

Chapter 4

Germany's Membership in the European Higher Education Area: Leading Europe

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Abstract

This chapter places Germany, as one of the four founders of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), at the centre of attention and analyses its Bologna stakeholders' perspectives on the role of European higher education (HE) represented by the case of the EHEA in the evolving mission of the European project, which is seen here as the Europeanisation project transcending the borders of the EU. The period of the early 2020s is the focus here. The analysis rests on the ideas of neo-institutionalism and is based on in-depth interviews with key German EHEA-related stakeholders and a selection of key official communications. The findings demonstrate that German Bologna stakeholders view Germany's EHEA membership largely as a tool for generating and maintaining political stability in the European region, and Germany takes an active leading role in this process.

Keywords: Germany; Bologna Process; European Higher Education Area; EHEA; Europeanisation; Europe; neo-institutionalism; policy; politics

4.1 Introduction

This is the first of the four chapters presenting the data from the project reported in this book. This chapter places Germany, as one of the four founders of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), at the centre of attention and analyses its Bologna stakeholders' perspectives on the role of European higher

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education (HE) represented by the case of the EHEA in the evolving mission of the European project in the early 2020s period.¹

The neo-institutionalist approach which frames the analysis in this book was spelled out in Chapter 2. The gaps in prior relevant research that this chapter addresses, collectively with other chapters which present data from the case studies, and the methodological considerations of the project that informs this chapter were detailed in Chapter 1. To remind, the discussion of the German case here relies on a thematic analysis of eight in-depth semi-structured interviews with an opportunistic/snowball sample of key German Bologna stakeholders and 10 of their official communications.² The interviewees include three key HE actors who did not wish to reveal their organisational affiliation as well as representatives from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research in Germany, German Rectors' Conference, Free Association of Students' Unions (FZS), Erasmus+ National Agency, DAAD and the Education and Science Workers' Union (GEW).

The findings presented in this chapter demonstrate that German Bologna stakeholders view Germany's EHEA membership largely as a tool for generating and maintaining political stability in the European region, and Germany takes an active leading role in this process. This chapter continues by contextualising some key recent developments in German politics, which is then followed by a review of literature on the Bologna Process (BP) in Germany and outlining and discussing key findings from the empirical part of the study.

4.2 Recent Developments in German Politics

This section maps the field of available research on Germany's recent politics which, according to historical neo-institutionalism (Peters, 2019), is an essential context for the analysis of Germany's views on the role of the EHEA in the European project. This context is also key to understand the rationalisation process of German EHEA stakeholders, the analysis of which in Section 4.4 will be guided by the rational-choice strand of neo-institutionalism.

There is, of course, no consensus regarding one political direction in Germany or any country. The idea of the 'polarisation of German politics' has been slowly creeping to the forefront since the 2000s 'in an era of multiple crises' (Hutter & Weisskircher, 2023, p. 403). Germany's response to the 2015 migrant crisis, generously welcoming migrants and actively encouraging other European Union (EU)

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²The 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>

countries to do so through its mechanisms of influence in the EU (Ayoub, 2023), has been one of the major dividing issues in Germany. Immigration has exacerbated internal divisions in Germany (Pickel & Pickel, 2023; Reiser & Reiter, 2023) but has been one of the elements in 'a deep, triple crisis involving shaky eurozone debt, Russian aggression in the east and a sudden surge in migrants and refugees' (Matthijs, 2023, p. 135). A combination of these challenges was a fertile ground for sprouting far-right movements. These far-right movements have developed in Germany to the extent that even gave opportunities for 'intra-party conflicts over the "true" version of the shared party ideology' (Pytlas & Biehler, 2024, p. 322).

