

# **Facilitation of European Influences over Developments in Quality Assurance in Higher Education in South Eastern Europe**

***Case studies: Slovenia and North Macedonia***

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**Master thesis/Faculty of Educational Sciences**

**UNIVERSITY OF OSLO**

**October 2019**

I, Aleksandra Zhivkovikj, declare that this dissertation is my original work, and has not been presented in fulfilment of other course requirements at any university.'

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2019

Facilitating European Influences over Developments in Quality Assurance in Higher Education in South Eastern Europe

Case studies: Slovenia and North Macedonia

<http://www.duo.uio.no/>

Print: Representralen, University of Oslo

*To my father*





## Summary

Higher education systems in South Eastern Europe have been going through radical reforms in the past three decades, as political and economic structures went through changes from socialism and planned economy to multiple political party systems and market economies. These reforms led to the introduction of new rationales and approaches that previously did not exist. One of the most notable ones is the introduction of quality assurance, as philosophy that assumes loosen governmental involvement in public sector and increased autonomy of public institutions (i.e. higher educational institutions). Such approaches contrast socialistic philosophy present in these countries for a long time, assuming strong governmental role in planning and providing good quality of education.

Despite this, South Eastern European higher education systems have been increasingly adopting innovations under influence of European organizations and institutions. Even more, higher education reforms in the region are seen as part of the path towards obtaining EU membership.

This thesis explored what makes national stakeholders accept European ideas, promoted through the Bologna Declaration and follow up documents and how their beliefs affected legislature changes over 30-year span in relation to European recommendations. More specifically, it observes 5 main factors that affect actors' beliefs during 3 decades in two post socialistic and transitional countries.

Findings show that the desire to be part of and holding a positive image about the European Union is a prevailing factor that cause the adoption of European recommendations in the domestic systems. Existence of domestic advocacy networks that promote European models, and participation of domestic stakeholders in European communities can also influence higher education reforms. Validity of European models is challenged in both case countries selected in this study (Slovenia and North Macedonia), but these beliefs don't affect significantly their adoption in the national systems. Lastly, legacies of previous socialistic arrangements that collide with European trends are still

alive, they influence stakeholders' opinions and to certain extent affect adoption of European influenced innovations.

This is the first study that empirically approaches the theme of European influences over higher education developments (with a focus on quality assurance) with Slovenia and North Macedonia as case studies. Even more, this is the first study that directly observes developments in quality assurance in higher education under European influences in North Macedonia chronologically.

## Foreword

Enrolling at GLOBED master program was the beginning of the most challenging two years I have experienced so far, fulfilled with some sunny, cloudy and thunder-ish days along the way. Here, I would like to express my gratitude to people who have supported me during no matter the season.

Firstly, I would like to thank my family for being unlimited source of strength and bravery. My mother Ljubinka for keeping me fearless, my sister Ana for keeping it real, my grandmother Nade for keep on reminding me of the `redness` in my blood and the star above my head (and all home made cookies), my uncle Martin for keep bringing me back on bright side of life and my cousins Simona and Jovana for feeding my inner child curiosity.

Secondly, I want to thank all the people that felt like home when home was so far away- Josefina for taking care of me in days when the world was turning upside down, Vesa and Ifrah for keeping my spirits high and music loud, Oyinda for the purest soul and hear full of understanding, Marc for all the engaging political discussions and endless amounts of frozen pizzas in Sogn, Ellen for the emancipating and inspiring me to explore other perspectives, Per for helping me understand the Norwegian culture and the art of slowing down, OSLOvers for making Oslo cozy, and GLOBEDians for creating and maintaining community bounded by solidarity and trust.

Thank you Sanja and Ina for being there always, providing me with space to talk and be heard.

This thesis wouldn't have been possible without the input from some wise maesters and higher education enthusiasts too.

Firstly, my supervisor Peter Maassen, who stimulated me to explore more, challenged my stances and helped me in narrowing down my fuzzed thoughts. Thank you for your guidance.



My deepest gratitude to Stojan Sorocan and the Ministry of Education in Slovenia, who aided my research process and fieldwork in Slovenia.

Thank you Pavel Zgaga, Marusa Komotar, Jernej Sirok, Miha Kordis and Darinka Vrecko for your help in understanding the Slovenian higher education landscape and dynamics.

Also, Suzana Pecakovska, Andrea Hofner and Martina Vukasovic, for sharing your expertise and moral support all along the way.

Here, I must also greet the OECD team for higher education in Paris, which provided me with internship during my studies-an experience that significantly strengthened my skills and knowledge about higher educational policies. So, Gabri, Gillian, Liam, Victoria, Claudia, Margarita and the rest, thank you for the amazing opportunity and the learning experience.

Additionally, I would like to thank lecturers Simon Marginson, Anna Smolentseva, Jussi Välimaa, Gaële Goastellec, Tommaso Agasisti and Pedro Teixeira, and participants at VII International Summer School on Higher Education Research organized by Higher School of Economics University in Russia for their valuable comments on my thesis and for the refreshing moments in Saint Petersburg.

Lastly, with the words of one of the greatest modern thinkers Calvin Cordozar Broadus Jr. (2018), I would like to close this life chapter and bravely step into the next one.

*`I want to thank me. I want to thank me for believing in me. I want to thank me for doing all this hard work. I want to thank me for having no days off. I want to thank me for never quitting. I want to thank me for always being a giver and trying to give more than I receive. I want to thank me for trying to do more right than wrong. I want to thank me for just being me at all times`*

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## List of abbreviations

BUFG	Bologna Follow Up Group
CEEPUS	Central European Exchange Program for University Studies
CEENQA	Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
EHEA	European Higher Educational Area
ENQA	European Network for Quality Assurance
ESG	European Standards and Guidelines
EUA	European University Association
EU	European Union
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher education institution
INAAQE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies
LHE	Law on higher education
ME	Ministry of Education
NAKVIS	National agency for quality in higher education of Republic of Slovenia (Nacionalna agencija Republike Slovenije za kakovost v visokem šolstvu)
NSD	Norwegian center for research data (Norsk senter for forskningsdata)
OAEVO	Board for accreditation and evaluation (Одбор за акредитација и евалуација во високо образование)
QA	Quality assurance
SEE	South Eastern Europe
UiO	University of Oslo (Universitetet i Oslo)

## Structure of the study

This thesis is divided in 8 chapters.

**Chapter one (Introduction)** discusses my primary motives for doing research in the region I call home. Region that is in general under-researched and where public information on HE developments is rarely available. Furthermore, I discussed the obstacles resulting from this status quo, but also other aspects which posed limitations along the way. I also consciously created some limitations related to the object of interest and methodology. The chapter also includes a discussion about this. Finally, Chapter one offers a list of terms which will aid readers to navigate easier in the further parts of the study.

Both case countries investigated in this study were part of the same socialistic federation for nearly 50 years and shared many similarities in the HE spheres. **Chapter two (Context)** will briefly discuss these commonalities in relation to HE and QA. This chapter also presents some information about present day HE systems and QA mechanisms in both countries. The aim of this part is to see what main differences are between the `old` system (i.e. pre independence) and present one (post-independence), and to set the playground of discussing European influences over changes that happened between then and now.

European initiatives in QA, projected through two main streams of influence (i.e. Lisbon and Bologna process) are presented in **Chapter three (Literature review)**. Particularities of the initiatives will offer a chance to see how much adoption of European ideas means change in traditions in HE systems in both countries (i.e. presents what is new). Here I will briefly elaborate on the concept of adoption and domestication on European ideas, with a focus on the adaptation pressures that they create over national governments. Finally, this part dives deeper into the modest chunk of literature which explores HE and QA systems in the region, looking for indications of change and the background reasons for such changes.

As this study elaborates the increase of similarities in organizational characteristics and forces that influence such convergence, **Chapter four (Theoretical underpinnings and analytical framework)** will briefly discuss one of the main theories of organizational change (i.e. theory of institutionalism) which served as underlying rationale since the beginning of my research. Furthermore, I will present an analytical framework that includes five main factors, borrowed from political science and comparative international studies.

**Chapter five (Methodology)** presents my thoughts of choosing a qualitative approach and tools to find information about the topic of interest for this research. It discusses the practicalities of performed interviews, such as time, language and location, which further offer some glimpse of the context in which HE actors operate and changes in QA systems occur. Explaining my positionality as researcher doing research in its own context, I also presented the self-reflective process I was going through. It also discusses how the study's results were analysed.

Main findings are presented in **Chapter six (Results)**. Insights are classified according to country and three main periods between 1991 (countries' independence proclamation) and 2018. This part also offers insights about the broader political context in which such factors operated.

**Chapter seven (Discussion)** elaborates on each of the observed factors. It converses about practicalities of each factor, and what is the new knowledge that this study offers to the world.

**Chapter eight (Conclusion)** presents closing remarks of this study.





# Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter presents what this study is going to explore and why it is important, setting the playground and narrowing the research domain. Additionally, it offers definitions of the main terms used along the way and gives further information about the structure of the thesis.

## General Statement

Higher education systems are going through substantial changes in regard to their role in society, governance structures and organization of core functions (i.e. teaching and research), as the national and global socio-political and economic contexts change (Olsen, 2005).

While reasons for such alterations vary, it is undisputable that national HE systems are under influence of ideas coming from the surrounding regional or global scene (Gornitzka, 2006; Hamalainen, Haakstad, Kangasniemi, Lindeberg, & Sjolund, 2001). In Europe, such influences are enhanced by the emergence of supranational actors who, through processes of cooperation and policy making, promote new solutions and models of governance leading to increasing similarities between national systems (Olsen & Maassen, 2007).

European initiatives' influence over development of national QA systems is suggested by the outcomes of a survey that included 26 European countries. The results show that five years after the introduction of European Standards and Guidelines in 2005, introduction and enhancement of quality assurance was leading reform for HEIs in Europe (EUA, 2010)<sup>1</sup>. Another study demonstrated that for 222 HEIs across 36 European countries the introduction of internal QA mechanisms was one of the most important innovations in their work, in the decade between 2000 and 2010 (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> Compared to 9 other areas: Enhanced cooperation with other HEIs, More autonomy of HEIs, Enhanced cooperation between HEIs and industry, More diversified funding, More competition between HEIs, New academic career policies, New entry requirements to different cycles, Changes in tuition fees, Less autonomy

This study explores the power of the European actors (i.e. the European Union and European organizations) over developments in national higher educational systems in new member states and candidate countries. Even more, it analyses the impact of European integration in post-communist countries in South Eastern Europe, contexts which historically nourished different ideological stances towards HE governance than initial EU member countries. Such arrangements created legacies that still strongly influence national dynamics, making European integration more challenging compared to the member countries with market economies and multiple party political systems based in Western and Central Europe (Sedelmeier, 2011).

Focus of the study is the quality assurance systems in HE, as one of the most notable characteristics of the European initiatives in the past decades (Maassen & Stensaker, 2011)

### **Significance of the Thesis**

The importance of this study and findings presented in later chapters can be operationalized in six main areas.

Firstly, it adds to the knowledge about relatively new research area which explores the impact of EU over domestic policies (Sedelmeier, 2011)

Additionally, it goes even further with exploration of these processes by observing national adjustments which take place in countries that either don't formally participate in decision making on European level (i.e. non-members) or have entered such processes later than the majority of EU members (i.e. new members). On this point, these countries either rarely upload their preferences to the European level or don't hold strong stances in decision making bodies (Vukasovic, 2013; Zgaga, Teichler, & Brennan, 2013).

Secondly, EU treaties don't allow implementation of formal mechanisms for influences over HE sphere in member states and higher education is still considered to be, primarily, a matter of national jurisdiction (Corbett, 2011). Therefore, other non-binding tools and approaches are used in this sphere. In this sense, this research is looking at more refined

forms of European influences over domestic changes and sheds a light on the soft power instruments that the Union is using.

Thirdly, this study aims to look at developments in heavily under researched small higher educational systems located in a post war region. It offers insights of the happenings in countries with a lack of complete or reliable data.

It also offers knowledge about past events, which has been lost due to lack of institutional memory and archives. This though, is more applicable in the North Macedonian than the Slovenian case.

It explores 30 years of developments, covering phases of introduction of independent QA elements in higher education, the establishment of organizational structures and changes in legislature under European influences.

This study is first of its kind regarding North Macedonia's developments, and first theoretically based study includes North Macedonia and Slovenia as case studies exploring QA developments and European influences.

Findings tell us not only the story of higher education systems, but also the broader socio-political environment in which such systems are based and by which they, undoubtedly, are affected.

Fourthly, the region is still highly under researched and narratives from post communistic and transitional communities are still not very present in academic and policy making discourses (Komotar, 2018b). Such circumstances create bias towards what is appropriate and what works, as research looks at more developed countries. Therefore, this study adds to the bulk of knowledge about underrepresented contexts and other realities.

Fifthly, research on higher education themes by domestic authors is still rare in the region. This is either because of a lack of tradition in doing research in this field, or a lack of systematic and continuous funding. Therefore, scientific work in this field is done mostly in relation to the international arena (Zgaga, 2014)

In this sense, the significance of this study also lies in being performed by a domestic researcher who understands the local cultural traits and offers insight knowledge.

Apart from offering empirical evidence, which will enrich the academic field, findings can also have practical implications on two main levels.

Namely, they can serve as a basis for improving European approaches towards (post) transitional countries. In addition, they can help domestic policy makers on the road to European integration.

Taking into consideration the somewhat different pathways taken by both countries, this study can be of great help for lesson drawing not only for other domestic actors in Slovenia and North Macedonia, but also for countries with similar socio-political contexts.

### **Research Question(s)**

Being aware that stakeholders in the region see Western systems and traditions as role model and their adoption as a tool for recovering from unsuccessful transitional period (Zgaga, Klemenčič, et al., 2013), I was interested to see how such models were translated in the national contexts.

I've put my focus on QA systems in HE, as an area in which European initiatives promote clear recommendations and have stronger impact (Maassen & Stensaker, 2011). But also, I chose this domain because it has been an arena for strong political confrontations in the countries of interest (Pecakovska, 2019; Zgaga & Miklavič, 2014) signalling importance for the domestic actors too.

