

Chapter 6

Italy's Membership in the European Higher Education Area: Coordinating Cooperation in Higher Education While Attempting to Stay Apolitical

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Abstract

This chapter analyses the politics of Italian Bologna stakeholders' membership in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the significance of this for the European region in the early 2020s. Drawing on neo-institutionalism and relying on seven in-depth interviews with key Italian Bologna stakeholders and their official communications, as well as some international-level EHEA communications, the chapter demonstrates a leading position of Italy in the development of the higher education vision and politics in the EHEA since the Rome ministerial conference in 2020. However, Italy's trialling of whether it is possible to remain apolitical in their work in the EHEA, which is by default a politically charged behaviour, has been explicitly focused on the Europeanisation particularly of relevant higher education initiatives rather than of the European region.

Keywords: Italy; Bologna Process; European Higher Education Area; Europe; policy; politics

6.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on Italy, which is the third of the four elements of the collective case study of the perspectives of the founders of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) regarding the role of European cooperation in higher

European Cooperation in Higher Education, 73–88



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doi:10.1108/978-1-83753-516-320251016

education (HE), represented by the EHEA, in the evolving mission of the European project in the early 2020s.

The neo-institutionalist approach which frames the analysis in this book was explained in Chapter 2. All the methodological decisions that underpin the project reported in this book were presented in the introductory chapter, but it is important to remind here that the Italian case rests on a thematic analysis of seven in-depth semi-structured elite interviews with an opportunistic/snowball sample of key Bologna stakeholders in Italy and 10 of their official communications.¹ The interviewees include a couple of key HE actors in Italy who wished to keep their organisational affiliation unrevealed, a former vice-chair of the Bologna Follow-up Group in Italy as well as representatives from the Italian quality assurance agency (ANVUR), the national Union of University Students (UDU) and the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI).

This chapter starts with explaining recent developments in Italian politics which is essential contextual information for our analysis below. This is then followed by a review of literature on EHEA's Bologna Process (BP) in Italy and presenting key findings about Italian EHEA stakeholders' perspectives on the role of HE in Europe after 2020.

The chapter demonstrates that Italian EHEA-related stakeholders, despite taking a coordinating role in the EHEA, have been trialing ways of staying apolitical before succumbing to the unavoidable connection between politics and HE. This attitude to politics may, arguably, be rooted predominantly in the assumed conflict between EHEA's inherent link to Europeanisation (Kushnir & Yazgan, 2023) and Italy's growing Euroscepticism, coupled with a commitment to maintaining security in the region (Albertazzi & Zulianello, 2021; Conti et al., 2020; D'Alimonte, 2019; Pasquinucci, 2022).

6.2 Recent Developments in Italian Politics

This section maps the field of prior research on the Italian political landscape. According to historical neo-institutionalism (Peters, 2019), it is an essential context for the analysis of Italy's views on the role of the EHEA in the European project. This context is also key to understand the rationalisation – rational decision-making – process of the Italian Bologna stakeholders. The analysis of it later in this chapter will be guided by the rational-choice strand of neo-institutionalism.

Right wing parties have exerted a significant influence over Italian politics over the past 25 years by emphasising immigration, law and order, Euroscepticism and tax reduction promises. This strategy was greatly shaped by the Forza Italia (FI) and its leader Berlusconi, who entered politics in 1994 (Albertazzi et al., 2021). Italy's traditional two-party system has collapsed, with the 2013 elections leading

¹The dataset with interview transcripts, generated and analysed during the research project that informs this book, is available in the Research Data Archive of Nottingham Trent University, at <https://doi.org/10.17631/RD-2022-0001-DDOC>.

to the instability of the coalition governments in the coming years (Chiaromonte & Emanuele, 2013). This was due to Prime Minister Berlusconi who encountered a series of scandals and legal proceedings related to his personal affairs and business dealings. The 2013 elections led two centre-right and centre-left parties, the party Il Popolo della Libertà (PdL) and the democratic party Partito Democratico (PD), to lose power (Chiaromonte & Emanuele, 2013). The 2013 electoral victory of the then populist Five Star Movement (M5s) party delegitimised the traditional ruling political class. After Berlusconi's conviction in 2013, he was prevented from holding public office until 2019, which prevented him from running as a candidate in the 2018 parliamentary elections or aspiring to the position of Prime Minister (Donà, 2022). It is worth noting that the M5s party has undergone a change in how it is perceived by the public on the political spectrum with it shaping itself as being beyond the left-right duality (Giannetti et al., 2024).