Despite the existence of Eurosceptic sentiments, such as those of the Alternative for Germany Party (AfD), 'Germany has always been a strong power in the European integration... and few would question Germany's ideological commitment to the European project in general' (Caporaso, 2021, p. 18). Germany was even referred to as 'Europe's indispensable nation' by Radoslaw Sikorski in his November 2011 speech in Berlin who, at the time, was the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs (Matthijs, 2023, p. 136). Its structural, institutional and ideational power has facilitated its leadership position in managing the interlocking crises in Germany and the European region, despite the so-called 'German question' of historians whether it could be considered a 'normal' country and be in the position to 'ever take on a mantle of regional or global leadership' regardless of its fascist past (Matthijs, 2023, p. 138). Germany acted as an 'enforcer-in-chief' during the Euro crisis (Matthijs, 2023, p. 144), as a 'facilitator-in-chief' during the Russian aggression crisis (Matthijs, 2023, p. 146) and a 'benefactor-in-chief' during the refugee crisis (Matthijs, 2023, p. 148).

Germany's long serving Chancellor Angela Merkel was replaced by Olaf Scholz in 2021, and despite the worries in the political circles around the continuity of Germany's politics after this change, coupled by the ongoing crises and populist gains in Germany, Germany remains EU's 'status quo power' (Becker, 2023, p. 1473). However, France's accompanying leadership in the European region (Bora & Schramm, 2023) and the smoothness of the Franco-German relationship is instrumental to Germany's effective leadership in the EU (Schramm & Krotz, 2024). The continuity of such a power configuration has been put into question, though, after the 2024 European Parliament election and the follow-up early legislative election in France which both confirmed that Macron's support had weakened and French political landscape is in chaos (Chabal & Behrent, 2024).

While the effects of this power shift in France on the Franco-German relationship is yet to be seen, the idea of Germany's undeniable leadership position in the EU is also echoed in the literature about German Europeanisation which highlights Germany's learning process in leading the way in the Europeanisation within the EU (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2020; Schoeller, 2019) and its assertive manner in doing so (Daehnhardt, 2022). German Europeanisation follows a bottom-up approach, given the independence that the 16 federal states have from the central government in policymaking (Kazanoğlu, 2021).

4.3 The BP in Germany

HE reforms in Germany in the context of its membership in the EHEA cannot be analysed without acknowledging that the education system in Germany is federalised, which prompts us to assume a degree of policy fragmentation in the implementation of education reforms in Germany. However, despite this federalism, the EHEA-related reforms in Germany have been more successful than any prior reforms due to effective soft governance which is part and parcel of the BP (Toens, 2009). The added incentive of Germany to exert its soft power in the European region through the EHEA to promote cooperation in the region has also helped the BP gain momentum in Germany (Kushnir, 2023).

The focus on the impact of the BP in Germany has been the most prevalent in relevant scholarship. There is a range of studies which highlight structural adaptations of Germany to the Bologna action points in specific areas of studies such as legal (Bücker & Woodruff, 2008; Riedel, 2005; Terry, 2019), nursing (Hensen, 2010; Taneva et al., 2023) and teacher training education (Kless & Pfeiffer, 2013). There are also studies about the impact of the BP on the German HE system in general. This is related to, for example, the success of the universities of applied sciences in Germany in their implementation of the BP (Teuscher, 2023), as well as progress towards measuring students' workload and understanding HE quality (De Rudder, 2010; Turner, 2019; Winkel, 2010) across German universities. Aside from this, scholarship discusses the impact of the BP on such specific aspects of German HE as doctoral education (Guth, 2006; Kehm, 2023) and student mobility (Gareis & Broekel, 2022). It is also worth highlighting a separate body of scholarship where the impact of the BP on the German HE is one of a range of case studies in focus or where BP's impact on Germany is mentioned in passing, such as in Dobbins et al. (2023), Teichler (2023), Zgaga (2023) and Lohse (2024).

Given the all-encompassing nature of the BP (Dobbins & Knill, 2009) and, more importantly, a degree of fatigue around the long and persistent discussions about it in the academic circles (Gareis & Broekel, 2022; Mendick & Peters, 2022; Pires Pereira et al., 2021), there is a plethora of recent studies about HE in Germany which touch on the ideas of the BP but do not make any explicit references to it or Germany's membership in the EHEA. Such studies include the foci on student mobility in Germany (Netz & Grüttner, 2021), multilingualism in the context of the internationalisation of German HE (Bradlaw et al., 2024), continuity in HE reforms (Rohs et al., 2023) and graduate employability (Petzold, 2021).

