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Abstract

Erasmus+ is a powerful tool of public diplomacy for the European Union (EU); however, its international dimension remains under-researched. This paper seeks to help bridge this gap by analysing the degree to which the EU's engagement through Erasmus+ is embedded in the overarching frameworks of its neighbourhood and enlargement policies. Drawing in particular on the experience of Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EU's engagement in the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans is scrutinised under three lenses: the objectives pursued, their implementation, and the domestic receptibility of Erasmus+. The paper finds a low degree of Erasmus+ embeddedness in the Eastern Partnership framework and a moderate degree of integration in the enlargement framework. In light of this finding, it argues that the EU should better employ this valuable tool in its external action and diplomacy. The three countries are highly receptive, but domestic constraints must be considered in EU planning. The paper concludes with policy recommendations that seek to better embed Erasmus+ in the EU's external policies, as well as to capitalise on the programme's potential as a tool for the Union's broader diplomatic strategy.

Introduction: Erasmus+ beyond the EU27

Before the news of the United Kingdom leaving Erasmus+, little public attention had been given to the operation of the European Union's (EU) programme for Education, Training, Youth, and Sport beyond its borders, and more generally to the role of Higher Education (HE) policy in EU external action. As a supplementary EU competence and a nationally sensitive question, education policy on the Union level has mostly been constrained to mobility activities, intergovernmentally established benchmarks, and the wider process of accreditation harmonisation known as the Bologna Process. This bears the question to what extent the EU displays a meaningful external engagement based on Erasmus+.

Most of the available literature on the EU's external HE engagement examines the Bologna Process, EU-induced reforms in HE, or generally HE in one or more countries, taking into account relevant socio-historical factors and related processes.¹ Nonetheless, scholars do not relate their findings to the EU's wider relationship with the country or countries under scrutiny. As a result, the question of differentiation in the EU's engagement through Erasmus+ in different parts of the world remains largely uncharted. Particularly in regions of high importance for the EU, engagement could be tailored to the wider policy framework, utilising existing networks and relationships, or be used as a medium to achieve region-specific objectives.

Erasmus+ can have a significant effect on citizens' perceptions, not least through exchanges. Similarly, capacity building, dialogue, and academic expertise in EU affairs can promote reforms and increase knowledge about the EU in society. The

¹ K. Rostiashvili, "Higher Education in Transition: From Corruption to Freedom of Information in Post-Soviet Georgia", *European Education*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2012, p. 34; J.P. Jallade, "International Approaches to Education: A Review of Some Major Cooperative Programmes", *European Journal of Education*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2011, p. 15; P. Furlong, "The Bologna Process: Informal Governance in the Wider Europe", lecture, *UACES 41st Annual Conference*, Cambridge, 5 September 2011, p. 16; V. Kushnarenko, L. Cojocari, "Internationalisation of Higher Education in Post-Soviet Small States: Realities and Perspectives of Moldova", *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2012, p. 134; S. Wulk, *The Role and Relevance of Higher Education Policy in EU External Relations: An Analysis of the Transmissive, Transformative and Transactional Qualities of University Institutions and Programmes*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2015; L. Highman, "The EU's External Engagement in Higher Education: Externalizing the Bologna Process", in C. Damro, S. Gstöhl, S. Schunz (eds), *The European Union's Evolving External Engagement: Towards New Sectoral Diplomacies?* Abingdon, Routledge, 2018, 196-215; C. Gerards, S. Schunz, C. Damro, "Opportunity, Presence and Entrepreneurship: Why the EU Acts Externally on Higher Education", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13154>.

visibility of Erasmus+ is an important resource to this end; indicatively, educational programmes are the most well-known EU activities in the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which renders Erasmus+ an invaluable tool for the EU's public diplomacy.² As argued in the literature, even though education does not form part of the EU's main external action priorities, it remains a significant "resource for creating soft power".³ The present study aims to highlight the role of Erasmus+ in EU external policy and diplomacy and contribute to this nascent body of literature on EU education policy.

This paper investigates the link between Erasmus+ and overarching policy frameworks in the Western Balkans and the EaP. It tries to determine to what extent the EU's engagement through Erasmus+ in HE in the two regions is embedded in the wider pre-accession framework and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). In other words, it examines to what extent Erasmus+ engagement in these regions is tailored to and conditioned by the overarching geographic policy framework.

To do so, three indicators of engagement are examined: first, the objectives pursued by the EU in the two regions, covering general objectives of external HE activity, specific HE objectives for the two regions, as well as general objectives of EU enlargement and neighbourhood policies which can be related to HE. Second, the implementation of Erasmus+ is investigated, comprising resources, consultation with domestic actors, and synergies with the wider framework of EU action. Finally, receptibility tests the programme's domestic acceptance. To determine the degree of embeddedness, these findings will be compared against general external HE engagement and against relevant aspects of the policy frameworks under scrutiny throughout.

The indicators are examined on the regional level and with a particular focus on Georgia, the Republic of Moldova (hereafter: Moldova), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The three cases are comparable as they all have European aspirations but are not candidate states; they have access to the same range of opportunities under Erasmus+; they are post-socialist republics, which has significantly impacted public institutions; and they face statehood consolidation problems.

² EU Neighbours East, "Annual Survey Report: 4th Wave", May 2019, p. 18.

³ H. Zichner, V. Saran, "The EU's Education Policy Abroad: The 'Power of Attraction' and the Case of Moldova", in B. Bruno, D. Happ, H. Zichner (eds), *European Neighbourhood Policy: Geopolitics between Integration and Security*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 163.

External engagement through Erasmus+ refers to the international HE dimension of the 2014-2020 programme. This includes student and staff mobility through International Credit Mobility (ICM) and Erasmus Mundus Joint Degrees (Key Action 1); capacity-building joint projects (targeting individual HE institutions) and structural projects (addressing systemic capacity-building) (Key Action 2); dialogue for policy reform (Key Action 3); and support for teaching and research on the EU (Jean Monnet).

The research is based on qualitative data obtained from EU documents on external action through Erasmus+ in the two regions and documents on multilateral and bilateral relations with the three countries. These sources are complemented by expert interviews with EU and domestic actors held in March and April 2020.

Based on the findings, which indicate that Erasmus+ embeddedness in the ENP is weak and in enlargement policy moderate, this paper argues that Erasmus+ is an invaluable, yet not fully exploited, tool for EU external action and diplomacy. To capitalise on the programme's full potential, the EU should take steps to better embed it in its geographic policies and public diplomacy. To this end, the paper will conclude with some recommendations for the future of EU external engagement in HE.

Objectives of engagement

This section will scrutinise the objectives of the international dimension of Erasmus+ and, building on these, examine region-specific objectives in the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans. This will allow to determine the degree of ambition in pursuing and contributing to ENP and enlargement-specific aims through Erasmus+.

