European political narratives in higher education: towards an ever-stronger politicisation?

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Abstract: Since the 2000s, the legitimisation of the European Union in the context of the politicisation of its governance has increasingly been framed as a competition of divergent narratives. Higher education (HE) has emerged as a prominent battleground through a dynamic of 'creeping integration'.

Our purpose is to analyse how and to what extent European narratives are mobilised by actors engaged in the European governance of HE (European institutions, stakeholders and civil society). The focus is on four main narratives: 'Europe of rights', 'Cultural Europe', 'Market Europe', and 'Peace/Power Europe'. Empirically, a selection of case studies since 2017 shed light on the uses of these narratives in the development of longstanding policy instruments (ERASMUS, the European University Institute) or more recent initiatives (European universities networks) within HE governance. Our findings suggest the mainstreaming of 'Market Europe', the fragilisation of 'Europe of rights', the resilience of 'Cultural Europe', and ongoing struggles around the ambivalences of 'Peace/Power Europe'. The conclusion is that the politicisation of narratives in the European governance of HE confirms trends observed in other policy sectors and levels of governance, with some specificities regarding the role of universities as symbols and deliberative arenas.

Keywords: narratives; European Union; legitimisation; politicisation; higher education

Introduction

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the debate on the legitimisation of the European Union (EU) in the context of the politicisation of its governance has increasingly focused on the role of narratives (Bouza Garcia, 2017, p. 285-290). Universities have been objects, actors and arenas in this intensifying battle over European narratives.

Universities have long been touchstones for the interplay between politics,

society, religion (De Ridder-Symoens, 1991), and, more recently, the market (Carvalho, 2021). They are symbols of competing models of intellectual and political modernity (e.g., the 'Humboldtian university', the 'corporate university') (Gumport, 2000; Krull, 2005) in a race for supremacy (Kirby, 2022). In the processes of nation- and state-making, they have served as matrices to produce ideas (Smith, 1998) and elites (Charle and Verger, 2012). From Renan in 1882 (Renan, 2022) to Macron in 2017 and 2024 (Macron, 2017, 2024), prestigious academic institutions like La Sorbonne have been used as platforms to voice political manifestos.

The purpose of this article is to study the transformation of higher education (HE) into a prominent policy domain for the development of European political narratives. The rise of universities as a point of contention can be related both to the increasing EU interventions in their governance and to raising tensions within academic institutions that are at the intersection of globalisation, societal diversification and conflicts of competences between supranational and national authorities (Gunn and Mintrom, 2022). We analyse to what extent and how, when dealing with HE, political actors (EU institutions, but also stakeholders and civil society) mobilise mainstream European legitimising narratives according to the context, the issue at hand, and the level of governance.

Regarding data and methods, our sources include documentary and media analysis (e.g., EU documents and communications, institutional activity reports, political statements, press releases), and quantitative data (e.g., opinion polls).

The article is organised as follows. The first part presents the four mainstream European narratives under study — 'Europe of rights', 'Cultural Europe,' 'Market Europe,' and 'Peace/Power Europe'— against the backdrop of the increasing

politicisation of the EU. The second part examines the 'creeping integration' which has led since the 1950s to growing EU interventionism in HE and turned it into a narrative battleground. The third part studies the uses of European narratives in HE governance since 2017 in the development of long-standing (ERASMUS) or more recent (European universities alliances (EUAs)) policy objects. The conclusion argues that the mobilisation of European narratives in HE largely mirrors the dynamics observable in other policy areas and other levels of governance, with some specificities regarding the political symbolism and role of universities.

Political narratives in the legitimisation of a politicising EU

The literature studying the legitimisation of the EU has increasingly questioned its capacity to produce narratives conveying a feeling of European identity (Checkel and Katzenstein, 2009; Risse, 2011). It suggests that such narratives vary throughout successive crises (Börzel and Risse, 2018) and according to the policy issue at stake (Saurugger and Thatcher, 2019, p. 68).

In the last two decades, a consensus emerged that the profusion of European narratives leads to a 'Justification Jungle' (de Wilde, 2022) or 'Narrative Ju-jitsu' (McMahon and Kaiser, 2022), but divergences remain regarding their link with the politicisation of the EU (Bouza Garcia, 2017).

Narratives and EU politicisation

Politicisation refers here to the necessity to re-appraise politics at the EU level in the analysis of individual, collective and institutional actors (Braun, Gross and Rittberge, 2020) or, in other words, the recombination of policies with politics (Schmidt, 2019, p. 1018-1036). Politicisation is commonly defined as, firstly, a process leading to a higher

salience of the issue at stake; secondly, a polarisation of opinions; and thirdly, the expansion of actors and audiences involved in the debate (Kauppi and Wiesner, 2018, p. 227-233). In this article, we analyse the first dimension of salience as the increasing transformation of HE into an EU policy, political and consequently narrative object; the second dimension of polarisation as the conflictualisation of HE issues and narratives; and the third dimension of expansion of actors and audiences through the uses, dissemination and effects of European narratives on HE.