Taking the above considerations into account, the general theme of this study concerns factors that influenced the domestication of European initiatives in the field of quality assurance in higher education in South Eastern Europe, with focus on countries that differ in their EU membership status<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Choices of case studies is further elaborated in Chapter 5

Two questions aided me to narrow the research process and have led to a more structured approach to this study:

***1. What were main developments of QA systems in higher education in relation to European initiatives in Slovenia and North Macedonia?***

***2. What factors influenced decision makers' beliefs regarding QA in higher education as promoted by European initiatives in Slovenia and North Macedonia?***

## **Limitations**

During the conceptualization and operationalization of the research theme, two types of limitations rose. Limitations related to the social sciences' approaches in exploring factors and limitations which appeared due to the practicalities of the observed contexts.

First limitation is related to the nature of factors themselves as relatively abstract concepts and patterns of action that tend to explain how specific outcomes occur in given contexts (Tilly, 2001). This makes them hard to observe directly and even isolate them from other mechanisms (Maxwell, 2004).

However, an attempt to avoid misconceptions about categories and understand their dimensions was done through performing broader literature review of factors in social science in general and political science studies in particular. As a result, the analytical framework of this study combines concepts from 3 theoretical and empirical studies.

Secondly, as factors exist or appear in different environments, they can produce fundamentally diverse effects. Therefore, crucial moment is taking into consideration the context in which such factors operate (Falleti & Lynch, 2009).

Analysing specific background factors of both countries in relation to HE changes was very difficult due to time constraints, but also because of the complexity of making a detailed overview of the socio-political, economic and cultural systems in a time span of

30 years. Therefore, this study involves discussions about the political circumstances in which changes in QA system took place but doesn't take into consideration other types of context elements (mostly economic ones).

Thirdly, this study can't offer extremely generalizable conclusions for all post-communist countries from Central and Eastern Europe (i.e. countries with similar governance ideology in the past), due to the diversity of realities happening after countries' independence (but also before that) which without a doubt resulted in different outcomes (Dobbins & Knill, 2009).

However, due to some ideological similarities, some resemblances are existent, and results can help furthering our understanding not only about the region but also other post transitional countries. Due to large cultural similarities with the rest of the countries in the South Eastern European region (Zgaga, 2011) results in this study are generalizable.

The most notable context-based limitation was the lack of access to publicly available resources such as reports, legal acts and correspondence materials especially in the earlier years of the newly established states (i.e. early 1990s). This is because such materials are either non-existent, documents are not public or there are no archives in the ministries.

Furthermore, many of the publicly available documents in the form of reports usually are created for the need of international organizations (Brankovic, 2014). Even though such materials were useful for creating some preconceptions about the developments in the HE and QA sphere, they were taken with precaution. Namely, in these contexts, documents often contain narratives aiming to present state institutions' efforts more appealing in front of European institutions. Progress in HE sphere towards European promoted models, are perceived as aiding mechanism for obtaining EU membership (Vukasovic, 2013) and reports can present slightly different realities than the actual ones.

These limitations made this research rely more on actors' stories and perceptions, which were considered as reference points of the factual events (more in Chapter 5). In the case of Slovenia, relevant studies were done by Slovenian authors which helped accessing developments chronologically and obtaining a clearer idea of the past events.

In the case of North Macedonia, there is a lack of institutional memory in the Ministry of Education regarding happenings in the first two decades. Administrative workers, who were involved in the implementation of European initiatives in the early 2000s (period when North Macedonia introduced the first legislation on HE), are now retired and refused to participate in this study,

Additionally, substantial institutional memory in this country is not created because of the frequent change of the leadership actors in the Ministry of Education, which brought their own administration changing the old one. Therefore, some of the findings in this context had to relate on the opinions of civil society workers and their archives.

## **Delimitations**

During the process of operationalizing this research project, I also made conscious limitations (i.e. delimitations) regarding the research object and methods. Such choices were made taking into consideration my practical knowledge of the observed contexts. Previous literature on HE reforms and status quo in South Eastern (more in Chapter 3) also determined some of the approaches taken in this study.

Five main boundaries regarding the practicalities of obtaining data were identified in the process of conceptualizing and performing this research.

Firstly, it is acknowledged that changes in the domestic HE and QA systems also occur because of influences coming from other sources, such as a New Public Management agenda and globalisation trends (more in Hamalainen et al., (2001)). Such influences collide, support and modify European trends in the field of QA. Since following mutual interferences is a rather complex task and way beyond the scope of this thesis, I decided to strictly follow recommendations presented in official documents such as declarations, communiques, and reports supported by EU institutions and organizations. This approach aided me in narrowing the scope of the research.

Secondly, research looked at initiatives coming from EU and other entities that promote European trends in QA. On the latter, it took into consideration organizations populated

by EU members, ones that include EU institutions as members and/or are logistically or financially supported by EU.

On the one hand, this was done because, as discussed earlier, EU institutions don't have formal competences in the HE and QA arena and practice some of their influences through other entities.

Thirdly, developments in the QA sphere were observed through legislature changes primarily. This was because in the observed context, decision makers tend to introduce reforms mainly through laws and amendments. On this point, in the SEE region, the details of QA systems but also other components of the Bologna process, are arranged in the highest legal acts for HE (Kanazir, Papadimitriou, & Stensaker, 2014), compared to some other post-communist countries, which leave the practicalities to other types of documents or policy instruments (Guri-Rosenblit & Sebkova, 2004).

Fourthly, this study excludes professors' and students' unions experiences, because both groups have been inactive or faced legitimacy issues in most of the given time frame in North Macedonia (Aleksoski, Bozhovikj, Galevski, Mirchevska, & Zhivkovikj, 2014; Zdravkovska & Barlakovski, 2016).

Lastly, the observed period was limited to post independence developments (i.e. after 1991). Lack of public data and research on the Yugoslavian HE system prevented substantial grounds for doing research for now. Legacies of what can be perceived as some form of QA (even though main philosophical underpinnings differed from what now is promoted by European initiatives) from pre-independence period are taken in consideration.

Knowledge about such legacies and dynamics in HE was mainly obtained through the process of data collection for this research and previous literature.



## **Definitions of Terms**

### ***Bologna related documents***

Non-binding documents signed by representatives from national governments in Europe, containing recommendations for more coherent national HE and QA systems.

Most notable ones are the Bologna Declaration (1999), follow up documents (communiqués) and European Standards and Guidelines (2005 and 2015).

### ***Factors***

Refers to the actions, facts and relationships in between the inputs (European trends) and outputs (changes in national systems) (Falleti & Lynch, 2009).

### ***Flagship University***

HEI based in the capital city of the country, which embodies wide scope of disciplines. In Slovenia, that is University of Ljubljana, while in North Macedonia, University of `Ss. Cyril and Methodius`` in Skopje.

Flagship universities in both countries traditionally enroll more than half of the student population in the country.

### ***Europe***

Geographical region consisted by 45 sovereign countries (UN, 2019).

In the regional context, the term refers to Western and Central non post-communistic European countries. Such terminology is used in the participants' views presented in the findings section.

### ***European Union***

Economic and political union consisted by 28 member countries based in Europe, which main aim is establishment and maintaining single market, providing free movement of goods, services, money and people (EU, 2019).

### ***European Higher Educational Area***

Initiative consisted by national governments which are compliant with Bologna declaration, aiming to make national higher educational systems more compatible.

### ***European institutions***

Official European Union structures such as European Commission, European Parliament, and European Council.

### ***European initiatives***

Processes leaded or aided by predominantly EU institutions or European organizations and networks, which project European national governments joined visions about arrangements in HE.

Two main initiatives in HE are taken in consideration. Lisbon strategy and Bologna process. Both will be further elaborated in Chapter 3.

### ***European (based) organizations***

Entities that are not part of the EU institutional structure and operate as independent networks or structures. Consisted by national representatives from European countries, such organizations are mostly funded through EU aided projects (and membership fees) and take central role in dissemination of European initiatives.

In this study mostly referring to European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA), European University Association (EUA), European Student Union (ESU) and European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE).

### ***European programs***

Programs that are supporting dissemination and implementation of Bologna related recommendations. Initiated or applied by European organizations or institutions.

They can be in a form of financial aid (for ex. Erasmus+, academic mobility programs between EU and non-EU countries) or consultancy (for ex. Institutional Evaluation

Program by EUA, which assesses HEIs' QA mechanisms and endorses improvements according to Bologna recommendations).

### ***Quality assurance tools***

Takes into consideration two main tools for QA: accreditation and evaluation (*Berlin Communiqué*, 2003).

#### 1. Accreditation

Certification of an institution or degree program which takes place after review of the minimum standards for content and specialization. It is awarded for a limited period of time within the frame of a transparent, formal and external peer review (Harvey, 2019).

The degree program must be reviewed after a certain time.

The process is steered by agencies which are also reviewed through regular external evaluation (Ibid), which are granted independency from governmental institutions in their work (*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, 2015).

#### 2. Evaluation

Assessing teaching and academic studies in a subject, department or HEI. Evaluation is carried out through internal or external procedures.

##### 2.2 Internal evaluation (self-evaluation)

Systematic collection of administrative data, questioning of students and graduates, as well as moderated conversations with lecturers and students (Harvey, 2019). Internal evaluation results should be used for strategical planning

of HEIs (*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, 2015).

### 2.3. External evaluation

Review team consisting of professional practice's peers, students and other actors, which visits the institution or department in order to assess the quality of the academic studies and teaching. The evaluation of academic studies and teaching has to take into consideration how effective the measures for internal quality assurance are (Harvey, 2019).

It is expected that HEIs should be able to choose external review agency, based either in the national or foreign context (*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, 2015)

### **South Eastern Europe**

Region in Europe consisted by 12 countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Turkey).

Popularly known as the `Balkans` (excluding Turkey).

Almost all SEE countries had communistic governance arrangements until 1990s. Seven SEE countries have been part of socialistic federation Yugoslavia for almost 50 years, between 1940s and 1990s.

## Chapter 2: Context

Factors are inevitably related to the context in which they are created, maintained and operate in (Falleti & Lynch, 2009). In order for the reader to have better understanding about how these factors influenced changes in the QA systems in Slovenia and North Macedonia, I presented many of the context related details in the main factors chapter.

The first focus of this chapter is the pre-independence period when both case-countries were part of the socialistic federation Yugoslavia sharing relatively unified (higher) educational system. The aim of the chapter is to acknowledge the characteristics of the Yugoslavian HE and QA system and trace what has actually changed between the `old` system and present one.

Secondly, this part of the thesis offers an overview of the main factual characteristics of the HE systems in both countries, providing ground for some comparison, but also for understanding the different paths the countries took in the past decades.

Some information about the EU integration processes happening in both countries will be presented, as the processes of Europeanization of the higher educational systems in such contexts can't be abstracted from their paths towards EU membership.

## Pre-independence status quo (Yugoslavia)

Yugoslavia was a socialistic federative republic created in 1945, right in the aftermath of the Second World War. Located in the South Eastern part of Europe, Yugoslavia consisted of 6 republics (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Montenegro) and 2 autonomous regions (Vojvodina and Kosovo).



Figure 1 Map of Yugoslavia with federative republics and autonomous regions

Three republics (Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia) had universities before the establishment of the federation, organized according to the image of universities in Western European countries.

In the quest for reconstructing the post Second World War torn region and strengthening the dissemination of ideological stances of the socialistic government, in the first few years after the war, two more universities were opened in two of the republics (North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) (Soljan, 1991).

These universities, located in capital cities, represented a weak and disintegrated union of faculties offering knowledge in a broad range of disciplines (Uvalić-Trumbić, 1990).

Universities were public entities, owned by the state. Though in the very last years of the federation (i.e. late 1980s), there have been some discussions about allowing private institutions to be opened, as part of the reconstruction of the federation towards a market economy (Uvalić-Trumbić, 1990)

Until 1974, higher education was the responsibility of a federal Ministry of Education, performing the task of overall planning and assessing the work of the institutions, resulting in a relatively unified HE system in all federative entities characterized by a three tier degree structure (Bachelors, Masters and PhD degree), the absence of doctoral education programs, high participation rates (traditionally enrolling high number of women) in some decades, and free education for full time students (Soljan, 1991).

With the constitutional changes in the early 1970s, federative republics gained independence over decision making in their educational systems (Uvalić-Trumbić, 1990). As part of a broad reform of the administration, HE was now managed by self-governing bodies consisting of a broad set of actors coming from HEIs, the communist party, trade unions, student representative organizations, work entities and other representatives in each republic (Soljan, 1991).

Despite this, legislative matters in the area of HE were the responsibility of a department or administrator within each federative Ministry for Education (Uvalić-Trumbić, 1990)

Despite ideological similarities, Yugoslavia was more related to Western than Eastern Europe, maintaining *hostile and cold* relations with the Eastern bloc (Zgaga & Miklavič, 2014). Compared to Soviet HE, the Yugoslavian HE system granted higher autonomy of decision-making to the federative units and HEIs. International academic collaboration was happening including students from African and Asian countries (Mikulec & Kump, 2018; Zgaga, 2011).

In the domain of quality assurance, the absence of mechanisms was due to a general assumption based on ideological grounds. Namely, it was considered that HE is of sufficient quality as it is provided, guaranteed and controlled by the state (Vukasovic, 2013).

Some basic forms of what today is considered to be QA were existent. Institutions were reporting about their work to a department or person responsible for HE in the Ministry of education annually. Such reports included data on the scope and forms of educational work, implementation of modern teaching methods and results achieved. However, the state-imposed standards for what was considered to be good quality work were not taking into consideration the heterogeneity and historical background of HEIs and nature of disciplines, making these indicators not fully adequate of assessing the diverse realities present in Yugoslavian HE (Kump, 1998).

In essence quality control was focusing on efficiency (Kump, 1998; Zgaga, 2017), rather than assessment in the context of accountability and increased HEIs autonomy (as promoted by European initiatives). Institutional quality assessment reports weren't tied to funding, and in the last years of Yugoslavia, HEIs even stopped reporting (Ibid).

