From International Commitments to Institutional Reality – The Case of Higher Education Policy in Europe

by
Simona Torotcoi

Submitted to
The Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy, and International
Relations
Central European University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Supervisor: Professor Liviu Matei

Budapest, Hungary
2020

Abstract

This dissertation explores the topic of higher education policy implementation in a multi-level voluntary governance setting, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)[1]. The EHEA and its predecessor, the Bologna Process, have been recognized as an unprecedented regional cooperation initiative in the field of higher education, with participating countries commonly agreeing on higher education reforms to be implemented nationally (e.g., degree cycles, recognition, mobility, quality assurance, student centered learning). Implementation reports have shown that despite the explicit commitment of national representatives, the same pressure, principles, arguments, and narratives they are all exposed to, the implementation of these reforms is uneven across the participating countries. This is not "puzzling" in itself. As in the case of any large and complex 'policy package', divergence is the norm. There is no example of full compliance achieved with identical implementation tools in any international agreement - especially a voluntary one - where there are no supranational/international agents with stronger competencies and possibilities for enforcement.

Analyzing the diverse literature on the implementation of these reforms, it was revealed that (1) implementation as a term is used broadly to denote a variety of stages of compliance; (2) country case studies, which look very generally at what facilitates or obstructs the implementation of the Bologna Process (BP) dominate, (3) there is little done on comparing different countries and policy areas at the higher education institutions' level; and, last but not least, (4) currently there is no theoretically grounded and methodological sound explanation for different implementation levels across the participating countries but a collection of multi-factors influencing implementation. Considering these trends, this dissertation asks: *What are the factors explaining the different levels of implementation of higher education policies within the Bologna Process?* First of all, this dissertation seeks to address this particular research gap by focusing on specific policy areas within the BP, diverse country contexts and higher education institutions within such contexts. Secondly, it aims to contribute to the broader policy implementation literature by providing a conceptual understanding of policy implementation, breaking it into *adoption*, *transposition* and *practical implementation*. Furthermore, this study puts forward an innovative integrated analytical

---

[1] In 1999, when the Bologna Process was officially launched, the Ministers of Education committed themselves to achieving the creation of an EHEA by 2010.

framework and a corresponding set of factors for each of the three implementation stages, and empirically tests them in the above-mentioned contexts.

In line with the proposed analytical framework, the dissertation argues that when explaining implementation there is a need to look at 1) the policy to be implemented – in this dissertation social dimension (SD) and quality assurance (QA) within the BP; 2) the specific country contexts and higher education systems - in this dissertation Moldova, Romania and Portugal were selected as diverse cases; and 3) the characteristics of individual higher education institutions in those countries – in this dissertation several higher education institutions across the three countries.

The dissertation hypothesizes three causal mechanisms for each of the implementation levels. Firstly, is hypothesized that adoption is the outcome of a policy fit between commonly agreed policies at the BP level and national preferences and interests, as manifested through national representatives' participation in BP. This causal model predicts that if BP policies have the support of top domestic actors and structures, this may push the national policies closer to the ones promoted by the BP. As a result, BP structures (e.g., working groups) prefer to collaborate with those domestic actors who are in favor of its policies. Secondly, specific to the transposition stage it can be hypothesized that mutual learning and other socialization processes equip governmental agencies and bodies, societal actors, and the academic community with information about the main developments at the EHEA level and contribute to national level policy-making by affecting the choices of national policy makers for specific policy instruments and implementation mechanisms. Thirdly, at the HEIs level, rectors and top-managers, academic and administrative staff, and also students develop institutional plans and policies in line with the national level policies or the BP, depending on their participation as stakeholders in the policy-making processes, and the added value of the policies in question for HEIs' institutional development.

The analysis is based on a set of 68 semi-structured interviews conducted between October 2017 – June 2018 with top higher education decision-makers, governmental representatives and agencies in the field, higher education experts and professionals, national student unions and other affected groups, higher education institutions' leaders and managers, professors, student representatives, staff and other administrative units. Besides this, the dissertation makes use of 6 additional interviews conducted with transnational and European level stakeholders, European level experts, professionals, and European level policy networks on higher education.

