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A qualitative inquiry into the europeanization of Romanian higher-education

Paul Dobrescu^a, Loredana Radu^{a*}

^aNational University for Political Studies and Public Administration, 6 Povernei st., Bucharest 60420, Romania

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 renowned 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, governmental actors), with the aim to create the best learning and career path for the Romanian students.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +4-0-754-227-595; fax: +4-0-21-211-01-11.
E-mail address: loredana.radu@comunicare.ro

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 renowned 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 *savoir-faire* 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 strengthening their status-quo. Second, the neofunctionalist 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 strength, 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” (Börzel & 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

dealing with EU Affairs. The study was conducted as part of the project “Euroentrepreneurship – university qualifications for the Europeanization of the Romanian society”, co-financed by the European Social Fund via the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013. The project was implemented between 2014 and 2015 by the National University for Political Studies and Public Administration (NUPSPA) (Bucharest), in partnership with the Institute for European Studies IES (Free University, Brussels) – two higher-education institutions offering specializations and degrees in EU Affairs. The IES was selected as a partner due to its prestige and experience in training full generations of European decision-makers and servants.

The project was designed to contribute to the development and strengthening of higher education in Romania by improving the capacity of Romanian universities to offer new professional qualifications and programs that are tailored to the requirements of the European job market. Consequently, the project entailed redesigning, diversifying and bringing up-to-date a series of master and Ph.D programs, which are relevant in the context of Romania’s ongoing Europeanization. In this specific context, the aim of the study was to assess how education programmes could be improved to better meet the needs of the European job market. More specifically, it explores the students’ perceptions on qualifications and competencies related to European affairs in order to collect the lessons learned and best practices which would improve current graduate programmes at NUPSPA.

Our research provides documented answers to three research questions:

1. How do Belgian students evaluate their qualifications and competencies related to European affairs?
2. How do Romanian students evaluate their qualifications and competencies related to European affairs?
3. What are the key differences between Romanian and Belgian students regarding their qualifications and competencies related to European affairs?

The research questions were addressed by means of qualitative methods. More specifically, interviews and focus groups with students and/or alumni from the two partner universities were implemented in both Romania and Belgium.

3.2. Discussion

Belgian respondents emphasized several aspects which, in their opinion, were particularly useful when integrating in jobs related to EU Affairs:

- The professors:
 - their experience (e.g. many hold positions as Commission officials, judges and practitioners in addition to teaching);
 - the use of modern teaching methods, which made it interactive, good mix between practice and theory;
 - the special care that professors showed for the students (e.g. additional support timely offered, on demand).
- The lectures/classes:
 - the quality of lectures, up to date with a lot of interesting supporting material provided timely;
 - practical orientation of courses (e.g. hands-on experience);
 - small size of the course group, which facilitated dialogue and debates;
 - the case-studies system was particularly interesting;
 - the variety which was offered in terms of courses, the individual style of each of the professors;
 - the courses were updated to the current situation of the EU and in most of the courses there were practical examples.
- The students/peers:
 - the international composition of the student group and teaching staff;
 - developing new professional friends and personal as well.
- Educational resources:
 - access to a full library of intriguing books that were freely accessible;
 - facilities of IES & the VUB campus, the frequent webinars/seminars/speeches offered at IES.

- Other aspects, such as visiting of the European Institutions and university's location in Brussels were mentioned.

However, one alumna mentioned that, despite its very informative character, the overall educational experience was "rich in perspectives but poor in employment related matters", thus suggesting certain difficulties from the employment perspective, which are somehow consistent with the European trends. Recommendations for improving the programme were equally diverse, and often asking for more of something that the alumni had liked. The most common response was suggesting guidance for the job market and internship opportunities. The second related to networking and connecting the programme with the rest of the university.

By answering the question "What part or aspects of your studies do you feel have prepared you the most for finding and succeeding in your work?", the Belgian students pointed at:

- the "excellent theoretical background knowledge of the EU institutions and especially meeting practitioners in guest lectures offer a practical example to the students";
- the up to date information on the European institutions;
- intensive coursework – "I left with a great deal of theoretical expertise, and the case study was especially valuable from a practical perspective"
- the international experience;
- studying and working together with students with different backgrounds;
- getting to know how Brussels works, networking in Brussels and what it can potentially offer;
- getting insights from the professors, and their knowledge on current issues;
- the ability to work with people of different backgrounds and opinions.