The international dimension of Erasmus+

The EU's rationale in pursuing an external dimension of Erasmus+ can be traced back to the Decision establishing Erasmus+ and the first annual work programme.⁴ Erasmus+ was created to bring together several different programmes and in this way increase “synergies, efficiency, and simplification” and “make EU actions more visible,

⁴ European Union, “Regulation No 1288/2013 establishing Erasmus+”, OJ, L347, 11 December 2013; European Commission, “Erasmus+ 2014 Annual Work Programme” (hereafter: 2014 Work Programme), C(2013) 8193, 27 November 2013.

coherent, and attractive".⁵ The delineation of a clear external dimension, which reinforces Erasmus+' "undisputable European added value", is "aimed at supporting the Union's external action" and "work linked to the priorities of European external actions".⁶

This linkage of Erasmus+ with external action objectives could be conducive to differentiation on the basis of the EU's geographic policies and priorities. However, the programme's mid-term evaluation shows that alignment with EU external action is lower than its complementarity with other Union programmes and that there is a margin for improvement of its international strand's "management, visibility, and communication".⁷

Work programmes throughout the 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) largely identify the sustainable development, modernisation, and internationalisation of partner countries and their HE institutions as key aims of the international dimension of the programme.⁸ While modernisation through capacity-building projects and internationalisation through mobility remain central priorities, intercultural awareness and people-to-people contacts are introduced as new elements from 2019 onwards.⁹ It is also implicitly acknowledged that the reach of mobility activities is too limited for them to constitute an inclusive approach to internationalisation. This is expressed through the new ambition to devise "innovative and creative international curricula" benefitting both mobile and non-mobile students in partner countries.¹⁰

The specific objectives of each Key Action have a similar yet different story to tell. Key Action 1 on mobility intends to contribute to the personal and professional development of participants and the improvement of teaching quality at large.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27; European Commission, "Communication: European Higher Education in the World", COM(2013) 499, 11 July 2013, p. 10.

⁶ European Commission, "Report: Mid-Term Evaluation of the Erasmus+ Programme (2014-2020)", COM(2018) 50, 31 January 2018, p. 4; European Union, "Regulation No 1288/2013 establishing Erasmus+", OJ, L347, 11 December 2013, Article 1.4; European Commission, 2014 Work Programme, *op. cit.*, p. 10; European Commission, "Staff Working Document: Mid-Term Evaluation of the Erasmus+ Programme (2014-2020)", SWD(2018) 40, 31 January 2018, p. 5.

⁷ European Commission, "Staff Working Document: Mid-Term Evaluation of the Erasmus+ Programme (2014-2020)", SWD(2018) 40, 31 January 2018, pp. 44, 76.

⁸ European Commission, 2014 Work Programme, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-13.

⁹ European Commission, "Amendment of the 2019 Annual Work Programme or the implementation of Erasmus+", C(2019)997, 15 February 2019, p. 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Intercultural understanding, international networks, and “a sense of citizenship and identity” are also seen as desirable results of this Key Action.¹¹ These objectives highlight the importance of presenting added value for the programme’s participants, diverging from the previous narrative of mobility as a ‘stepping stone’ towards HE internationalisation. The objectives of Key Action 2 do not make an explicit reference to partner countries, although the EU’s engagement through capacity-building is very strong. This Key Action aims at modernisation and increasing synergies between HE and strategies for employment, growth, and the promotion of democratic values, among others.¹² Key Action 3 works towards the involvement of non-governmental stakeholders in public debates on policy reform and the increase in international exchange of good practices.¹³ Finally, Jean Monnet’s key aim is the creation of “interest in the EU and [...] the basis for future poles of European knowledge, particularly in Partner Countries”.¹⁴

Overall, it is clear that the international dimension of Erasmus+ has some distinct objectives. Synergies with other EU policies stands out as a particularly strong objective, as do HE internationalisation and modernisation. Over the course of the MFF, there is a visible increase in the ambition of the objectives pursued and a vocalised focus on the level of individuals. This indicates a top-down and bottom-up strategy intending to affect individual perceptions but also relevant structures to bring about more lasting and sustainable change.

Eastern Partnership

Zooming in on specific EaP-level objectives stemming from Erasmus+ and EaP documents, these general objectives can now be related to the EaP framework.

The most prominent aim guiding Erasmus+ engagement in the neighbourhood is the pursuit of synergies with the ENP, in line with the Erasmus+ general objective of supporting external action. Such references can be traced back to as early as 2011, where a Joint Communication on the neighbourhood called for increased

¹¹ European Commission, “Erasmus+ 2020 Annual Work Programme” (hereafter: 2020 Work Programme), C(2019)5823, 7 August 2019, p. 67.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹³ European Commission, “Amendment of the 2018 Annual Work Programme for the implementation of Erasmus+ 2018”, C(2018) 774, 15 February 2018, p. 64.

¹⁴ European Commission, 2020 Work Programme, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

cooperation in HE, pursuant also to the 'more for more' principle.¹⁵ Early Erasmus+ documents refer to the need for better "links between policy and programme", while the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Commission's DG International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO, now International Partnerships INTPA) recognise the "modernisation and opening up of HE" as a key priority for the ENP, to be achieved through Erasmus+.¹⁶ Recently, Erasmus+ has employed the same vocabulary, potentially pointing to synergies and a move towards a common narrative that seeps through a wide range of policies. A symbolic example of such synergies is the 2015 ENP Review which links education to the management of 'frozen conflicts' by urging the inclusion of universities from conflict areas in Erasmus+.¹⁷ In more recent strategic documents, quality enhancement, modernisation, and internationalisation through Erasmus+ emerge as a main normative priority.¹⁸

The first element differentiating the EU's engagement in the EaP consists in linkages with the labour market. The EU includes mobility and capacity building in HE in the neighbourhood under the umbrella of "all sectors relevant to the Internal Market", while the connection of education to the labour market is explicitly defined as a post-2020 priority.¹⁹ The Erasmus+ regulation also calls for the "promotion of regional cooperation [...] in particular with neighbourhood countries", while the creation of an Erasmus+-based partnership also formed part of the European Neighbourhood Instrument's (ENI) priorities.²⁰ Furthermore, the Joint Communication 20 Deliverables for 2020 sets out the intention of creating a network of universities under the auspices of

¹⁵ European Commission, High Representative, "Joint Communication: A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood" (hereafter: A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood), COM(2011) 303, 25 May 2011, p. 10.

¹⁶ European Commission, 2014 Work Programme, *op. cit.*, p. 30; EEAS, DG DEVCO, "Programming of the ENI 2014-2020: Strategic Priorities 2014-2020 and Multi-Annual Indicative Programme 2014-2017 – European Neighbourhood-wide programmes", date unknown, p. 4.

¹⁷ European Commission, High Representative, "Joint Communication: Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy" (hereafter ENP Review), JOIN(2015) 50, 18 November 2015, p. 9.

¹⁸ European Commission, High Representative, "Joint Communication: Eastern Partnership- 20 Deliverables for 2020" (hereafter: 20 Deliverables for 2020), SWD(2017) 300, 9 June 2017, pp. 44-45.

¹⁹ European Commission, High Representative, A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood, *op. cit.*, p. 10; European Commission, High Representative, ENP Review, *op. cit.*, p. 9; European Commission, High Representative, "Joint Communication: Eastern Partnership Policy beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that Delivers for all" (hereafter: Eastern Partnership Policy beyond 2020), JOIN(2020) 7, 18 March 2020, p. 8.

²⁰ Erasmus+ Regulation, Article 8.2; EEAS, DG DEVCO, "Programming of the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) 2014-2020" (hereafter: Programming of the ENI 2014-2020), date unknown, p. 12.