This research highlights the complex relationship between the BP, national, and institutional policy-making and the importance of national and institutional (interest) structures, actors (coalitions) and processes in the implementation of international commitments. While it is assumed that there is a sequential "filter" when it comes to the implementation the BP commitments, with each level and layer of policy-making preconditioning the following one, this dissertation has shown that this is very much dependent on the policy in question. QA is a rather well-defined and technical area, with clear conceptualizations and operationalizations, with structures and bodies at the European, national and institutional level, whereas the SD is underdeveloped in this respect. HEIs implement QA policies because of the competitive environment they have to operate in but also because of the existent monitoring mechanisms (at the institutional, national and BP level). The SD is a rather unstructured and more sensitive area, with most of the universities putting forward their own preferred approaches on how to deal with such issues. If in the case of QA in most of the countries there is a national level agency, which pushes for implementation at the HEIs level, in the case of SD the situation is loose. Given such differences between these policy areas, the corresponding implementation "filters" are different, therefore the different levels of implementation.

This dissertation also revealed the extent to which HEIs react to national and transnational (BP) policies given their autonomy and institutional preferences. Looking more broadly at HEIs behaviors within the BP, it can be stated based on the research for this dissertation that their participation is rather minimal and their engagement with the BP usually takes place through transnational structures rather than the national level delegations and structures. This poses further challenges for implementation, since HEIs become "passive" recipients and targets of national and BP policies despite their own agentic capacities.

Glossary

Concept	Working definition
Adoption	Refers to the incorporation into national laws and regulations of specific policy provisions, or directives by participating countries.
Compliance	Enactment of higher education policies that act in ways that are consistent with the goals and objectives intended by the policy makers.
Transposition	The translation of an objective, goal into operating guidelines and/or specific policies.
Implementation	Stage of policymaking through which adopted policies are put into effect. It is situated between the formulation of a policy and the (un)intended outcomes of that policy.
Policy convergence	A coming together of two or more distinct entities or phenomena. The act of increasing similarity between the policies of different countries or institutions.
Action line/ Commitment	A course of action seeking to address a goal or an objective, in order to redress policy problems, create or improve policy.
Transfer	A process by which knowledge about policies in one sector or as proposed by one model is used for the development of policies at another model.
Participating countries	Bologna Process member countries and associate members.
Quality assurance (QA)	All the policies, ongoing review processes and actions designed to ensure that institutions, programs and qualifications meet and maintain specified standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure.[2]
Internal quality assurance	Institutional policies targeting the quality of institutions, degrees (including joint degrees, cross-border higher education), programs, including aspects related to the design of study programs, their objectives and learning outcomes and obtained qualifications.
Social dimension (SD)	Policies aiming at equality of opportunities in higher education, in terms of access, participation and successful completion of studies (e.g., studying and living conditions, guidance and counselling, financial support).[3]
Communiqué/Declaration	Policy documents at the Bologna Process setting the main action lines to be implemented at the national and institutional level.
Implementation outputs	The volume of legislation and administrative acts and institutional level higher education policies produced (adopted) over a certain period of time.
Implementation outcomes	The actual results caused by implementation outputs.

---

[2] *Quality Assurance 2007-2009*. The European Higher Education Area. Retrieved March 20, 2020, from http://www.ehea.info/pid34784/quality-assurance-2007-2009.html

[3] *Social Dimension 2007-2009*. The European Higher Education Area. Retrieved March 20, 2020, from http://www.ehea.info/pid34785/social-dimension-2007-2009.html

List of Abbreviations

A3ES - Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education in Portugal

AG - Ad-Hoc Working Group

ANACEC – The Moldavian National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research

