politics of the EHEA and their involvement in it.

This article reports on an aspect of a two-case-study extract from a larger four-case-study project that covers all four founders of the EHEA: the UK, Germany, France and Italy. The overarching research design of this project was informed by BERA (2018) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, and data collection followed a favourable ethics decision from the Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BLSS REC) at Nottingham Trent University. According to Stake (1994), while a collective case study presupposes a degree of comparison, it is not a comparative study as such, rather it is a study that targets generating a full account of the issue in focus in several cases.

The UK and Germany, arguably, represent two rather opposite cases of Europeanisation, with Germany being the lead driver in Europe and the UK having distanced itself from Europe through Brexit (Daehnhardt, 2022). Unlike these two cases which have recently been analysed in terms of their EHEA memberships by Kushnir (2023), France and Italy should not be overlooked in scholarship. They represent an important area of inquiry related to the EHEA, given their position in terms of Europeanisation which is somewhat distinct from the UK/Germany polarisation—France’s and Italy’s recent gravitation towards a so-called ‘middle ground’ in terms of Europeanisation, demonstrating both a lot of support for Europe as well as strong Euro-sceptic tendencies in recent politics (Schmidt, 2020; Pasquinucci, 2022). France and Italy are in the focus in this article.

Data collection for both cases relied primarily on in-depth semi-structured elite interviews with an opportunistic/snowball sample of Bologna stakeholders from both countries: France $n = 4$ and Italy $n = 7$ (Appendix A), conducted in 2022. Additionally, supplementary data in support of some of the claims made by the interviewees were sought from four recent official communications available on the EHEA website which were issued between 2020 and 2022 (Appendix B). A justification for this temporal framework is rooted in the fact that 2020 marked a milestone of EHEA development, when a new deadline for it was set (EHEA, 2020) and 2022 documents were the most recent ones available on the EHEA website at the time of search in 2023.

Interview audio-recordings were transcribed and analysed thematically, along with the official communications. Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) guide for open and axial coding of themes guided the analysis. The open coding stage was informed by the conceptual framework spelled out earlier in the article, and the emerging themes and sub-themes generated separately for each case study were illustrated by a list of relevant quotations from both datasets: interview transcripts and official communications. Similar data segments were grouped with the aim to record patterns related to the politics of HE (e.g., 25 codes were identified, such as “politics”, “political”, “cooperate”, “collaborate”, “exchange”, “forum”, “share”, etc.). The multiplicity of the codes from the interview transcripts and official communications formed the basis of searching for and reviewing the themes, with this being done for the interviews first, supplemented by adding relevant codes from the official communications.

The themes were regrouped in the axial coding and the final super-ordinate themes were identified. The final themes that are relevant to this paper are: (1) the EHEA as a forum for supporting the cooperation in higher education cannot be separated from

wider politics, and (2) the influence of wider politics of France and Italy on Bologna’s stakeholders’ decisions with regard to their specific EHEA-related business. These themes relate directly to the two parts of the research question stated earlier, and they also form the basis of the presentation of the findings and their discussion in sub-Sections 5.1 and 5.2 below, respectively.

Results and discussion: the politics of the memberships of France and Italy in the European Higher Education Area

The thematic analysis of the expert interviews and official communications of key Bologna stakeholders in France and Italy has revealed their perspectives on the role of the relationship between their EHEA memberships and their wider politics. This is indicative of the idea that memberships in fora, such as the EHEA, which do not legally bind signatures to any commitments, are, in fact, political. What follows below is a presentation and discussion of the key themes concerning first, the views of key HE stakeholders in France and Italy regarding the inseparability of EHEA’s work from politics in general, and second, the influence of the wider politics of France and Italy on Bologna’s stakeholders’ decisions with regard to their specific EHEA-related business.

The EHEA as a forum for supporting the cooperation in higher education cannot be separated from wider politics.