Erasmus+ and member states' initiatives.²¹ Such ambition has not been followed up consistently. For example, the Key Action 3-funded activity of HE Reform Experts – networks of experts promoting reform in partner countries – could work on a regional platform, especially capitalising on the already existing EaP multilateral track of cooperation.²² However, they are kept on the national level; only recently has this ambition started to resurface through an International Policy Dialogue revolving around the promotion of regional policy in HE matters.²³

A relevant overarching objective of the Eastern Partnership is the strengthening of civil society, which has been identified as a “vector for reform”.²⁴ According to the EU Global Strategy, educational exchanges strengthen such “societal links”, thus facilitating people-to-people contacts, one of the central pillars forming the Eastern Partnership.²⁵ Finally, an objective of EU-EaP cooperation in the field of HE which also contributes to internationalisation and modernisation is the question of legal convergence. This objective falls outside the scope of Erasmus+, strictly speaking, but can be promoted through structural projects and policy dialogue. The Association Agreements with Georgia and Moldova mention convergence related to the Bologna Process.²⁶ This has been recently reiterated on a EaP-wide level, whereby neighbours are expected to align their laws and practices “with European developments”, explicitly mentioning the Bologna Process but not EU norms and policies, in a potential attempt to keep such convergence at arm's length.²⁷

To sum up, the EU's engagement in the Eastern Partnership is differentiated along four axes: linkages between HE and the labour market, a focus on regionalisation and on civil society, and legal approximation. It can be concluded that the EU has an

²¹ European Commission, High Representative, 20 Deliverables for 2020, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

²² European Commission, “Communication: European Higher Education in the World”, COM(2013) 499, 11 July 2013, p. 13.

²³ European Commission, 2020 Work Programme, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

²⁴ EEAS, DG DEVCO, Programming of the ENI 2014-2020, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

²⁵ High Representative, “Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe, A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy”, June 2016, p. 25.

²⁶ European Union, “Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Georgia, of the other part”, OJ, L261, 30 August 2014, Article 359; European Union, “Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Moldova, of the other part”, OJ, L260, 30 August 2014, Article 123.

²⁷ European Commission, High Representative, Eastern Partnership Policy beyond 2020, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

ambitious, albeit not very differentiated, approach to cooperation with its Eastern neighbours. This ambition can be understood as a 'side effect' of pursuing other policy objectives like economic growth or democracy, but also as a step towards societal approximation. This approximation is based on a double socialisation strategy: on the political level through bilateral and multilateral policy dialogue and at grassroots level through mobility opportunities for students and academics. These objectives can also be linked to an 'education-security nexus', as the diffusion of European values through educational programmes can consolidate a democratic 'ring of friends' around the EU, mitigating external security concerns.²⁸ What stands out is that, in its strategic documents, the Union has made no reference to differentiation among EaP countries.

Western Balkans

Before comparing the Western Balkans to other regions, it is important to note two peculiarities that affect the EU's approach. First, all Western Balkan countries have an enlargement perspective, but their respective trajectories of state development and European integration differ vastly. Second, candidacy creates a unilateral obligation to harmonise domestic legislation with the EU *acquis*, rather than involving bilateral and multilateral negotiations as is the case in the EaP, for example.

From the very beginning, Erasmus+ was seen as a tool contributing to enlargement policy objectives.²⁹ According to an official at the Commission's DG Education and Culture (EAC), the aim is for all Western Balkan states to become programme countries in the coming years, while they "already participate [...] with a higher status than the rest of partner countries, as they all pay a reduced yearly entry ticket".³⁰ As such, a nuanced application of the overarching objectives of Erasmus+' external strand is observed. For example, modernisation and internationalisation can be seen as a step towards convergence with EU standards and accession to the Union. In support of this perspective, the literature posits that internationalisation serves as a vessel for domestic reforms rather than as a clear objective in and of itself.³¹

²⁸ B. Bruns, D. Happ, "EU Extra-Territorialisation and Securitisation: What Does it Mean for Ukraine and Belarus?", in B. Bruns, D. Happ, H. Zichner (eds), *European Neighbourhood Policy: Geopolitics between Integration and Security*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 148.

²⁹ European Commission, 2014 Work Programme, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

³⁰ Interview with DG EAC official 1, via email, 3 April 2020.

³¹ P. Zgaga et al., *Higher Education in the Western Balkans: Reforms, Developments, Trends*, Ljubljana, University of Ljubljana Faculty of Education, 2013, p. 61.

Much like in the EaP, HE is seen as an important part of the labour market. This objective is resonant with domestic perceptions on the importance of HE, as increased employability appears to be the perceived added value of tertiary education regionwide.³² Addressing a Serbian audience, EU Commissioner Mariya Gabriel classified education and research as the most important mechanism for sustainable growth and Erasmus+ as a way to address brain drain.³³ Brain drain prevails as one of the biggest socioeconomic problems in the region, with five Balkan countries making the global 'top 10' according to the World Economic Forum.³⁴

Looking at objectives specific to the Western Balkans, EU engagement can be traced as far back as the Thessaloniki Agenda of 2003, where education features as one of the key priorities, since it is considered a medium to reconciliation after a decade of deadly conflict.³⁵ This reflects the EU's desire to not import conflicts inside its borders, as this process started long before cooperation in other policy areas had been formally institutionalised. Reconciliation and good neighbourly relations through education are equally prominent in more recent strategic documents.³⁶ In addition to its regional dimension, this priority also has an important intra-national dimension, as discrimination in access to education has historically been an important issue in the ethnically-torn Balkans.³⁷ Reconciliation is attempted in an organic and sustainable manner, starting from the bottom-up in order to gradually eliminate prejudices by the time of accession.

Mimicking internal EU education policy, the second Western Balkans-specific objective is the element of identity-building. Given their (potential) candidacy, the EU

³² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³³ "Marija Gabriel: Moramo preuzeti kontrolu nad transformacijom sveta rada", *Danas*, <http://www.danas.rs/nedelja/marija-gabrijel-moramo-preuzeti-kontrolu-nad-transformacijom-sveta-rada>, 1 March 2020, consulted 7 March 2020.

³⁴ The Economist, "The Countries with the Biggest Brain Drain", https://www.linkedin.com/posts/the-economist_when-people-in-rich-countries-worry-about-activity-6629063517842616320-X-Qo, 2 February 2020, consulted 10 February 2020.

³⁵ Council of the European Union, "The Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans- Moving Towards European Integration", in General Affairs and External Relations Conclusions, 10369/03, 16 June 2003, pp. 15, 18.

³⁶ European Commission, "Communication: A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans" (hereafter: Credible Enlargement Perspective), COM(2018) 65, 6 February 2018, p. 15.