ANOSR - National Alliance of Student Organizations in Romania

ARACIS - The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

BFUG - Bologna Follow-up Group

BP – Bologna Process

CIPES – The Centre for Research in Higher Education Policies

CNOSM – The Moldavian National Council of Student Organizations

CoE - Council of Europe

CRUP - Council of Rectors of Portuguese Universities

CTNM – National Youth Council Moldova

DGES - General Directorate of Higher Education

EC - European Commission

ECTS - European Credit Transfer System

EHEA - European Higher Education Area

ENQA - European Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

ESU - European Student Union

EUA - European University Association

EURASHE - European Association of Institutions in Higher Education

HE – Higher Education

HEI – Higher Education Institution

IVA – International Voluntary Agreement

LRC - Lisbon Recognition Convention

OMC – Open Method of Coordination

QA – Quality Assurance

SCL - Student Centered Learning

SD - Social Dimension

UEFISCDI - The Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding

WG - Working Group

Introduction

There has always been an interest in exploring compliance and implementation of international treaties and laws from either the perspective of the involved actors, the process itself and its analysis, trends in development, or the issues the key stakeholders face. However, only recently has the topic of the implementation of international voluntary agreements (IVAs) sparked academic interest[4]. For example, in the field of European integration several scholars have been exploring member states' compliance with EU soft law (Senden, 2004; Falkner et al., 2005). An area in which there is clearly a high scholarly interest in studying compliance with IVAs is environmental policy (e.g., the Kyoto Protocol, the Copenhagen Agreement) (Blackman et al., 2012; Croci, 2005). IVAs can have different shapes (e.g., public schemes, multi-stakeholder agreements) and sizes (regional level agreements – e.g. macro-regional cooperation initiatives; state level agreements – e.g., OSCE). IVAs are tools through which parties assume "obligations" among themselves, which are not legally binding, and engage in different convergence, cooperation, or harmonization processes in order to achieve integration or create a common ground framework in that respective policy area.

Enacting policies that are consistent with the goals and objectives intended through IVAs represents a starting point for the members of those agreements to express their commitment towards those aims. In counterpart to the simple agreement on, or adoption of, international documents, the lack of actual policies at the national level, despite the commitment to similar objectives and standards results in different implementation outputs, outcomes or underachievement of the intended goals. This was the case, for example, with the Millennium Development Goals as an IVA. The question why countries are presenting different levels of implementation with regards to commonly agreed IVAs is a foundational one for both policy analysts and political scientists. This question will be addressed in the current study with the aim of contributing to the understanding of policy implementation as a more general policy phenomenon, for which higher education (HE) policy – the Bologna Process - is used as a specific area. Despite broad similarities across participating countries and the same goals of harmonization and policy convergence, the BP presents different implementation outputs across countries and universities, as revealed through numerous reports and dedicated scholarly literature. This dissertation aims to articulate conceptually and unravel empirically the factors leading to such varying implementation performance.

---

[4] For a discussion on the difference between compliance and implementation see section 4.1.

Very often, IVAs involve integration aspects. This is certainly true for the BP (Furlong 2011; Veiga, A., Magalhães and Amaral, 2015). Due to their non-binding nature, IVAs provide fertile ground for exploring what drives the differentiated integration aspect (Holzinger and Schimmelfennig, 2012) – that is, the territorially fragmented validity of commonly agreed rules and behaviors in an international setting. First, the differentiated aspect comes from the flexibility of the system, which permits such rules not to be applied in certain contexts. However, this phenomenon is not only about the validity of the rules but also about the ability and eagerness of the actors to participate in the desired integration process (Andersen and Sitter, 2006). Scholars have put forward different types of differentiated integration. For example, Holzinger and Schimmelfennig (2012), based on a series of criteria –whether differentiation is temporal or permanent, whether it is functional or territorial, etc. - came up with around ten types of differentiated integration, ranging from multi-speed, multiple standards to flexible cooperation[5]. In a similar fashion, Schimmelfennig, Leuffen and Ritberger (2015, p. 765) coined the terms *vertical* and *horizontal differentiation*. Vertical differentiation refers to cases in which a policy area has been integrated at different speeds and reached different levels of centralization over time. Horizontal differentiation relates to the territorial dimension and refers to the fact that many integrated policies are neither uniformly nor exclusively valid in the concerned policy contexts, that is they may stand beside one another and express different approaches to the policies.