This subsection addresses the first part of the research question, namely the perspectives of key HE stakeholders from both countries of our interest regarding the political nature of EHEA as an international forum. Not only has the EHEA been developing as a platform for international cooperation in HE, but also—and more importantly—as a platform for knowledge exchange more widely, for connecting countries and providing a forum that allows cooperation and dialogue within Europe and between Europe and other countries and regions across the world. As a result, we can witness the inseparability of the work focused on HE in the EHEA and the wider politics of EHEA’s signatories. The comment from a representative of the Conference of Italian University Rectors illustrates how the EHEA is a platform for exchange that has an integral political undertone:

We developed a vision of an open and inclusive European Higher Education Area. It is a political issue to make the EHEA as more open and inclusive as possible. We believe that having contacts with other geographical systems, education systems... is very important to connect, to have exchanges, to exchange good practices and so on. And this is from a political point of view (D7).

Clearly, the EHEA and its recent objectives of being “inclusive, innovative and interconnected” (EHEA, 2020: 3) is by its nature political. Since its establishment, the EHEA has played a key role in advancing HE in Europe and beyond by pursuing common vision through communication and cooperation. While EHEA’s focus seems to be on HE policies, there is an undeniable relationship between HE and wider political processes, as discussed previously in this article with regard to HE in general, not related specifically to the EHEA (e.g., McLendon, 2003). The EHEA, which is a non-binding international policy forum, has been developed based on the Open Method of Coordination. While such governance sometimes translates into divergent policy outcomes for the signatory countries, such as in the case of the implementation of the ECTS (Kushnir, 2017), the shared nature of decision-making sustains strategic choices of EHEA governing actors. This nature of decision-making in the EHEA, and the apparent drive for more inclusivity and openness (EHEA, 2020) illustrates the theoretical discussion in sub-Sections 2.2 and 2.3 above about when wider politics of friendship building among countries is reflected in HE but also when HE can be

instrumentalised for the wider politics of cooperation and openness.

Despite the EHEA transcending the borders of the EU, there still seems to be a connection between the politics specifically of the EU and EHEA developments:

...the things that happen at the EU level are a bit overlapping with what happens at the EHEA level (D2, key HE actor in Italy)

European integration has been challenged by internal and external instabilities from the Euro crisis of 2010s and migration flows across the Aegean to Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and authoritarian tide in Eastern and Southern Europe and in its neighbourhood (Ferrara and Kriesi, 2022; Schimmelfennig, 2021). These multidimensional developments bring discussions on European disintegration to the forefront (Webber, 2018). These may imply that the EHEA can be fragile to what happens within the EU Member States and abroad. For instance, the rise of Euroscepticism in Italy (Albertazzi and Zulianello, 2021; Conti et al., 2020; D'Alimonte, 2019; Pasquinucci, 2022) may have repercussions for the Italian strategy of cooperation with European partners in the framework of the EHEA too. These are not necessarily material repercussions but ideational ones. However, as the EHEA is committed to values of the EU such a democracy, rule of law and equality, it can act as a useful forum to bring these ideas back on track. One interviewee put it:

The only way for us, as a country, as an economic force, but also as a group of citizens is to have a fully functional Europe, and therefore a fully functional EHEA (C3, representative of the Assembly of Directors of University Institutes of Technology (ADIUT) in France).

This quote clearly demonstrates the link between a strong EU and a strong EHEA. A functional education provision is one of the core elements of democratic regions (Bergan, 2022). A similar position of the Bologna stakeholders in France can be illustrated by the quote from the same representative of the Assembly of Directors of University Institutes of Technology (ADIUT) in France:

...we need to provide more education, more democracy (C3).

The illiberal turn in some of the EU countries implies a major democratic decline affecting not just the EU but Europe as a wider phenomenon that transcends the borders of the EU. This signals a value change in countries like Hungary which may lead to a potential ideational clash with other EHEA members regarding the policies on European HE, such as for example, academic freedom. The ousting of the Central European University from Budapest in 2018 into exile in Austria (Enyedi et al., 2019) is a telling example of this.

Fundamental political differences amongst the countries that make up the EHEA would prevent the EHEA as a collective to pull resources as well as ideas and to implement similar policies. This might be a crucial challenge considering there are still major differences between the BP countries not only in their degree structures and in HE environments (Eta and Mngo, 2021). Nevertheless, the cooperation and collaboration provided by the EHEA can be seen as a tool to improve commitment to European values and to increase coherence between the countries. HE institutions play a crucial role in responding to the anti-democratic challenges as the examples on Belarussian and Ukrainian students demonstrate (Kurapov et al., 2023; Nikolayenko, 2021). The EHEA's dedication for freedom of expression, academic freedom and institutional autonomy, and free movement for students and staff becomes even more important in the current global political climate (Gallagher, 2018). This potential of shaping the wider politics is what Gallagher (2018) defines as the civic and social role of HE in line with the notion of university's having a third mission for societal change apart from teaching and research (Pausits, 2015).

