

Chapter 5

France's Membership in the European Higher Education Area: (Still) 'Moderating' the Leading of Europe

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Abstract


This chapter presents an analysis of the politics of French stakeholders' choice to be in and develop the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the significance of this for the European project, which has been emerging as a phenomenon wider than the EU itself. Similarly to the previous chapter, empirical research here is informed by neo-institutionalism and is based on in-depth interviews with key French stakeholders in the Bologna Process and their key official communications on the topic. The findings demonstrate that France appears to support Germany's leading position in the Europeanisation in the region. Evidently, French EHEA stakeholders choose to position France as a 'moderator' country in the Europeanisation process in the European region in the early 2020s, with the EHEA being a forum for EHEA members' cooperation in higher education and wider political diplomacy.

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

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the second of the four elements of the collective case study of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) founders' perspectives on the role of European cooperation in higher education (HE) in the evolving mission of the European project in the early 2020s. France is the focus in this chapter.

European Cooperation in Higher Education, 57–71

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The neo-institutionalist approach which informs the analysis in this book was spelled out in Chapter 2. The gaps in prior relevant scholarship that this chapter contributes to addressing and the details of the methodological decisions underpinning the project reported in this book were presented in the introductory chapter. However, it is worth reminding here that the analysis of the French case relies on four in-depth semi-structured elite interviews with an opportunistic/snowball sample of key Bologna stakeholders in France, as well as 25 of their official communications.¹ The interviewees include a French expert in the Bologna Process (BP) and representatives from ENIC-NARIC France, the Assembly of Directors of University Institutes of Technology (ADIUT), a national student organisation (FAGE).

This chapter proceeds with outlining recent developments in French politics as an essential context for the analysis later in the chapter. This is then followed by the review of literature on the BP in France before key findings are presented regarding French EHEA stakeholders' perspectives on the role of HE in Europe in the early 2020s period.

5.2 Recent Developments in French Politics

The following literature review maps the field of available research on recent state of affairs and challenges in French politics and the links that these developments have with Europeanisation and, in particular, Franco-German relations as a key aspect of French external relations. This background information is key to understand the developments with regard to the French membership in the EHEA later, following the logic of the historical strand of neo-institutionalism.

5.2.1 Crises as a Context

French politics has undergone a range of defining developments in the recent years which have been facilitated by turbulent global sociopolitical phenomena. These developments have been shaped by migration flows, climate change, protest movements, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated evolving French politics during Macron's Presidency since 2017. Many of these phenomena are not exclusive to France as they have an impact on the European region and beyond. Therefore, it is not possible to separate these from the Europeanisation trends in France. In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on immigration flow into France and the EU (European Union).

Immigration has been a divisive matter in the realm of French politics (Ostermann & Stahl, 2022). It entered the political agenda a few years ago, with the post-2015 'migrant crisis' due to a dramatic increase in border crossings resulting from conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan (Kushnir et al., 2020). According to Vertier et al. (2023), France received the influx of asylum seekers

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>.