Policy implementation scholars have offered several explanations for diverging compliance outcomes by putting as main variables the salience of the policy, its design and governance system, but also the institutional arrangements and resources needed for operating that policy, including the will of the responsible bodies. However, currently there is no generally agreed theory of implementation. The existing literature offers only a collection of multi-factors influencing implementation (Howlett, 2018; Hrebiniak, 2006; Spillane et al., 2002; Mazmanian and Sabatier, 1981; Pressman and Wildavsky, 1974; Hjem and Hull, 1982; Montjoy and O'Toole, 1979). Differentiation comes somewhat as unexpected if one considers that all participating actors have agreed on the respective policies and expressed their willingness and commitment to implement them. In addition, the nature of the IVAs result in that all signatories are all exposed to the same principles, arguments and narratives, and the

---

[5] For example, multi-speed differentiated integration suggests an increasing degree of flexibility in the integration process, with participating countries being allowed to move at a different pace towards the common goals. Multiple standards imply that different groups of participating countries will have to comply with a different set of standards. Flexible cooperation or integration flexible integration are used interchangeably to refer to the different refers to the different modes of integration adopted by participating countries.

same pressure from the in-place governance structures and/or peers. However, as in the case of any large and complex 'policy package', divergence is the norm. There is no example of full compliance achieved with identical implementation tools in any international agreement, and especially in a voluntary one, where there are no supranational/international agents with stronger competencies and possibilities for enforcement.

European integration and Europeanisation scholars have provided different reasons for different policy implementation outputs, including the governance system at hand (Falkner et al., 2005), the specificities of the national contexts (Schimmelfennig and Winzen, 2017), the governance arrangements (e.g., multi-level governance settings – international, national/regional, and institutional) and the chosen policy instruments and tools (Ágh, 2014), and their impact on creating a shared understanding and common policy practices (e.g., normative-ideational factors - Holzinger and Schimmelfennig, 2012). Other studies link variation in implementation across policy sectors and countries to differences in member states institutions, their capacities and willingness to be engaged in new policy processes, their policy-making traditions and heterogeneities (Knill and Lenschow, 1998), and the degree of change and resources the policy in question entails (Andersen and Sitter, 2006). Given the non-binding aspect of IVAs, member countries have the discretion to slow down or even neglect the transposition and practical implementation phases. In a similar fashion, assuming the legal framework is in place at the national level, the lowest level implementation institutions might choose to adapt or adjust to the new policies pretending to align their behavior with the prescribed rule or change their behavior in superficial ways that leave the intended objective intact. This is certainly the case in higher education (Batory, 2016). It can be claimed that differentiated integration is multi-leveled: it happens across countries, but it also "happens within them and among components belonging to different states that connect to each other and/or to the European level" (Fumasoli, Gornitzka and Leruth, 2015, p. 1).

By using the case of higher education policy in Europe, a policy sector which presents high levels of differentiated integration (c.f. Veiga, Magalhães, and Amaral, 2015), this dissertation aims to explore what drives the different levels of implementation across the BP countries/EHEA[6].

---

[6] Recently there is an increasing emphasis on regional integration projects which, among many others, engage in different policy convergence and harmonization processes including cooperation in higher education as a way to overcome globalization challenges. Initiatives from the MERCOSUR, the ASEAN group, from the African Union or the European Higher Education Area (the Bologna Process) are a few examples of the macro-level situation.