The rise of populism in Italy has been a hot topic in a recent growing body of relevant literature (Albertazzi & Zulianello, 2021; Conti et al., 2020; D'Alimonte, 2019; Di Matteo & Mariotti, 2021; Pasquinucci, 2022; Zulianello, 2022). Italian modern populism holds its roots in the 1990s and the devolution of the two-party system (D'Alimonte, 2019). A few recent studies (Albertazzi & Zulianello, 2021; D'Alimonte, 2019; Di Matteo & Mariotti, 2021; Zulianello, 2022) have demonstrated that recent populist gains in Italy can be explained taking into account the links with the economic and related institutional problems in Italy as well as the issues related to migration into the European region which have had an impact on Italy as well. In particular, these scholars highlight the consolidation of the League which is the right-wing political party as well as the M5s, with its complex identity endorsing populism and claiming to be beyond the left-right division (Albertazzi & Zulianello, 2021; Conti et al., 2020). Albertazzi and Zulianello (2021) investigate regional cleavages in this populist consolidation by contrasting the League with the M5s which happen to have divergent agendas, albeit both populist. According to them, the League has gained its success through cultural cleavages, while the M5s has gained its popularity through focusing on economy and institutions, and thus, on a Eurosceptic electoral campaign. The 2018 elections in Italy resulted in a historic victory of the populist forces (D'Alimonte, 2019). An incrementally increasing gap between the Italian elites and the rest of the population has brought about the popularity of the League and M5s as they have been promising a radical change for the country (D'Alimonte, 2019). Similar trends have gained traction in other countries across the European Union (EU) (Pasquinucci, 2022).

With the 2018 elections, the M5s and the League emerged victorious and they joined forces to establish the Conte I government, which held power from June 2018 to September 2019 (Donà, 2022). However, a year later, the Conte I government was replaced by a coalition involving the M5s, the Democratic Party and other smaller left-wing parties, resulting in the formation of the Conte II government, which governed between September 2019 and February 2021. Due to the instability of the coalition, the President of the Republic made the decision to invite Mario Draghi, the former President of the European Central Bank, to form

a new government in February 2021 (Donà, 2022). The Italian elections of 2022 were called following Mario Draghi's resignation. Arguably, a combination of those developments and the 2022 elections, in particular, have led to the normalisation of the populist right in Italy (Zulianello, 2022).

Another populist right-wing party, FdI (Brothers of Italy) won the 2022 elections leading Giorgia Meloni to become the first female Prime Minister of the country. Her party promotes conservative values, national identity, and Euro-scepticism. It advocates for stricter immigration policies, traditional family values, and economic nationalism (Donà, 2022). Meloni's triumph presents the culmination of a gradual process of normalising and integrating populist ideologies within Italian politics that commenced in the early 1990s (Zulianello, 2022). The composition of the latest government is historically significant as it consists of two populist parties who represent about 80% of the votes (Donà, 2022). Italy's national results of the 2024 European elections have shown that 'Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia party has won European elections in Italy with a whopping 28% of votes. Analysts say she secured herself as kingmaker in the European Parliament' (Euronews, 2024). However, regional elections in Italy in 2024 have put Meloni's nearly pan-Italian support into questions. For instance, *The Guardian* (2024) reports that:

The Italian prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, has suffered her first regional election setback since taking power after a leftwing candidate was elected president of Sardinia. Alessandra Todde, a politician with the Five Star Movement (M5S) who was backed by the Democratic party (PD), has become the island's first female president, narrowly beating Paolo Truzzu, the rightwing candidate chosen by Meloni.

The presentation of the M5s as a left-wing party is, of course, debatable but not entirely surprising, given the complexity of M5s shifting identity (Giannetti et al., 2024).

Italy's relations with the EU have also been affected by the migration flows shaping public attitudes towards the EU and its institutions. Italy has been one of the forefront countries on the immigration route of the people fleeing from countries such as Syria and Afghanistan following the war in Syria. After Greece, Italy has served as the country of first arrival for refugees who reach Europe via sea routes (Castelli-Gattinara, 2017). The influx of migrants combined with the authorities' weaknesses in managing the arrival of migrants has led to tensions with the EU. Additionally, it has sparked public controversies regarding the scale and financial implications of Italy's involvement in patrol operations (Castelli-Gattinara, 2017).