The influence of wider politics of France and Italy on their Bologna's stakeholders' decisions with regard to EHEA-related business. This section builds on the ideas regarding the interconnectedness of the EHEA and politics, discussed above, and focuses on another key theme which emerged from the data, related to the influence of France's and Italy's politics on their Bologna stakeholders' decisions with regard to the EHEA-related undertakings. Consistent with the above discussion, wider political developments particularly in France and Italy shape the decisions of these countries' relevant policy actors regarding EHEA related issues. The analysis suggests that decisions of EHEA stakeholders cannot be immune to political events such as any sort of crisis that happens in the member countries or outside.

As mentioned previously in this article, other scholars have noted the importance of France's leadership role in the European matters (Krotz and Schild, 2013; Schmidt, 2020; Sutton, 2007). The country remained as the beacon of European integration together with Germany despite challenges to France's party system followed by economic and social crisis of 2000s and 2010s (Degner and Leuffen, 2019). France can be considered as one of the role model countries to inspire adopting pro-European values across the continent. Talking about this issue a Bologna stakeholder from France states:

We think that Europe works well when France and Germany work together for Europe. That's the type of situation where we regard ourselves as leaders, basically. Sometimes embarrassing actually... we regard ourselves as the leaders of Europe. That's basically what it is. Let's say one of the leaders of Europe... there is such a notion of a European people, I think. And we've said it many times. But that's about freedom, that's about being able to speak freely... therefore, we have to work on how to achieve this everywhere, including in Belarus, and in Hungary, and in many places (C3, representative of the Assembly of Directors of University Institutes of Technology (ADIUT)).

This quote is illustrative of France's crucial role in Europe and the EHEA in particular. Clearly, this interviewee views Europe as wider than just the EU, encompassing other parts of the geographical Europe such as Belarus. The challenge has been how to sustain the pursuit of common objectives in the regions where political, economic social instabilities happen to take place. An authoritarian turn in a country may lead to a total transformation of its external relations, and therefore, this is likely to shape the level of international cooperation and openness in HE as well as in other areas. In reviewing the literature on how wider politics has been reflected in the HE of particular countries, such cases as Belarus and Russia were with their authoritarian leaders (Terzyan, 2019; Nikolayenko, 2021), were discussed.

Despite facing Eurosceptic challenges (Goodliffe, 2015; Ivaldi, 2018), particularly with the rise of the Front National (FN), French political actors have overall remained Europhiles (Palombarin and Amable, 2021). Right-wing populist FN, one of the founders of which was Marine Le Pen, has played a crucial role by consolidating on Euroscepticism growing in France (Ivaldi, 2018). In the 2017 and 2022 French presidential elections, Marine Le Pen, who called for a French exit from the Eurozone, was defeated by Emmanuel Macron. The focus of the latest election campaigns was on Covid-19 and the Russian war in Ukraine, rather than the EU (Durovic, 2023). In the 2017 presidential campaign, FN and Le Pen called for a French exit from the Eurozone which was criticised by President Macron for being unrealistic and dangerous (Ivaldi, 2018). FN's economic plan focused on a strong welfare state and a divorce from the restrictions of the Economic and Monetary Union (Amable et al., 2012). The fact that a leader like Le Pen did not actually call for a French exit from the EU itself (only from the Eurozone) is

significant to prove France's overall political dynamics and its pro-EU political elite (Clegg, 2022). The Yellow Vests protests and the Covid-19 crisis later on posed significant challenges to Macron's presidency, but his joint proposal with Merkel for a €500 billion EU pandemic recovery programme demonstrated France's aspirations to remain a strong player within Europe (Sobanet and Singh, 2020; Chamorel, 2019).