European narratives seem intrinsically linked to a dynamic of politicisation. Their multiplication is the outcome of the end of the 'permissive consensus' that made possible to deepen European integration in the relative indifference of public opinions. Advocacies for different visions of Europe cast light on cleavages that used to remain latent. Manners and Murray highlight that the main driving forces of engagement with European narratives are the 'contestation of hegemonic ideas' (e.g. the prevalence of economy over politics) and/or feelings of insecurity, both factors necessarily creating conflict (Manner and Murray, 2016, p. 199). Other scholars advocate that this conflict may work as an 'empowering dissensus' (Oleart, 2020) enabling rather than weakening EU action.

Politicisation should not be understood as a one-way path but rather as a reversible process of constant de/re-politicisation according to the stake, the moment, the arena and the actors. Historical sociologists of institution- and community-making highlight that the 'cultural infrastructure' of European integration (e.g. the euro, the European citizenship, or here HE policy devices) is 'depoliticised by design' (McNamara, 2015, p. viii) as a condition for its acceptance by member states and citizens. But they also point the limits of such a depoliticisation to explicitly engage with the public, especially in times of crisis that request a stronger allegiance (McNamara, 2015, p.162). This may lead to repoliticisation when a shift occurs from the incremental legal construction of authority

— perceived as banal (like the laborious 'creeping integration' of HE (Pollack, 1994) as a European competence) — to moments of swift reforms and consolidation of power that directly engage political passions (McNamara, 2019). Our purpose is to study variations of legitimising narratives in such shifts.

What EU narratives?

Several prominent scholars have proposed inventories of European political narratives that are not identical (Kaiser, 2017; Manners and Murray, 2016; Trenz, 2016; Nicolaïdis and Pelabay, 2008). For this research, we rely on this state of the art and on a template developed in previous publications to focus on four narratives: (1) 'Europe of rights', (2) 'Cultural Europe', (3) 'Market Europe', and (4) 'Peace/Power Europe'.

The 'Europe of rights' narrative (1) refers to human rights as master frame of EU legitimisation. The EU is framed as a cosmopolitan entrepreneur reshaping politics through law (Beck and Grande, 2007). From the 2000s onwards, the 'Europe of rights' narrative became increasingly contentious due to the critics against the supposed excess of human rights (Lacroix and Pranchère, 2016); the perverse effects of 'creeping integration' through judiciary mechanisms perceived as encroaching on national sovereignty (Saurugger and Terpan, 2021); and the incapacity of the EU to deliver what it promised (De Búrca, 2021). Consequently, the reference to rights was progressively replaced by the one to 'European values' both as softer principles enshrined in the treaties and as common cultural features. This shift from rights to values goes hand in hand with the politicisation of EU affairs. Values are more polysemic than rights and conflicts of interpretation are no more resolved in courts by judges but rage in the political and public spaces without an actor powerful enough to impose a definitive meaning.

The 'Cultural Europe' narrative (2) refers to a cultural common ground shared by all member states. It is more low-key than other older EU narratives referring to a

common European identity (Calligaro, 2013), as it does not claim to re-establish at supranational level the – theoretical – nation-state model of congruence between culture and politics (Smith, 1992). Consequently, it carries less transformative ambition and charismatic momentum (Foret and Calligaro, 2018).

The 'Market Europe' narrative (3) goes beyond the description of the EU as a mere union of interests, regulatory policy machine justified by its outputs (Scharpf, 2009) to define it as a political system centred on the single market, prosperity, and efficiency of technocratic governance (Manners and Murray, 2016, p. 186-187). European governance is analysed as a resilient and adaptative authority 'governing by rules and ruling by numbers' (Schmidt, 2022) that emerges self-reinforced from the successive crises. The European 'politics of economic activity' is framed by values that are used by actors seeking to change or reproduce institutions and policies (Smith, 2016, p. 8). Narratives in terms of 'openness', 'transparency' or 'innovation' illustrate the merging of political and economic ends and means to justify the EU as a political system made by and for the market (Foret and Vargovčíková, 2021).

The 'Peace/Power Europe' narrative (4) hybridises the tale of the EU as a peace project with the claim to turn it in a global player able to develop military capacities (Manners and Murray, 190, p. 197). Recent crises, especially the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, accelerated the reconversion of the EU as a 'hard power' willing to enhance its strategic autonomy. This narrative evolution is illustrated by the self-definition of Von der Leyen as the 'leader of a Geopolitical Commission' (Haroche, 2022) and the advocacy for European sovereignty in virtually all policy domains (Roch and Oleart, 2024).

HE is, therefore, a touchstone of broader dynamics at work in the progress of European integration and the subsequent evolution of its legitimising narratives.

European political narratives and higher education

The four mainstream European narratives have dominated the European debates and initiatives on HE. The 'Europe of rights' narratives put the emphasis on free access to education without borders and academic freedom. The 'Cultural Europe' narrative spans from appeals to a shared civilizational heritage to more modest support for cultural diversity and exchange (Corbett, 2005, p. 89). The 'Market Europe' narrative has shifted from its initial focus on the spillover of interests and ideas driving deeper integration to the promotion of the 'knowledge economy' from the late 1990s onward (Cussó, 2008). The 'Peace/Power Europe' narrative has resurfaced in full force during the last two decades in a 'poly-crisis Europe' (Zeitilin, Nicoli, and Laffan, 2019) confronted with security challenges, existential threats and to a fragmentation of issues that HE is reflecting as a magnifying glass (Rudolph et. al., 2024).