The migration crisis has served as a substitute for significant changes within the Italian party politics – in other words the right-wing populist surge (Geddes & Pettrachin, 2020). The migration issue was politicised by the political elite and the media (Caponio & Cappiali, 2018). Immigration has become a high-stake issue in Italian politics often appropriated by the populist movement (Dennison &

Geddes, 2022), resulting in a form of a politically saturated hostility (Barisione, 2020).

Apart from the issues discussed above, Italy has also been challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic and the Climate Change in the recent years. Scholars suggest a mismanagement of the pandemic during the first phases due to undertaking some rapid measures and a lack of coordination between political and scientific elites (Bull, 2021; Ruiu, 2020; Sanfelici, 2020). Overall, the crises have sparked a growing discussion regarding the future of the EU integration/disintegration (Hutter & Kriesi, 2020; Riddervold et al., 2021). Such developments have contributed to a high degree of Euroscepticism in Italy, especially by those populist far-right parties that have also used the European financial crisis as a matter of discussion as it also affected Italy (Conti et al., 2020). The economic and political challenges faced by the country, coupled with such issues as immigration and the perceived lack of equal treatment by the EU have contributed to Euro-sceptic sentiments (Conti et al., 2020). For instance, both M5s and the League framed immigration issue to criticise the EU (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020). For the M5s, Italy was left alone in dealing with a migration flows, and they argue that European countries needed to fairly distribute the migrants. The League holds a considerably more rigid stance advocating for a complete ban on immigrants entering Italy and advocates for the establishment of a different Europe that prioritises security, traditional family values and Christianity (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020).

6.3 The Bologna Process in Italy

The adoption of the EHEA-related reforms in Italy has been examined by a range of scholars (Aittola et al., 2009; Ballarino & Perotti, 2012; Cammelli et al., 2011; Chies et al., 2019; Di Pietro, 2012; Guccio et al., 2016; Jakobi & Rusconi, 2009; Moscati, 2009; Ursin et al., 2008).

Being one of the founders of the BP, Italy was, of course, among the first few countries to start adopting the BP which has been a process with many successes along the way, as well as a range of challenges (e.g., Ballarino & Perotti, 2012; Cammelli et al., 2011; Di Pietro, 2012; Guccio et al., 2016; Moscati, 2009). The BP-related reforms in the Italian HE system have been the most significant reforms in the area of education in general ever accomplished in the country (Ballarino & Perotti, 2012) and there is a lot to celebrate regarding the achievements of the implementation process. In particular, the BP reforms have had a positive impact on university enrolment rates in Italy (Di Pietro, 2012), and teaching efficiency in Italian universities has improved significantly (Guccio et al., 2016).

The 1990s marked early efforts towards modernisation and the development of a focus on HE quality assurance in Italy. Early attempts proved to be ineffective due to a lack of transparency in university management structures and resistance from the academic community. In 1999, the *Comitato Nazionale la valutazione del sistema universitario* (CNVSU) was established to review university

self-evaluation reports, and student participation was encouraged through the use of questionnaires to evaluate teaching activities. In 2010, a new national quality assurance body ANVUR (*Agenzia Nazionale di Valutazione del Sistema Universitario e della Ricerca*) was created. Significant aspects of this framework were influenced by the French and British quality assurance institutions (Dobbins et al., 2023). A significant change that took place was the introduction of an accreditation system. This change resulted in the establishment of a new organisational unit known as the Quality Assurance Committee (QAC), which now oversees quality assurance processes (Agasisti et al., 2019).

These reforms have taken place not without criticism. Critical voices have been sounding regarding the lack of improvements that the lifelong learning initiatives have brought about (Jakobi & Rusconi, 2009). Similarly, HE quality assurance practices in Italy have also faced criticism (Ursin et al., 2008), evidenced by questioning university student performance and reasons behind persistent social inequalities in graduation rates in spite of the Bologna reforms (Chies et al., 2019). There has been a well-known socio-economic division between the northern and southern regions in the country which have caused an imbalanced flow of students, with a significant number migrating to the northern regions for university studies. The areas that are economically disadvantaged tend to have lower rates of high school graduates transitioning to university, lower graduation rates and eventually a higher likelihood of students migrating in search of employment opportunities (Columbu et al., 2021). Santelli et al. (2022) who examine student mobility in the southern Campania region find that students are drawn to prestigious universities in the northern regions, particularly when they want to pursue a Master's degree.