similar to some first-entry European countries, such as Greece and Italy. The asylum seekers coming to France settled in Calais in North France, and by October 2016, an unauthorised camp with a population of 6,400 residents had emerged. However, it was subsequently shut down by the government, and the migrants were dispersed to different regions across the country. [Vertier et al. \(2023\)](#) examine the relationship between the relocation of these migrants and extreme voting patterns in France. They explore the impact of the dismantling of the migrant camp in Calais on voters' political attitudes and electoral behaviour. They argue that the dismantling of the camp heightened public concern about immigration and led to an increase in the support for far-right anti-migration political parties. Similar to other EU countries, French politics has been challenged by extreme powers. For instance, there are similarities of immigration attitudes of people who vote for far-right parties: French Rassemblement (RN) national and the German Alternative for Germany (AfD) ([Ostermann & Stahl, 2022](#)). Another challenge in French politics has been recent protest movements ([Duyvendak, 2019](#); [Bourdin & Torre, 2023](#)). They are related to economic concerns and managing other challenging influences of globalisation. France has experienced social unrest, particularly with the Yellow Vest movement that emerged in 2018. The movement highlighted issues of economic inequality, dissatisfaction with government policies and the demands for greater social justice ([Jetten et al., 2020](#)). This unrest can also be associated with the environmental politics in France. There has been a growing emphasis on sustainability, the utilisation of renewable energy sources and the reduction of carbon emissions in the country. Public trust in institutions and political actors play a crucial role in shaping attitudes towards climate policies in France ([Douenne & Fabre, 2020](#)). Scepticism towards government effectiveness and concerns about the transparency and fairness of policy implementation can hinder public support for climate measures. The protests underscore the need for effective communication, addressing economic and social considerations and building trust in order to garner broader support for climate action in France. Another protest movement emerged in 2023 due to pension reform package introduced by President Macron. Large-scale strikes and demonstrations were held to oppose government plans to reform the pension system, with concerns over the potential impact on retirement age and benefits ([Vail et al., 2023](#)).

Apart from these challenges in France, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant issue related to managing vaccination rates and balancing public health with freedoms. French public's approval of relevant COVID-19 safety measures depended strongly on their low level of trust in the national leaders ([Altiparmakis et al., 2021](#)). The vaccination campaign, in particular, became politicised. Compared to the supporters of the political centre, the supporters of the far-left and green parties were more likely to be opposed to mandatory COVID-19 vaccine ([Gagneux-Brunon et al., 2022](#)) – a different trend to the right-wing vaccine hesitancy in other countries such as the United States ([Carpiano et al., 2023](#)). However, France overall had a high prevalence of vaccine hesitancy ([Bajos et al., 2022](#)).

The COVID-19 crisis and unidentical government reactions to the pandemic across the EU have further underscored the need for European solidarity, and

Macron was at the forefront of pushing for coordinated responses from the EU countries. He called for joint EU efforts to address the economic impact of the pandemic, including the issuance of shared debt through the EU Recovery Fund. Macron saw the crisis as an opportunity to strengthen European cooperation and build a more resilient and socially oriented Europe (Clegg, 2022). Evidently, the pandemic reinforced the importance of European solidarity, with President Macron taking a leading role along with Germany in advocating for coordinated European responses (Kempin, 2021).

The incrementally growing weight of the multiple and interlocking crises in France has significantly challenged the support for Macron which has led to a political turmoil in France. Macron called snap parliamentary elections in June 2024 in the wake of a big victory for his rival Marine Le Pen's National Rally party in the 2024 European Parliament vote. Chabal and Behrent (2024, p. 330) summarise these developments by stating that 'Macron successfully provoked a political earthquake, but he has not been able to control the new political landscape he created.' This is because while the far-right National Rally failed to secure the most seats in the snap legislative elections, they set sight on the 2027 presidential vote, the left-wing New Popular Front coalition came first, with Macron's centrist coalition coming in second. President Macron has refused to name Lucie Castets from the New Popular Front as Prime Minister, which had led to a political crisis (BBC, 2024). At the time of writing this chapter, the country is still stuck in a political standoff. The examples of the crises in the recent years briefly discussed above sparked debates about the role of the EU in French politics. An increasing influx of immigrants has brought forward the debates on national identity, immigration policies and the rise of far-right populism in France (Ostermann & Stahl, 2022). Protest movements highlighted deep divisions within French society and fuelled debates about income inequality, taxation and the role of the state (Bourdin & Torre, 2023). The pandemic highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the French healthcare system and exacerbated discussions on public trust in the political leaders in France (Brouard et al., 2020). Overall, these crises contributed to uncertainty and prevented a smooth implementation of French reform agendas.