Available data shows no accreditation procedures, as the state oversaw the establishment of HEIs and guaranteeing their quality. Following quality assurance as promoted by recent European initiatives did not exist in the Yugoslavian higher education system.

### **Post-independence status quo**

Disintegration of Yugoslavia formally began with Slovenia's proclamation of independence in 1991, followed by a 10-day war between the Slovenian and Yugoslavian army. A few months later, Macedonia also proclaimed independence, as the only country that departed Yugoslavia in a peaceful way during the 1990s.

The 1990s were characterized by series of wars in the territories of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia ending in 1995, an armed conflict between the Kosovar army and Serbian forces in 1998 and 1999, a NATO intervention in (nowadays territories of) Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro in the late 1999, a refugee crisis in Kosovo and opening refugee camps in North Macedonia and Albania at the very end of the decade. Additionally, in 2001, North Macedonia went through an armed conflict between an ethnic Albanian militant group and the national army.



The first decade of the 2000s was characterized by some efforts of the countries to narrow their paths towards EU membership, out of which most notable is Slovenia's entrance in the EU in 2004 and Croatia in 2013. However, this period was also characterized by a trend of right-wing political parties grasping power (Zgaga, 2017) some of which, as was the case in North Macedonia, perplexing EU integration processes starting earlier and finding alternative strategic partners in the East.

At the beginning of the second decade of the 2000s, the introduction of neo-liberal policies in the public sector, including higher education (introducing tuition fees, cutting public funding for universities, Bologna reforms) which did not improve the living standard in most of the South Eastern European countries (Dolenec, Baketa, & Maassen, 2014), inspired appearance of strong student movements which eventually grew into broader coalitions against political establishment in many of the countries in South Eastern Europe (Kanzleiter & Tomic, 2012). Both in Slovenia and North Macedonia, in 2013 and 2016 respectively, such movements played important role in the change of right-wing governments.

These happenings caused prolonged transitions, some of which last until today. In this sense, South Eastern European countries were lagging in the processes of democratization and reformation of the higher education systems from planned to market economy, compared to other countries which were also going through transition (i.e. Central and Eastern European countries (including Slovenia)) (Vukasovic, 2012).

Prolonged transitional periods made the region poorest in Europe, with rates reaching 41% in North Macedonia regarding population at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2016. Slovenia, though, is one of the 5 countries in Europe with lowest risk of population being in poverty or social exclusion (rates are estimated at 17%) (EuroStat, 2019)

Even until nowadays all of the South Eastern European countries, including Slovenia, are considered as either hybrid regimes or flawed democracies (EIU, 2018)<sup>3</sup>. Regarding guaranteeing political rights and civil liberties, North Macedonia holds a partial status

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<sup>3</sup> Based on 60 indicators, classified in 5 main categories: Electoral process and pluralism, Functioning of government, Political participation, Political culture Civil liberties

while Slovenia is considered free in this sense (Freedom House, 2018)<sup>4</sup>. Such social and economic disadvantages strongly affected the quality of public sectors, including education and health (Dolenec et al., 2014).

## **EU integration**

Looking at the EU integration paths of Slovenia and North Macedonia, they differ significantly. Right after proclaiming independence, Slovenia went through relatively smoother transitional period compared to the rest of the post Yugoslavia countries and started paving its road towards the union, relatively early (Zgaga, 2011). It obtained membership status in 2004.

On the other hand, North Macedonia's EU membership story is rather complex. Namely, the country obtained candidate status in 2005, making it the second longest waiting candidate for entrance in the EU (after Turkey). Out of all of candidate members, only North Macedonia and Albania (which gained candidate status in 2014) have not started yet the negotiation processes with the EU (European Commission, 2019b). It is unknown when full membership status will be obtained.

Reasons for such slow-paced dynamics between the EU and the country are related to North Macedonia's lack of capacity and political will for combating corruption and politization of the public sector (European Commission, 2019c). Additionally, diplomatic unease over historical issues with Greece (EU member and neighboring county) led to a Greek veto over accession in 2009 (Tziampiris, 2012).

As part of the EU reforms, the country changed its constitutional name from `Republic of Macedonia` to `Republic of North Macedonia` in 2018, after reaching an agreement with Greece over the usage of the term `Macedonia`, which Greece historically considered a part of their unique ancient Hellenic culture (Tziampiris, 2012). As Greece withdrew their opposition towards the beginning of EU negotiation rounds, it was expected that these

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<sup>4</sup> Based on 25 indicators, classified in 2 main categories: Political rights and civil liberties. More at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/methodology-freedom-world-2018>

processes will begin in 2019. However, at the moment of writing of this thesis (September 2019) such processes have not started yet.

### **Higher education systems in Slovenia and North Macedonia**

Circumstances debated above inevitably affected the developments in the higher education systems both countries. While the main historical progresses in the higher education systems with focus on QA in this period will be presented in the findings section, Table 1 summarizes present-day similarities and differences

Slovenia and Macedonia are relatively small countries, populated by approximately 2 million people (State Statistical Office of Republic of North Macedonia, 2019; Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2019b). The number of students during the years also followed similar rates.

Unlike in Yugoslavia, where all the universities were public, the network of universities nowadays in both countries consists of public and private institutions. Both higher education systems, though small regarding number of students, are burdened with a large number of institutions. Slovenia has a significantly higher number of private HEIs.

Traditionally, flagship universities enroll more than half of the student population in the two countries (State Statistical Office of Republic of North Macedonia, 2018a; Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2019a) and consist of a large number of faculties offering a wide scope of disciplines.

Slovenia and North Macedonia are participating in the European higher education area (EHEA), as Bologna signatory countries. Slovenia was one of the initial signatories of the Bologna Declaration in 1999, while North Macedonia joined EHEA in 2003 ("Full Members," 2019). Both countries are participating in EU funded programs for supporting education, including academic mobility and universities' organizational development activities (i.e. Erasmus plus). However, Slovenia uses 3 times more of the Erasmus funds in higher education compared to North Macedonia. Looking at the academic mobility, Slovenia hosted or sent 10 times more students and staff members than North

Macedonia, through the Erasmus plus program in 2016 (European Commission, 2017).

Both countries spend a similar percentage of their GDP on higher education in recent years.

*Table 1 Higher educational system characteristics in Slovenia and North Macedonia*

	<b>Slovenia</b>	<b>North Macedonia</b>
<b>Total population</b>	2 084 301	2 077 132
<b>EU membership status</b>	Full member since 2004	Candidate country since 2005
<b>Bologna adoption</b>	1999	2003
<b>Total student population in higher education<sup>5</sup></b>	65,425	58,425
<b>National HE GDP<sup>6,7</sup></b>	0.95%	1.03%
<b>Number of public HEIs</b>	4	6
<b>Number of private HEIs<sup>8</sup></b>	41	13
<b>Outbound student and staff mobility through Erasmus plus program<sup>9</sup></b>	2885	394
<b>Inbound student and staff mobility through Erasmus plus program<sup>7</sup></b>	3 595	362

<sup>5</sup> Statistics for Slovenia present total student population including students in Bachelor's, Master's and PhD programs in academic year 2018/19; Statistics for North Macedonia present student population including students in Bachelor's and Master's programs in academic year 2017/18 (State Statistical Office of Republic of North Macedonia, 2018a, 2018b; Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2019a)

<sup>6</sup> Statistics for Slovenia are for 2017. Statistics for North Macedonia are for 2019 (Government of Republic of North Macedonia, 2019; Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2017)

<sup>7</sup> Statistics for both countries' present public expenditure only

<sup>8</sup> Statistics for Slovenia include: independent universities, independent faculties, academies and professional colleges. Statistics for North Macedonia include: Independent universities, independent faculties and (one) professional college (NAKVIS, 2019; State Statistical Office of Republic of North Macedonia, 2018a)

<sup>9</sup> For academic year 2016/17 (European Commission, 2017)

## Quality assurance systems

Looking at the specificities of the quality assurance systems in both countries nowadays, they involve tools and specialized bodies, which perform tasks related to QA in HE. However, in North Macedonia an independent body is still not established. Additionally, the Slovenian QA agency has significantly higher number of staff than the North Macedonian agency. This demonstrates a lack of administrative capacities in this body. Taking into consideration high number of HEIs, number of staff and the list of tasks that such agencies perform in both contexts, its notable that both QA bodies are having a high administrative burden. The composition of decision-making bodies of QA agencies is comparable in a number of ways. Further, the North Macedonian QA agency is still not member of any European or international QA network.

The following table presents main similarities and differences between both countries.

*Table 2 Quality assurance systems in Slovenia and North Macedonia*

	<b>Slovenia</b>	<b>North Macedonia</b>
Types of QA mechanisms	1. Initial study program accreditation 2. Institutional accreditation 3. Institutional reaccreditation 4. External evaluation of HEI 5. Internal evaluation of HEI 6. Internal evaluation of study program	1. Initial study program accreditation 2. Study program re-accreditation 3. Institutional accreditation 4. Institutional reaccreditation 5. External evaluation of HEI 6. Internal evaluation of HEI 7. Internal evaluation of study program 8. National HEIs ranking
Independent QA Agency and year of establishment	NAKVIS, established in 2010	Agency for quality of HE, prescribed with LHE in 2018  *Since in 2019 QA body is not established, Board for accreditation and evaluation of

		HE, which is financially and logistically dependent on ME, is issuing accreditations
Members of decision-making bodies in QA body	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. HEIs' representatives</li> <li>2. Students' representatives</li> <li>3. Trade unions' representatives</li> <li>4. Employers' representatives</li> <li>5. Governmental representatives (administrative workers)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. HEIs' representatives</li> <li>2. Students' representatives</li> <li>3. Academy of science and arts' representatives</li> <li>4. Employers' representatives</li> <li>5. Governmental representatives (professors at HEIs)</li> </ol>
Administrative cadres in the QA body <sup>10</sup>	20	3
Membership in European networks and organizations	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) (2013), European Consortium for Higher Education Accreditation (ECA) (2013), International Association of Quality Assurance Agencies (INQAAHE) (2014), European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) (2015), Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA) (N/A)	None

<sup>10</sup> Information retrieved from NAKVIS (n.d.-a) and OAEVO (n.d.)

## **Chapter 3: Literature review**

This chapter looks at five main topics deriving from the research questions. It defines what European influences and processes mean. It also elaborates what initiatives in higher education are fuelled by the EU regarding HE and QA, and what they bring in regard to a coherent QA model on European level.

Moreover, it looks at literature that discusses developments of legislature in QA sphere in SEE region. This overview also served as a basis for acknowledging what factors were significant for such changes, whenever studies offered some insights. On this point, this part puts accent on studies regarding post Yugoslavia countries (as group of SEE countries), due to joined legacies<sup>11</sup> and present-day similarities in socio-political sense.

Decision makers' opinions, beliefs and activities in relation to European initiatives are presented along with the literature overview of developments in QA, as most of the available studies combine both types of information.

### **European level**

#### **Domestication of European initiatives**

This study explores processes of the European Union's influence on national public sectors. According to Radaelli (2003) such processes include creating, dissemination and institutionalization of formal and informal rules, beliefs and norms which are defined in the EU public policy and then incorporated in the domestic discourses, identities, political structures and policies.

This process is interactive including exchange of information between the EU as a supranational entity and nation states, which, through different means, mutually influence

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<sup>11</sup> Even though other SEE countries also had socialistic and communistic political arrangements, they were differing in the level of state control over the public sphere. In this sense, Bulgaria and Romania were part of the block of Eastern European countries under heavy influence of SSSR and therefore had stricter regimes, while Albania was isolated from the international community and was considered as dictatorship. Yugoslavia was considered as very progressive and economically stabile country compared to other Eastern and South Eastern European countries

rules, initiatives and discourses (Börzel, 2003a). On this point, Börzel (2003b) recognizes two types of influence streams. One resembling a transfer of national preferences to the European level (i.e. uploading processes) and the other one referring to a transfer of European ideas to the national level (i.e. downloading processes).

Just as many newcomers to the EU traditionally are '*EU policy takers rather than EU policy shapers*' due to a lack of capacity to create and upload preferences (Ibid), countries in the SEE region, which are suffering from even higher governance and financial deficiencies, rarely participate in the 'uploading' activities. On this point, despite a lack of capacities, many of the SEE counties are not members of the EU and therefore lack formal mechanisms to influence EU policies. Even though some of the European initiatives provide space for participation of national representatives in working groups, such chances are rarely substantially used. Therefore, this thesis will look at the downloading processes, applying a top down approach (Börzel, 2003b).

### **European initiatives in higher education**

Traditionally, the principle of subsidiarity applies when it comes to the policy role of the European Union in the area of (higher) education (Maassen & Musselin, 2009). This principle prevents the EU from direct involvement in national legal matters (i.e. passing laws instead of national governments). Instead, the EU can only support or coordinate actions in the area of education. Such approach surpasses union's coercive influence (demonstrated though the possibility of EU to pass laws instead of national governments) expressed in other areas such as customs union, competition rules for the single market and monetary policy for the eurozone countries (European Commission, 2019a).

However, this does not prevent the EU from creating and disseminating policies in the area of higher education through other means rather than law making. Applying a soft law approach, known under the term 'Open Method of Coordination' which includes creation of guidelines, benchmarking, indicators and practice sharing (Eurofound, 2010), but also through financially supporting organizations which implement activities which are aligned with EU preferences, the EU exercise influence in this public sphere too.



Maassen & Musselin (2009) recognize two main streams of European influence over national contexts. Firstly, the Lisbon strategy is a working plan initiated by the EU in 2000, aiming to make Europe “*the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, and respect for the environment*” (European Council, 2000). Higher education is approached mainly through the economic rationale, i.e. as a tool for improving labour market capacities for the citizens of the EU member and candidate countries (Maassen & Musselin, 2009). In this case, the EU transmits signals through legally binding directives, recommendations and funding instruments that financially aid activities that are related to fulfilling the instrumental role of HE, such as the recognition of qualifications in specific professions or research cooperation (Vukasovic, 2014).