Criticized by many, praised by others, the BP is a voluntary agreed, collective and intergovernmental effort to strengthen the competitiveness and attractiveness of the European HEsystem by helping the existing diverse systems to converge towards more transparent systems and create a harmonized European higher education area (Garben, 2010). It is widely accepted that the BP (currently consisting 48 European countries) is a *sui generis* phenomenon. This idea of uniqueness has been portrayed from different perspectives, looking either at the voluntarist character of the process, its mode of governance, its bodies and ways of functioning, and its legal basis (Elken et al., 2011; Erdoğan, 2015). The most notable characteristics of the BP are "the apparent informality of the processes, the co-option of membership, the reliance on flexible shared targets for intermediate objectives, the common culture of policy learning and the emphasis on continual enhancement to drive reform" (Furlong, 2011, p. 19). The BP reflects the liberal intergovernmentalism (Moravcsik, 1998) phenomenon, which perceives participating countries as central actors in the integration process behaving like rational actors pursuing their own interests, but accepting the idea of a shared soft sovereignty.

"The Bologna Process represents an unprecedented, ambitious and original European initiative" claims Matei (2014) with the occasion of Bologna Process Researchers' Conference. Among many others, he claims that the uniqueness of the BP stands in its ability to create "a European space for dialogue in higher education" and "a platform to inform decision-making and stimulate and support practical action in HEat the European, national and institutional level". The BP has a few action lines, or sub-policy areas, such as: the adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees; a two cycles system; a system of credits; mobility; European cooperation in quality assurance; lifelong learning; doctoral studies and the synergy between the EHEA and the European Research Area, etc. (Terry, 2007). Like in most IVAs, the BP reports and studies have shown that even despite the explicit commitment of national representatives with regards to the BP reforms, the implementation of these reforms is uneven (Sin, Veiga and Amaral, 2016) for the Process as a whole, across countries and policy areas.

Implementing Higher Education Policy in Europe

In recent decades, it has been shown that there is a growing interest in assessing the level of implementation of the BP policies and their impact at the national level[7]. Much of the interest in research has been stimulated by the Europeanization of HE and the extent to which HE has become subject to European decision-making, impacting therefore the domestic politics

---

[7] See Chapter 2

and higher education systems (Vukasovic and Huisman, 2018). From outside Europe, the interest has been triggered by the potential of the BP project to serve as a policy model for other regions (Zmas, 2015). Much of the current debates around the BP refer to the implementation process, its harmonization and policy convergence outcomes (e.g., Dienel, 2019), and the dichotomies around it: national versus supra-state interests, the social vs the economic role of HE, etc. (Keeling, 2006; Hackl, 2012).

Notwithstanding its legally non-binding and strong intergovernmental character, participating countries have implemented many elements of the BP. Implementation studies have shown that indeed participating countries move in the same direction, however they do so at varying degrees and paces (Heinze and Knill, 2008). The 2015 Bologna Implementation Report claims that the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is moving towards a "more common and much more understandable structure of degrees", with almost half of the participating countries making "substantial progress in implementing national qualifications frameworks" (Bologna Implementation Report, 2015, p. 17). Moreover, "the use of learning outcomes in curriculum development has grown substantially" (p. 18) and substantial developments took place with regards to recognition and quality assurance. Sursock, Smidt and Korhonen (2011) show that quality assurance, internationalization, governance, and funding reforms are the most frequent developments, whereas in terms of social dimension, lifelong learning (LLL), mobility and employability the participating countries present very different situations.

A closer look at the existing implementation reports shows that there is a lot to be done to achieve the full implementation. There is uneven implementation of specific policies within individual countries and across countries and regions (e.g., see Veiga, Amaral and Mendes (2008) for Southern European countries). The implementation performance of BP policies cannot be categorized based on a Western Europe – Central Eastern Europe distinction, HE system or governance type. In short, there is no clear pattern of implementation given the existing similarities across different HE systems in Europe (for example, for the three broad models for European universities: Humboldtian, Napoleonic and Anglo-Saxon). The different levels of implementation across the participating countries affect the desired BP end goals of "full harmonization" and policy convergence, in other words to make the European HE systems "more alike, to develop similarities in structures, processes and performances'' (Heinze and Knill, 2008, p. 498). A central theme of this dissertation is to underscore that in spite of great similarities across participating countries and their goal to achieve harmonization and policy convergence, there has been a substantial variation in the BP implementation outputs. This

dissertation argues that this variation can be explained by examining the national level implementation processes and their mechanism fostering policy change.