5.2.2 The Evolution of European Politics in France and Macron's Leadership

The crises mentioned above have significantly influenced the development of France's Europeanisation. During the formation of the EU, France maintained its significant role, although not as dominant as Germany, which emerged as the forefront leader of the EU (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2020). However, both France and Germany played a crucial role in the establishment of a unified Europe following World War II (Sutton, 2007). The deep-rooted bilateral relationship between the two countries has allowed them to collectively influence the shaping of Europe, according to Krotz and Schild (2013). They emphasised the importance of such factors as adaptability in the close relationship between France and Germany, in spite of some inherent differences in their political aims, such as in the case of their stances on international affairs and the pressures exerted by policy stakeholders within their nations.

In the context of France's efforts to collaborate with Germany in driving European integration, France itself has undergone Europeanisation as a result of the evolving nature of European integration since the 1950s. Europeanisation is explained by Ladrech (1994, p. 69) as 'an incremental process re-orienting the direction and shape of politics to the degree that political and economic dynamics of the EU become part of the organisational logic of national politics and policy-making.'

During the 1980s, domestic actors in France within the Fifth Republic, that is the current republican system of government in France, established in 1958, perceived European integration as institutional changes to be resisted (Ladrech, 1994). French authorities viewed European integration as a strategy to constrain German influence following World War II since Germany has consolidated its economic power (Giurlando, 2021). The imbalance between France and Germany became more pronounced following the reunification of Germany and the expansion of the EU to include Central and Eastern European countries (Steible et al., 2022). Nevertheless, France remained a key player within the EU but not as strong of a player as in the case of Germany that emerged as a supreme leader of the EU. For instance, France's rejection of the EU's constitutional treaty in the 2005 referendum illustrated France's so-called lukewarm leadership role in the EU (Sutton, 2007). However, regardless of some of such Euro-sceptic sentiments, there are plenty of strong voices in France that remain loyal to sustaining France's leadership in Europe and support for Germany's efforts in this domain (Degner & Leuffen, 2019; Schild, 2013).

The start of Macron's presidency can be considered as a turning point in the Europeanisation trends in France. After taking office in 2017, Macron has been actively working towards enhancing European integration and establishing France as a significant actor in shaping the future of the EU. His election in 2017 sparked a renewed focus in France among policymakers on EU matters and a determination to revive France's involvement in European decision-making (Steible et al., 2022). Basically, Macron has been following the motto 'Make Europe Great Again', emphasising the importance of a strong and united Europe; he has been aiming to counter Euroscepticism and bolster France's position within the EU (Bouza García & Oleart, 2022, p. 272).

The nature of France's leadership role in the EU along a more powerful actor – Germany – has been the reason for summarising in the title of this chapter France's role in the EU as 'moderating the leading of Europe'. While this has been the case, the future of this position has become uncertain in the context of the most recent – at the time of writing the chapter – events in France, namely the 2024 European Parliament election and the 2024 France snap legislative election, briefly explained in the previous sub-section.

5.2.3 The Franco–German Relationship

As mentioned previously, the Franco-German partnership can be considered the motor of European integration. The below provides more details about the dynamics of this relationship. France and Germany have influenced most

significant EU policies such as creating the European Council, the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty (Webber, 2005). The relationship between France and Germany has recently gained an even greater significance in the Brexit context (Krotz and Schramm, 2022). As the EU has been facing significant internal and external challenges, a strong partnership can be pivotal for shaping the future of European integration. Scholars argue that managing the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an improvement in the Franco-German relationship. This is due to the European Recovery initiative driven by the two countries (Steible et al., 2022). Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron jointly introduced a European Recovery fund to address the COVID-19 crisis. This initiative included the establishment of an ambitious recovery fund amounting to 500 billion Euros (Capati, 2024).

