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Higher education and democratisation in Western Balkans : challenges for integration into European Union and global economy

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Pre print Policy brief

Abstract

Higher education and research activities in Western Balkans countries started to be in the focus of interests of the EU recently even if access to EU funds for higher education and research is possible since few years. The article analyses the role of higher education and research in the context of EU integration of Western Balkans countries. Many reforms of higher education systems have been implemented since the integration of Western Balkans countries in the Bologna Process. However, many efforts are still needed to strenghten ther higher education and reserach sector in the Western Balkans.

Introduction

Western Balkans countries have experienced profound transformations over the past three decades: exit / transition from communism to a market economy, appearance of new states, conflicts of the 1990s in the former Yugoslav area, migrations, process of joining the European Union. In this context, education systems have also undergone transformations. This raises the question of the relationship between higher education and the process of democratization. As such, the main research work is based above all on the relationship between higher education and citizenship and participation in civil society. (Nie, Junn and StehlikBarr, 1996)¹. In addition, other researchers have analyzed the relationship between education levels and voting (Milligan, Moretti and Oreopoulos 2004)². Higher education has also been studied in terms of its contribution to political activism (Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2009)³. Some researchers have analyzed the transformations of education systems and higher education in the Western Balkans in the context of integration into the European Union (M. Vukasovic 2012)⁴. Based on this research and fieldwork, the objective of this article is to raise the following questions: What role can higher education play in the democratization of the Western Balkans?

¹ Norman H. NIE, June JUNN and Kenneth STEHLIK-BARRY *Education and Democratic Citizenship in America*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1996

² Kevin MILLIGAN, Enrico MORETTI, Philip OREOPOULOS, Does education improve citizenship? Evidence from the United States and the United Kingdom, *Journal of Public Economics*, vol.88, 2004, pp.1667-1695

³ Nancy BURNS, Kac LEHMAN SCHLOZMAN, Sidney VERBA, *The Private Roots of Public Action: Gender, Equality, and Political Participation*, Harvard University Press, 2009, 471 p.

⁴ Martina VUKASOVIC, European integration in higher education in the Western Balkan countries (WBC) A Review of Literature, Norglobal programme, 2012

How have higher education systems changed in the context of the exit from communism towards capitalism? Did the 1990s leave its mark on higher education systems? How can higher education contribute to transmitting European values? How does higher education contribute to the integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union and into the global economy?

Post-communist Legacy and transformations of political and economic systems; What are the consequences for higher education in the Western Balkans?

Following the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia since the 1990s, the higher education system has undergone profound transformations. Firstly, the education systems have undergone profound changes following the arrival of new political parties resulting from the first “free” elections in the early 1990s. Each state in the Western Balkans has its particularities. Thus, Croatia and Serbia are the countries with the oldest tradition of higher education. The other countries have more recent higher education systems. The decade of the 1990s was a period of rising nationalisms and economic collapse. During this decade there was also a collapse of values, a significant increase in the informal economy and an increase in corruption in all spheres of society, including higher education. It was also a period with winners and losers from the post-communist transition with wars. It is in this context that private higher education institutions have appeared. In addition, during this decade the migrations of young people to Western countries were significant. Most of the private higher education institutions created during this decade have survived. Others were created in the 2000s. Some of these institutions have been the subject of criticism in the media of the Western Balkans countries⁵ regarding the quality of studies, corruption and the purchase of diplomas. Some public higher education institutions have also been the subject of criticism and cases exposed in the media. The number of students in private universities remains very high. The question of financing studies in private higher education is a real problem for many families. In addition, even in public universities, there are two categories of students : those on State budget and other self-financing. It thus appears for example that one out of two students must finance their studies in Serbia with very high amounts in a country where monthly average salaries are low and the cost of living high. In this context, students who can benefit from State support are thus largely privileged.

The Bologna process and the reforms of higher education systems in the Western Balkans

Most of the Western Balkans countries have implemented reforms related to the Bologna process since 2003. So, only few years after the 29 Bologna signatories have agreed to support the general principles of the « Sorbonne declaration ». In this context, Western Balkans countries could participate to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)⁶. For example, Serbia joined the Bologna process in 2003 and has adopted new legislation. The adoption of the higher education law supporting the implementation implementation of the

⁵ <https://www.ekspres.net/srbija/sporne-doktorske-diplome-predmet-pravne-ekspertize-provera-oko-100-doktorata>.

⁶ ZGAGA, Pavel, Reconsidering the EHEA Principles: Is There a ‘Bologna Philosophy’? In A. Curaj, P.Scott, L. Vlasceanu & L. Wilson (Eds.), European Higher Education at the Crossroads: Between the Bologna Process and National Reforms (pp. 17-38). 2012 Dordrecht: Springer.