These four main narratives constantly combine and overlap. Academic freedom is frequently presented as an outcome of the multisecular emancipation from Church and State later integrated in legal common cultures of member states, thus bridging the 'Cultural Europe' and 'Europe of rights' narratives. In the same way, notions that passed from the economic to the political spheres such as 'good governance' or 'innovation' as conditions for prosperity, security and influence illustrate the hybridization of 'Market Europe' with 'Peace/Power Europe', and 'Cultural Europe' when these notions are culturalised as core components of Europeanness.

Higher education as an EU policy and a narrative battleground (1957-2017)

The European institutions had no initial competence in HE but gradually gained indirect influence through fundamental rights (especially freedom of circulation), funding, and

market dynamics. The Treaty of Maastricht (1992) gave the EU a supportive competence in HE and a shared competence in research. The support for research justified by the search for competitiveness and the necessity to adapt the HE institutions (HEIs) to the emerging 'knowledge economy', served as a Trojan horse to shape the other university missions such as teaching and professional integration (Corbett, 2005, p. 25-29). Like in many other policy sectors, this 'integration by stealth' (Majone, 2005) relying on interests, self-mobilisations of actors, intergovernmental mechanisms and transnational circulation of best practices is not a process easy to encapsulate in legitimising narratives.

Justifying integration through education (1957-1980s)

Since its inception in 1957, the ambition to complement the European Economic Community (EEC) with a cultural dimension that could support a broader political vision was present, but it only began to materialise in the 1970s.

A milestone was the creation in 1972 of the European University Institute (EUI) of Florence to foster cultural exchange and train European leaders. Based on an inter-governmental agreement, the EUI nevertheless was a 'community-driven' project which hastened the creation of a rudimentary bureaucracy for education at the European level in 1971 (Corbett, 2005, p. 75), and a dedicated Directorate for Education and Training in 1973 (Wächter, 2012, p. 164).

In the discussions around its creation, the Education Committee (1974) claimed that education should not 'be regarded merely as a component of economic life' (Council of Ministers, 1974). However, the first action programmes on education starting in 1976 were designed to encourage cooperation between HEIs as well as to enable the integration of migrant workers' children and unemployed youth on the labour market (Cino Pagliarello, 2022a, p. 61-62). Meant to provide workforce with new skills adapted to a

post-industrial economy (Flury et al., 2021, p. 349-350), HE was acknowledged as a key policy-sector on behalf of market logic.

One step further was made in 1985 when despite the lack of legal recognition by the Treaty of Rome (1957), the European Court of Justice ruled that 'vocational training' (Art. 128) should encompass most university-level study (Gravier decision) (Keeling, 2006, p. 204). The decision enabled the European Commission's (EC) to launch programmes in HE or assist member states with funding and expertise in this area. The Education Action Programme (1976-1984) (Council of ministers, 1976) which laid the foundations for the Joint Study Scheme (1984) (Enders and Don F Westerheijden, 2014, p. 171), COMETT (Community Programme for Education and Training in Technology) (1986), ERASMUS (European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) (1987) or Lingua (Action programme to promote foreign language competence in the European Community) (1990) aimed all at bridging universities and economy. TEMPUS (Trans-Mobility Programme for University Students) (EEC, 1990), founded at the end of the Cold war, was the first programme with a more political purpose to diffuse the European model of education towards countries emerging from communism (Wächter, 2012, p. 168). It staged a preliminary version of 'Peace/Power Europe' narrative to attract them in the European orbit and contributed, together with the Jean Monnet Programme for the promotion of teaching and research in the field of EU studies (2001), to the public outreach of EU institutions outside Europe (Dakowska, 2019).

In the same way, the ERASMUS Programme adopted in 1987 (Council of ministers, 1987) combined civic, economic, and soft power purposes. A presumably symbol of European identity in the making at a time the organization was failing to spark interest among its citizens (Cherry, 2019), its first objective was to increase mobility for students and teaching staff and strengthen cooperation between universities across

Europe. Initially drawing on the 'People's Europe' Communiqué (1984), ERASMUS aimed at contributing to 'strengthening' the 'identity and image' (Adonnino, 1985, p. 7) of the organization and complement its economic dimension by a 'community of the intelligence' (Corbett, 2005, p. 181). But building upon previous legal provisions (EEC, 1957), ERASMUS was nevertheless a scheme 'in tune with the new Community strategy to complete single market' (Corbett, 2005, p. 121). This shaped the definition of mobility to match market objectives such as 'competitiveness' (Council of Ministers, 1987) and turned ERASMUS into a showcase for the 'Market Europe' narrative.

Institutionalizing the European governance of HE: From the Maastricht Treaty to the Bologna process (1990s-2000s)

In the 1990s, the European interventions in HE seemed to have reached a level of institutionalization in two senses. On the one hand, they were formally integrated in the treaties. On the other hand, they extended their scope to the global organization of universities and became increasingly intertwined with intergovernmental and national governance, reflecting a logic at work in all policy domains (Bickerton, 2013).