This prevailing pro-EU attitude is promoted in France and beyond through cooperation in higher education through the EHEA. In this manner, the same representative of the Assembly of Directors of University Institutes of Technology (ADIUT) reflects on the meaning of a particular event for supporting wider cooperation and friendships in Europe:

I organised a conference in Hungary. Just to make sure that we remain visible. And the European commissioner came. And of course the minister of Orbán, of higher education... But he came too, and of course they didn't speak together. But still that proved that we [EURASHE] were still relevant (C3, representative of the Assembly of Directors of University Institutes of Technology (ADIUT))

There are similar findings in the case of Italy with regards to political developments shaping EHEA related issues. This is evident in the case of Italy's initial reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, demonstrating some restraint from the pan-European view and focusing on Italy's domestic business. Initially, Italian ministry of education did not initiate expressing a stance on the Russian invasion and considered that the EHEA as an institution could choose to remain uninvolved in making an open judgement Russia's and Belarus' governments' actions:

there is a very high interest [in the Italian ministry] to keep these issues [response to the war] technical and not political, which is actually a political question (D4, key higher education actor in Italy).

Yet, the choice not to respond is in itself a political take, as suggested by the interviewees themselves above. The politics of such an initial suggestion is has a reason behind related to Italian Euroscepticism and Italy's closer ties with Russia. These are in line with the rise of right-wing populism and Euroscepticism in Italy in the recent years (Albertazzi and Zulianello, 2021; Conti et al., 2020; D'Alimonte, 2019; Pasquinucci, 2022). Various populist and Eurosceptic parties, such as M5S, Five Star Movement and the League, had increased their voting bases in the 2018 Italian general elections (Conti et al., 2020). While these parties moved from opposition to governing positions in the 2018 general elections as well as the European Parliament (EP) elections in 2019, a Europhile Democratic Party moved to opposition (Angelucci and Carrieri, 2022). Italian Eurosceptics consolidated on Italian nationalism together with us vs. them (Europe) dichotomy blaming the pro-EU elites (Pasquinucci, 2022). The 2022 Italian parliamentary election led to the first female-led government in the Italian history, and a right-leaning government composed of two radical populist parties (Fratelli d'Italia and Lega Nord) (Garzia, 2023). Together with the rise of right-wing forces in Italy, the nature of relations between Italy and Russia can explain Italian caution regarding the condemnation of the invasion of Ukraine through the EHEA. Italy is one of the largest dependents on Russian gas in Europe (Prontera, 2021). Considering these, the below comment from another key HE stakeholder in Italy is not surprising.

During the interviews, another key HE stakeholder in Italy commented:

Basically, what they [Italian ministry] said is that they didn't want to [sign the letter to suspend Russia and Belarus]... And it was also the French position at the time. Also France didn't want basically, to mix. They wanted the European Higher Education and the Bologna Process to not be involved with respect to political matters. So, to keep them separate. Now, it's very difficult that this

is the position that can be taken, because the Russian Rectors' Conference has said yes, we support the war. So, also that makes it difficult to have this kind of position... It can also be that in general, there are countries that are less harsh towards Russia. Italy has historically been one of them. It might also be that they want to do only the necessary and not the surplus. At the same time, I don't know whether this is the position because Italy's had struggles in many measures. So, it might be that there are other motivations or they will eventually sign (D2, key HE actor in Italy).

On the 22of April 2022, BP members including France and Italy issued a joint statement followed by a French-led meeting. In this joint statement, the EHEA as an institution stated that the Russian invasion of Ukraine:

...disregards the values and goals of the EHEA and fundamentally violates all the obligations and commitments Russia has undertaken since it joined the EHEA in 2003. It has also undermined the trust that is fundamental to European higher education cooperation. For Russia to regain the trust of other EHEA members will be a long and difficult process (EHEA, 2022c).

Despite Italy's concerns, the EHEA was able to take a unified action against the Russian aggression (which eventually included the critical voice from Italy) in line with the values it had reaffirmed back in 2020, such as advocating for democracy, freedom of speech, etc. (EHEA, 2020). This demonstrates the EHEA's wider objectives apart from HE policies. It acts as a platform to unite countries under common values of democracy. The quest for strengthening peaceful and democratic societies is the major objective that brings the EHEA countries together against such political developments. Indeed, the Russian invasion of Ukraine exposed the meaning of being a member of a particular forum. Despite the challenges the EU and wider Europe have been facing, including the rise of populism and Euroscepticism across the region, the EHEA is one of the major platforms to feed a shared commitment to European values:

...what is happening in Ukraine, means that also, being part of the Bologna is going to be, let's say, a commitment, a bigger commitment than it has been so far (D2, key higher education actor in Italy).