Bologna process followed in 2005. The reform process continued with the adoption of standards for accreditation, self-assessment and external quality control in 2006. This set the conditions for the start of the accreditation process for higher education institutions and study programs in 2007⁷. This laid down the framework that is still in effect. It is only after 2012, that is to say after obtaining the status of candidate country for membership of the European Union, that Serbia can benefit from other European funds alongside the pre-funds. - IPA membership (IPA I, IPA II and currently IPA III). Among these funds is the European research support program Horizon Europe. In Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania, higher education reforms linked to the Bologna process also took place in the early 2000s. Bologna was also followed by a modernization and internationalization of higher education. Standards and guidelines for quality assurance were adopted in all Western Balkans countries⁸. Since their adoption, significant progress has been made in ensuring the quality of higher education and other action lines of the Bologna Process, such as the development of the qualifications framework, the recognition of qualifications and the development of learning outcomes.

European Union integration and higher education : a lever for democratisation ?

The processes of integration into the European Union have both repercussions on the educational systems of higher education but also represent opportunities for higher education and research institutions in the Western Balkan States⁹. The reforms have repercussions on different levels¹⁰, for institutions and organizations but also for students, teachers and researchers and people employed in higher education and research. In most of Western Balkans countries these changes have created new opportunities. However, there is still of lack of utilisation of possibilities in term of accession to EU funds for Higher education and Research. Even if it is possible for higher education institutions from Western Balkans countries to the Horizon Europe programme, to Erasmus plus and other programm, there is a significant lack of capacity in project development and preparation even if there are some success stories¹¹. In addition, economic situations in the Western Balkans are also lower than those in the EU member States. In this context, the socio-economic background and environment for students and researchers in Western Balkans is not favorable and they are disatvanged in comparison with students in EU members countries¹². In this context, investments in knowledge

⁷ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/serbia/higher-education>

⁸ ZGAGA Pavel, Bologna in the Western Balkans : reconsideration on Higher education reforms in the region, *Nastava i vaspitanje*, 2017 vol.66, br.1, pp ;7-21

⁹ <http://www.nsinitiative.uns.ac.rs/index.html> (consulted on June 20th 2023)

¹⁰ Harry de BOER, Jon FILE, Marco SEEBER, Martina VUKASOVIC, Don F.WESTERHEIJDEN, *Policy Analysis of Structural Reforms in Higher Education, Processes and Outcomes*, Palgrave, Macmillan, 2017.

¹¹ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/europe-world/international-cooperation/serbia_en (Consulted on 12th June 2023)

¹² See the PISA assesment (PISA is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment). Results shows that a student's socio-economic background is represented through the index of ecoomic, social and cultural status (ESCS), which is created based upon information about a student's home environment, parents' level of education and parents' employment. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/764847ff-en/1/3/1/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/764847ff->

economy¹³ can benefit to all socio-economic sphere. In this sense, the creation of Horizon Europe Joint Committees¹⁴ with Western Balkans countries can be very useful. They can contribute to strengthen and promote Research and Innovation through cooperation and integration in the new European Research Area (ERA)¹⁵. The European Union support also development of science and innovation development parks. Some of them are financed by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)¹⁶. These initiatives can contribute to strengthen linkages between universities, research centers and the private sector. Having in mind the importance of new technologies and innovation for the economic development, these initiatives can also foster the employment of young researchers. Mobility of students and researcher from Western Balkans country is already supported by the European Union and bilateral funds. Through this mobility, new idea, new concepts, new thoughts can be exchanged and they can contribute to democratisation. In the past, the « intelligentsia » from Western Balkans had the opportunity to study in Vienna, Muchen, Paris, London and other Western European cities. This was crucial to build the legislative frameworks, to transfer knowledge in many fields. Nowadays, challenges are similar and higher education and research activities can play a crucial role in the democratisation and development of the region.

What role for doctoral studies in Western Balkans ?

In the field of doctoral studies and research, several initiatives have emerged over the past twenty years. Thus, launched by NGOs (think-tanks), the idea of creating a Research Center for South-Eastern Europe was taken up by the University of York through the creation of an independent associative structure based in Thessaloniki in 2003. The idea of creating a regional platform for the development of cooperation in higher education and research also came from civil society and was promoted by think-tanks. The idea was taken up by the University of Zagreb, which launched a cooperation platform “Regional Platform for Benchmarking and Cooperation in Higher Education and Research” in which several Western Balkan countries participate. This platform aims to improve the quality of studies in universities. However, few concrete results have emerged despite this interesting initiative. In 2016, the idea of creating a fund for research in the Western Balkans (Western Balkan Research Fund) was also launched, which has not yet seen the light of day. In addition to the IPA pre-accession funds, the Western Balkan countries can participate in European projects in the field of research. However, the number of projects submitted to Horizon and other programs remains low. Furthermore, research networks between the Western Balkan states remain weak and very few partnership projects are presented for European funding. Despite the existence of cross-border cooperation projects within the framework of the pre-accession funds (IPA) which are

[en&_csp=c8a6d28bf137221d8a45ab2b8d91930e&itemIGO=oced&itemContentType=book#section-d1e850](#)
(Consulted on 12 th June 2023)

¹³ S. HANCOCK, A future in the knowledge economy? Analysing the career strategies of doctoral scientists through the principles of game theory. *Higher Education*, 2018