Secondly, the Bologna Declaration is an initiative by European national governments aiming to reach “*greater compatibility and comparability of higher educational systems*” across Europe. Signed in 1999 by 29 ministers of education (including Slovenian one), it created the European higher education area (EHEA)<sup>12</sup>. It proposes coherence of European national HE systems through the establishment of a credit transfer system (i.e. ECTS), two degree levels (i.e. undergraduate and graduate) and quality assurance systems with similar indicators and measurement approaches (Bologna Declaration, 1999). The core idea of the Bologna process is increased mobility of students, employability of European citizens, and making the European higher education area more attractive for international students (Ravinet, 2008).

Even though national governments’ initial motives behind the implementation of the Bologna process vary from enforcing national reforms under the justification of international compliance to using the opportunity to gain international recognition of the national system (Westerheijden, 2007), the Bologna process carries a convergence note in its essence (Maassen & Stensaker, 2011).

Compared to the Lisbon agenda, the Bologna process has no strong administrative body that has a means to influence national convergence (Vukasovic, 2014). The Bologna

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<sup>12</sup> Term that refers to group of countries that follow Bologna recommendations

follow up group is the core actor that oversees the implementation of the Bologna process (Westerheijden, 2007) and is co-chaired by both EU and non-EU country representatives.

The non-binding nature of the Bologna Declaration highlights the voluntary approach taken by the governments, and the way of implementing and designing Bologna reforms is a matter of national responsibility. However, as Ravinet (2008) notes, the initial voluntary nature slowly turned into a monitored coordination through the introduction of follow up mechanisms, such as the submission of national reports and organizing working groups for further development of Bologna recommendations (organized through BUFG), which further created space for comparisons between countries. In the author's words, they *'create effects of socialization, imitation, and shame – which can be powerful means of coercion'* (Ibid).

To sum up, both initiatives differentiate in their governance nature, one being a supranational initiative (Lisbon strategy as a process initiated by the EU), while the other one is a matter of intergovernmental agreements and collaboration (the Bologna process as an activity initiated by national governments, excluding the European Commission during the first years). However, as time passes, both processes become more and more intertwined, aiming to enhance four main objectives: mobility, employability, attractiveness and competitiveness of the European Union (Neave, 2002).

Even more, Westerheijden (2007) sees the EU as a main driver of Bologna process related developments. An example is the involvement of the European Commission in the Bologna follow up group, or the Union's financial support of the implementation of Bologna related activities. Such arrangements link Bologna's lack of strong administrative backing with the Commission's administrative and financial capacities (Gornitzka, 2007). As a consequence, the Bologna process cannot be understood separately from EU's policy (Pépin, 2007). According to Vukasovic (2014), such arrangements create *'multilevel multi actor governance layer'*, which can create an atmosphere of obligation to adopt and apply some policies which in their essence should be voluntary and matter of prior discussion in the domestic context. SEE HE stakeholders mostly perceive European initiatives through these lenses (Vukasovic & Elken, 2013).

While this study takes into consideration both influences, which as discussed are intertwined, the main focus is on the Bologna related processes as they arrange quality assurance matters in a clearer and more specified way. Such clarity offers access to exploring factors in relation to European initiatives in a more precise way. In this sense, the Lisbon strategy is more ambiguous when it comes to (quality assurance in) higher education and concerns the priorities of the member states and EU as political entity primarily (Veiga & Amaral, 2009).

## **European initiatives in the area of quality assurance**

### ***Overview of QA trends in higher education***

While quality assurance elements in higher education have been detected very early in the work of the medieval universities starting from the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994), it is only in the past few decades that quality assurance in the form of evaluation and accreditation performed by third party (i.e. body independent from the government) have been on the rise (Neave, 1988).

Neave (1988,1998) recognizes that such reforms in the higher education sector are related to general ideological shifts in public sector governance in Western Europe in the 1980s. Derived from neo liberal premises, state intervention is justified only in cases when it is regarded necessary, leading to loosening governmental involvement in many spheres, including higher education (Westerheijden, 2007).

Lack of governmental involvement also led to enhanced autonomy of public institutions, including universities. In this reasoning, quality assurance is found to be a tool for holding institutions accountable for their work, as the state is abstracted from being fully responsible for guaranteeing the quality of services (Ibid). On this point, the main responsibility for the quality of the primary academic processes (education and research) now belongs to the institutions themselves. One of the main characteristics of `quality assurance` wave is also the introduction of intermediate agencies that do a posteriori evaluation of HEIs (Neave, 1988)

Along with reductions of public funding, increasing demands for transparency and enabling space for private providers which led to increased marketization of higher education, quality assurance was one of the tools of this wave of reforms in higher education in the past decades (Westerheijden, 2007; Westerheijden, Stensaker, & Rosa, 2007).

### ***Codification of European trends in QA***

Early research shows some forms of quality assurance appeared or already existed in different national contexts in Europe in the first decade of the 1990s, even though such trends weren't widespread (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2007). QA approaches were diverse in their methods, mostly serving national needs (Sarrico, Rosa, Teixeira, & Margarida, 2010; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). European initiatives in the field of higher education, which appeared at the late 1990s, however, encouraged the establishment of coherent quality assurance systems in national contexts (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2007). In a number of respects, quality assurance was in the heart of the Europeanization initiatives (Maassen & Stensaker, 2011).

Quality assurance was approached as a means to improve EHEA's attractiveness for international students, and to strengthen the coherence of qualifications obtained in different European countries (i.e. mutual recognition of qualifications, which should be of a similar quality regardless the location). Moreover, QA is viewed through the economic rationale as a tool for assuring customers (i.e. students and society) that the provided services (by the HEIs) are meeting some pre-defined standards (Sarrico et al., 2010; Westerheijden, 2007).

As discussed earlier, the Bologna declaration explicitly promoted *European collaboration in quality assurance, in view with developing coherent and comparable criteria and methodologies*. In this sense, even though Bologna didn't introduce QA as novelty in the HE sector, it speeded up the conversion of systems (Maassen & Stensaker, 2011), and therefore represents an important focal point of dispersion of signals regarding what are European preferences in regard to QA (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2007).

As the Bologna declaration converted to the Bologna process (Ravinet, 2008), during the years, relatively general prescriptions in the area of QA turned into more specific recommendations. Namely, quality assurance is a matter of discussion in every follow up communique between 2001 and 2018.

It is worth mentioning that in 2005, ministers of education of EHEA, adopted the European standards and guidelines (ESG) in 2005, further revised in 2015. This non-binding document promotes more clear and specific endorsements of QA arrangements in national systems. The ESG promotes recommendations for internal and external evaluation of HEIs and arrangements of the work of the QA bodies. The nature of such guidelines is technical, i.e. arranging procedures (how QA is done), rather than content oriented (what is evaluated) (Westerheijden, 2007). Nonetheless, some authors discuss possibilities of interference of European initiatives in the quality assurance of the curricula and teaching processes in the future (Maassen & Stensaker, 2011).

The importance of quality assurance for the EHEA is also demonstrated in the recent Paris communique (2018), which listed QA as one of the three main areas of interest for the newly established support thematic peer groups at the BUFG. This communique encourages the usage of EU funds in establishing such collaborations, demonstrating the interference between EU and EHEA initiatives once again.

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to analyse all QA recommendations in the Bologna related documents, here I will present of the most notable ones:

- Primary responsibility for the quality of HE lies in HEIs (i.e. universities and colleges).
- The development of internal mechanisms for QA by HEIs (i.e. self-evaluation reports, strategical planning based on reports, establishment of commissions which will include variety of stakeholders etc.)
- The establishment of accreditation and evaluation procedures in the national systems.

- The establishment of independent agencies for QA (in organizational, operational and outcome sense).
- Periodic evaluation of quality assurance agencies by a third (non-governmental) party regarding compliance with ESG.
- Involvement of several groups of stakeholders in the decision-making processes in the QA bodies (such as students' and employers' representatives)
- International collaboration in the field of QA, through participation in European based networks and registers (i.e. EQAR), mutual recognition of accreditations, evaluation of HEIs by foreign QA agencies which are compliant with ESGs

### ***Organizational structure***

Despite the development of soft power instruments at the European level, the past two decades (2000-2019) are also characterized by the establishment of European-based organizations working in the field of QA. An example is the formation of the organization European Network for Quality Assurance in 2000, which brings together national agencies working in the field of QA. This platform organizes events related to the dissemination of good practices aiming to enhance the collaboration between national entities. Additionally, it performs international projects in the field of QA, and publishes reports, position papers and research findings on the matter (ENQA, n.d.-a). In 2003, ENQA was assigned to draft the ESG, along with three other European organizations representing HEIs and students (*Berlin Communiqué*, 2003). At the moment, the network has 51 members based in EHEA countries. Membership in the network is conditioned with following the ESG, and each agency is re-evaluated regarding fulfilment of recommendations periodically.

Another example is the establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register in 2008, by ENQA and three other European based organizations representing HEIs and students. Offering information about recognized national QA agencies which comply with ESGs, the register was envisaged to serve as a point for validating obtained accreditations (through checking the reliability of the QA agency that issues such

approval), and helping HEIs to choose agency which will assess their work (offering opportunity for QA agencies to operate beyond national borders). (ENQA, n.d.-b). At the moment, EQAR consists of 32 members.

Bologna related documents enhance the position of such organizations, by assigning them to draft further QA related documents (such as the ESGs), and perform QA activities in national contexts (such as ENQA's periodic evaluations of national QA agencies regarding their compliance with ESGs). Additionally, a brief overview of the main projects led by such organizations showed strong financial support through EU aided funds (ENQA, 2019; European Association of Institutions in Higher Education, 2019; European University Association, 2019). This demonstrates that such organizations have an important influence, and therefore their activities in domestic contexts will be taken in consideration in this study.

## **National level**

### **Developments in QA sphere in South Eastern European region and actors' beliefs: Comparative studies**

The introduction of and changes in the QA systems in SEE countries are related to two waves of general reforms expressed through higher education legislation modifications (Zgaga, 2011). The first wave of reforms is characterized by the introduction of first legislatures on higher education, which aimed to restructure the HE systems according to new political and economic realities (i.e. introduction of market economy and multiple political party systems). Exact time periods of adoption of such laws vary from country to country depending on the socio-political context. In Slovenia, first legislature on HE was adopted in 1993, in North Macedonia in 2000.

Countries that entered the European Union during the 2000s, referring to Slovenia and Croatia, introduced QA mechanisms already in the decade between 1990 and 2000 (Kanazir et al., 2014; Vukasovic, 2014). However, even in these countries, Vukasovic,

(2014) notices that QA systems were rather limited and ineffective during the implementation of the first wave of reforms.

The second wave of reforms occurred in relation to Bologna recommendations in the 2000s. Such reforms included legislative changes regarding reconstruction of study programs, the implementation of the European Credit Transfer System, the introduction of a two tier study structure, the introduction (or changes in) of QA system, and the development of national qualification frameworks (Dolenec et al., 2014). As a matter of fact, in most post Yugoslavian countries, quality assurance mechanisms have been introduced as part of the Bologna inspired reforms taking place in the period after 2000s (Kanazir et al., 2014). Introduction of Bologna related novelties in the domestic HE systems created unease among the academic communities in the region, primarily professors and students at flagship universities. The Bologna process was perceived as a tool for commodification of the higher education and downplaying its role to service for providing labour force (Vukasovic, 2013; Zgaga, Klemenčič, et al., 2013). On this point, in a comparative study including post Yugoslavia countries, HE stakeholders in all countries, except Kosovo, expressed negative beliefs that Bologna improved the quality of education (Zgaga, Klemenčič, et al., 2013). Such beliefs caused delays in either the adoption or implementation of Bologna inspired reforms in countries such as Croatia and Slovenia (Vukasovic, 2013).

However, the introduction of QA elements in the HE system wasn't found to be controversial as main stakeholders (i.e. flagship universities) focused more on opposing other types of reforms which re-arranged institutional governance, such as weakening faculties' autonomy and strengthening the position of universities as united entity (Vukasovic, 2013, 2014). Even more, quality assurance in some post Yugoslavian countries is found not to be a core academic interest, but rather a matter of interest of mostly younger staff (Vukasovic, 2014).

European standards and guidelines are incorporated in the legislature in most post Yugoslavia countries. However, underneath formal efforts, Kanazir et al. (2014) show that Bologna inspired legislatures, adopted in the period between 2000 and 2011, still grant a primary role in QA processes to the governments (instead of granting more autonomy to



HEIs and independent agencies as recommended in European initiatives), which shows slow adoption of some European recommendations.

In addition, even though QA reforms haven't been considered as controversial, implementation of such innovations has been a challenging step. Namely, out of all the Bologna reforms introduced in these contexts, in 2011, SEE countries lagged behind most with the implementation of these Bologna related recommendations (along with the introduction of introduction of qualification frameworks) (Dolenec et al., 2014). This might be related to the lack of capacities or financial means for implementation (Dolenec et al., 2014; Vukasovic, Babin, Ivošević, Lažeti, & Miklavič, 2009), but might also be due to political elites' interest in having a strong involvement in QA activities rather than loosen the control over HE public sector (Zgaga & Miklavič, 2014).

Some of the SEE quality assurance agencies participate in European organizations working in the field of QA (such as ENQA) (Kanazir et al., 2014), but their impact in the decision- and rule-making is unknown. Even more, it is under-researched how participation in such organizations influences the transfer of ideas from the European to the national level. This is something that is addressed in this study.

### **Developments in QA sphere and actors' beliefs: Country specific studies**

#### ***Slovenia***

Studies that observe developments in the higher education system in Slovenia show that this country has introduced HE legislation and QA system very quickly after proclaiming independence in 1991 (Komotar, 2018b; Vukasovic, 2013; Zgaga & Miklavič, 2014). Studies exploring the reasons for such immediate action present two types of rationales demonstrated by HE actors which are mutually related. Firstly, actors' motives were related to the new realities and needs in the HE sphere. Here referring to the massification of HE and diversification of the network of HEIs as the market opened for new providers, which led to concerns regarding the quality of HE services in the new (post-independence) context (Komotar, 2018b). QA was seen as a tool for helping HEIs' needs, rather as part of general restructuring of public governance philosophy.