The range of overlapping gaps in prior relevant research was detailed in Chapters 1 and 3. However, it is worth mentioning again that with regard to the German case in particular, the above literature review has demonstrated that the state of affairs with respect to Germany's membership in the EHEA after 2020 has not been the focus of attention, Germany has not been studied as a founder of the EHEA along with the other three founders by other scholars and the link of Germany's EHEA membership and wider politics remains an under-researched area.

4.4 Germany's Membership in the EHEA as a Channel for Its Soft Power in Promoting Stability in the European Region

The analysis of the interviews and official communications from key Bologna stakeholders in Germany has shed light on their vision of the role of HE in Europe in the recent context. This section presents key findings and discusses them in light of the theoretical and empirical literature outlined in the earlier chapters of this book. These findings focus on the German stakeholders' rationalisation of Germany's EHEA membership as a tool for generating and maintaining political stability in the region, and their perspectives on how Germany has been taking an active leading role in this process.

Germany plays an active role in the EHEA, according to the interviews conducted, which also resonates with the literature review presented above (e.g. Kushnir, 2023; Toens, 2009). What this literature does not address and what this study provides is an account of how the rationale for Germany's membership in the EHEA is negotiated by key Bologna stakeholders. Another point that this literature does not address and that this study provides is how Germany's membership in the EHEA fits with Germany's wider politics. This chapter highlights that while Germany is not the same kind of driver of the EHEA as it used to be in the past when work on building the EHEA started in 1998, Germany still leads on many aspects of EHEA's work, and all of German Bologna stakeholders express Germany's sense of responsibility for the stability in Europe and the development of European HE. What concerns HE, key German Bologna stakeholders' rationales for actively supporting Germany's active role in the EHEA are as follows. One of the key rationales is cooperation in HE with the focus not only on harmonising HE structures but more importantly the values of democracy. The other rationale for Germany's membership in the EHEA is benefit-drawing for the improvement of German HE and economy. Crucially, in addition to these specifically HE-related incentives, there are two wider incentives, which are emphasised more by the interviewees, related to promoting political stability and security in the European region.

The thematic analysis has revealed a prominent theme of Germany's sense of responsibility for promoting the politics of cooperation and peace-keeping in the European region and around it, which is partly exercised through its work in the EHEA. The representatives from the Bologna stakeholders in Germany were unanimous on this. It is striking to see how Bologna stakeholders use this reason to reinforce the importance of their commitment to the EHEA:

...we think that the EHEA can facilitate. ... exchanges of opinions, of science. And let people meet with each other, so that they can't imagine anymore to have war with each other. In a way, it is more than just education. It's also a peace policy if you want. ... [the BP is] about unity. ... at least we want to reach that we don't have war against each other. That we talk to each other, that we understand each other. And we think that the EHEA can facilitate that process. (B1, a representative from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research)

The link between education and peace is timely in the context of the invasion of Ukraine, which is what the interviewee above implied, although the interview took place just before the full-scale attack on Ukraine was launched in February 2022. The ideas expressed remain relevant as the political strategic significance of being a member of the EHEA remains the same for Germany:

. . . it is still the dialogue with Eastern Europe, especially the Russia-influenced countries that were part of the Soviet Union before. . . So, this is still one strategic point. The other is, of course, to have a link with Western countries, that are not parties in the EU, but that are traditionally strong partners of Germany, like Turkey, Norway, UK, Switzerland. (B1, a representative from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research)

Germany's Bologna stakeholders' choice to view and use Germany's EHEA's membership as a tool for enacting Germany's sense of responsibility for developing cooperation and friendship in the European region is in line with the literature on Germany's leading role specifically in the EU (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2020; Becker, 2023; Daehnhardt, 2022). While this literature is limited to the discussions of the EU, the ethos of Germany's aspiration to support Europeanisation in the region, evident from this literature, runs in parallel with the findings from this project on Germany's utilisation of its EHEA membership as a way to promote Europeanisation. Although in the EHEA's case, Germany's Europeanisation acquires a new meaning – wider cooperation and a friendship-zone generation, and a clear bridge between developments in HE cooperation and wider politics. Education can never be neutral – it is always political (Marshall & Scribner, 1991). Thus, it is not surprising that there is a mutually shaping relationship between HE and the context in which it operates, as discussed extensively by the representatives from key Bologna stakeholders in Germany as well as evident in their official communications. For example, the EHEA is explicitly mentioned in *the Internationalisation Strategy* for Germany (Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 64), emphasising academic mobility and resulting cooperation in the European region as the drivers of 'stability and peace in the regions involved'.