As regards the research conducted among Romanian students, the findings could be couagulated around the main discussion topics:

- the development of smart improvements for the academic programs;
- the need to synchronize the Romanian academic programs with other (similar) academic programs in the EU;
- the validation of the qualifications obtained by Romanian graduates by other Member-States; and
- the necessity to link the academic qualifications in EU affairs to the demands of the employers.

Thus, all respondents highlighted that an essential elements aiming at improving the Romanian academic programs, consists in appropriately sizing their practical dimension of all teaching activities by means of simulations, case studies, and other similar instruments. More specifically, students emphasized the need to redesign internships so that they might ensure an European perspective on their future professions and jobs. In this vein, the involvement of potential employers, as well a close interaction with relevant stakeholders (i.e. governmental structures, European institutions) are deemed vital for the Europeanization of the academic opportunities provided by Romanian universities. A more specific recommendation has been to align the study programs to existing relevant standards promoted by professional associations, companies, or public administration. This suggests that students would mostly value a horizontal type of Europeanization, where academia collaborates with industry stakeholders in order to Europeanize the Romanian society by accommodating various needs and perspectives belonging to both national and European actors.

As regards the synchronization between the Romanian study programs and other European programs, the respondents' main concern is related to a weak socio-cultural adaptation of European best practices to the Romanian higher-education. Students specifically addressed the issue of cultural inadaptation as a means of highlighting the idea that EU affairs-related qualifications should also embody – to a certain extent – national specificities. Students might seem to suggest that, as far as the design of academic programs is concerned, a bottom-up approach should be (more) compatible with a top-down perspective, in the sense that it should complement it rather than contradict or oppose it. Thus, students suggested that the inability to study in an international environment should be mitigated through classes specializing in intercultural communication, guest speaking sessions given by EU professionals, and experience exchanges with Erasmus students in Romania. The idea of employability was evident throughout the

interviews. Students asked for a closed link between the university, the one hand, and the business environment, on the other one.

The conclusions of the Romanian research reveal two improvement areas. Firstly, a good academic experience means quality and relevance of knowledge. Secondly, students emphasized the importance of transversal capabilities – such as team work abilities, communication skills, or leadership abilities – for any EU-related job; these should be listed among the learning objectives of any academic program focusing on EU affairs and other related competencies.

4. Conclusions

Any comparison between the two studies should take into account the social and cultural differences between the two countries. Romania is a new member-state, with a limited EU experience, whereas Belgium stands right at the heart of European integration. The differences between the Romanian society and the Western societies, the specific academic traditions, as well as the internationalization degree of Western higher-education are important contextual factors, which can not be ignored.

Despite all these national structural particularities, we could identify some similar problems that students are facing. Both Romanian and Belgian students emphasised the fact that nowadays having a good academic education is not sufficient anymore; academic degrees are most often taken for granted by the potential employers, thus not constituting an added value *per se*. The European job market would always look for candidates with proven practical skills.

Even though Romanian students tend to signal a certain lack of practical courses during their graduate education, they are not always willing to fill this gap on their own - for example, by enrolling in unpaid internships or volunteering opportunities. On the contrary, Belgian students are almost always open towards unpaid professional experiences that might help them gain some skills, which, in the medium and long-run could support them in finding appropriate jobs. Of course, this could be due to the fact that Western cultures are generally more entrepreneurial, whereas Eastern cultures tend to be more passive. However, it is necessary that the Romanian students should develop the ability to pursue long-term, not only short-term, objectives.

If Belgian students are inclined to accept the EU as an internal, even domestic, actors, which is part of their education, Romanian students place a certain distance between the national and the European landscapes. Romanian students would like to learn about the EU, by combining the European with the national perspectives. Thus, they subscribe to a horizontal bottom-up europeanization tendency, which is somehow a mix between the two explanatory models described above.

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