Secondly, Slovenia's strong drive to become part of the European Union made HE governance actors very perceptive of ideas coming from Western European countries. Western European contexts were studied, and lesson drawing was a commonly used approach in the creation of HE policies (Komotar, 2018b; Štremfel & Lajh, 2012; Zgaga & Miklavič, 2014). However, on the latter, studies partially elaborate details (i.e. who was involved, how decisions were made etc.) and the results part will dwell deeper into these matters.

Slovenia's strong drive for being aligned with European initiatives is also demonstrated through the country's involvement as initial participatory side of Bologna declaration in 1999. However, as the time came for the Bologna Declaration to be translated into legislative, Zgaga & Miklavič (2014) note criticism coming from the academic community, mostly based at the flagship university. These beliefs postponed the adoption of Bologna inspired amendments in Slovenia, including ones regarding the QA system. While tensions have been present between different stakeholders, Bologna inspired legislation was passed by the assembly only five years after Slovenia signed Bologna declaration (i.e. 2004). Vukasovic (2013) argued that innovations in the QA system as part of the Bologna inspired legislation, haven't been a matter of debate, as the HE actors focused on other reforms which clashed with Yugoslavia inherited legacies. An important historic momentum reported in previous studies is the change of provisions regarding QA in 2004, which challenged the independency of the QA agency and caused a detour of Slovenia's strong path towards compliance with European initiatives (Komotar, 2018b; Vukasovic, 2013; Zgaga & Miklavič, 2014).

Authors relate these developments with (1) a general misunderstanding of Bologna recommendations among HE governance actors, and (2) the desire of the political party in power to strengthen its influence over HE using the system of QA (Zgaga & Miklavič, 2014). Therefore, Slovenia implemented some Bologna related recommendations relatively later than other post Yugoslavia countries. Such developments prevented Slovenia's involvement with European organizations which condition membership with compliance with ESGs. However, with the change of the political party in power in 2008, Zgaga & Miklavič (2014) notice returning of Slovenia's compliance with European

recommendations in the QA sphere, taking strong interest in participation in ENQA and other European based initiatives (such as EQAR). This led to legislative changes and the returning of independence status to the QA agency.

Observing most recent trends in the QA system, Komotar (2018a) notes that Slovenian stakeholders are expressing more interest in the internationalization of the work of the national QA body, obtaining international accreditations and introducing indicators for evaluating mobility on institutional level. While not a central topic of the study, some findings show that such ambitions are related to learning from the work of other agencies through the international networks Slovenian entities take part in. Komotar (2018a) notes that most recent changes are related to enhanced institutional autonomy in the QA processes, which follows European narratives of shifting the responsibility of guaranteeing quality to HEIs.

### ***North Macedonia***

Knowledge about the developments in the first decade of the 1990s (i.e. after the independence) in HE in North Macedonia is rarely discussed in the academic literature. This is related to the absence of legislature and specific policies in the field of HE, which demonstrates one of the main differences between the selected case studies. Lack of governmental involvement led to *‘widespread corruption, nepotism and favouritism that still exist today, jeopardizing the relationship of trust between the institutions and the government’* (Petkovska, 2011).

Therefore, the results chapter will give an overview of the discussions among stakeholders in this period and look closer at some of the factors that influenced (the lack of) initiatives in the sector.

First legislature was introduced in 2000, when European initiatives expressed through the Bologna Declaration and the Lisbon Agenda, were in the spotlight of the international academic community. Until then, the Yugoslavian legislature from 1985 was still partially arranging matters in higher education (Ibid). New legislature introduced QA mechanisms in the system. Pecakovska (2019) discusses that the introduction of the QA system

started enthusiastically in the early 2000s, as specialized QA bodies started undertaking accreditation and evaluation activities. However, Stojanov & Angeloska-Galevska (2006) note predominantly negative attitudes towards the system of QA among professors at public universities, as they perceived some indicators to be unattainable. QA was seen to be threat, as professors feared that such mechanisms would interfere in their career progression. European influences were not of interest in the abovementioned studies, which mostly focused on the domestic processes and relations between actors.

Pecakovska (2019) notes that after the initial phase of introduction and implementation of first accreditation and evaluation activities in the early 2000s, there has been a significant increase of government's involvement in QA processes in the period between 2007 and 2017. Interference was demonstrated through an increase of the number of governmental members in the decision-making bodies of QA agency, the appointment of prominent members of the political party or vocal supporters of governmental policies in HE in such bodies, and the creation of QA standards and legal provisions by the government, without consulting other HE actors. On the latter, in this period the government assumed power to set reforms in the HE sphere, leaving no or little space for other actors to enter the decision-making processes. This caused a lack of consensus and de-attachment from such reforms within the academic community. HE in this period was under strong jurisdiction of the state and often used as a tool for addressing broader plans and visions of the ruling political party (Galevski, 2014).

These studies show that government representatives' opinions in this period are very important in understanding how these actors comprehended European initiatives and acted upon them. However, due to the unavailability of these actors (this will be discussed further in the Methodology chapter), I had to find alternative ways of acknowledging their positions (such as the involvement of civil society workers as participants).

While ESGs are formally adopted in the legislature, in a study that assesses North Macedonian compliance with such recommendations, Pecakovska (2015) demonstrates that the implementation of European initiatives, in practice, is very moderate or low. Additionally, the results show that the academic community in Macedonia has very little

knowledge about ESGs and that involvement of the professors and students in QA processes is not substantial (Ibid).

The latest developments of QA system are described by Pecakovska (2019), in regard to the legislature drafting processes and involvement of different stakeholders. However, this study does not offer insights of the perception of European trends and their implementation in the newest legislative on HE adopted in 2018. This will be additionally explored in the results part.

## Chapter 4: Theoretical considerations and conceptual framework

This chapter discusses the main theoretical underpinnings of this study offering understanding why countries like Slovenia and North Macedonia converge their national systems in regard to European models. This chapter also summarizes the main factors that have been noted in the literature and are related to the question of European trends' adoption and their translation in national contexts. It offers a conceptual framework which was used as guideline during the fieldwork and analysis of results.

### Theory

Leading theoretical basis of this study is institutional theory.

According to March & Olsen (2005) an institution is an *'enduring collection of rules and organized practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and relatively resilient to the idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing external circumstances'*.

Institutions are built by three main elements- regulative, cognitive and normative pillar (Scott, 2008). This thesis primarily analyses regulative elements of QA, i.e. legislature formation and changes, and the subjective judgements and information processing (i.e. cognitive elements) that lead to such formations.

This thesis focuses on the activities that change such structures, despite their strong immersiveness in collective understanding and beliefs. On this point, institutionalization is a *'human activity that installs, adapts, and changes rules and procedures in both social and political spheres'* (Bevir, 2006). According to Colyvas & Powell (2006), it describes how *'new, ambiguous, unfamiliar and previously resisted ways of doing things become desirable, appropriate and routinized'*.

One of the core concepts in this theory is institutional isomorphism (i.e. increased similarity among organizations). Three main forces influence organizational isomorphism. Firstly, organizations change under formal pressures coming from other organizations on which they are dependent or by cultural expectations from the society they are part of. It assumes the existence of authority that influences the developments, such as state actor or legislature (coercive isomorphism). Secondly, organizations change or modify in times of uncertainty, aiming to adapt to other organizations that are perceived as successful (mimetic isomorphism). Thirdly, normative isomorphism relates to the rules of professions, i.e. what is considered to be appropriate and justified by individuals within organizations which have been through similar socialization processes in university programs or their participation in professional associations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Following this logic, it is easy to predict how newly formed countries and nations, or peripheral organizations, will further develop their systems, if it is acknowledged what domestic actors and decision makers viewpoints of successful organization are (Mayer, 1981).

Going further, I followed two institutional theory approaches, i.e. historical and sociological (Hall, 1996). One aided me in developing an understanding about the events in the field of QA in HE on the national level (RQ1), while the other one provided ground for understanding processes of persuasion and socialization which influenced domestic stakeholders in times of making decisions about QA (RQ2).

Historical institutionalism studies human interactions in relation to rule structures created by individuals and groups. It approaches interactions chronologically (Sanders, 2006). It approaches past events as processes, which helps in further understanding and constructing the social dynamics (Goastellec & Valimaa, 2019). Historical institutionalists oppose the fact that the same operative forces will lead to the same outcomes everywhere, and promote that the effects of such forces will depend on *contextual features often inherited from the past* (Hall & Taylor, 1996). In the context of this study, a historical institutionalist approach would emphasize traditions and legacies deriving

from Yugoslavia or earlier post-independence years as a factor that affected the developments in higher education in both countries.

This approach pays more attention to the question what are external social forces or group dynamics that are responsible for institutional change (Sanders, 2006). Therefore, historical institutionalism is limited in explaining internal motivation of actors participating in (re) designing institutions (Kralikova, 2016).

Therefore, using postulates originating from sociological institutionalism aids in better understanding of the internal motives of actors when observing past events that led to the creation or change of the institution (Kralikova, 2016). In this view, institutions affect human behaviour not only in the sense of developing understanding what one should do, but also create an image of how one should behave in a given setting (Hall & Taylor, 1996). On this point, Berger & Luckman (1966) discuss that images of what is considered socially expected and accepted are constituted from the institutional forms and signs present in the surrounding environment (i.e. in this case the European arena). On this point, a sociological approach sees domestication of European ideas through processes of socialization, collective learning and persuasion. Such activities lead to internalizing of norms promoted by the environment and development of new identities and cultural understandings (Börzel & Risse, 2005). Sedelmeier (2011) suggests that domestic actors who go through such processes, eventually become convinced that such rules are valid and intrinsic.

Factors grounded in sociological institutional underpinnings affect actors to perform (or constrain) organizational changes because they primarily impact on their beliefs, values and identities (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Risse, Cowles, & Caporaso, 2011). In this sense, changes in the QA system in both countries are observed through exploring the background beliefs of actors.



## **Analytical framework**

### **Factors**

The analytical framework designed for this study consists of categories borrowed from Börzel (2003a) and Sedelmeier (2011). These studies explore broader scope of factors that affect downloading processes of policies and ideas from the European level to new, candidate and member countries of the EU. Such studies observe a transfer of ideas in different public sectors (not necessarily higher education) and have their disciplinary underpinnings in comparative international political studies. Additionally, I followed Vukasovic (2013), as the only available study that explicitly explores factors for domestication of European ideas in three post Yugoslavia countries-Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia. Therefore, the enlisted categories will include findings from this study and explain how my study will broaden the knowledge found in previous studies.

On this point, most of the studies that discuss developments and actors' positions in QA in HE in SEE are atheoretical in their nature, and therefore do not specify factors. However, some information can be abstracted and related to some categories defined in theoretical studies and I will present them here also.

In line with the theoretical considerations of this thesis (i.e. socio-historical institutionalism), I have focused my research on five main factors.

### **1. Legitimacy**

#### ***1.1. Legitimacy of EU demands***

This study took legitimacy as validity of ideas promoted in European initiatives, projected through Bologna related documents, presented in the previous chapter. On this point, consistency between European promoted norms in technical and political sense with domestic understandings will lead to lower adaptational misfit, and a lack of opposition towards such innovations, and they comply domestic cultural beliefs (Börzel, 2003b; Sedelmeier, 2011).

Vukasovic (2013) concluded that European recommendations regarding QA didn't face legitimacy issues. Positive attitudes towards European initiatives speeded up processes of acceptance of European ideas by domestic actors and furthered their incorporation in the legislative system. However, in the same study actors expressed more positive beliefs about the validity of European ideas regarding QA before and during countries' accession in the EU (i.e. between 1991 and 2004), than in recent years.

On the contrary, actors in North Macedonia expressed negative opinions about the introduction of QA mechanisms in the system in the early 2000s (Stojanov & Angeloska-Galevska, 2006).

Since findings about this factor in previous studies contrast, the results chapter in this thesis will look at how these ideas penetrated the system, and what were the consequences of the challenged legitimacy of such European ideas in the domestic context.

## ***1.2. Legitimacy of processes through which the EU formulates demands and promotes rules***

Participating in making and codifying the conditions and rules increases the probability of positive responses and adoption by new or candidate countries. This is because participation in working groups or decision-making bodies provides direct access to the learning environment, but also an opportunity to transfer preferences on the European level, which if accepted, will lead to lower adaptational pressures in the domestic context.

Taking into consideration that at some point both Slovenia and North Macedonia haven't participated in some of the processes regarding drafting of European recommendations or European organizations membership rules, I was also interested to see how actors perceive decision making processes that they are not part of, but yet have to implement outcomes from. In this sense, I wanted to know their narratives regarding this and whether they interfere with domestic decision-making. Both aspects are under-researched in Slovenia and North Macedonia and will be taken in consideration in this thesis.

## **2. Identification with the EU**

When public or key actors identify in a positive way with the EU, have admiration or high amount of respect, the EU rules will appear more appropriate for the decision-makers and therefore persuasion and learning processes go faster.

As discussed earlier, previous literature shows that in the first years of the independence, but even nowadays, Slovenian HE actors nourish a strong positive image about the EU. However, this hasn't been explored yet in the North Macedonian context.

## **3. Existence of change actors/norm entrepreneurs in the domestic context**

### ***3.1. Actors that participate in epistemic communities***

This category puts domestic stakeholders who take part in the EU's or other European organizations' activities, as drivers of change. Namely, such actors not only put pressure on governments, but also take an important role in persuading them that the EU promoted policies are reasonable, desired and adequate (Sedelmeier, 2011). Börzel & Risse (2005) (citing Haas (1992)) add that such actors are individuals who have authority based on a claim to scientific knowledge.

In Vukasovic (2013), actors' participation in epistemic communities had some influence over adoption of European ideas in different countries and periods. Results show that in contexts with undemocratic regimes and wars (for ex. Serbia during the 1990s), the inclusion of academics from public universities in international networks and organizations has been a very important step for acknowledging the latest trends on the European level in HE, and later aided the introduction of QA mechanisms in the national systems.

In Dolenc et al. (2014) European supported programs played a crucial role in improving the academic mobility in the region and aided the access to European epistemic communities for the domestic actors.