In 1992, the European engagement in education was eventually acknowledged by the Maastricht Treaty (Art. 149) that legalised previous practices and funding of the cooperation between member states without opening new areas of EU intervention (Wächter, 2012, p. 165-166). Regarding the reluctance of both member states and universities to comply with direct European interferences (Ravinet, 2014, p. 88), HE was defined as a 'subsidiary competence' of the EU (Serano-Velarde, 2014, p. 12) restricted to exchange programmes and international mobility. In practice, the increasing agency of the Commission complemented the leadership of the larger member states, and strategic reappropriations of European dynamics by national political actors and civil society organizations to serve their specific purposes (Tomusk, 2007). The two main steps

constituted by the Sorbonne declaration (1998) (EHEA, 1998) and the Bologna process (1999-2010) must be understood in this context.

In parallel to the 'vertical Europeanisation', several inter-governmental projects paved the way for the harmonization of HE systems by the end of the decade. In 1997, the Council of Europe and UNESCO adopted a joint declaration on the quality assurance systems in HE which defined common standards and thresholds pertaining to the excellence of the European HE systems (Council of Europe and UNESCO, 1997). In 1998, France, Germany, Italy, and the UK, took a further step by introducing the European Credit and Transfer Scheme, a system aimed at render diplomas more readable through a standardised instrument (EHEA, 1998). By asserting the 'need for immediate reform' (Enders and Westerheijden, 2014, p. 171) in HE, the Sorbonne Declaration reflected a new shift from serving the European market to reshaping universities according to European standards.

Launched a year later, the Bologna Process emphasises the economic role of HE with competitiveness and employability as its main objectives (EHEA, 1999). It claimed that before being a 'disinterested search for truth', education functions as an 'instrument in a nation's international competition for increasing wealth' (Enders and Westerheijden, 2014, p. 171).

As an intergovernmental initiative led by France, Germany, Italy, UK, the Bologna process was not necessarily popular among other countries afraid of this hegemonic 'diktat' (Ravinet, 2008, p. 358). Caught up in the race for the reform of HE systems (Enders and Westerheijden, 2014, p. 174), 29 Ministers of Education eventually signed the documents, endorsing the integration of more than 4000 universities within a European HE area (EHEA) by 2010. Excluding any 'watchdog' and sanction for no-compliance implemented through the Open Method for Coordination (OMC), Bologna

remains the most successful attempt to harmonise the HE systems, a case of deliberative governance (Hoareau, 2011) attracting interest to join the process from non-EU countries (Wächter, 2012, p. 173).

Criticised for deepening the 'liberalization of HE' (Garcia, 2007), the Bologna process still advocated for a 'Europe of knowledge' opposed to the 'Europe of banks and euro' (EHEA, 1999). It positioned education as an essential tool to enhance European citizenship and heritage as well as the 'sense of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural area' (EHEA, 1999). Later, under pressure from representatives of the universities and students, the Prague Communiqué specifically mentioned that education was 'a public good', and 'not a tradable commodity' (EHEA, 2001), amplifying the impression that Bologna process was characterised, by a form of ideological 'malleability' (Ravinet, 2014, p. 97), that hybridised 'Market Europe', 'Cultural Europe' and 'Global Europe' narratives.

Initially sidelined, the EC gained influence within the Bologna process (Damro & Friedman, 2018) by providing expertise, policy instruments and funding. In 2005 it was invited to join the board of the Follow-up Group in recognition of its participation in the process (Ravinet, 2014, p. 96-97). Since then, the convergence between EU's policies and intergovernmental initiatives increased, especially after the launch of the Lisbon strategy in 2000 (Keeling, 2006, p. 211).

Lisbon strategy or how the EC copes with globalisation in HE

A major policy shift, the Lisbon Strategy (2000) was the EC's response to the challenges of global competition aiming to achieve 'economic growth, job creation and social cohesion' (European Council, 2000). It proclaimed the creation of a European Research Area (ERA) understood as a common market for the scientific outcomes turned into goods and services. In 2001, a work programme was adopted to improve 'the quality and

effectiveness of education', 'access of all to education', and the connection of 'the education and training system to the wider world' (EC, 2001) by the introduction of benchmarking instruments to measure the performances of the main stakeholders (Wächter, 2012, p. 171-172).

In terms of narratives, the Lisbon Strategy prioritised the reference to a market-friendly version of 'Europe of rights' (e.g. social integration, access to work, gender equality). The ambition to build a 'knowledge economy' refers to a labour market of high-skilled workers capable to cope with economic, technological, or environmental challenges. The European HEIs were invited 'to deliver more graduates and better trained' (Enders and Westerheijden, 2014, p. 171), called upon to rely more on private funding (donations, sale of services, student contributions) (Ravinet, 2014, p. 94) and to cooperate with the private sector (EP and the Council of the EU, 2006). They were missioned to go beyond their teaching and education duties (Serrano-Velarde, 2014, p. 8) to become providers of services, almost 'corporate' organizations (Matei, 2018, p. 599), and through the 'lifelong learning' to complete the connection between education and economy (Mitchell, 2006, p. 391).

While a part of the HEIs resisted, most of them followed this path (Capano & Piattoni, 2011) as it allowed them to untie from state control (Howarth, 2005) and used the 'Market Europe' narrative to advance their own goals.