French leadership role in the EU along a more powerful actor – Germany – in of European integration (Aggestam and Hyde-Price, 2020) can also be traced in President Macron's putting forward the European Universities Initiative idea in 2017 in his Sorbonne speech, as part of the European Education Area. The European Universities Initiative was eventually launched by the European Commission at the end of 2018 in the Erasmus + Programme Guide for 2019. It aimed to improve strategic partnerships across EU HE institutions. President Macron's strong focus on European languages, identity and solidarity in the initiative, which is also reflected in its design, demonstrates that the European Universities Initiative primarily aims at promoting cultural integration within Europe. Importantly, in this regard, France's stance on the European University aligns with the position on European cultural integration that Germany held in the post-WWII period, both countries now envisioning the European Universities Initiative as a means to achieve the original objectives of a supranational university (Kempin, 2021).

Yet, the two countries do not necessarily share exactly the same objectives regarding global politics. Scholars highlight some differences between the two countries, particularly since Macron's presidency in 2017 which has reframed French foreign policy. For instance, differences exist in areas such as shaping transatlantic security relations, particularly with regard to NATO, as well as the economic policies of the EU (Kempin, 2021). For instance, Macron has criticised Germany's position on the Eurozone. He has consistently advocated for the abandonment of the 3% GDP debt ceiling due to it being outdated. The two countries have different perspectives on the role of NATO and dealings with Turkey (Major, 2021). Such differences in the political priorities of France and Germany have also been a precedent for some tensions between the two countries in their ongoing partnership, particularly during Macron's rule (Krotz & Schramm, 2022). The collaborative role and leadership of France and Germany, the two largest and most influential Member States of the EU, remains crucial for the future of Europe. Despite difficulties arising from different preferences, France and Germany have demonstrated joint leadership during the moments of existential threat to the EU such as during the COVID-19 pandemic (Krotz & Schramm, 2022), as well as to the security of Ukraine and the rest of Europe during Russia's attack on Ukraine (Kushnir, 2023).

5.3 The BP in France

Having discussed recent developments in French politics – the context in which French HE has been developing, it is timely to move on to the review of literature specifically about the BP in France. In the last couple of decades, the implementation of the BP and the execution of relevant changes in France's HE has been widely explored (e.g. [Castin, 2009](#); [Jakobi & Rusconi, 2009](#); [Malan, 2004](#); [Musselin, 2009](#); [Pilkington, 2012](#); [Witte et al., 2008](#)). This body of literature has emphasised several significant aspects of the BP in France, including the process of implementation and the consequences of the BP in France, the difficulties encountered during the implementation of the BP, and how BP reforms have served as a platform for the Europeanisation of HE in France.

Scholars have focused on several important transformations that happened in French HE with regard to the BP. Similar to other countries that are part of the EHEA, France has attempted to enhance its collaboration with others in HE, facilitating academic mobility ([Malan, 2004](#)) and promoting competitiveness and quality in HE ([Castin, 2009](#); [Musselin, 2009](#)). Introducing three cycles of studies was another significant reform brought about by the BP. All these changes, along with the evolving neoliberal context, facilitated the development of the phenomenon of competitiveness among French higher education institutions (HEIs), as some recent studies explicate (e.g. [Mai, 2022](#); [Sánchez-Chaparro et al., 2020](#)), as well as the rise of quality assurance pursuits ([Benito & Romera, 2011](#); [Sánchez-Chaparro et al., 2020](#)). [Batechko and Durdas \(2020\)](#) argue that the French approach to evaluating the quality of HE already operates on multiple levels, providing university staff with the means to assess the advancement of the HE practice.

These transformations in the French HE, guided by the BP, have been accompanied by a range of challenges. One example of such challenges is related to the competitiveness aspect mentioned above as a correlation has developed between university autonomy and university rankings in France ([Mai, 2022](#)). [Aust and Musselin \(2014\)](#) highlight a significant impact of university rankings on the transformation of the French HE system, particularly in shaping the evaluation criteria for university performance, which revealed weaknesses in French HE. French universities' initial poor performance in rankings created the need for the reform of the HE system as many French HE institutions did not have the characteristics necessary for the representability in the ranking (i.e. having large comprehensive universities, publishing in English-speaking journals [[Aust & Musselin, 2014](#); [Highman, 2021](#)]). Another challenge was in the implementation of the three-cycle study system which met resistance from universities which were used to doing things differently in accordance with the previously established conventions. For example, academics criticised the reform, emphasising its failure to adequately address the needs and demands of students and the labour market ([Castin, 2009](#)).