³⁷ European Commission, "Commission Staff Working Document Analytical Report Accompanying the Document 'Commission Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's Application for Membership of the European Union'", SWD(2019) 222, 29 May 2019, p. 152.

postulates that “[everyday] life in the Western Balkans should progressively become closer to life within the European Union”.³⁸ Two already discussed priorities are used to concretely support this objective – socioeconomic development and reconciliation – in this way linking the different components of EU engagement in the region.³⁹ The integration of all Western Balkan states as Erasmus+ programme countries can significantly enhance the EU's toolbox to pursue this objective.⁴⁰

It becomes apparent that the EU's engagement in the Western Balkans has a deeper focus than in other regions. Apart from structural change and socialisation, it tries to affect deep-seated ideational problems that have posed a challenge for the peaceful co-existence of ethnic groups in the region, state-building, and EU integration. Even though similar problems also exist in secessionist parts of the Eastern Partnership, the EU's approach in the Western Balkans is significantly more decisive and explicit. This can be explained by the prospect of enlargement, which creates a greater sense of urgency to resolve national, regional, and ethnic challenges in the Balkans. To some extent, the aims pursued in the Western Balkans resemble the internal policy design of HE, notably through the promotion of a common identity and the instrumentalisation of HE as a tool for economic growth and social progress.

To sum up, the objectives of the international dimension of Erasmus+ provide a solid foundation for the EU's engagement. This is particularly true in the case of the Eastern Partnership, where region-specific objectives are not strongly differentiated from those universal objectives. In the Western Balkans, a greater emphasis on identity and reconciliation leads to the conclusion that engagement is somewhat better embedded in the objectives of enlargement policy.

Implementation

Having looked at the objectives guiding EU action, it is now time to turn to the implementation of the programme. After recalling the key principles that guide all Erasmus+ activity in partner countries, the operationalisation of the particular objectives for the two regions will be analysed based on the EU's implementation modalities.

³⁸ European Commission, *Credible Enlargement Perspective*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

³⁹ Interview with DG EAC official 1, 3 April 2020; European Commission, “Communication: A New European Agenda for Culture”, COM(2018) 267, 22 May 2018, p. 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

General implementation principles in partner countries

As explained earlier, the international dimension of Erasmus+ is considered a tool furthering external action at large. It is, therefore, logical that contributions from financial instruments for other policies are integrated in the Erasmus+ budget.⁴¹ For the 2014-2020 MFF, these were represented under Heading 4 funding and followed the EU's geographic priorities.⁴² In the final allocation, more than 1.5 billion Euro of the Erasmus+ budget came from external action instruments, including the ENI and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA).⁴³ Considering the volume of financial contributions coming from the Commission's DG Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (NEAR) and DG DEVCO, these two DGs have "an important role in deciding to modify the content and modalities of implementation of an action" and therefore are in weekly communication with DG EAC.⁴⁴

Partner countries are not eligible for all strands of Erasmus+; for example, school education activities and the flagship initiative of European Universities are only open to programme countries. Moreover, applications for ICM funding have to be submitted through institutions in programme countries.⁴⁵ This could socialise HE institutions into a system of falsely perceived 'hierarchy' between them and demote partner countries to an associate status. This is aggravated by the fact that funding for organisational costs is only made available to HE institutions from programme countries, to be shared with partners from other countries at their discretion.⁴⁶ This appears to be more of a problem in the Eastern Partnership, as both Georgian and Moldovan universities rarely receive such funding, whereas funds are more frequently shared with BiH universities.⁴⁷ Finally, partner countries do not have National Agencies to which the Commission delegates implementation tasks. Instead, National Erasmus+ Offices (NEOs) are tasked with promoting the programme's visibility, supporting HE

⁴¹ European Commission, "Communication: European Higher Education in the World", COM(2013) 499, 11 July 2013, p. 10.

⁴² European Commission, 2014 Work Programme, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁴³ European Union, "Regulation No 232/2014 establishing a European Neighbourhood Instrument", OJ, L77/27, 11 March 2014, Article 17.

⁴⁴ Interview with a Policy Assistant, DG NEAR, via email, 1 April 2020.

⁴⁵ European Commission, 2020 Work Programme, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

⁴⁶ Support and Promotion for Higher Education Reform Experts (SPHERE), "Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility – A Study of the Mobility of Disadvantaged Students from Partner Countries", January 2020, p. 38.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39; Interview with National Erasmus+ Office in the Republic of Moldova, via Skype, 18 March 2020.

institutions in the application process, and acting as a liaison between the Commission and local authorities.⁴⁸

Eastern Partnership

The budget dedicated to Erasmus+ from the ENI is not negligible, with a contribution of 88 million Euro for 2020, covering both the Eastern and the Southern dimensions.⁴⁹ Additionally, 251 million Euro is given to the EaP strand for human rights, good governance, and mobility, which encapsulate wider cross-cutting EaP objectives and to which educational programmes can contribute.⁵⁰ Overall, this budget facilitated 80.000 exchanges from the EaP over the 2014-2020 period and corresponds to more than 15% of the global envelope available for Erasmus+ mobility and 11% of the global envelope for capacity-building in HE.⁵¹

DG NEAR's well-established channel of communication functions as the "main entry" to the region for DG EAC in terms of consultation.⁵² Dialogue on the multilateral level is pursued under the umbrella of the EaP's platform on people-to-people contacts, where a special panel for Education, Culture, and Youth was established in 2017, upgrading the importance of HE.⁵³ In 2019, a "structured consultation on the future of the EaP" was launched by the Commission, receiving proposals from EU institutions, member states, all EaP countries, and other stakeholders.⁵⁴ According to a Commission official, "the consultation showed a broad consensus that the current policy framework is robust and should continue delivering tangible results for people" and simultaneously revealed the need for increased local engagement and visibility.⁵⁵ As such, there is a well-structured framework of inter-institutional and external consultation guiding the work of DG EAC and DG NEAR.

⁴⁸ European Commission, 2014 Work Programme, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

⁴⁹ European Commission, "Draft General Budget of the European Union for the Financial Year 2020, Volume 3, Section III: Commission", COM(2019) 600, 5 July 2019, p. 1177.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1176.

⁵¹ European Commission, "EU Supports Employment Opportunities and Active Citizenship of Young People in Eastern Partner Countries", 6 February 2019; European Commission, "EU-Eastern Partnership Cooperation through Erasmus+", 20 September 2019; European Commission, "Erasmus+ for Higher Education in Georgia", November 2018.

⁵² Interview with DG EAC official 1, 3 April 2020.

⁵³ EEAS, DG DEVCO, Programming of the ENI 2014-2020, *op. cit.*, p. 16; European Commission, "EU-Eastern Partnership Cooperation through Erasmus+", 20 September 2019; Interview with a diplomat, Mission of the Republic of Moldova to the EU, via Skype, 24 March 2020.

⁵⁴ Interview with a DG EAC official 2, via email, 3 April 2020.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

The allocation of funds from the EaP envelope to different countries is reflective of the different levels of engagement. Georgia's political proximity to the EU is clearly reflected in its budget allocation, having received one quarter of the overall regional Erasmus+ budget in 2018.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, Moldova's share is the lowest in the region (7% for 2015-2018), partly contingent on factors like population.⁵⁷ However, additional funding has been made available to both countries, which is domestically understood as a sign of "support for the countries that signed Association Agreements".⁵⁸ EU documents equally recognise increased participation in Erasmus+ as a component of "EU support" for the implementation of Association Agreements.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, in Georgia, the implementation of Erasmus+ is seen as "somehow parallel" to the ENP framework.⁶⁰ Notwithstanding the EU's failure to highlight it in its communication activities, it can be concluded that the EU successfully links funding to its bilateral relations through Association Agreements.