Besides, this EU agenda has been deeply shaped by global trends in HE and research, in cooperation with international institutions such as the OECD, World Bank, UNESCO and the Council of Europe (Saarinen, 2008, p. 341-359). The EU strived to diffuse its Bologna (Kushnir, 2016) and Lisbon (Dakowska, 2019) models internationally, and adjust to the system of rankings which increasingly structured a

global competition (Marginson and van der Wende, 2007, p. 309), through a combination of 'Power Europe' and 'Market Europe' narratives.

European narratives in HE governance since 2017: towards an ever-stronger politicisation?

The history of EU interventions in HE shows their progressive politicisation, the various combinations of the different European narratives and their reappropriations by various actors. We focus on the most recent period since 2017 to deepen the analysis of a selection of case studies. 2017 marks a symbolic milestone with the speech by Emmanuel Macron at La Sorbonne (Macron, 2017) and the Communication 'Strengthening European Identity Through Education and Culture' by the EC (EC, 2017) leading a bit later to the launch of the European Education Area (EEA) (2018). The same year, the School of Transnational Governance (STG) was founded by the EUI, and the European Council called for the establishment of European Universities (European Council, 2017) till 2024.

Our findings suggest that despite politicisation and 'dissident' voices from both member states, universities and political actors, the EU narratives in HE do not significantly deviate from previous developments. They appear deeply rooted in the same logic and logistic of the market expansion as prior to 2017.

In short, politicisation leads to the institutionalization of preexisting narratives and practices, both in the continuation of longstanding projects (ERASMUS, EUI) and in emergent ones (EUAs).

The multi-level governance of HE and policy mobilisation of universities

The Europeanisation of HE governance has been institutionalised through both supranational interventions and intergovernmental cooperation.

In 2015, references to 'European identity' and, 'European values' such as 'social inclusion', 'diversity', 'gender equality' and fight against 'racism' and 'discrimination', were reintroduced by the EU governments and the EC (EU Ministers of Education, 2015). This was a reaction to the terrorist attacks from Paris and Copenhagen and to 'internal challenges in European education' (Cino Pagliarello, 2022a, p. 177). Education was defined not only as a market-device but as a source of 'critical thinking' and 'personal development' (EU Ministers of Education, 2015).

Traumatic events like terrorist attacks may lead to an upsurge of politicisation and references to 'Cultural Europe'. Still, the 'Market Europe' narrative continued to frame the HE objectives, confirming the Education and Training Programmes 2010 and 2020 priorities (Council of the EU and the EC, 2004; Council of the EU, 2009) to foster 'mobility', 'skills', and 'innovation' (EC, 2016) as a response to the transformations in the job market by new technologies.

In parallel, the HE governance has entered a phase of 'transnationalisation' that redistributes the roles between political levels and types of actors. The proliferation of organisations, experts, and stakeholders—including enterprises, NGOs, student associations, local authorities, and consultancies—that took part in reforms of HE policies transformed the role of the EC (Dakowska, 2019) from being an initiator and coordinator, into an 'orchestrator' mediating between different voices (Cino Pagliarello, 2022a, p. 190). These voices contribute to raising awareness of the new challenges HE faces, such as climate change, sustainability, and digital transition, through narratives like 'Green Europe' that appear as sub-narratives of the broader 'Market Europe'.

The institutional redesign of the HE policy after the 2024 elections may make this evolution even more explicit. The EC president von der Leyen decided to create a new vice-president mandate for 'People, Skills, and Preparedness' (von der Leyen, 2024a).

Separated from culture – under the responsibility of a commissioner for 'Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sports' – education is missioned to strengthen 'our social market model' by 'developing human capital' and filling the 'skills and labour gaps that hold back our productivity' (von der Leyen, 2024a). As research and innovation - placed by the EC President, 'at the centre of our economy' -, education is committed to enhance 'Europe's competitiveness' (von der Leyen, 2024a) 'in the race to a clean and digital economy' (von der Leyen, 2024b). Defined as a component of a 'new culture of preparedness', education is expected to overcome crisis which associate the volatility of the labour market with health issues and the 'economic risks' with 'security threats' (von der Leyen, 2024a). Education serves therefore, not only as an instrument of stabilisation, but as a sort of software for managing risks and loss reduction bulwark.

ERASMUS: mainstreaming into Market Europe, fetishisation and politicisation

In the last two decades, the ERASMUS programme has pursued its institutionalisation as a flagship policy. Regarding its original ambition to make more explicit the cultural dimension of European integration (Corbett, 2005, p. 130) and to democratise mobility, ERASMUS failed to deliver since 'only 1.7 % of the EU population did actually participate in the programme' (European University Foundation, n.d.). In 2014, ERASMUS+ opened to a broader public (unemployed people, teachers, staff from education and training establishments, etc.) (Agence ERASMUS, 2022). The 'ERASMUS for All / ERASMUS High School' Scheme (2021) further extended it to secondary education. ERASMUS+ also marked a diversification in terms of policy fields beyond education such as training, youth, and sports.

This faith in the ERASMUS+ emblematic policy is still visible in prospective views of the future of Europe like the Draghi and Letta reports (Draghi, 2024; Letta 2024).