In this thesis, as participation in epistemic communities was taken any form of involvement of HE actors in groups and programs that primary role is sharing good practices regarding HE governance and innovations with other HE actors from abroad.

### ***3.2. Advocacy networks***

While actors in epistemic communities are bounded by expertise, actors in advocacy networks in the domestic context are related by shared values and beliefs (Börzel & Risse, 2005). These actors approach communally shared norms and identities and try to persuade other actors to reconsider their preferences.

In Galevski (2014), Pecakovska (2011), Vukasovic (2013) and Zgaga & Miklavič (2014) there are some indications of the existence of such groups in both countries, mostly organized through the flagship university or political parties in power. The results chapter will explore which advocacy groups existed and what was their influence over the topic of interest for this research.

### ***3.3. Involvement of foreign experts and European organizations representatives in domestic developments***

This category was introduced as a result from previous findings in the literature. For example, Dolenc et al.(2014), Petkovska (2011) and Tiplic & Welle-Strand (2006) report that during the 1990s, the main source of international influence in the region came from organizations such as World Bank and OECD. Even more, due to a lack of administrative and financial capacities, many post Yugoslavia countries were heavily dependent on foreign expertise, mostly coming from western European countries. This created somewhat expert colonialism blooming in the first two decades (even though still present in individual countries in the region nowadays too) (Zgaga, 2014).

Zgaga & Miklavič (2014) debate a more independent approach in Slovenia, coming from intrinsic domestic motives, and less dependence on foreign expertise in the formation of HE (and QA) provisions in the early 1990s. However, before the first legislature was adopted in Slovenia, it was assessed by Council of Europe (Ibid). Pecakovska (2015) shows that the first activities related to the introduction and implementation of QA

provisions in 2000 in North Macedonia included experts from two Western European countries (i.e. France and Netherlands). Involvement in the developments in HE by these actors has been aided mostly by international organizations and the EU.

Here I would hypothesize that such individuals have an important role in the transfer of ideas and lessons from their contexts (i.e. countries which have implemented QA in HE earlier and HEIs which already have experience with such processes). In this case persuasion would be easier since there is the general perception that these experts have better scientific knowledge regarding QA from the domestic actors.

#### **4. Political culture**

According to Risse et al. (2011) (citing March & Olsen (1998)) informal institutions embody *‘collective understandings of appropriate behaviour’* in the national or institutional context. The focus in this thesis is on the political culture, seen as either consensus oriented or confrontational. On this point, consensus-oriented culture will provide space for mutual socialization and easier persuasion activities, while confrontational political culture among stakeholders might potentially lead to difficulties in law adoption or implementation of provisions or policies.

Previous literature shows that in both countries there have been confrontations between HE stakeholders regarding adoption of European initiatives in the domestic system. In Slovenia it caused postponed implementation of Bologna reforms (Vukasovic, 2013; Zgaga & Miklavič, 2014). In North Macedonia, it is still not explored what effects these confrontations had. This study will cover these aspects, but also go deeper into the different beliefs and processes of persuasion among Slovenian actors.

#### **5. Legacies**

Legacies are practices of doing things *‘the old way’*, i.e. as they were arranged and performed in Yugoslavia. In relation to QA, I considered as legacy the following notions:

1. Governmental responsibility over quality of HE and HEIs’ work

2. Reporting is done for the needs of the government, which further plans finances and other matters of importance for HEIs
3. Absence of a QA body
4. Absence of accreditation processes performed by a third entity (i.e. QA body) (Opening of HEIs and study programs is government's responsibility)
5. Absence of self-evaluation mechanisms at the institutional level.

Vukasovic (2013) recognized that there weren't strong legacies related to QA, as this way of quality assessment did not exist in Yugoslavia. However, she notes that legacies regarding other HE reforms influenced the opposition of some European inspired reforms in the newly established countries. A clear-cut answer is not possible, but such findings suggest that there might be some effects of this mechanism over the development of QA systems in such contexts too. Influences of Yugoslavia over HE system in North Macedonia have never been discussed before. Therefore, the research process took in consideration this factor too.

### **Periodization**

Another aspect that I took into consideration when looking at the European initiatives in QA was clarity and strength of signals coming from European level, as previous research shows that these two parameters intensified through the years and therefore created more powerful forces of change (Vukasovic, 2013).

In relation to QA in European initiatives, the following three periods will be examined (Ibid).

Table 3 Periodization of clarity of European initiatives in quality assurance in higher education between 1991 and 2018

Period	Type of document	Codified recommendation	Clarity
<b>Before 1999 (Pre-Bologna period)</b>	Existence of some collaboration between QA agencies and HE actors, but no central policy initiative in the field of HE and QA on European level.	/	Low
<b>Period 1999-2004 (Bologna reforms period)</b>	Bologna declaration  Follow up communiques (Prague Communiqué 2001; Berlin Communiqué 2003)  * First bodies specialized networks for QA on European level appear in this period (such as ENQA)	1. To develop mutually shared criteria and methodologies for quality assurance  2. Introduction of evaluation and accreditation as QA mechanisms	Moderate
<b>Period 2005-nowadays</b>	European Standards and Guidelines (2005)  Revised European Standards and Guidelines (2015)  Follow up communiques (Bergen Communiqué 2005; London Communiqué 2007; Leuven Communiqué 2009; Budapest Communiqué 2010; Bucharest Communiqué 2012; Yerevan Communiqué 2015; Paris Communiqué 2018)	1. Rules about internal evaluation of HEIs  2. Rules about external evaluation of HEIs  3. Rules about external evaluation of QA agencies  (ex `QA agencies should go through external review once every 5 years, to demonstrate compliance with ESGs`; Findings from external evaluation quality assurance should be published in full reports,	High

		available to the academic community, external partners and other individuals`	
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# **Chapter 5: Ontology, epistemology, methodology and method**

## **Ontology, epistemology and methodology**

This study adopts an interpretivist research perspective, which states that there is not one cohesive reality and people create meanings on matters based on their personal interactions with the world around them. In this view, researchers attempt to understand the phenomena by observing the *meaning and value that participants assigned to them* (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2011). Truth is consensus formed by its co-constructors, and in this manner, knowledge has the trait of being culturally derived and historically situated (Scotland, 2012). This motivated me to ask open questions about how involved actors experienced some events. As stories unraveled, new questions emerged and old ones were modified during the research process (Lapan et al., 2011).

Understanding internal motives of the actors who contributed towards translation of European idea in domestic contexts, required applying qualitative methodology in this study, as qualitative research puts emphasis on the phenomena from the perspective of the actors (Ibid).

## **Method**

### **Case studies**

This thesis provides in-depth study of events and processes over a prolonged period (Scotland, 2012) in two countries. Selection of case studies was done based on two premises. Firstly, I was interested to explore developments in my home country, as it's highly under researched context and there is necessity of information on past events. Secondly, I was interested to see why such events occurred, and whether alternative pathways were possible. This required including a comparative aspect.

The selection of the second case study (i.e. Slovenia) was done following Heinze & Knill (2008) framework on HE system's convergences under European influences. Namely, countries with similarities regarding language, pre-existing policies, university cultures, socio economic structures and policy problems, tend to respond similarly to European initiatives (Ibid). As presented in Chapter 2, both countries were part of a same federation for almost 50 years, and therefore share socio-political and language commonalities, which enable a comparison between them. Even more, both countries have a similar size of higher educational systems, relations between faculty members and the university (in regard to fragmentation of decision making), dominance of some disciplines etc.

On the other hand, from my previous understandings, but also the consulted literature, it was notable that both countries took somewhat different paths after their independence. One very much focused on implementing EU recommendations in the domestic context (Slovenia) and the other being more of a passive observer (North Macedonia). This inspired me to dwell deeper in the reasons for such attitudes among HE actors, taking into consideration the relatively similar start in the early 1990s. Additionally, as both countries differ in their EU membership status, one being member since 2004 (Slovenia) and the other one holding candidate status since 2005 (North Macedonia), I was curious to see how events developed in countries with different legislative arrangements with the EU.

### **Process tracing**

In order to develop a better understanding of the details and authenticity of both case studies, but also present credible causal social scientific explanation (Falleti & Lynch, 2009), process tracing method in this research followed `causal process observation` niche. It presents information about, both, context and factors. This approach was also adopted since some of the findings suggested great importance of the domestic political settings over the developments in the HE and QA.

## **Interviews with HE actors**

Primary method for acknowledging actors' perspectives in this study was performing personal interviews with stakeholders from higher educational sphere in both countries. This method offered me an opportunity for deeper exploration of attitudes, values, beliefs and motives through direct communication, observation of nonverbal transfer of information and assuring that participants formulate answers independently (Louise Barriball & While, 1994).

In order for deeper discussion about the potential factors to be developed, interviews were semi structured. While as researcher I had some preconceptions about the narratives, deriving both from previous studies and my positionality as researcher, with using less structured approach I aimed at providing space for new categories to rise and known ones to be potentially upgraded or confronted. In this sense, the interview framework included initial questions about processes behind legislature changes in each of the three periods (i.e. 1991-1998, 1999-2004, 2005-nowadays). Participants were asked to talk more about why legislature change occurred, what was their standing point at that time and what were other actors' positions. These questions reflected the historical approach taken in this study, and aimed to get answer to the question what factors affected developments in QA (RQ1).

In addition, participants were asked about their opinions on different European initiatives and associations, such as ESGs and external evaluations performed by European University Association. Through their answers, I aimed to acknowledge the meanings which are attached to European trends, reflecting the social institutionalism approach of this study. Findings from these questions are related to RQ2, offering knowledge on what aided stakeholders' belief formation and dissemination. However, actors had the liberty to discuss other events and context related matters. Most of the interviews included follow up questions deriving from previous answers which aimed at clarifying participants' answers, and understanding their personal approaches (i.e. as individuals, rather than institutional representatives) in specific cases.

## ***Selection of participants***

Initial starting point of the selection of participants was detecting groups of stakeholders which are involved in the QA and higher educational sphere in both countries. This study considers stakeholders as actors which are affected by and exert hold over organization's context and infrastructure (Burrows, 1999).

This study focused on the opinions of the following stakeholder groups:

1. Ministry of Education
  - 1.1. Former and/or present leadership (i.e. Ministers, Secretary Generals)
  - 1.2. Administrative staff
  
2. Quality assurance bodies
  - 2.1. Former and/or present leadership (i.e. Presidents, vice presidents)
  - 2.2. Former and/or present members of governing bodies (i.e. QA's Councils)
  - 2.3. Administrative staff
  
3. Flagship university
  - 3.1. Former and present leadership (i.e. Rectors, vice rectors, deans, vice deans)
  - 3.2. Administrative staff (QA office)
  
4. Individuals involved as consultants in QA related activities (legislature drafting, establishment of QA bodies, development of indicators etc.) or civil society workers that monitor the implementation of QA related policies

The limitation of which groups to involve was performed based on two premises. Firstly, following publicly available documents and sources in both countries, and, secondly, by having some previous knowledge regarding dynamics between actors in the higher educational sphere. Following these steps, I mapped the most active stake holders in the legislature formation processes and ones which bear the responsibility to perform QA activities.

The selection of participants had different path in both countries. As insider of the higher education system in Macedonia, I was familiar with individuals who took part in some of the developments in the county. Following the previously drafted map of events (Annex 2), I identified actors who were involved in the processes in each of the three time periods. An additional help regarding who to contact, was offered by a recent PhD graduate and higher educational expert who works in non-governmental organization which closely follows and participates in policy making in the educational sphere.

In Slovenia, I used snowball technique for selection of participants. This approach includes reaching out to participants through contact information provided by other informants (Noy, 2008). The process was repetitive, i.e. some of the participants recommended other participants that would be suitable to talk to regarding the topic of the study. First instance regarding obtaining suggestions who to contact was a leading Slovenian scholar. Furthermore, a former Secretary General for higher education got highly interested in the study and provided substantial help in selecting and contacting participants. Additional help was offered by parliamentary member and former student activist with whom I had personal contacts. Lastly, two PhD students from the University of Ljubljana offered some suggestions and contacts. Some of the Slovenian participants were at leading positions in QA bodies, and their contact information was publicly available at the Slovenian quality assurance agency web page. All the participants were initially contacted by e-mail. Some of the participants that didn't respond to the request were contacted by phone, which helped in receiving confirmation for participation. In Slovenia, the present leadership of the flagship university didn't respond to any of the

invitations to participate and one former Ministry of education official declined the invitation.

On this point, in North Macedonia almost half of the initially contacted individuals rejected or didn't respond to the invitation(s) to participate in this study. This group consisted of Ministry of Education employees who were engaged in the implementation of the Bologna process in the first decade of the 2000s, QA body leadership and other members in the period between 2006 and 2016, and a long-term flagship university leadership representative.

The total number of participants in this study is 24. Taking into consideration that both countries have small higher educational systems, many of the interviewees have been or are holding positions as leading figures on national (i.e. Ministry of education) and institutional level (i.e. flagship university, faculties and QA bodies). Also, many of the participants have been involved with different stakeholders at different stages of their career. For example, one of the interviewees at some point has been vice rector at flagship university, and later member of QA body. Another interviewee used to hold a leadership position at a faculty at the flagship university, be head of QA commission at their faculty and do consultancy for higher education legislature. On this point, maybe future research should explore how actors that get involved in decision making processes in HE, mingle their multiple identities and how this affects HE dynamics.

Actors' multiple identities were helpful since many of the participants had some extended knowledge and experience with both legislation drafting in HE and implementation of QA activities in practice.

Most of the participants are professors at flagship university. This shows that in both countries the expertise in regulating matters from the higher educational sphere is concentrated at the universities.

Coding of the interviewees is presented in Annex 3.

### ***Time period and language***

The interviews were performed in the period between January and February 2019. All the interviews were held face-to-face. They were performed in Macedonian, Serbo-Croatian and English language. On this point, in Slovenian interviewees were asked which language is most suitable for them and had the option to choose between English and Serbo-Croatian. Most of the participants chose to use Serbo-Croatian language, as some of them referred to it as *`our language`* (i.e. *`nash jezik`*). Some of the interviewees switched from Slovenian to English language at some point.