Such BP-induced structural reforms in French HE came to be associated with Europeanisation in and beyond HE in France. Some scholars mention that the BP should be analysed as a process of Europeanisation rather than only as a set of

HE reforms (Dakowska, 2019; Dobbins, 2017; Kushnir & Yazgan, 2023; Musselin, 2009; Pilkington, 2012; Sacilotto-Vasylenko, 2013). The mere fact of European Commission's involvement in governing the BP was a clue by Dakowska (2019) to argue for the need of such an analysis. According to her, the European Commission's influence is strengthened through the deployment of its experts, who act as policy brokers, working to promote a broader European agenda at the domestic levels of the EHEA signatory countries. This allows the EU's clientele to engage with domestic actors, including those in France, in order to advocate for European policies (Dakowska, 2019).

The overlapping gaps in prior relevant research were explained in Chapters 1 and 3. To remind, with regard to the French case, the literature presented above has focused on the state of affairs with respect to France's membership in the EHEA after 2020, France has not been analysed as a founding country of the EHEA along with the other three founders, and the link between France's membership in the EHEA and France's wider politics have not been scrutinised.

5.4 An Instrumental Role of France's Membership in the European Higher Education Area in Moderating the European Project

The analysis of the interviews and official communications from key EHEA stakeholders in France has demonstrated their perspectives on the role of HE in Europe post-2020, including the significance of France's membership in the EHEA for France, the insight this gives us about France's wider Europeanisation agenda and the evolving mission of the European project. The below discussion focuses specifically on what we have learned about France's stakeholders seeing France as one of key leaders of Europe in general as well as its HE in particular and seeing HE cooperation as a gateway to friendship in the European region, although it is not an easy achievement.

The data from this project echo the sentiment in the scholarship about France's leadership role in the European region (Krotz & Schild, 2013; Schmidt, 2020; Sutton, 2007) along with Germany (Degner & Leuffen, 2019). However, while Germany is considered to be a stronger leader overall (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2020), French Bologna stakeholders see France and Germany more as equal partners in the leading of Europe when it comes to leadership through education:

We think that Europe works well when France and Germany work together for Europe. That's the type of situation where we regard ourselves as leaders, basically. Sometimes embarrassing actually. . . we regard ourselves as the leaders of Europe. That's basically what it is. Let's say one of the leaders of Europe. . . (C3, representative of the Assembly of Directors of University Institutes of Technology (ADIUT))

Given this leadership role of France in Europe, it would not come as a surprise that France leads the way in terms of education developments, particularly in HE:

...our president, Emmanuel Macron, has made everything in order for higher education in France to lead the way and to fit in the European system. He wants France to be an example for the higher education field in Europe, and so he has made everything for it to be true. (C4, representative of a national student organisation (FAGE))

The interviewee refers to the European Universities Initiative in the quote above that is an aspect of the European Education Area which has increasingly been interlinked with the EHEA developments (Wagenaar, 2022). Kempin (2021) acknowledges that the overarching strategic aim of the European Universities Initiative is cultural integration in Europe; however, this is presented again as a vision shared by the two key leaders of Europe, namely France and Germany. However, the interview above exemplifies the idea expressed by others implying a greater importance of France in this process. Regarding specifically the EHEA, France's leadership position in European HE was evident in its preparation for the EHEA 2020 ministerial conference hosted by Italy. As illustrated by an official communication of the [French Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation \(2019\)](#), prior to the conference, France launched a national consultation on the prospects of the EHEA to which higher education establishments in France as well as the wider public were invited to respond.