In spite of the lack of official barriers to entry, Italy is falling behind most developed nations when it comes to the percentage of young people who have completed HE (Contini & Salza, 2020). Cappellari and Lucifora (2009) examined Italian secondary school graduates both before and after the Bologna reform on the degree structure. They found that the reform had a substantial positive effect on the likelihood of people pursuing HE, particularly among students who were considered 'marginal'. These marginal students, characterised by strong academic abilities but disadvantaged family backgrounds, experienced a more pronounced increase in college enrolment as a result of the reform (Cappellari & Lucifora, 2009). Moreover, school to work transition in Italy is slow despite the labour market in Italy has undergone recent reforms that aimed to enhance flexibility by reducing the costs associated with hiring and firing (Pastore, 2019).

More recent studies about the membership of Italy in the EHEA focus on how the Italian HE system has evolved during the BP. Specifically, Beine et al. (2020) examine the trade-off between HE quality and costs at Italian institutions and maintain that those institutions which charge more in fees ended up with fewer international students, and this has resulted in less income from tuition fees. Another aspect of HE in Italy that has gained momentum in relevant scholarship is an increasing role of Italian HE institutions in promoting sustainability and social change (Fronidizi et al., 2019). Also, Italian universities' entrepreneurial role (Vesperi & Gagnidze, 2021) and HE digitalisation (Piomalli, 2023) have also

been addressed. In addition, the role of Italy in contributing to shaping the politics of the EHEA is also important in understanding how the driving role of Italy as a founder of the EHEA has changed (Kushnir & Yazgan, 2023).

The literature reviewed above seems to suggest that Italian membership in the EHEA still has an important role in Italy. This is despite the challenges in the implementation of relevant reforms. The gaps in relevant prior research on EHEA's founders' role in the EHEA and the link between the EHEA and wider politics were explained in Chapters 1 and 3. It is worth reminding here briefly that what concerns the Italian case, the literature review above has shown that the state of affairs with respect to Italy's membership in the EHEA after 2020 has not been the focus of attention, Italy has not been scrutinised as a founder of the EHEA by other scholars, and the relationship between Italy's EHEA membership and wider politics remains an under-researched area.

6.4 A Coordinating Role of Italy's Membership in the European Higher Education Area and the Politics of Attempted Apoliticism

The analysis of the interviews and official communications from key Italian Bologna stakeholders has shed light on their vision of the role of HE in Europe in the early 2020s. The section presents key findings and discusses them in light of the theoretical and empirical literature outlined in Chapters 2 and 3. These key findings focus on Italian stakeholders contributing to driving the development of the EHEA as a forum for cooperation in HE in the European region which, yet, cannot be separated from the wider politics of Europe; and on Italy's conflicting attitudes towards the politics in European cooperation in the area of HE.

6.4.1 The EHEA as a Forum for Cooperation in Higher Education in the European Region Intertwined With the Wider Politics of Europe

The EHEA has been evolving as an international forum for cooperation in the area of HE, as well as a base for exchanging knowledge more broadly – through allowing the development of connections among the EHEA signatories and offering a platform for a dialogue within the European region as well as between it and other regions worldwide. Resultingly, a tight link has been developing between HE cooperation within the EHEA and the wider politics of the countries that are members of the EHEA:

We developed a vision of an open and inclusive European Higher Education Area. It is a political issue to make the EHEA as more open and inclusive as possible. We believe that having contacts with other geographical systems, education systems... is very important to connect, to have exchanges, to exchange good practices and so on. And this is from a political point of view. (D7, a representative of the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI))

The same interviewee adds that the political flavour of the EHEA has been work in progress, as it has been evolving:

The European Higher Education Area was a cultural project... maybe not at the very beginning. (D7)

Since the establishment of the EHEA, it has been instrumental in coordinating HE cooperation in the European region and beyond, predominantly by converging HE structures and pursuing a common vision (Kushnir, 2020). While HE policies have been EHEA's focus at least until the 2020 Rome Conference, there has been an unquestionable link between these policies and wider EHEA's politics, as suggested by the literature review presented in Chapter 3. The EHEA has been developed with the help of on the Open Method of Coordination. While such a governance mode is a non-binding way of cooperation, the shared nature of decision-making in the EHEA has been a strategic choice of EHEA stakeholders, following the logic of the rational-choice strand of neo-institutionalism explained in Chapter 2. Such a shared nature of decision-making within the EHEA, and the EHEA's recently updated aim of becoming 'inclusive, innovative and interconnected' (Rome Ministerial Communiqué, 2020, p. 3) illustrates the discussion in Chapter 3 – when the aspiration of building friendship among the countries is mirrored in HE, but also when cooperation in the area of HE becomes used to support wider politics.