As this dissertation will show, most scholarly work on this subject lacks a theoretically grounded and methodological sound explanation of this empirical puzzle. Looking more broadly at these studies, it can be claimed that they predominantly look at the implementation of those policy areas which are more technical, with formal guidelines for implementation or at least some more clear provisions, and some bodies or agencies which facilitate implementation. While country case studies, which look very broadly at what facilitates or obstructs BP implementation (overall) dominate, a review of the literature also shows that there is little done at the higher education institution (HEI) level and on comparing different countries and different policy areas. In short, no study has built a theoretical framework and/or compared different national conditions and contexts in order to explain the variance in implementation across countries, institutions and policy area, and the necessary and sufficient conditions for implementation. This dissertation undertakes to fill this gap building on policy implementation theories, EU integration studies and HE research.

Research Gap and Justification

Taking into consideration that both BP implementation reports and academic sources show that there is systemic variation in terms of compliance across different participation countries but also across different levels and forms of compliance, this dissertation aims to provide answers to the following question: *What are the factors explaining the different levels of implementation of higher education policies within the Bologna Process?* In other words, this dissertation aims to explore what factors account for the variation in implementation and whether they hold across policy areas and countries (old and new participating countries, EU and non-EU participating countries, countries with different socio-economic and political contexts). Here, *implementation* refers to the stage of policy making through which the status quo is changed and policies are put into effect. It is operationalized as adoption, transposition and practical implementation.[8]

The BP is considered a policy model (conveyed through common commitments) which is used for the development of national policies (Matei, Craciun and Torotcoi, 2018; Powell and Finger, 2013), first by adopting the necessary legislation which provides a legal framework for addressing the policy issue at hand. Once the necessary legal framework is adopted at the

---

[8] See (Jentoft, 2014) for a similar approach for explaining environmental agreements implementation; or Toshkov (2011); Dimitrova and Steunenberg (2017) in EU studies.

national level, the next step for the competent authorities is to translate these policy provisions into operating guidelines, action plans and strategies, etc. The final implementation phase refers to the stage in which these policies are put into effect at the HEIs' level. In other words, it refers to the practical implementation European integration scholars talk about when referring to the establishment of the necessary agencies, tools and instruments, monitoring and compliance mechanisms at the lowest institutional level (Versluis, 2007, p. 53). Based on the above multiple dimensions of implementation and the variables affecting it (Robichau and Lynn, 2009), this dissertation will structure the analysis in two levels: countries as units of analysis (adoption and transposition) and HEIs as sub-levels of analysis (practical implementation).

The uneven implementation outputs across the BP, combined with the specificities of the national HE systems and institutions, suggests that a multiple comparative study design is an effective way to explain the differentiation in implementation of agreed upon policies. The three countries examined in this dissertation, each of which present different implementation levels within the BP, are Portugal, Romania, and Moldova.

Firstly, these cases provide fertile ground for exploring whether the time period a country has been part of the BP matters in the implementation outputs (Holzinger and Schimmelfennig, 2012). This is in line with the sociological institutionalism argument which contends that with time participating countries acquire knowledge about the rules and procedures and internalize its principles, which further helps navigating better through the system. Both Portugal and Romania joined the process in 1999, whereas Moldova in 2005.

Secondly, the three cases allow exploring the role of the European Union (EU) institutions and agencies in "interfering" within the BP and the use of their instruments in enhancing certain policy areas (Huisman and Van der Wende, 2004; Batory, 2016; Dakowska, 2017) (e.g., funding supporting the development of related QA projects). The three countries have different experiences with the EU both time-wise and policy-wise: Portugal became a member of the EU in 1986 (with time it internalized EU's principles and policies – i.e., deeper integration), Romania in 2007 (it had to catch up with EU's policies and had to adjust many of its operational sectors and governance structures), whereas Moldova signed the association agreement in 2014 as a non-EU member and thus it is not directly exposed to EU's policies.