In terms of local authorities' involvement in the decision-making process, space for improvement seems to exist in both Georgia and Moldova. According to the Georgian NEO Coordinator, consultations for the 2021-2027 programme were very limited across external governments, National Erasmus+ Offices, and EU-based stakeholders.⁶¹ Representatives of the Moldovan NEO also perceive consultation as insufficient, considering it only takes place on a thematic basis and without the opportunity to discuss the entire range of education matters.⁶²

The EU Delegation acts as the liaison between Brussels and the local authorities, helping the Executive Agency in its selection of capacity-building projects and monitoring progress where the Executive Agency cannot do so itself.⁶³ However, it "cannot capitalise on these programmes", which indicates that the Commission only

⁵⁶ European Commission, "Erasmus+ for Higher Education in Georgia", November 2018.

⁵⁷ European Commission, "Erasmus+ for Higher Education in Moldova", November 2018.

⁵⁸ Interview with Lika Glonti, Coordinator of National Erasmus+ Office in Georgia, via Skype, 13 March 2020; Interview with a diplomat, EU Delegation in the Republic of Moldova, via Skype, 16 March 2020.

⁵⁹ European Commission, High Representative, "Joint Staff Working Document: Association Implementation Report on Georgia", SWD(2020) 30, 6 February 2020, p. 2.

⁶⁰ Interview with Lika Glonti, 13 March 2020.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Interview with National Erasmus+ Office in the Republic of Moldova, 18 March 2020.

⁶³ Interview with a diplomat, EU Delegation in the Republic of Moldova, 16 March 2020.

delegates specific tasks to Delegations without leaving them substantial freedom to integrate Erasmus+ activities in their day-to-day engagement with citizens.⁶⁴

In Moldova, Erasmus+ engagement has achieved the inclusion of a 'frozen conflict' region through the participation of a Transnistrian university in Erasmus+. This move is truly symbolic, and in its first year of participation just four students from Tiraspol went abroad. However, it opens a significant 'window of opportunity' for the EU to further engage with Transnistria.⁶⁵ It also proves that the inclusion of secessionist or disputed regions in the programme is possible, as selections and budgets are handled by the EU.

Global objectives are significantly more visible in the EU's Erasmus+ engagement with the EaP, as its impact is mostly discussed in terms of capacity-building reforms towards modernisation and internationalisation. Such reforms are most often made with reference to Bologna Process guidelines, thus linking the overall Association Agreement processes of educational reform to Erasmus+ activities and promoting a synergy. Reforms and mobility projects also appear to be contributing to the strengthening of civil society, including in regions of 'frozen conflicts'. However, very little reference is made to socioeconomic advancement and regional cooperation in the implementation of Erasmus+. Finally, the ENP principle of differentiation is not applied to the opportunities available for more advanced partner countries, as could be the case to prompt further progress and convergence. Apart from funding, the degree of integration in the EaP framework is rather low and implementation overwhelmingly focuses on global targets.

Western Balkans

The budget allocation for the Western Balkans is rather significant: in 2020, 32 million Euro from the IPA were earmarked for Erasmus+, while 18% of the global Erasmus+ budget for individual mobility is allocated to the region.⁶⁶ In terms of dialogue, DG NEAR is in the lead in close technical consultation and agreement of common lines

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ European Commission, "Draft General Budget of the European Union for the Financial Year 2020, Volume 3, Section III: Commission", p. 1162; European Commission, "Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility: Handbook for Participating Organisations, Version 2.0", November 2017, p. 9.

with DG EAC.⁶⁷ Here too, some very important advancements setting the Western Balkans apart from other regions are noted.

In order to maintain a credible enlargement perspective and accelerate progress, the EU increasingly invites Western Balkan governments to informal Councils and technical-level discussions in relevant committees and working groups.⁶⁸ All Western Balkan states have appointed representatives to participate in discussions on the EU's strategic framework for education and training and in the Open Method of Coordination.⁶⁹ This allows for an unprecedented degree of input and potentially a first step towards elite socialisation into the Brussels *modus operandi* modelled on the experience of the 'big bang' enlargement of 2004. However, it is not clear how substantive the input of the Western Balkan states is through this mechanism. For example, in an informal video conference of EU Education Ministers, even though the Ministers from Iceland, Norway, and Switzerland were invited, Western Balkan states were absent.⁷⁰

Simultaneously, Ministerial meetings through the Western Balkans Platform on Education and Training are foreseen on an annual basis, with additional follow-up technical sessions.⁷¹ Ministerials also take place in the framework of the European Semester-like Economic Reform Programmes, whereby discussion on education "covers all levels of the education system, governance, and financing".⁷²

The implementation of Erasmus+ in BiH warrants special attention due to the country's institutional complexity, consisting of two entities and one district, ten cantons, and a central state-level government. In education, the competence lies on the cantonal level in the Federation, with the entity in Republika Srpska, and with the Brčko District, while international cooperation is dealt with centrally.⁷³ In consultations, DG NEAR tries

⁶⁷ Interview with a DG NEAR official, via email, 3 April 2020.

⁶⁸ European Commission, *Credible Enlargement Perspective*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁶⁹ M. Jusić, N. Obradović, "Enlargement Policy and Social Change in the Western Balkans", *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, Sarajevo, 2019, p. 20.

⁷⁰ Council of the European Union, "Press Conference Following the Video Conference of Ministers of Education", <https://video.consilium.europa.eu/en/webcast/7b4bdfcb-f9f1-4a3f-9510-42c404c470ea>, 14 April 2020, consulted 15 April 2020.

⁷¹ European Commission, 2014 Work Programme, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

⁷² Interview with a Policy Assistant, DG NEAR, 1 April 2020.

⁷³ Interview with Dejan Rosić, Project Officer in the National Erasmus+ Office in Bosnia and Herzegovina, via email, 13 April 2020.

to involve all relevant actors and always stresses the need for “country-wide coverage with all public policies” in interactions with the central government.⁷⁴ However, especially considering ethnic divisions in BiH and the significance of education in nation-building, it should not come as a surprise that education policy is fragmented and often contradictory. Out of the almost 4000 questions in the questionnaire accompanying its application for EU membership, BiH failed to answer 22 due to internal disagreements; 17 related to education policy.⁷⁵ BiH's struggle with harmonising its accreditation system leads to a significant reduction of proposals for structural curriculum-related projects, which in turn affects the entire selection of Erasmus+ projects covered by the IPA.⁷⁶ Considering that ICM is premised upon a common framework of recognition, these discrepancies also impact mobility.⁷⁷

As part of BiH's Stabilisation and Association Agreement, education matters are discussed in the annual Sub-Committee on Innovation, Information Society, and Social Policy with “all levels of the administration” present and with an agenda co-set by the Commission and national authorities.⁷⁸ The EU Delegation consults with civil society to ensure appropriate input in these annual meetings and maintains an open line of dialogue with the government.⁷⁹ In collaboration with the NEO, it also helps increase visibility and understanding, for example by organising annual pre-departure events for outgoing Erasmus+ participants.⁸⁰

In this case, region-specific objectives are put into practice rather clearly. Formal conditionality and convergence with the EU *acquis* are not pursued through Erasmus+, but the selection of relevant structural projects under Key Action 2 can further enlargement negotiations. In terms of socioeconomic development, it becomes clear that education is clustered together with other social policies in the EU's interactions with the Western Balkans, which are therefore highly interlinked in the policy-making process.