The data overall provide important insights into underlying political elements of EHEA. The findings presented in this section corroborate the idea in the literature about HE politics (e.g., McLendon, 2003) on the relationship between HE and wider political processes. What it adds to this literature is a specific case of the EHEA, the politics of which has only been mentioned in various ways in the literature but has not been the focus of prior studies. Prior literature, for instance, touched on the political reasons for countries' joining the EHEA (Huisman and Van Der Wende, 2004; Zgaga, 2009). However, this older literature does not consider current political trends in the EHEA, such as those related to Brexit or the invasion of Ukraine. Neither does that literature consider the perspectives of key Bologna stakeholders in France and Italy which still play an important leading role in the EHEA, following their involvement in its establishment over a couple of decades ago. Additionally, the findings in this section contribute an insight, previously missing in the literature on the BP, about the influence of wider politics of specifically France and Italy on their Bologna's stakeholders' decisions with regard to their specific EHEA-related business.

Conclusion

This article has explored recent politics of the EHEA by focusing on the examination of the continuing involvement of France and Italy in it. This exploration relies on expert interviews with representatives from key policy-making institutions in France and Italy, which are two of the EHEA's founding countries, and key

recent EHEA official communications. The thematic analysis of these data sources reveals that the EHEA is not just a forum for HE cooperation, but a political platform for building cross-country relations in the European region and a platform for generating responses to crises and threats. Additionally, specifically, France's and Italy's continuing memberships in the EHEA have a particular political undertone dictated by both the internal politics of both countries and the evolving politics of the EHEA.

These results serve as another proof that wider politics cannot be separated from the HE, which has been suggested by other scholars (e.g., Marshall and Scribner, 1991; Gittel and Kleiman, 2000; McLendon, 2003). The main contribution of this article, however, is in exploring recent politics specifically of the EHEA. Given that this has been the largest HE cooperation initiative not just in the European region but in the world (Kushnir, 2023), it is paramount to acknowledge that the implications of this cooperation cross far beyond the domain of HE. Some form of the instrumentalisation of HE cooperation in the EHEA for wider (political) purposes was acknowledged at the beginning of the development of the EHEA, following its formation in 1998. For instance, Central-Eastern European countries saw their EHEA memberships as a means to demonstrate to the EU countries their willingness to Europeanise as well, that would, supposedly, help in paving their way towards eventually joining the EU too (Huisman and Van Der Wende, 2004; Zgaga, 2009). However, examples like this are outdated and focus solely on specific countries/regions in the EHEA which do not represent the founders of the EHEA, such as France and Italy in our case. French and Italian cases are insightful not just for their own sake but also for showcasing how wider EHEA politics still depends on their contributions. Moreover, these cases demonstrate that the EHEA is, indeed, a political platform, capable of responding to wider political processes happening in the world and striving to exert a form of influence on these processes through its own reactions to them. These significant and timely insights should serve as a stepping-stone to further research, particularly into the politics of growing interconnections between the EHEA and other education initiatives in Europe, such as, for instance, the expansion of the European Universities Initiative and UK's rejoining Horizon Europe.

Data availability

The dataset with interview transcripts, generated and analysed during the current study, is available in the Research Data Archive of Nottingham Trent University, at <https://doi.org/10.17631/RD-2022-0001-DDOC>.

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Author contributions

Authors were working as a team in writing the paper. NY led on the write up of the literature review section and part of the theoretical framework section of the paper following IK guidance. IK provided strategic leadership on shaping the vision for the paper, following data collection and analysis conducted by her in the framework of the awarded grant. She led on all other sections of the paper.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

The overarching research design of this project was informed by BERA (2018) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, and data collection followed a favourable ethics decision (Ref: KUSHNIR 2021/414) from the Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BLSS REC) at Nottingham Trent University.

Informed consent

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews.

Additional information

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