It is important to acknowledge that this wider politics may have various stakes on democracy and human rights promotion. There are cases when authoritarianism in HE and the wider society mutually feed each other, such as in Russia and Belarus (Nikolayenko, 2021; Terzyan, 2019) or Afghanistan (Akbari & True, 2022). There are also more positive examples of HE being used for economic growth (Nyangau, 2014) or inter-county friendship promotion through Europeanisation (Huisman & Van Der Wende, 2004).

The politics specifically of the EU and the EHEA still seem to be intertwined even though the EHEA evidently transcends the borders of the EU:

Of course, here the things that happen at the EU level are a bit overlapping with what happens at the EHEA level. (D2, key HE actor in Italy)

As explained in Chapter 3, HE became EU's instrument for Europeanisation a long time ago. To remind, the European Commission viewed HE as a tool to help develop a European single market, the idea of the European citizen (Keating, 2009) and European identity (Grek, 2008). The 1991 Memorandum on Higher Education demonstrated that HE was part of the European Commission's 'agenda of economic and social coherence' (Huisman & Van Der Wende, 2004, p. 350). These strategies were further embodied in the facilitation of the so-called 'European dimension' in the consolidated European HE space and searching for more cooperation opportunities which eventually brought about the start of the work on the EHEA (Robertson et al., 2016). Arguably, the expansion of the EHEA beyond EU's borders in the effort to

build wider friendships in the European region and beyond (Kushnir, 2016). This was coupled by recent increasing gains of Euroscepticism within the EU (Vasilopoulou & Talving, 2024) which has inspired EU policy-makers to create the European Education Area. Its creation in 2017 has signified retracting to the idea of an education space specifically for the EU (Kushnir, 2021, 2022), while reserving the EHEA for the cooperation both within the EU as well as between the EU and nearby regions.

6.4.2 Paradoxes in Italy's Driving the EHEA: Its Understanding of Politics in HE Cooperation While Trying to Stay Apolitical

Having discussed the interconnectedness of the EHEA and European politics, which is evidently recognised by Italian Bologna stakeholders, it is now timely to draw attention to the paradoxically conflicting attitudes of Italian BP stakeholders in certain highly politically charged situations related to HE cooperation in the framework of the EHEA. The politics of attempted apoliticism on behalf of Italy in HE cooperation in the EHEA can be illustrated by the cases of responding to the repressions of students in Belarus who stood up to political injustice as well as to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Regarding Belarus, relevant scholarship is strikingly scarce, which may be a consequence of the censorship and surveillance prevalent in the country. During the presidency of Lukashenko since 1994, Belarus has been advancing its autocratic structures, whereby the President has had supreme decision-making powers, suppressing opposition voices through controlling the public space (Terzyan, 2019). This politics was also reflected in the relatively recent protests, joined by students, which was a reaction to the falsified 2020 election results in Belarus (Nikolayenko, 2023). The protests led to student arrests and expulsions from Belarusian universities. At least 466 students were detained and at least 153 students were expelled from their universities at the time (Amnesty International, 2021).

The data from the project reported in this book add an important aspect to the above limited scholarly debate. This aspect focuses on the accession and tolerating of Belarus as a member of the EHEA as seen by Italian Bologna stakeholders. First of all, the issues in Belarus HE, stemming from the above discussion of Belarus' wider politics, did cause precautions on the part of many EHEA members, particularly Italy. However, Belarus' accession into the EHEA was seen by Italy as a way to support members of the HE community in Belarus:

Belarus is considered by some in the EHEA as – how to say – a not legitimate member. And I can see from working with them that unfortunately they had non-legitimate things going on before the invasion of Ukraine. And Belarus has the support of the Russian Federation... But I see that they were not any worse than Azerbaijan or some other countries... So before the invasion I did my best to support Belarus to help them. (D6, former vice-chair of the Bologna Follow-up Group in Italy)