⁷⁴ Interview with a DG NEAR official, 3 April 2020.

⁷⁵ European Commission, “Communication: Commission Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's Application for Membership of the European Union”, COM(2019) 261, 29 May 2019, pp. 2-3.

⁷⁶ European Commission, “IPA Multi-Country Programmes: Activity Report January-June 2019”, date unknown, p. 184.

⁷⁷ Interview with Dejan Rosić, 13 April 2020.

⁷⁸ Interview with a DG NEAR official, 3 April 2020.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Interview with DG EAC official 1, 3 April 2020.

Reconciliation is operationalised on two dimensions. Clearly, the opportunity to travel abroad and meet new cultures and ways of thinking promotes bottom-up reconciliation nationally and regionally. Nonetheless, the EU also attempts to address this objective in a top-down fashion. By pushing for country-wide solutions and applications in BiH, it tries to create mutual understanding and bring different groups together on the governmental and administrative levels. Meetings covering the entire region also produce this effect on a regional scale. Finally, the inclusion in relevant internal EU procedures socialises politicians and civil servants into the EU system and creates the foundation for a common identity that can be mirrored in domestic policies and ultimately transferred to citizens.

Overall, the attention given to Erasmus+ in the Western Balkans in terms of budget, decision-making, and delegation of tasks among EU institutional actors reflects the level of priority that this region represents for the EU. Here, integration in the overall framework of external engagement is moderate to high. The robust pre-accession framework “does not overshadow” Erasmus+, according to a DG EAC official.⁸¹ On the contrary, the implementation of Erasmus+ by DG NEAR and the EEAS, where appropriate, ensures the contextualisation of the programme in the wider framework of engagement.

Barring the availability of supplementary funding, the embeddedness of EU HE engagement in the EaP in terms of implementation appears to be rather weak. By contrast, the EU's firm approach in the Western Balkans is reflected in the clear pursuit of region-specific objectives in Erasmus+' implementation.

Receptibility

Finally, turning to receptibility, domestic acceptance in Georgia, Moldova, and Bosnia and Herzegovina will be examined successively. The three countries are appropriate for comparison as they all have statehood consolidation problems, which may affect domestic absorption. Equally, they aspire to a closer relationship with the EU, they are Erasmus+ partner countries, and are not candidate states. This examination will offer a glimpse into the impact of the EU's engagement as analysed in the paper so far and segue into pragmatic, actionable policy recommendations for the European Union.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Georgia

Erasmus+ is no exception to Georgia's high engagement with the EU, with more than 3500 participants benefitting from ICM and around 1000 project proposals involving Georgia being submitted in the 2015-2018 period.⁸² Georgia ranks 8th among all Erasmus+ partner countries around the world in terms of successful projects.⁸³

This high level of participation is also evidenced on the political level. The Georgian government aspires to programme country status, which, according to the Georgian NEO Coordinator, is "a politically driven decision".⁸⁴ The politicisation of such decisions indicates that the stakes for cooperation with the EU on education matters are quite high. Georgia's keenness to benefit more from its partnership with the EU is also confirmed by a report from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, which asserts that Georgia is "seeking greater alignment to EU policies and practices".⁸⁵ This attitude may be partly attributed to 'self-conditionality' and 'self-socialisation', concepts which capture some EaP countries' tendency to follow EU policies as if they were enlargement candidates in the hope to eventually acquire candidate status.⁸⁶ In national strategic documents, Erasmus+ is also recognised as a vector leading to "high academic performance and internationalisation".⁸⁷ However, it is also acknowledged that Erasmus+ activities are "not sufficient to make significant impacts at the systemic level" [sic].⁸⁸

The Georgian people resonate with reforms and pursue more participation in EU programmes, as these provide them with the tools to implement reforms that reflect

⁸³ Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport of Georgia, "Unified Strategy for Education and Science for 2017-2021", <http://mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=7755&lang=eng>, date unknown, consulted 4 January 2020, p. 6.

⁸⁴ Interview with Lika Glonti, 13 March 2020.

⁸⁵ R. Ruochen Li et al., *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Georgia*, Paris, OECD Publishing, 2019, p. 209.

⁸⁶ F. Schimmelfennig, "Europeanisation Beyond the Member States", *Zeitschrift für Staats- und Europawissenschaften*, 2010, p. 333.

⁸⁷ Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport of Georgia, "Midterm Evaluation of the Implementation of the Unified Strategy for Education and Science 2017-2021", <http://mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=7755&lang=eng>, 21 February 2019, consulted 4 January 2020, p. 47.

⁸⁸ Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport of Georgia, "Unified Strategy for Education and Science for 2017-2021", <http://mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=7755&lang=eng>, date unknown, consulted 4 January 2020, p. 28.

the country's needs.⁸⁹ Indicatively, 48% of the public recognises the EU's role in improving Georgian education.⁹⁰ This is also manifested through the non-negligible increase of structural projects, which target the national level, initiated by Georgian actors in collaboration with European partners.⁹¹

In terms of the durability of reforms, Georgia faces a general structural problem due to the frequent change of government. As described by the NEO Coordinator, "institutions do not work and individuals mean a lot" which has led to delays in passing measures that were initiated by former Ministers.⁹² This problem of internal durability should be addressed by the EU, not least for the country's general governance, as it could set back Georgia's significant progress in various sectors. Despite these problems though, the 'main' reforms stemming from the Bologna Process remain in place.⁹³

Hence, the level of receptibility in Georgia is high despite some general governance issues. EU-promoted reforms are received with a high level of domestic ownership and seen as desirable. The only danger is the potential saturation of interest in the future if Georgia is not given more opportunities through Erasmus+, considering its progress in converging with Western standards.

Moldova

Capacity building remains at the heart of discussions on Erasmus+' effectiveness in Moldova. The Ministry of Education, Culture, and Research acknowledges the impact of EU-promoted reforms and, even though awareness about the specificities of Erasmus+ remains low on the political level, support for it and for relevant domestic actors is high.⁹⁴ The narrative largely centres around the EU's ability to introduce effective reforms; for example, the NEO believes that Bologna Process reforms would not have been as smoothly implemented in the absence of further reforms prompted by EU programmes.⁹⁵ Since the introduction of these central reforms, "a new

⁸⁹ Interview with Lika Glonti, 13 March 2020.

⁹⁰ EU Neighbours East, "Annual Survey Report: 4th Wave", May 2019, p. 49.