Some of the younger participants in Slovenia chose to discuss in English, because they found it more suitable. For example, one of the participants said: *`the terminology of QA is better in English language, we still don't have adequate translation that captures the essence of the concepts`* (Interview no. 15). This demonstrates that QA terminology is new in linguistic sense, signaling novelty of such concepts in these contexts.

### **Document analysis**

Apart from performing interviews, this study also consulted documents that offered primary and secondary type of information. The purpose of accessing documents was to (1) locate legislature changes, explore when and how such changes occurred, (2) develop a timeline of events which will help in narrowing the interview questions, (3) gain information about the practical implications of legislature provisions, and (4) create more objective and factual representation of the results part taking in consideration the ex post nature of the interviews.

The following types of documents were consulted:

1. Laws and subsidiary legal acts (such as rulebooks)
2. National programs and strategic documents from the sphere of higher education
3. White papers

4. QA bodies' reports
5. External evaluations reports performed by European organizations

This study only took in consideration publicly available documents.

All the documents were accessed electronically, in the period between November 2018 and August 2019. Documents were obtained via official national gazettes, web pages of the Ministries of education, QA bodies and international organizations (ENQA, EHEA). On this point, the QA agency in North Macedonia launched a web page only recently. This web page only contains basic contact information and doesn't present any documents or extensive information about present and former members and the leadership core. Therefore, access to documents issued from this stakeholder were hard to find and, if existent, are not included in this research (except one report which was shared by one of the participants with me). Some of the participants in both countries also shared reports or correspondence materials from their private archives during the interviews. Based on the findings from the documents, I drafted timeframe of events of interest for the topic of this study. The table is presented in Annex 2.

### **Ethical considerations**

This study followed the ethical guidelines provided by University of Oslo and the Norwegian center for research data. In December 2018, the fieldwork plan which included detailed information about the selection of participants, analysis and presentation of data successfully passed the ethical clearance process performed by the Norwegian center for research data. Following these rules, at the beginning of the interview, each participant was informed about the purpose of the study and given the option to retreat from the interview if they are not willing to participate further on.

The interviews are anonymous.



The data in this study is presented according to the number of the interview taken. The reason for such approach, instead of referring to the professional position taken by the interviewee (ex. high ministry official, member of QA body etc.) is because of the small higher education sphere and network of actors who share close relations and familiarity. This potentially can lead to recognition of some of the participants, and therefore, breach anonymity boundaries. In the words of one of the participants:

*‘We are such a small country, everybody knows everybody here’  
(Interview no.12)*

## **Positionality**

Doing research on my domestic context and contributing towards improvement of the status quo was one of the leading motivations for this study. As former student at the flagship university, long term junior researcher in a nongovernmental organization which does research and policy making in the youth and educational sphere and activist in few student initiatives, including the historically largest student movement in the country, I already participated actively in some of the policy making processes and had substantial knowledge of the system dynamics.

These circumstances made me an insider of the system (Herr and Anderson, 2012), causing both opportunities and threats along the way. On the one hand, understanding the context and culture, having previous direct communication with other individuals involved in the higher educational arena and having access to documents, helped me significantly in organizing interviews, reaching participants, leading the discussions and grasp anecdotes and nonverbal gestures. On the other hand, my involvement as activist in the past made some of the participants reluctant towards participating in the study or discussing some matters at the beginning of the interview.

In addition, some of the participants couldn't understand my role as researcher once asked about processes in which we have been involved in together, or context related matters (i.e. I was treated as former student or participant in the process). Such example is the following excerpt:

*'I don't understand why you are asking me these things. Like you don't know already' (Interview no. 1)*

Being aware of my position, I challenged many of my views (and truths<sup>13</sup>) with my supervisor, who already had experience with doing research in these contexts but wasn't ethnically nor culturally part of them, giving me outsider perspective along the way.

An additional facilitating mechanism was the internal process of acculturation I was (and am still) going through as an Erasmus mobility student. Being exposed to cultures and settings different than my native one<sup>14</sup>, I have consciously and unconsciously rethought many aspects of my domestic culture in the past semester. During this process, some subsequent changes in my personal cultural patterns occurred (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936), and this is something that was highly notable for me as I was performing the fieldwork. Both approaches helped me to do a step back and observe the object of the study, but also the participants in less subjective way.

In the Slovenian context, my positionality was, what Herr & Anderson (2012) would describe as, a multiple positionality perspective. On the one hand, I haven't been extensively familiar with the dynamics in the Slovenian higher educational system, or even more specifically, with the QA domain (i.e. I was outsider to the system). Because of this, the interviews in this context have been more in-depth oriented, aiming to understand the details of underlying processes in the QA sphere. On the contrary, interviews in the Macedonian context have been wider in scope, covering broader range of topics from the higher educational sphere.

While performing the fieldwork in Ljubljana, I communicated actively with a Slovenian ministry representative which helped me to clarify some of the interviews' findings related to some factual events. Additionally, active communication with two Slovenian PhD

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<sup>13</sup> 'Insiders to a setting do not have direct access to the truth of the setting. There is merely one truth among many' (Herr & Anderson, 2012)

<sup>14</sup> As part of GLOBED program, I spend each semester at different European city and lived in Spain, Norway and France.

students working in the field of QA in Slovenia helped me to develop deeper understanding of the Slovenian higher educational system.

On the other hand, being a researcher in the higher education sphere, academic community member and person coming from a country which shared political and social commonalities gave me a glimpse on some aspects. Some examples are knowing the dynamics between actors in small higher educational systems, understanding the strict division between teaching and research institutions, and the challenges that universities are facing regarding fulfilling criteria of international ranking lists. This position helped me in establishing closer relations with the participants during the interviews.

Many of the participant assumed that they don't need to elaborate further when talking about culture related matters. Such example is presented in the following interviews excerpts:

*...I had to convince everybody in the Senate, the students and everyone else that this is the most important document. I can tell you these things because you understand the environment. If I was telling this to other people from Western Europe, the Netherlands let's say, they wouldn't believe me, they don't understand that this is possible.* (Interview no. 19)

*At the end of the day, we are still Balkans<sup>15</sup>. You know what I mean* (Interview no. 13)

### **Fieldwork setting and dynamics**

Participants were asked where the most appropriate place for them is to have the interview. Most of the participants suggested meeting in their offices or places usually located at faculties at flagship universities or in the Ministry of Education. In Slovenia, three participants asked to meet in cafes in Ljubljana, demonstrating more openness towards discussing topics of interest for this study. During the interviews in Macedonia,

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<sup>15</sup> By the term `Balkans`, some of the Slovenian participants referred to using personal connections for gaining benefits in the public sphere (i.e. nepotism) strong hegemonic attitudes among older professors at public universities (Interview no. 15)

participants often pointed at the environment where they work or teach in relation to the questions about quality of teaching and research, building quality assurance systems and maintaining quality culture.

*`You are asking me about the quality of higher education in Macedonia. Look at this office. It got flooded few days ago. I had to call and pay for plumber by myself. What kind of quality we are even talking about here? What European initiatives? We don't even have the basic conditions to work` (Interview no.1)*

*`It's hard for me to talk about any kind of quality assurance, when this room (room where the participant does research) hasn't been renovated since 1980s. I don't know how I am expected to fulfill some criteria and meet goals written in the law and all of those rulebooks` (Interview no.2)*

Such findings suggest that in this country, HE actors don't consider QA to be strong topic of interest and give primary consideration to more basic problems in their working environments,

Many of the interviewees in this country took the opportunity to talk about other matters in the higher educational system, such as lack of funding, political parties' interference in the decision-making processes, and widespread nepotism and corruption not only in the HE sphere, but in the broader public sphere. Discussions were often sidetracked, as many of the interviewees insisted on talking about the general status quo in higher education, or national politics, rather than QA matters and policy making. This affected the outcome of the interviews, in which some of the findings did not fit the used framework. Additionally, many of the participants did not have much knowledge on the European trends and narratives rarely included discussions about these ideas.

In this context, some of the interviews contained disguised power omnipotence demonstrated by participants, as a result of the prescribed roles in the interviewees' perceptions (i.e. I was perceived as student who knows less and should not be questioning the validity of the claims presented by professors) (Haworth, 2006).

On the other hand, the interviews in Slovenia were very focused on the topic of the research. Some of the participants also took the opportunity to discuss the broader higher education status quo, often discussing high enrolment rates effect on quality of higher education in negative sense. Many of the interviewees highlighted the benefits of entering the EU, the importance of EU funds for the improvement of the public sectors, and expressed support towards North Macedonia's accession processes. On this point, in the open parts of the interviews, most of the participants expressed enthusiasm for Macedonia's agreement on name change with Greece, even though this wasn't initiated by me as topic of discussion. This signals Slovenian HE actors strong positive cognitive relation to EU and active thinking process of EU trends. Many of the participants in this country were talking about their personal experiences as external evaluators or consultants in the QA domain in North Macedonia, demonstrating existence of some regional collaboration and networks.

### **Analysis of data**

All the interviews were tape recorded, and further transcribed. The analysis of the interviews was performed by applying qualitative content analysis approach. Namely, this theory guided method of analysis extracts the relevant information from the text and processes only that information (Glaser & Laudel, 2013). Following this, starting point were the categories in the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 4. The selected set was left open for modifications regarding the number (categories can be added or not be present) and structure of categories (dimensions of categories can be added or changed) depending on participants' responses.

Findings about research question 1 were obtained through following the map of legislature changes and participants' narratives about certain events, processes and facts behind them (i.e. participants as objective references) (Wengraf, 2011). Findings about research question 2 were obtained through participants' narratives about their roles, attitudes and beliefs in times of legislature (i.e. exploring the subjectivity of the participants) (Ibid).



## **Chapter 6: Main findings**

This chapter presents the main findings of my study. The results part will present information about main legislature changes recognized or demonstrated by the participants and factors identified by the researcher. Additionally, this section will offer information about national political contexts in legislation changes and their implementation took place. The presentation of the results consists of the case studies and three stages of clarity of European recommendations in chronological way.

### **Case study: Slovenia**

#### **Period: 1991-1998**

The first years of independence were characterized by lots of enthusiasm and a strong EU oriented discourse. Slovenian higher education was going through substantial reforms, aiming to stimulate the country's integration in the EU. Reforms of the HE system were mainly led by an advocacy network consisting of actors coming from the flagship university, which further increased their knowledge through participation in epistemic communities mostly through projects supported by the EU.

This period in Slovenia also marks the establishment of QA structures in times when a strong and clear signal about the nature of European trends was absent. In addition, there was to some extent a lack of such mechanisms in many western European countries. Some of the factors influencing these developments were related to the existence of legacies, which positively correlated with European trends in actors' beliefs, existence of consensus-oriented culture, high level of trust among actors, and a strong desire to identify with Europe.

### ***First legislature on higher education***

In 1993, the Assembly of Slovenia adopted a new Law on higher education, which reformed higher education relatively early compared to the rest of the former Yugoslavian countries. This progress though did not come as surprise for the interviewees.

The developments in the political context of the country before the independence are of importance for understanding this relatively early reform. Namely, in 1986 the League of communists of Slovenia elected a liberal president, which introduced a more *‘relaxed atmosphere’* in the public discourse and aided to the rise of ideas for the establishment of a western-style parliamentary system and the introduction of a market economy (Ravinet, 2008).

One of the leading roles in this period was taken by student initiatives.

*‘It was a period in which, not only in HE, but education in general, there were lots of discussions and innovations. At that point, we discussed the idea for external testing in high school for example.’ (Interview no. 23)*

For actors that took key positions in HE reform implementations, these processes were the beginnings of the establishment of stronger advocacy network that promoted the introduction of QA in higher education after the independence, but also in later periods (i.e. post 2005). Those individuals were part of the academic community at the flagship university, and some of them later took leading positions in the Ministry of Education within a liberal oriented government that was holding office starting from 1992.

Such an example is the work of the Center for development of university (*‘Center za razvoj Univerze’*) which engaged young academics from the flagship university in Ljubljana during mid and late 80s. This group drafted new legislature on the work of universities before the independence, an initiative that was supported by the Assembly once Slovenia became independent.

*‘It wasn’t political initiative, but the Assembly at that time confirmed it. They gave a mandate to this group to start working. Such initiatives were happening a lot in other sectors too.’ (Interview no. 23)*



The process of persuading the Assembly regarding the urgency of adoption of such legislature was based on two main arguments, both related to QA. Firstly, they referred to isolated initiatives of opening private companies offering higher educational services (some form of private HEIs), and the danger of having unregulated HE, for example, with respect to the impact on the quality of graduates entering the labor market. This was characterized as a matter of national concern.

Secondly, the question of quality assurance was approached through the prism of international collaboration and maintaining good relationships with other countries. This was a highly important matter for the newly formed state from a diplomatic point of view.

*‘One day we received a letter from the Italian embassy saying that there have been some suspicious private entities organizing classes for students held by Slovenian professors in Italy. Because our professors had diplomas obtained at the public universities in Slovenia, those were recognized as valid in Italy since we had bilateral agreement for recognition of qualifications. They wanted to cancel that agreement. That was big scandal for the country and taken very hard by some of us’ (Interview no. 23)*

The abovementioned example shows that some of the motives in introducing QA mechanisms were related to national needs at the given time, rather than the adoption of reforms just because of environmental pressures coming from the surrounding (i.e. European trends).

### ***The introduction of accreditation and evaluation***

The 1993 Law on higher education announced the introduction of QA, in the form of accreditation of institutions and study programs, and self-evaluation. European initiatives at that time weren’t promoting such innovations and signals regarding QA models were rather weak. Additionally, such formal QA mechanisms were still relatively absent in many western European HE systems too.

Suggestions about the QA model came from the group based at the Center for development of the university, which through a project supported by domestic and international funds, explored different European QA systems.

Interviewees discussed that they found Western European countries' models more appealing, compared to some forms of QA mechanisms existent in Eastern and Central Europe countries.