However, the cooperation with Belarus has complicated reaching decisions particularly regarding EHEA's ambitions to promote academic freedom, university autonomy, etc.:

We have seen that there were some problems, for example, in the case of Belarus and other countries. In principle, we agree, but when we have to decide a common action on general themes, then it is difficult. (D1, key HE actor in Italy)

While the condemnation of Belarus' politics is evident in the above quotes regarding Belarus' membership in the EHEA in general, responding to student repressions in Belarus during and after the 2020 presidential elections was less of a unanimous act among the Italian Bologna stakeholders, demonstrating that the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research in Italy was holding back:

I'm working on fundamental values, and they [Italian ministry] were among those that haven't signed either the official statement condemning Belarussian repression during the Rome 2020 conference... (D2, key HE actor in Italy)

Apparently, this Italian Ministry was considering similar abstinence during EHEA's preparation of the *Statement by members and consultative members of the Bologna Follow-up Group on consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine* (EHEA, 2022), which it eventually did sign and which was about suspending Russia and Belarus from the EHEA:

We, therefore, ask the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) to suspend the Russian Federation's rights of participation in all structures and activities of the EHEA, including the BFUG, working groups, task forces, peer learning groups and similar structures. We ask the BFUG to extend the same measures to Belarus. (EHEA, 2022, p. 1)

Motivations behind considering abstaining from signing the Statement above on the part of Italy was explained by a key HE actor in Italy:

Basically, what they [Italian ministry] said is that they didn't want to [sign the letter to suspend Russia and Belarus]... They wanted the European Higher Education and the Bologna Process to not be involved with respect to political matters. So, to keep them separate. Now, it's very difficult that this is the position that can be taken, because the Russian Rectors' Conference has said yes, we support the war. So, also that makes it difficult to have this kind of position... It can also be that in general, there are countries that are less harsh towards Russia. Italy has historically been one of them. It might also be that they want to

do only the necessary and not the surplus. At the same time, I don't know whether this is the position because Italy's had struggles in many measures. So, it might be that there are other motivations or they will eventually sign. (D2)

However, the consideration not to respond would in itself be politically charged:

...there is a very high interest [in the Italian ministry] to keep these issues [response to the war] technical and not political, which is actually a political question. (D4, key higher education actor in Italy)

Nevertheless, the EHEA was able to take a unified action against Russia and Belarus for their cooperation in launching the invasion of Ukraine. This also included the voice from Italy which was paramount to stay in tune with the values that Italy had reaffirmed during the EHEA Conference in Rome in 2020, such as the freedom of speech, democracy, etc. ([Rome Ministerial Communiqué, 2020](#)). This demonstrates EHEA's wider objectives in addition to specifically HE policies by acting as a forum for uniting countries under common values. In spite of the issues that the European region has been facing, linked to populist gains, the EHEA has emerged as a major platform to foster a shared vision and commitment to democratic values:

...what is happening in Ukraine, means that also, being part of the Bologna is going to be, let's say, a commitment, a bigger commitment than it has been so far. (D2, key higher education actor in Italy)

On April 22, 2022, EHEA members, including Italy, issued the Statement in which the EHEA as an institution stated that the Russian aggression against Ukraine:

...disregards the values and goals of the EHEA and fundamentally violates all the obligations and commitments Russia has undertaken since it joined the EHEA in 2003. It has also undermined the trust that is fundamental to European higher education cooperation. For Russia to regain the trust of other EHEA members will be a long and difficult process. ([EHEA, 2022](#), p. 1)

6.5 Conclusion

Chapter 6 has placed Italy at the centre of attention, which is the third of the four elements of the collective case study of the EHEA's founders' perspectives about the role of European cooperation in HE, represented by the EHEA initiatives, in our understanding of the evolving mission of the European project in the early 2020s. This chapter explained recent developments in

Italian politics as an essential contextual information for our analysis, followed by a review of literature on the BP in Italy and presenting key findings. The data have demonstrated that Italian stakeholders have been contributing to driving the development of the EHEA as a forum for cooperation in HE in the European region which, importantly, cannot be separated from the European wider politics, despite Italy's conflicting attitudes towards the politics of HE cooperation.

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