Thirdly, compared to other regions the EHEA is an exceptional multi-level governance context comprising of at least three different levels: supranational, national and institutional. Many studies have argued that an analysis at the regional level of the BP has been lacking despite the fact that countries with similar cultural, economic and political conditions, such as

Romania and Moldova, are more likely to lead to policy coordination/convergence/ transfer (Heinze and Knill, 2008; Elken and Vukasovic, 2014).

Last but not least, the different socio-economic and political dynamics participating countries present (Dakowska, 2017; Triventi, 2014), the contexts in which HE policy-making takes place, and the type of (higher) education systems represent core dimensions in exploring what matters for complying and implementing the BP agreed commitments. Romania, Moldova and Portugal illustrate well such differences.

Besides country and HE specificities factors, a second set of explanatory factors for the HE policy implementation variation is the nature of the policy in question: its political salience, how clear or abstract it is conceptualized and the degree of change and resources it entails (Hrebiniak, 2006). This dissertation focusses on two different policy areas promoted by the BP, quality assurance (QA) and the social dimension (SD). The preference for these two policy areas has been triggered by the fact that they both constitute BP fundamental commitments. Quality assurance is one of the original foundations of BP, whereas the social dimension came on the agenda later on. Both represent different rationales for the BP: quality assurance was a top down approach (supranational actors and governments leading the agenda), whereas the social dimension came later on (2001) and it was brought on the agenda by the students.

The dissertation relies on a dataset of 68 semi-structured interviews conducted starting from October 2017 to June 2018. The core is 62 interviews (Moldova – 17 interviews, Portugal – 17 interviews, Romania – 28 interviews) with top HE decision-makers, governmental agencies in the field, HE experts and professionals, national student unions and other affected groups, top HEIs' leaders and managers, teachers, student representatives, staff and other administrative units. The remaining interviews include European level experts, professionals, and European policy networks in HE (e.g., European Students Union). Interviewees were asked about their understanding of the BP and how familiar they are with it, how they have been contributing (or not) to creating a shared understanding and implementation QA and SD policies at the BP, national or institutional level, what they consider as main challenges and opportunities in implementation, etc. (see Annex 3 for an interview guide for each category of interviewees).

Structure of the Dissertation

In order to answer the question of *what are the factors explaining the different levels of implementation of higher education policies within the Bologna Process?,* the dissertation is structured as follows. A first part which sets the methodological and analytical approaches

(Chapters 1-4). The second part (Chapters 5-7) is the empirical analysis of the case studies. Chapter 1 expands the current introductory section and reflects upon the grounds for cooperation in HE in Europe. It then provides a brief account on the emergence of the BP as a voluntary initiative, its governance structures, and the policies it promotes. This will be the basis for developing the analytical framework and the empirical analysis. The chapter proceeds with an analysis on how these policies – or action lines - have been defined, how they evolved, and identifies two key observations. First, there are action lines which are not clearly defined and operationalized and create confusion when compared with each other. The second observation refers to the fact that there is a strong (inter)dependency relationship between some of these policies. The lesson from the two observations is that having both unclear and interdependent policies generates highly relevant implications for implementation.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature concerned with the implementation of the BP within the European Higher Education Area: official documents, policy reports and academic studies (looking at the mode of governance, developments, path and speed of implementation, and the factors contributing or obstructing implementation). The findings of the review show that despite the increasing volume of studies in this area there is no theoretically grounded and methodological sound explanation for different implementation levels across the participating countries and HEIs. However, the existing studies provide useful insights into the state of the art of the BP implementation and they also shed light upon the different factors which account for certain implementation outputs or patterns. The chapter concludes with a summary of the existing theoretical approaches and factors that could contribute to explaining the various degrees of policy implementation across countries and HEIs.