In economic terms, the recommendation is to quintuple the funding dedicated to promoting skills and mobility to foster European competitiveness (Draghi, 2024, p. 268). In political terms, ERASMUS+ is missioned to transform mobility from 'a privilege of a selected few into a fundamental right' by 2030, to encourage civic engagement and democratic participation, and to achieve 'social inclusion and diversity' as well as 'green transition and digital transformation' (Letta, 2024, p. 24).

The European Parliament (EP) has made chorus by recommending the tripling of the ERASMUS+ budget in the 2028-2034 period to increase the inclusivity of students,' and protect the capacity of Hungarian ones to enjoy the same rights despite sanctions linked to rule of law issues (EP, 2024). The ERASMUS programme is thus flourishing beyond its statistical limits, and its symbolism is mobilised in a variety of narratives ('Europe of rights', 'Social Europe', 'Green Europe') stemming from its original 'Market Europe' and 'Cultural Europe' matrix. ERASMUS has also been instrumental to advocate 'Peace/Power Europe' as, since 2004, ERASMUS Mundus aimed to attract students from third countries to the EU (EP and the Council of the EU, 2003) with again, the double purpose of improving 'intercultural understanding' and seducing the most talented workers to reinforce the competitiveness of the EU (Wächter, 2012, p. 170).

Despite its iconic status, the ERASMUS programme has not been exempted from contestation in the context of the politicisation of EU governance. It has – sometimes – been questioned regarding whether it was worth the money spent on it much more than in political terms or on its intrinsic value. To some extent, these criticisms remain in the framework of the 'Market Europe' narrative as the discussions focused on the outputs. Still, the symbolic strength of ERASMUS was mobilised to counter any political move likely to impact its implementation. For example, in 2015, the Commission dramatised the risk of damaging the students' mobility programme to criticise the refusal by the EP

to take funds from other investment plans to finance the 'Juncker plan' to rescue the European economy by asking with a hint of threat: 'Does the Parliament want to inflict cuts on ERASMUS?' (Barbière, 2015).

The success and limited contestation of ERASMUS are even more remarkable as its societal transformative potential as a 'cultural infrastructure' of European integration is still controversial (McNamara, 2015, p. 106-107). ERASMUS is hailed as the largest programme in the world promoting cross-border study and the 'ERASMUS generation' is celebrated as a pool of workers with transnational experience prefigurating the ideal-type of the mobile and innovative Europeans ready to tackle global challenges. However, its capacity to shape a sense of European identity is widely questioned (Sigalas, 2010; Kuhn 2011). This is an example of the sustainability of political narratives telling 'success stories' on a basis of a symbolism that prevails upon actual policy outcomes.

The European University Institute: the commodification of the European HE governance and its narratives

Even with less public clout than the ERASMUS programme, the EUI is another European flagship policy project in HE. Founded in 1976 in Florence, with the mission to 'foster the advancement of learning in fields which are of particular interest for the development of Europe' (EUI, 1976), the EUI is 'both a university and an international organisation' (Palayret, 2020). In 1992, a convention clarified its status and reaffirmed its focus on the promotion of the European cultural heritage in relation with other cultures (EUI, 1992).

While being emblematic of 'Cultural Europe', the EUI has since its origins been driven by the tension between competing visions of, on one hand, a school of leaders and a source of expertise for the EEC and, on the other hand, an institution of education and research claiming the academic freedom and emancipatory mission anchored in the European universities' tradition.

Successive initiatives illustrate these two visions. In 1993, the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies was created to bridge research and European policymaking and reinforce interdisciplinarity, in addition to the four existing departments (history and civilisation, economics, law, political and social sciences) (EUI, 2024d). In 2006, the EUI opened the Max Weber Programme for postdoctoral studies to strengthen the scientific role of the institution, with the current slogan of 'Making a Difference in Global Academia' (EUI, n.d.).

Confronted with financial difficulties after Brexit as UK was one of its main sponsors and pressures from EU institutions to increase its fundraising capacity and global appeal, the EUI created in 2017 the School of Transnational Governance (STG). Aiming to 'deliver education on European issues' (EC, 2017) and train policymakers and leaders worldwide, the STG sought to teach governance beyond the State (EUI, STG, 2021) and complete its public funding by private incomes (EUI, 2017).

This evolution of the EUI illustrates the coupling between the 'Market Europe' and 'Peace/Power Europe' narratives, arguably at the expense of 'Cultural Europe'. The EUI Strategy for 2019-2024 put forward the bridging of capabilities gap in HE by interdisciplinarity; connections between academia, civil society, and the private sector; and global engagement (EUI, 2019). Meanwhile, the ambition is to capitalise on the political 'acquis communautaire,' promoted as a unique political experience, to attract scholars and executive education clients from around the world (e.g., from the financial and banking sectors) (EUI, 2024a).