A key reason for France to aim to develop European HE is because, evidently, France's Bologna stakeholders choose to see HE cooperation as a gateway to strengthening 'the attractiveness of the Europe zone' ([The French Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, 2020](#)) and cross-country friendships in the European region:

...the attack [of Russia] on Ukraine shows. ... that if we don't act as a continent, we just are going to lose millions of our citizens. ... Some people, as I said, the extreme right or the extreme left will criticise Europe and say that we would be better without. But I mean those attract a very small amount of the vote. ... But I'd say that every one is absolutely convinced that education, and a European education is our way forward. I'm sure there's no question about that. (C3, representative of the Assembly of Directors of University Institutes of Technology (ADIUT))

According to the rational-choice strand of neo-institutionalism, such as choice to view HE as such is a rational decision. The unifying role of HE in Europe in the framework of the EHEA has also started pointing to a greater appreciation by the French Bologna stakeholders of the links between an HE community and a peaceful wider community:

...the present events in Ukraine [invasion by Russia] show in retrospect that we were right to start working on European community. And at least there's a European community of higher education... And if we are not able to have a perfect democracy everywhere, at least we are able to share. (C3, representative of the Assembly of Directors of University Institutes of Technology (ADIUT))

This implies that the old peace-building sentiment that prompted the development of the European project (Polyakova, 2016) has started gaining momentum again. However, it is:

...challenging to have team 'EHEA'. Of course, you've got two areas in one, EU and non-EU, and the western side and the eastern side... it's a strategy to be in the EHEA as a member. (C2, French expert in the Bologna Process)

Internal and external instabilities from the Euro crisis of 2010s through to Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic (Ferrara & Kriesi, 2022; Schimmelfennig, 2021) have challenged European integration. These crises have brought the discussions about European disintegration to the forefront (Patberg, 2021). Such discussions may even question whether the EHEA is immune to similar disintegration processes. For example, recent populist gains in France (Chabal & Behrent, 2024) may also, arguably, become reflected in the French cooperation strategy with European partners in the framework of the EHEA in the future. Nonetheless, as the EHEA is committed to such European values as democracy and the rule of law, it should be able to serve as a platform to bring these values and ideas back on track. This is illustrated in the following quote:

The only way for us, as a country, as an economic force, but also as a group of citizens is to have a fully functional Europe, and therefore a fully functional EHEA. (C3, representative of the Assembly of Directors of University Institutes of Technology (ADIUT))

Undoubtedly, inclusive education provision is a core element of innovation (The French Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, 2022) and democracy (Bergan, 2022). A similar position of the Bologna stakeholders in France can be illustrated by the quote from the same representative of the ADIUT:

...we need to provide more education, more democracy. (C3)

Some EU countries have recently experienced an illiberal turn which signals of a democratic decline which influences not just the EU but also a wider Europe. This suggests a value change in countries such as Hungary, and this may,

arguably, cause an ideational clash with other members of the EHEA in relation to such issues as academic freedom. The expelling of the Central European University from Budapest in 2018 and its move to Austria (Enyedi et al., 2019) is a telling example of this.

EHEA's dedication to institutional autonomy and academic freedom, and student and staff mobility has become more important in the current political climate (Gallagher, 2018). This potential of the EHEA for shaping the wider politics is what Gallagher (2018) sees as HE's civic and social role.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has shed light on French EHEA stakeholders' perspectives on the role of HE in Europe, particularly in the current context post-Brexit and post-COVID, yet with still an ongoing invasion of Ukraine. The data have demonstrated that France BP stakeholders see France as one of key leaders of Europe in general as well as its HE in particular, and they also see HE cooperation as a gateway to friendship in the European region, albeit it is not an easy task to achieve. The data above point to important insights into underlying political elements of the EHEA. The analysis of the data suggests that there is an association between EHEA membership and wider politics, which is the idea furthered in the next data chapters.

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