⁹¹ Interview with Lika Glonti, 13 March 2020.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Interview with the National Erasmus+ Office of the Republic of Moldova, 18 March 2020.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

generation of students" has been educated and socialised into a more Europeanised system.⁹⁶

Interestingly, Moldova is the only EaP country where educational programmes are overtaken by 'infrastructure development projects' as the most visible activities that citizens associate with the EU.⁹⁷ This may indicate that the primary added value of the programme for Moldova is not student mobility, but rather more structural and usually less visible capacity-building projects. The 13 joint projects currently implemented around the country present an opportunity for systemic improvement; such projects have produced a "qualitative jump of the entire system" and contributed to positive reforms outside their scope.⁹⁸ Reforms appear to be durable, but their visibility in society and even among university students and staff is low.⁹⁹ Nonetheless, there is a strong sense of ownership for staff participating in capacity-building projects.¹⁰⁰

The percentage of selected capacity-building proposals from Moldova was very low throughout the MFF, ranging from 6% to 10% of applications.¹⁰¹ This may mean that, despite high interest, the quality of applications is insufficient, as also indicated by a Moldovan diplomat, who expressed their wish to see more competitive Moldovan proposals corresponding to EaP standards.¹⁰²

Finally, there is no agreement on whether the cultural proximity between Romania and Moldova impacts the latter's reception of Erasmus+. From an EU perspective, Moldova consults with Romania for feedback on reforms that Romania has already implemented, without there being a further link with Moldovans' acceptance of Erasmus+ and related reforms.¹⁰³ However, there appears to be ample cooperation on the level of the NEO and Romania's National Agency. Apart from support in ICM implementation, the two organisations hold joint activities with universities from both countries and try to increase participation and potentially widen the type of projects

⁹⁶ Interview with a diplomat, Mission of the Republic of Moldova to the EU, 24 March 2020.

⁹⁷ EU Neighbours East, "Annual Survey Report: 4th Wave", May 2019, p. 49.

⁹⁸ Interview with a diplomat, Mission of the Republic of Moldova to the EU, 24 March 2020.

⁹⁹ Interview with a diplomat, EU Delegation in the Republic of Moldova, 16 March 2020; Interview with the National Erasmus+ Office of the Republic of Moldova, 18 March 2020.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Interview with a diplomat, Mission of the Republic of Moldova to the EU, 24 March 2020.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Interview with a diplomat, EU Delegation in the Republic of Moldova, 16 March 2020.

pursued in Moldova.¹⁰⁴ This proximity makes the programme and individual activities “more understandable” to Moldovans.¹⁰⁵

To conclude, the main problem in Moldova appears to be the quality of proposals submitted and, by extension, the small number of those selected. However, ICM and a more Europeanised educational system are very well received, while capacity-building projects have led to quality improvement and a more widespread European identity. All things considered, the degree of receptibility in Moldova is high.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina's participation in Erasmus+ is rather satisfactory considering the aforementioned structural limitations. In 2018, more than 1000 students and staff took part in exchanges and 141 proposals involving BiH were selected out of a total of 191 received.¹⁰⁶

Engagement through Jean Monnet activities could be key in increasing interest and positive identification with the EU; however, in the period between 2015 and 2018, only 3 projects were selected from BiH.¹⁰⁷ Such engagement will be crucial in the coming years, taking into account the lengthy candidateship process which may reduce momentum and shift public opinion away from the EU. Revisiting the objective of approximating every-day life in the Western Balkans to the EU, Erasmus+ is perceived domestically as “one of the strongest promotional tools of the EU's values and probably [the] most successful”, indicating that there is fertile ground for more Jean Monnet engagement.¹⁰⁸

The programme is received well not only on the level of individual participants but also by HE institutions and governments.¹⁰⁹ However, the lack of coordination often hinders implementation and integration in general.¹¹⁰ The situation is aggravated by the “lack

¹⁰⁴ Interview with the National Erasmus+ Office of the Republic of Moldova, 18 March 2020.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ European Commission, “Erasmus+ for Higher Education in Bosnia Herzegovina”, November 2018.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Dejan Rosić, 13 April 2020.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Jusić, Obradović, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

of skilled policy-making staff" due to the hyper-fragmentation of HE policy, which virtually makes universities policymakers.¹¹¹

In engaging with Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EU must be aware of certain underlying challenges and risks. Erasmus+ funding must be part of a strategy addressing overarching governance problems in order to prevent the perpetuation and exacerbation of structural problems. The literature has identified this as "the desire to 'Europeanise' the system overnight [which has] too often resulted in 'cosmetic changes'".¹¹² The EU must be careful so as not to prompt hasty reforms.

All in all, and despite the plurality of voices and actors, Erasmus+ appears to be perceived as a way to explore and understand the EU. It can be concluded that the EU's increased efforts in the region are received well and provoke demand for further engagement.

As could be expected, receptibility is overwhelmingly positive in all three cases despite domestic constraints caused by the frequent change of government, low quality of proposals, and over-fragmentation of education policy. The three countries are keen on a closer relationship with the EU and invite more engagement.

Discussion of the findings

It is now time to return to the central question of the paper, namely to what extent Erasmus+ engagement is embedded in the overarching frameworks of the ENP and enlargement policy. The analysis has shown that external engagement through Erasmus+ is primarily guided by overarching global objectives. There is some elaboration of Eastern Partnership-specific objectives, which, however, are not sufficiently autonomous from universal Erasmus+ objectives to be considered as substantial differentiation. The link made with civil society is indicative of some extent of integration in the wider EaP framework, where one of the four platforms of engagement refers to civil society. Meanwhile, there is some differentiation of engagement in the Western Balkans due to the countries' special status as (potential) candidates, with specific objectives covering socioeconomic development, national and regional reconciliation, and the creation of a common identity.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹¹² Zgaga *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

In terms of programme implementation in the EaP, a synergy consists in the availability of additional funding for countries that have signed Association Agreements. The principle of differentiation is not utilised in Erasmus+ activity more broadly, in this way undermining the total level of integration in the EaP framework. In the Western Balkans, a clearer link was observed between objectives of action and implementation. Integration in the enlargement framework manifests itself in the form of linkages between HE and wider social policy and by allowing participation in relevant EU meetings. Erasmus+ in this case is moderately but impactfully integrated in the enlargement framework.

Finally, all three countries have an overwhelmingly positive experience with Erasmus+, which can be explained by their overall close relationship to the EU and high ambitions. As is logical given the selection of the three countries, the keenness to converge with European standards is high in all cases, even when domestic constraints pose a challenge to the selection and impact of Erasmus+ projects. Opinions about the degree of integration of Erasmus+ in the wider ENP or enlargement framework remain mixed.

All in all, there is relatively little variation of the EU's engagement in terms of its objectives and implementation on the basis of the overarching policy framework. Undoubtedly, the degree of embeddedness is higher in the enlargement space than it is in the EaP both in the objectives pursued and in the implementation of the programme. The most important implication of this conclusion is that the programme's externalisation and the EU's engagement towards the two regions is not optimally efficient. A better integration of Erasmus+ and other Union programmes into these frameworks can accelerate progress, as they can be used as part of the Union's conditionality scheme or in order to create momentum in HE and other sectors. Finally, the current situation can be the source of confusion and transmit an unnecessarily overcomplicated image of the EU to partner countries' citizens. These observations lead to some policy recommendations on strengthening the link between the external dimension of Erasmus+ and the EU's overall external action and diplomacy.

Synergies with conditionality

Erasmus+ operates in parallel to the conditionality employed by the EU in its geographic policies despite its potential as a carrot in the equation to encourage

further cross-sectoral improvement. Incorporating Erasmus+ achievements and benchmarks is feasible in the Eastern Partnership and the pre-accession framework, where the programme can act as an incentive leading to further benefits in education or other policies. Such practice can create strong momentum, through which more difficult reforms can be tackled in related fields like democracy, human rights, and rule of law. Particularly where reforms have stagnated, this momentum may be incremental in breaking out of deadlock. Especially in these fields, education forms part of the solution as it can affect citizens' perceptions about society and governance, as well as set the example for further structural reforms on the basis of those implemented in HE.