This increasing predominance of economic and geopolitical justification has met resistance among academics and researchers. Since its origins, the STG settled in Florence city centre was considered with caution or hostility from the hills of Fiesole where the older components of the EUI are situated. Insiders fear the loss of the

uniqueness of the EUI as a pioneer transnational institution, since many universities across Europe have become internationalised, its banalisation if teaching is prioritised over research, and the risk of commodification of knowledge and loss of intellectual independence. The gradual transformation of the EUI into a hybrid structure – 'an intergovernmental institution in terms of governance and funding, a community institution by the policy-oriented research (…), and a traditional university by its departments dedicated to fundamental research' (Palayret, 2020) – has been accompanied by increasing competition between narratives defining its identities. Its former president Renaud Dehousse (2016-2024) repeatedly defended its 'real' mission against the danger of the marketisation of HE (Lamb, 2016). Its successor, Patrizia Nanz, took over this advocacy by stating that 'As a university, our purpose is to generate knowledge and skilled people (…) maintaining intellectual vitality and pluralism (…), a long-term research agenda (…) and to engage more fully in public debate' (EUI, 2024b).

This comes with an increasing risk of politicisation, as illustrated the recent Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the students' mobilisations that the president Nanz had to manage by respecting divergent opinions within the EUI community but also between member states that are part of its governance and funding (EUI, 2024c).

European universities Alliances: More of 'Market Europe' and integration by stealth

Launched in 2019, the European Universities Alliances (EUAs) are a third flagship project of the EC. On one hand, it reactivates the symbolism of a 'Europe of universities', and a tradition of mobility of ideas, students and scholars that dates to the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment (Charle and Verger, 2012). On the other hand, it is part of a broader strategy aimed at integrating HE, research, and innovation to enhance competitiveness and deepen European integration (Maassen, Stensaker and Rosso, 2023). In practice, the

EUAs duplicate usual technics of EU governance: organisation in networks, mutualisation of resources to do more with less, empowerment of civil society but within strict conditions and according to a roadmap to meet well-defined objectives; financial incentives through competitive calls rather than structural fundings. As such, it is a poster case of the 'Market Europe' narrative, illustrating the combination of neomercantilism and ultraliberalism through the alliance and quasi undifferentiation of public and private actors that is exclusive neither to HE nor to the EU (Warlouzet, 2022, p. 454).

A first constitutive feature of the EUAs is the focus on mobility across national (between countries), sectoral (between policy domains, civil society, and market) and technological (between 'real life' and digital spheres) boundaries. The EUAs are designed to bolster academic cooperation through student and staff mobility, joint degrees, mutual recognition of qualifications (Vukasovic, 2017) and function as inter-university campuses to pool resources (Council of the EU, 2021).

A second constitutive feature of the EUAs is its multi-level political origin reflected in its internal organisation (Vukasovic et al., 2018). Based on bottom-up initiatives and supported by supranational funding (ERASMUS+, HORIZON), the EUAs are embedded in both vertical and horizontal processes of Europeanisation in HE but remain under the scope of their national authorities. Universities are thus involved in potentially conflicting dynamics. They are expected to act as entrepreneurial institutions defining their own objectives and recruitment strategies, building partnerships with local municipalities, student associations, NGOs, and industry, and attracting students (Council of the EU, 2021). They are also requested to serve as catalysts for European identity and citizenship, provide training aligned with transnational labour market needs, and address contemporary political (e.g., populism and radicalisation), economic (e.g., competitiveness), and societal (e.g., inequality, climate change, digital transition)

challenges (EP, 2021). Finally, they are expected to be instruments and symbols of national interest, identity, and sovereignty.

Consequently, the narratives mobilised to promote the EUAs display a high degree of hybridisation and overlap.

Cultural Europe': diffusing European identity and values

The EUAs are missioned to promote a 'European identity and culture', equip students with a 'comprehensive understanding of European history and cultural heritage', stimulate 'research' and 'foster a critical European memory' (EP, 2021). Besides, they are presented as instruments to turn into reality European values of 'freedom, democracy, equality, respect for the rule of law, human rights, and dignity' (EC, 2017). This request makes knowledge and transnational training available for students from 'socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and underrepresented genders' (EP, 2021).

The EUAs are also aimed to disseminate European values worldwide by appealing to international students by the allure of the 'the European way of life' (EC, 2022). Once again, the 'Cultural Europe' narrative overlaps with 'Market Europe' and 'Peace/Power Europe'. The mobilisation of culture as a form of soft power joins a more utilitarian argumentation. The EUAs claim to offer to both European and international students' valuable education, training, and upskilling opportunities to prepare them for a flexible labour market (EC, 2017). Their purpose is also to arming European universities with a new resource in the global competition to progress towards excellence and improve their rankings, even if the EUAs tend in the constitution of their networks to reproduce existing hierarchies between universities (Lambrechts et al., 2024).

Strengthening the Single Market, EU governance... and internal gaps?

The EUAs were primarily designed to create jobs, stimulate economic growth, and increase competitiveness by both completing the internal market through 'cross-border service provisions' and expanding into the global one (Cino Pagliarello, 2022b, p. 158). This aspect of the 'Market Europe' narrative, in the same logic of efficiency, is coupled with a bureaucratic justification based on outputs. Viewed from Brussels, the EUAs were created to overcome the shortcomings of the Bologna process and to fix the problematic coordination of EU research, innovation, and education policies (Maassen et al., 2023, p. 953-954). However, this top-down ambition of rationalisation meets on the ground the complexity of structures and authorities.

