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A qualitative inquiry into the europeanization of Romanian higher-education

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Abstract

In this paper, we look at Romanian higher-education through the lenses of Europeanization, with the specific aim of identifying key trends, actors, and improvements needed to bridge the gap between the Western and the Eastern higher-education systems. As a "new" member-state, Romania underwent many structural changes. Our aim is to understand whether and how these changes have contributed to the Europeanization of the Romanian higher-education; we will do this by looking at its main beneficiaries, namely the students. In order to build a clear case, we perform this analysis in comparative terms – by taking, as a baseline, the Belgian higher-education, highly renowed for its European orientation, given its very proximity to Brussels and to the European institutions.

Our study reveals that, in order to be wired to the European job market, Romanian higher-education must europeanize horizontally, by involving actors from both the academia and the external environments (i.e. businesses, governamental actors), with the aim to create the best learning and career path for the Romanian students.

Keywords: europeanization; higher-education; Romania; European Affairs.

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1. Introduction

The European idea bears – apart from a purely symbolical significance – a very pragmatic and domestic stance, which is particularly relevant in the current turmoil context. Given the much debated European crises (i.e. the Ukrainian crisis, the "refugees crisis", the Schengen crisis), investigating europeanization mechanisms has probably never been more relevant and critical for building a clear view on the European Union and its perspectives. Education plays – or should play – an important role in fostering Europeanization, especially in those countries, such as Central-European states, that have only recently started to gain full access to the benefits of EU membership.

We will look at Romanian higher-education system through the lenses of Europeanization, with the specific aim of identifying key trends, actors, and improvements needed to bridge the gap between the Western and the Eastern education systems. As a "new" member-state, Romania underwent many structural changes. Our aim is to understand whether and how these changes have contributed to the Europeanization of the Romanian higher-education; we will do this by looking at its main beneficiaries, namely the students. In order to build a clear case, we perform this analysis in comparative terms – by taking, as a baseline, the Belgian higher-education, highly renowed for its European orientation, given its very proximity to Brussels and the European institutions.

2. Europeanization – a brief conceptualization

Exploring Europeanization has proven to be a challenging, as well as a strategic endeavour, for both scholars and policy-makers. Robert Ladrech defines Europeanization as an "incremental process re-orienting the direction and shape of politics to the degree that EC political and economic dynamics become part of the organizational logic of national politics and policy-making" (1994, 69). The most cited categorization of Europeanization refers to "downloading" vs. "uploading" processes. This has been translated into the theory of vertical and horizontal Europeanisation (Börzel & Risse, 2000; Koopmans & Erbe, 2004; Meyer, 2007; Liebert, 2007; Brüggemann et. al., 2007). Vertical Europeanization consists of communicative channels between national/domestic actors and European institutions. It could take place either bottom-up (i.e. departing from the domestic level towards the European "core") or top-down (i.e. the "Brussels" exports its rules, procedures and *savoire-fair* to the member-states). *Horizontal Europeanization* refers to linkages between different member states. For example, newer member-states could import EU-related knowledge and know-how from older member-states.

Most of the research on Europeanization focuses on downloading processes, and, more specifically, on the top-down paradigm, resulting three explanatory streams. First, the inter-governmentalist stream (Milward 1992; Moravcsik 1994) assumes that European integration is under the control of the Member States, as a means of strenghening their status-quo. Second, the nefunctionalist stream (Marks 1993; Marks, Hooghe, & Blank, 1996) focuses on the persuasive effects that European integration might have over the very autonomy of the Member States. Third, the multi-level governance stream considers that European integration is not a matter of gaining or losing state autonomy or strenght, but, rather, a means of transforming the Member State as a consequence of the collaborative relations which would gradually emerge among various levels of governance. Not surprisingly, top-down approaches have been criticized for their rather narrow perspective, "which conceptualizes the process largely as a one-way street and treats target countries as passive recipients of EU demands for change" (Borzel & Pamuk, 2011, 6). Our paper looks at what it is often referred to as a "domestic turn" in europeanization studies (McCaulley, 2011). The domestic turn highlights that "Member State governments may be the most important shapers of EU decisions. Yet, domestic actors are their main takers." (Börzel, 2003, 4). And their main implementers, we might rightfully add. National stakeholders, such as universities, have the power to influence how a society relate to the EU.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

Our research builds on a larger study that focused on the qualifications and competencies required from university graduates to improve their access to the European job market, and more, specifically, to professions