'More for more'

Under the key principle of differentiation, the more engagement and compliance with the EU an ENP state pursues, the more rewards it gets from Brussels. The results of differentiation are evident in all policy areas, and so Erasmus+ should also be reflective of the variation of ENP countries' relationship with the EU. Of course, it must be kept in mind that Erasmus+ can approximate less Europhile countries to the EU and socialise their citizens into EU values. Therefore, it is crucial that Erasmus+ activity in less engaged neighbouring countries continues at the same, if not increased, intensity.

Differentiation should not be manifested through discrimination of applications coming from certain countries against others. However, it is possible to open up additional strands of Erasmus+ for the countries that have sufficiently approximated their educational systems to Bologna Process and EU standards. In the medium term, an upgrade to programme country status could be an additional reward. This will require significant progress, but is clearly pursued by the 'frontrunners' of the EaP and will allow for a clear and definitive differentiation of EaP countries in the field of education.

European Universities Initiative in the Western Balkans

The current internal Erasmus+ priority is the refinement of the European Universities Initiative, which, for the pilot calls, is only open to programme countries. An encouraging sign is that the original idea of excluding non-EU programme countries

has been scrapped, rendering further expansion conceivable.¹¹³ The inclusion of Western Balkan states to the initiative from the outset can be an invaluable tool for socialisation and lead to more effective reforms and adherence to the EU *acquis*. Through participation in the Initiative, Western Balkan states can start being involved in internal aspects of Erasmus+. Simultaneously, the increased exchange of good practices within the consortia is likely to lead to university-level and, inductively, also nation-wide reforms. The opportunity for students and staff to interact with peers from other countries in a more 'integrated' manner compared to short-term exchanges is also likely to increase grassroots understanding and approximate life to the EU.

Evidently, the feasibility of such an expansion is contingent on full compliance with the Bologna Process. Therefore, clear and timely communication of such an advancement and its conditions needs to be made to the respective governments. Particularly in BiH, this initiative can accelerate the implementation of Bologna reforms in pursuit of greater opportunities under Erasmus+. Considering the fact that the Commission would like all four remaining states to become programme countries within the 2021-2027 MFF cycle, the introduction of this initiative before programme status can equally facilitate this upgrade and socialise them into the EU HE area more smoothly.

A bigger role for National Erasmus+ Offices

Upgrading the role of NEOs can be beneficial for the EU in managing Erasmus+ and in tailoring the programme to the specific needs of each country. Their role can be modelled on National Agencies to include delegated tasks from Brussels and an increased representative role in consultations with the EU. National Erasmus+ Offices are sometimes excluded from national dialogue, despite their unique position which permits them to collect individual HE institutions' and civil society's views on cooperation with the EU. In the coming years, the EU should make full use of their network's added value in order to ensure a fuller picture and a more tailored approach. In this way, they can also more effectively provide guidance for applicants and increase the overall quality of proposals submitted in partner countries.

¹¹³ Klaus Birk, Director of German National Agency (at the time), "International Collaboration: Alliances Going Beyond the EU/EEA", panel discussion, Guild Forum 2019, Brussels, 5 December 2019.

EU education diplomacy

The role of Erasmus+ as a perception shaper and socialising tool of the European Union underpins the paper's central argument and has been consistently underlined in the findings. The EU Global Strategy equally highlights the significance of "joining-up public diplomacy across different fields".¹¹⁴ Despite this, the programme is not sufficiently integrated in the EU's public and cultural diplomacy. The pluralist and bottom-up nature of cultural diplomacy brings non-governmental actors to the fore; the importance of such actors in promoting EU values through education must be acknowledged and included in the EEAS' cultural diplomacy strategy. A first step is observed in the Joint Communication on International Cultural Relations, where education is labelled an "[agent] for dialogue and exchange"; however, in practice, it remains relatively marginal.¹¹⁵

As argued by Piros and Koops, in order to remain relevant in the modern global landscape, the EU must "[diversify] its diplomatic toolkit not in a vacuum but linking the appropriate policy instruments with the relevant actors".¹¹⁶ A diplomatic strategy capitalising on education and Erasmus+ as a tool can be hybrid, implemented both through EU Delegations as well as through the EU27 national diplomatic systems. This can strengthen the strategy's impact while simultaneously increasing member states' engagement with the international dimension of Erasmus+ in their bilateral and multilateral dealings.

External engagement through Erasmus+ offers a unique opportunity to project the image of an open EU to different levels of society and should be exploited to the full in promoting the Union, its actions, and its values through EU public and cultural diplomacy. The practical, empirical perspective of grassroots participation can have an irreplaceable enriching added value which in turn can augment the overall EU narrative and image, as well as their reception abroad.

¹¹⁴ High Representative/Vice-President of the Commission, "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe, A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy", June 2016, p. 23.

¹¹⁵ European Commission, High Representative, "Joint Communication: Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations", JOIN(2016) 29, 8 June 2016, p. 16.

¹¹⁶ S. Piros, J. Koops, "Towards a Sustainable Approach to EU Education Diplomacy? The Case of Capacity-Building in the Eastern Partnership", in C. Carta, R. Higgott (eds), *Cultural Diplomacy in Europe*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 133.

Conclusion: towards increased embeddedness

This paper presents a preliminary attempt to understand the co-existence of and interaction between Erasmus+ on the one part and the European Neighbourhood Policy and enlargement policy on the other part. It examined the degree of embeddedness of Erasmus+ in these policies and argued that Erasmus+ is an invaluable, yet rather unexploited, tool for the EU's external action and diplomacy. Through the investigation of objectives, implementation, and receptibility of the programme in the two regions, it showed that the embeddedness of the EU's Erasmus+ engagement in the Eastern Partnership is weak and in the Western Balkans moderate. Based on these findings, policy recommendations were formulated to increase the impact of the programme in the 2021-2027 MFF and beyond.

The selection of three largely pro-EU cases may limit the power of generalisation of this study with regard to partner countries' receptibility and ambition to participate in more aspects of Erasmus+, particularly in the case of the EaP. This 'bias' has been taken into account throughout; the policy recommendations reflect and reinforce this by emphasising the need for more differentiation in the EU's engagement with advanced EaP countries.

Future research is needed to investigate to what extent the identified 'first steps' of integration continue and are strengthened in the 2021-2027 MFF. More holistic and in-depth analyses of domestic receptibility of Erasmus+ in different countries can also constitute the basis for future EU country-specific or regional priorities and strategies. Lastly, the degree of complementarity of Erasmus+ and other thematic policies or programmes is a related research avenue of high interest and policy relevance. All in all, if one thing is to be taken away from this paper, it is undoubtedly that the EU's external action and diplomacy can benefit and remain suitable for the 21st century through synergies with and embeddedness of its most renowned policies and programmes.

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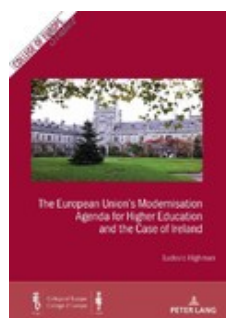
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