The potential for the EHEA to be a platform for Germany's stability-inspired soft power in the European region has, arguably, increased recently. Apparently, the EHEA had lost its momentum (Gareis & Broekel, 2022; Mendick & Peters, 2022; Pires Pereira et al., 2023), but the new war in the European region has reignited the need not to lose this platform for promoting cooperation:

The relevance for EHEA has been changing over the years. . . And long before war in Ukraine, I often thought that it would be almost impossible to get the European Higher Education Area going nowadays. (B4, a representative from the Rectors' Conference in Germany)

The most turbulent times since WWII that have arrived to Europe with the attack on Ukraine and other crises that have recently occurred have inspired another aspect of Germany's wider politics of cooperation using its EHEA membership as a tool for promoting the politics of friendship and creating a ring of friends specifically around Germany – for Germany's safety:

We are located in the middle of Europe, and international cooperation is becoming more important every year. (B2, a key HE actor in Germany)

What concerns HE, in particular, Bologna stakeholders in Germany choose to be active in the EHEA to drive cooperation in HE in the region with the new emphasis not only on the structural aspects of HE, which is the focus of prior literature on the topic (e.g. Gareis & Broekel, 2022; Turner, 2019), but more importantly, the values of democracy, academic freedom and integrity:

...what used to be the core of Bologna: increasing mobility, introducing study cycles... in that sense Bologna has become less important. It is becoming more important in other regards and we're coming to that: fundamental values, academic freedom, and now, of course, the war on Ukraine – we would rather see the importance of the Bologna Process in this area now as a forum for exchange. (B4, a representative from the Rectors' Conference in Germany)

Lastly, it is not surprising that Germany, similarly to other countries, would have some self-related interests associated specifically to HE while pursuing the EHEA, such as using the EHEA membership to improve German HE specifically and, as a consequence, its economy:

...it's also easier, when you have a problem, to call someone in another country and ask him, how do you solve the problem? (B1, a representative from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research in Germany)

Europeanisation is very important for Germany on an economic level. That's also an education thing, that's why there's a lot of interest... they [central government] were like, we're going to have this huge European thing [the BP] and if we don't do this all together, then we are going to be left behind. And so, the whole process [the BP] was used to give motivation to the federal ministers to really do some reforms. (B5, a representative from the Free Association of Students' Unions)

While benefit-drawing for HE improvement through implementing different action points of the BP is a typical theme in prior literature on the BP in Germany

(e.g. Hüther & Krücken, 2018; Turner, 2019), viewing this as part of wider economic benefits and, more importantly, a method of governance shift has not been a focus in the literature. The last quote above is a powerful example of how Germany's EHEA membership has been used by the central government bodies in Germany as a power tool for them to establish a form of control through coordinating the work of the independent federal ministries in the area of HE. The BP is also acknowledged as a driver for 'promoting higher education reform in Germany' on the national level in the press release of the [Federal Ministry of Education and Research \(2021\)](#), although the gravity of what is meant in this official communication can only be realised when put in the context of the discussion with the interviewee mentioned above. The scope of these coordinated and harmonised national reforms had not previously been possible in the fragmented policy context of German federalism (Toens, 2009).

4.5 Conclusion

Chapter 4 has placed Germany in the spotlight, with it serving as the first of the four elements of the collective case study of the EHEA's founders' perspectives on the role of European HE, represented by the EHEA initiatives, in our understanding of the evolving European project's mission in the early 2020s. Chapter 4 has contextualised recent political developments in Germany and provided an outline of the literature on the BP in Germany before presenting and discussing key findings. The data have demonstrated that German EHEA-related stakeholders have been viewing Germany's EHEA membership as a tool for supporting political stability in the European region. Importantly, Germany has been taking an active leading role in this process. The findings presented in this chapter are further discussed in relation to the findings from the remaining case studies in Chapter 8.

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