Starting in 2019 for 17 European universities, the EUAs currently involve 430 HEIs in 64 alliances. Originally intended for the EU, it was enlarged to universities from third countries (EUA, 2024). The multiplication of participants and their diversity creates difficulties in managing the networks. A first challenge is the discrepancy between the means and the objectives as EU institutions themselves acknowledge that the funding remains insufficient (Cult Committee, 2023). This lack of resources discourages poorer HEIs and explains that that large universities located in Southern and Northern Europe are significantly more represented in EUAs than smaller ones in Western and Central Eastern Europe (Cult Committee, 2023). Tensions may arise between high-ranked universities striving for global excellence, and others anchored in local realities and/or prioritizing inclusiveness (Cino Pagliarello, 2022b, p. 157), as well as between the national and supranational levels of governance at the expense of European cohesion (Gunn, 2020).

Reappropriations and counter-narratives by universities as a form of repoliticisation

The communication of HEIs involved in EUAs reveals how EU narratives are being appropriated. The 'Cultural Europe' narrative is largely dominant with references to 'European identity/culture', 'Europeanness' (Gunn, 2020; Cino Pagliarello, 2022b), and occasionally the 'European way of life' (e.g., UNITA), even among UK and Turkish universities (Gunn, 2020). Occasionally, specific reinterpretations of this narrative are visible in the acronyms and self-definitions of some networks, through the promotion of a 'multifaceted' (e.g., CIRCLE U.) or 'civic' (e.g., CIVIS) identity.

The 'Market Europe' narrative and its counter-balance advocacy for 'Social Europe' are —the second most common narrative as two faces of the same coin displaying competing interpretations of European values. 'Growth', 'skills,' and 'mobility' are put forward along with partnerships with business, industry, and private companies (e.g., ENGAGE.EU, COLOURS) while references to 'innovation', 'excellence', 'boldness' (e.g., T4EU) or 'market' (e.g., CIVICA) are made by alliances of business, technological and scientific universities. Other EUAs prioritise 'diversity', 'inclusiveness', 'solidarity', or less frequently 'humanism' (e.g., EUT+), 'democratic participation' and 'civic engagement' (e.g., UNITA, FORTHEM), to balance the market logics with political claims.

Most alliances, however, are deeply committed to addressing the current societal and economic agenda sponsored by EU institutions (e.g., EUNICE). An alliance like CIVICA stands out by its outspoken concern in influencing 'policymakers in designing effective policy responses' (CIVICA). This alliance includes top universities that are traditionally matrixes of international elites like Bocconi, the CEU, the EUI, the Hertie School, Sciences Po Paris, and the London School of Economics and Political Science. These institutions mobilise both the 'Market Europe' and the 'Power Europe' narrative

to assert their geopolitical mission, aiming to 'strengthen Europe's role in the world' while addressing the 'poly-crises' of economic and social disparities, environmental degradation, and climate change (CIVICA).

Other EUAs express similar aspirations in a more modest philosophy (e.g., EuPEACE). Networks such as SUNRISE, UNITA, or EMERGE claim to 'give a voice to smaller-sized universities from non-metropolitan areas' (UNITA) and to 'overlooked minorities', to 'empower the margins' by 'co-creating knowledge in the periphery of Europe' (EMERGE). This quick survey of the self-advocacy of the EUAs show that the reappropriation of EU narratives by universities contribute to their politicisation due to the resilient tensions between the purposes, means and justification of the European policy in HE.

Conclusion: Higher education as 'business as usual' for the politicisation of European narratives

The analysis of the progressive interventions of European institutions in the governance of HE and of their most recent developments suggest that this policy sector does not stand out from the usual logics of EU legitimisation. A double singularity of universities is that they are policy actors at the crossroad of social spheres (market, society, power) and levels of governance; political objects with a strong symbolism; and arenas of ideological debates. To this extent, it is no surprise that European narratives combine, compete, and hybridise in HE governance even more than in other domains of public action and show dynamics of politicisation.

The erosion of the transformative and charismatic dimensions of narratives mobilised to justify EU action in HE mirrors a more general 'disenchantment' of

European legitimisation. The taming and various reappropriations of 'Cultural Europe', the upgrade of 'Market Europe' and its occasional limitation by regulatory claims, and the ambivalent uses of 'Peace/Power Europe' are illustrated by cultural policy (Sassatelli, 2009), LGBT rights (Ayoub and Paternotte, 2014) or digital copyright policy (Bonnamy, 2023).

More comparative research across policy issues, time and space is needed to refine the understanding of the dynamics of the politicisation of European narratives in HE. Regarding key issues, the study of research policy could shed light on the respective agency of national and supranational actors and narratives, given the earlier and more pronounced 'creeping integration' that has reshaped this sector, which is closely tied to HE due to the scientific role of universities.

Timewise, it would be interesting to focus on periods of crises (e.g., the controversy about the Central European University mixing geopolitical, human rights and economic concerns) to see whether the salience of narratives differ in moments of intense politicisation. Across space, the comparison with policy and narratives trends in HE in Europe and commensurable polities (e.g., the US, Japan) could highlight similarities, divergences and interactions and consequently demarcate what is imputable to the specificities of the EU.

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