Chapter 3 presents the research design employed. It first reiterates the uneven implementation of the BP as presented in the main implementation documents and proceeds towards justifying the choice for the research design. The section continues with providing an account of the choice of the policy areas examined in this dissertation, the main rationales for the country case selection and the choice of HEIs in these countries. In order to enhance the transparency of the data collection process, the section provides further details on the interviews and the main themes addressed.

Chapter 4 addresses the existing knowledge gap in researching HE policy implementation within the EHEA and puts forward an integrated analytical framework for understanding the different factors facilitating or obstructing policy implementation. Grounded in implementation theories and backed-up by existing research on European integration, policy

change and policy transfer, the proposed framework makes use of existing research on the BP implementation, but also on related initiatives and processes functioning in a somewhat similar way to the BP (e.g., international voluntary agreements in the field of environmental protection). The framework differentiates between three stages of implementation: adoption, transposition and institutional implementation, corresponding to different levels/degrees of implementation at the national and institutional level.

The framework aims to build a more appropriate approach for researching different implementation outputs. The chapter puts forward three main hypotheses regarding mechanisms fostering policy change in line with the BP. Firstly, it hypothesized that adoption is the result of policy fit between commonly agreed policies at the BP level and national preferences and interests, as manifested through national representatives' participation in BP. This causal model predicts that if BP policies have the support of top domestic actors and structures, this will push the national policies closer to the ones promoted by the BP. Secondly, specific to the transposition stage it is hypothesized that mutual learning and other socialization processes equip governmental agencies and bodies, societal actors, and the academic community with information about the main developments at the BP level and contribute to national level policy-making in thus way, by influencing national policy makers. Last but not least, at the HEIs level top-managers, academic and administrative staff, and students develop institutional plans and policies in line with the national level policies or the BP depending on their participation as stakeholders in the policy-making processes, and the added value of the policies in question for further institutional development.

The following three chapters (Chapters 5 to 7) are dedicated to answering the research question by focusing on each of the three implementation stages. Chapter 5 is focusing on adoption. It begins with a short overview of the context in which the countries under consideration joined the BP by pointing out the motivations they had to join the BP, as an important factor to pursue reform. The chapter proceeds with a summary list of the major SD and QA reforms as an indicator of the adoption and transposition performance of the countries under consideration within the BP. Further, the chapter focuses on the countries' engagement with the overall process, their participation in the BP governance structures, and the opportunities these have created for uploading their policy preferences onto the BP agenda. It looks at key decision-makers and country representatives in the BFUG and its working groups. The chapter assesses whether the incorporation of implementers and target groups (HEIs and students) into the decision-making processes at the BP level and their support affects the adoption of the QA and SD policies. It positions some of the key supranational and

transnational HE actors within the BP and the main mechanisms at work with regard to their members at the national level. The last two sections concentrate on governments preferences with regards to the policies to be adopted.

Chapter 6 focuses on transposition. It first examines domestic actors' input and participation in national level policy making (e.g., participants in the BP working groups, national experts participating both at the supranational and national level policy-making processes, the wider HE community and student representatives) and the organizational socialization practices they engaged in. It then assesses the decision-making authority, discretion, and capacity that implementing organizations have with regards to policy transposition and further implementation.

Chapter 7 focuses on the practical implementation at the HEIs level. It seeks to unbundle the BP policy-making processes in several HEIs from the three countries under consideration. As an indicator of HEIs' performance with regards to QA and SD policies, the chapter provides a summary table presenting the major reforms undertaken by the universities studied. Further, the chapter discusses the policy-making context at the HEI's level and their relationship with the BP and the main national level policy-making processes they are subject to. The chapter explores the role of institutional leadership (rectors and top managers) in setting their institutional agenda and the necessary mechanisms for policy implementation and implementers familiarity with the policy goals. The section focusses on different university structures with competence in QA and SD at the university level (e.g., internal QA commissions, student organizations and different student support services).

Lastly, the dissertation brings together the different proposed factors and concludes with a discussion on the utility of the proposed analytical framework.