¹⁴ The first Serbia-Horizon Europe Joint Committee has been organised on June 15th 2023 https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/europe-world/international-cooperation/serbia_en

¹⁵ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/our-digital-future/european-research-area_en#commissions-plan-for-a-new-era-based-on-excellence (Consulted on 29th June 2023)

¹⁶ <https://www.ebrd.com/news/2023/serbia-to-build-science-and-technology-parks-with-80-million-ebrd-loan.html> (Consulted on July 7th)

currently in the third phase IPA III (2021-2027), these projects do not cover the academic field and rare are the projects that associate research centers or universities with the private sector for innovation projects. On the other hand, cross-border cooperation projects such as the Danube Strategy or the Ionian Adriatic Strategy, which bring together Member States of the European Union and the Western Balkan States and have for some years included research centers in certain fields (environment, transport, cultural heritage) remain at this stage initiatives that do not integrate the question of the training of future researchers. All life learning is crucial for a researcher career¹⁷. In this sense, in parallel to their research, young reserchers should learn how to build their carreer and how to develop a « scientific project orinted culture ». This goal is not easy and require investments in capacity bulidings of individual researchers, higher education instutions and research centers.

French experience in the field of doctoral studies and the Western Balkans

Doctoral studies in the Western Balkans deserve to be better structured and doctoral students during their doctoral career should be able to benefit from a supervised and reasoned doctoral training program. In this area, France has experienced a very clear development of its doctoral schools in recent years through an enriched training system and reinforced support for doctoral studies. Thus, since the decree of 25 May 2016 setting the national training framework and the procedures leading to the award of the national doctoral diploma, doctoral students benefit from training and professional research experience which leads to the production new knowledge. A training agreement is drawn up for each doctoral student. Doctoral training includes personal research work carried out by the doctoral student, supplemented by compulsory additional training validated by the doctoral school. It covers work of scientific, economic, social, technological or cultural interest. Since the certification of the doctorate, defining the skills of doctoral graduates and registering the doctorate in the national directory of professional certification, the issuance of the doctorate certifies the ability to produce new high-level scientific knowledge as well as the acquisition and mastery of 6 blocks of skills common to all doctors and linked to their training through research.

With the aim of promoting the recruitment of doctors by employers in the production and service sectors, these blocks of skills are defined by decree. In addition to cross-cutting seminars on disciplinary and areal themes and thematic schools organized by research teams, there are doctoral training workshops, intensive training courses in research methodology and tools, generic cross-training scientific English, editorial know-how, development of scientific presentation in the form of a slide show, use of bibliographic management software, introduction to digital identity and social networks for young researchers, optimization of research and monitoring, presentation of electronic resources in open access, raise awareness of the risks of plagiarism, research ethics, etc.), as well as the seminars which will have to cover the items of the several blocks of skills. Individual doctoral student monitoring committees, from the second year of the doctorate, also evaluate the progress of the doctoral students' work. Concerning Western Balkans countries, France has launched in 2021 the programm ES-Balk

¹⁷ L. AUROIL, L., M/ MISU. and R.A. FREEMAN,, Careers of doctoral holders: analysis of labour market and mobility indicators. OECD Science, Technology and Industry working papers, 2013.

supported by FEI (France Education International)¹⁸ to support innovative projects in higher education in Western Balkans. Within this programme a project for a creation of regional doctoral school for Western Balkans¹⁹ has been implemented as well as other projects. The french interest to invest in higher education and research in Western Balkans follow other initiatives towards research, innovation and development. Support to higher education and research in Western Balkans countries is still needed in order to help building of future of students and young researchers. The mobility of students and researchers is also crucial to transfer knowledge with other countries. This mobility with the Western Balkans region is also important for reconciliation. The question of independence of research activity is also crucial for the democratisation of the region.

Policy Recommendations

1. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms of higher education and Research in Western Balkans countries should be developed in accordance with EU best practices.
2. Capacities of higher education institutions and research centers as well as individual researchers in Western Balkans countries to apply to EU funds should be strengthened through specific EU and bilateral projects. In this sense, international aid towards Western Balkans should allocate more funds for capacity building projects in higher education and research.
3. Links between higher education institutions, research centers and private sector as well as with civil society in Western Balkans countries should be developed in order to promote research and innovative approaches to development and employability of students after their studies.

About the author

Nebojsa Vukadinovic is a senior lecturer at Sciences Po Paris (campus Dijon) and an associate researcher at IRM-CMRP (University of Bordeaux). He is also a lecturer at INALCO (Paris). His research focuses on the European integration of Western Balkan countries with special regards to relations between external and local actors in the region. His research also focuses on the transformation of states and the economic development of Western Balkan countries. He holds several MA-equivalent degrees: DEA in Economics from the EHESS (Paris); DEA in Political Science from Sciences Po (Paris); and DEA of Philosophy from the University of Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne. He also holds a PhD from Sciences Po Paris. He is member of the Scientific Committee of EuropaNova

¹⁸ <https://www.france-education-international.fr/document/aapes-balkvf> (Consulted in April 2021)

¹⁹ <https://edbalk.eu/>