*` We were looking at few systems simultaneously and taking what was considered as logical. And in our case, we introduced accreditation in times when this mechanism wasn't very popular in Western Europe. Also, we were looking at some weird systems in Middle and Eastern Europe which had hard accreditation. We didn't want to introduce them, but we were looking at something more open` (Interview no. 21)*

*`At the same time, discussion about accreditations appeared in those Western countries, countries of which we tried to be part of. There were some internal discussions in the Ministry, but just as everything else, we were looking at what everyone else is doing around us` (Interview no. 13)*

This illustrates that the desire to identify with Europe was influencing domestication of ideas coming from western European countries and rejecting ideas that came from politically similar countries (i.e. effort to denounce legacies).

Another aspect of the introduction of accreditation was the absence of opposition to these ideas- a trend that continued to flourish until the change of the government in 2004. Interviewees discussed a strong consensus oriented political culture as a factor that stimulated the introduction of these innovations.

*`There weren't big discussions around it. It was an idea that came from public universities at the end of the day. They didn't want new HEIs to enter higher educational sphere that easily. To me, and to the person that was in charge of the HE matters in the Ministry, that idea looked logical` (Interview no. 13)*

Another characteristic of the political culture was the high level of trust among key actors in these moments. This was based on the close relations between the actors which came from the flagship university.

*`Once the Prime Minister said to me that I trust [name of high ministry official] too much. And I said: Who else I can trust if not people coming from the university in this country. He said: It's okay, but at the end, if*

*something goes wrong, you are the one that will be fired. My answer was: I understand. That was the only time in 10 years that we discussed this. The climate was favorable, I have to say` (Interview no. 13)*

### ***First accreditations and evaluations***

Looking at the practicalities of the model, accreditations were issued by a National Council for Higher Education (further: Council), which also served as consultancy body within the Ministry. This body started operating in 1996. An additional body that had the role of assessing HEIs, i.e. the National Commission for Quality Assurance, was also established in 1996 (Ministry of education, science and sport, 2003). The Council's members were appointed by the Government of Slovenia, and they were university professors.

Accreditations were given based on a list of `Yes` or `No` questions, and decisions were made based on the number of positive or negative responses per member. In this period most of the applications were approved, a step that was justified by some of the actors as *`gathering experience and practicing, rather than applying strict criteria and making clear cuts`* (Interview no. 23).

Accreditation was seen as a mechanism for protecting the position of the two public universities, against the establishment of new HEIs. QA bodies were heavily dominated by professors from both universities in this period.

The legislature also introduced self-evaluation at HEIs. Also the introduction of this mechanism did not receive much criticism from the academic community and other stakeholders. Partially this was because of the lack of negative consequences for the HEIs, but also because of some preexistent practices of reporting at HEIs (i.e. existence of legacies from Yugoslavia).

*`There weren't any objections almost. Those reports didn't have direct influence on the financing aspects, so it wasn't sensible topic. I never*

*felt that it was a problem, nor strong rejection of such system`  
(Interview no. 21)*

*`In times of Yugoslavia, each faculty was obliged to write some kind of self-evaluation report in order to gather important data. It contained some statistics, such as entrance and competition rate, each year. So here we weren't novices in this field so to say` (Interview no. 23)*

Self-evaluation provisions also required the inclusion of students' opinions in the process, even though this was not common practice in all European countries at the time.

This decision was also based on legacies from the old system, in which there was an inclusion of students in some decision-making bodies, but also strong student organizations which not only took part in the HE reforms, but also supported the independence path in the mid and late 1980s.

Just as with accreditations, the first self-evaluation efforts were done by people who had interest in this field, mostly professors rather than administrative workers. Some of those taking a role in these processes on the institutional level became part of the advocacy network that supported the process of Europeanisation of the QA system in later periods.

### ***Involvement in European programs and organizations***

Very soon after the independence, Slovenia became recipient of European Union funds dedicated to reconstructing economies and aiding transitions to market economies in post communistic countries in Europe (European Commission, 1992). Starting from 1992, Slovenia was already using TEMPUS project funds for stimulating academic mobility with EU countries (European Commission, 1995).

Additionally, Slovenian professors coming from public universities participated in other European and internationally based programs such as COST, Copernicus and the 5<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme (Ministry of education, science and sport, 2003).

Some of the interviewees that were pushing for reforms towards more European aligned legislations in the upcoming periods, reported participation in such projects in the first decade of 1990s. For example, a former high-level leadership ME actor, described the

process of learning about self-evaluation models and applying the knowledge in the domestic context during their times as professor at public university.

*`I got scholarship from the USA embassy to learn how to make strategical documents of the University. They took me to 11 states, and I saw 16 universities. After that, they called me to go to Twente, London...EU commission gave so much money for this. After I returned, I started working on establishing smaller self-evaluation commissions at the faculties. I was just suggesting to the deans, with really nice tone, that maybe we should include students, maybe we should try...` (Interview no. 19)*

An important element that was highlighted by the actors was also the inclusion of foreign professors in the process of establishing the legal provisions in practice through mobility programs funded by the EU.

*Some of our colleagues from abroad helped us a lot. You know, those people have well-known names, academic titles, high reputation, they are top level researchers. Of course, we prepared them what kind of confrontation they might face and gave advices about our cultural understandings. Their visits were about giving courage to the professors and deans. Professors will listen about quality or QA only from people equal to them` (Interview no. 19)*

Slovenia's ambitious start in the QA field can also be illustrated by the inclusion of both public universities in European University Association's pilot program for external evaluation (later known as Institutional Evaluation program) in 1996.

Despite joining epistemic communities, Slovenia also participated in the creation of, mostly, regional networks for academic mobility. Such networks were facilitating the participation in epistemic communities. For example, not long after adopting the first LHE in 1993, Slovenia and 5 other governments from Central and Eastern Europe established the Central European Exchange Program for University Studies (further: CEEPUS) (Sorantin, 1998). This arrangement was considered as a preparatory activity for joining the EU's Socrates program in the upcoming period. Nonetheless, the findings didn't offer clear evidence on the role of such regional communities in the development of the Slovenian QA system.

## **Period: 1999-2004**

Slovenia was one of the signatory countries of the Bologna declaration in 1999. This inspired the introduction of legal changes aiming to align the domestic system with the European requirements. However, such innovations did not go unchallenged by some stakeholders, which mainly disputed the legitimacy of demands contained in the declaration. Some of the opinions were related to keeping legacies, which were directly opposing Bologna demands.

Parallel to this, Slovenia became an EU member in 2004. This process speeded up the domestic Bologna reforms, including the QA system, as these activities were seen as part of the package of EU integration.

Participation in epistemic communities became more substantial, as some actors took important roles in European based initiatives and organizations. This aided policy makers to know what the upcoming trends in the QA sphere would be, and implement them in the domestic context, even before they were officially promoted in the communiques. This period also marked an end of the 12-year governance of the public sector by the liberal oriented government, and election of new right with oriented government in 2004.

### ***Amendments 2004: Introduction of Bologna reforms***

Bologna recommendations were firstly introduced in the domestic context through the Higher Education Master plan, adopted in 2002. This document which included substantial part about QA, was firstly discussed by the Assembly in 1999, only four months after signing the Bologna declaration in 1999 (Ministry of education science and sport, 2003). Some of the strategic goals were related to improved inclusion of students and employers' representatives in QA processes and strengthening the role of self-evaluation.

This approach towards slower introduction to Bologna was applied due to some opposition of the innovations promoted by this European initiative among the academic community based at the public universities. These circumstances caused long lasting debates about applying Bologna in the local context. For an illustration, four years after

joining Bologna, in 2003, Slovenia still had not decided about the reform of the degree system as promoted by Bologna. Justifications of such delays were related to the doubts how rapid changes in the study programs were going to influence Slovenia's small higher education system, with potentially negative consequences in the labor market. Additionally, *'analysis of the development of study structures within a wider European environment'* was required (Ministry of education, science and sport, 2003). This illustrates that some actors, mainly based at the flagship university, expressed doubts regarding the legitimacy of demands included in the Bologna declaration. This caused a delay in the adoption of European initiatives, even though mainly in a legal sense, since many of the reforms started taking place before 1999 already.

However, despite strong debates (and oppositions) about Bologna, appearance of this European initiative aided Slovenia's future pathway.

*'Although the signing of the declaration on EHEA in Bologna in 1999 didn't mark the beginning of discussions on the direction higher educational development in Slovenia, it did significantly help the decisions made after signing' (Ministry of education, science and sport, 2003)*

On this point, a former high-level ministry official, related the changes towards more Bologna aligned domestic regulations with Slovenia's entrance in EU.

*'In Slovenia, we achieved so much more, because of one and only reason-We entered the EU. And before that, we got clear directions that we have to change the HE towards the principles of Bologna declaration' (Interview no. 19)*

In 2004, Slovenia adopted amendments aiming to advance the legislature towards Bologna propositions, but also to tackle some of the issues which have been raised as result of the developments in the higher education system. These amendments, which were initially proposed by a larger group of professors, primarily tackled the internal reorganization of HEIs, funding formula, changing the enrolment criteria and improved involvement of students in decision making processes (Ministry of education science and sport, 2003).

## ***Changes in the QA system***

Amendments related to the QA sphere announced changes in the mechanisms, procedures and bodies responsible for the quality of the system. Firstly, apart from institutional and program accreditations and self-evaluations, external evaluation was introduced in the QA system. Secondly, a new public agency for evaluation (further: Agency), which was supposed to perform external evaluation checkups, was introduced. This body consisted of members mostly appointed by the HEIs, but also included students, employers' and government representatives. The Agency was supposed to work independently from the Ministry of Education.

The Council kept the accreditation role. Unlike the previous period where the selection of members was the full responsibility of the Government and all the members were university professors, legislature changes suggested a different nomination system. HEIs, students, employers and the government were given the chance to propose their own representatives. This change marked, at least formally, a restriction to the heavy dominance of the academic staff from public universities' participation in the decision-making processes in the previous period. Also, it dispersed the power of the selection of members to a few stakeholders, dismantling the Government's central position in these processes.

Thirdly, QA procedures became more specific. An example is the limitation of the duration of program and institutional accreditation to 7 years (which further triggers re-accreditation procedure). In addition to Bologna amendments, the Council adopted new criteria for monitoring, assessment and assurance of quality in higher education the same year (Rodman & Širca, 2008). This rulebook specified some procedures and clarified some aspects of the QA processes. These specific changes in the QA system were introduced as a response to the 2003 Berlin communique, promoting adoption of European Standards and Guidelines in 2005.

Knowledge about the upcoming trends was coming from participation in epistemic communities. Most notable is the involvement of the then general secretary for higher education, as the general rapporteur (2001-2003) for the Berlin Conference, and as a



member of the Board of the Bologna Follow-up Group (2004-2005) (Centre for Educational Policy Studies, 2019).

*‘We knew about the content of the communiques (referring to Bergen communique 2005) and European standards and guideline for QA. We were in touch with them. Forming independent agency and inclusion of students was a technical matter. It was clear that this is something we have to do’ (Interview no. 23)*

However, the penetration of ideas related to dispersing the governmental power over decision making processes in the public sphere was also part of the package of broader reforms for EU membership. For example, giving autonomy to entities which previously were part of government institutions, was part of a general reform of the public administration in the education sector in Slovenia, at the doorstep of EU’s membership.

*‘As the idea was becoming stronger in Europe, that it should be more solid and bold structure, it was clear that such bodies can’t stay within the Ministry. We also autotomized other institutions such as Center for external testing and Center for vocational education. There weren’t big discussions around these changes in the Ministry’ (Interview no. 13)*

Though the changes in the QA system weren’t that vocally opposed by the stakeholders (i.e. public HEIs), such changes created unpleasantness. These opinions will echo in the upcoming periods, creating some substantial changes in the QA system later on.

*‘The universities weren’t that fascinated by this idea of having an independent agency which will dictate them what to do. In the Council for HE there were rectors and such figures, which had big influence over the processes. And in the ‘independent’ model-they didn’t know how it will work for them. But they knew that those are the trends in Europe, and which way we should go’ (Interview no. 21)*

On the other hand, findings suggested the presence of two groups of foreign experts which offered advice on QA reforms. Firstly, EU evaluation teams assessing the country’s preparedness for obtaining membership status, exercising coercive influences.

*‘At the end of the 1990s we had European evaluators coming here, observing and giving us recommendations. We had peer reviews, and other types of checks. When you have more documents arriving, the*

*Minister has to change the law. If you want to enter the union, off course. Though, no one says that if you want to enter you have to change it, but on paper, they recommend you to change the QA system if you want to be in the union...` (Interview no. 19)*

Secondly, academics from Western European countries worked directly with the ministry and HEIs as advisors. However, while in the previous period there has been very positive attitudes towards these groups, some participants expressed skepticism towards what these experts promote.

*`I was always telling those Western experts that they change their concepts and systems every 10 years. Then they come here, and they tell us what's in and what is not. For example, experts from the Center for Higher Educational Policy Studies in Netherlands, criticized our accreditation system in 1993. Now when trends changed, they came here, and they praised accreditation as tool for quality improvement. They are never satisfied, they always change something` (Interview no. 21)*

Apart from using legislative instruments, changing and strengthening the QA system was stimulated through financial mechanisms introduced by the Ministry of Education. For example, the `Quality Assurance in Slovenian HE 2001-2006` project led by two public universities, aimed at creating adequate models for self-evaluation and criteria for external and internal assessment (Ministry of education, science and sport, 2003). This project started in 2001, which shows that some Bologna reforms were already implemented before the legislature was updated.

The process of learning and getting HEIs accustomed to the newly adopted and specific criteria for QA was also aided through another project which took place in 2006 (Rodman). The Ministry of Education supported pilot external evaluations at 4 faculties at public universities.

### ***Involvement in European programs and organizations***

Apart from individuals taking part in meetings of national representatives regarding Bologna drafting, which had a strong influence on the developments in the QA sphere in this period, Slovenia joined other initiatives that facilitated the processes of learning about

European trends. Namely, Slovenia joined the Socrates-Erasmus program in 1999, which increased the access to mobility between academic cadres and, therefore the exchange of information about how things are done in other HE systems in Europe. Just as in the previous period, these visits were found to be very important for the process of persuasion of the domestic actors that QA mechanisms are useful, and their adoption means modernizing the country.

Additionally, Slovenia became a member of the Network of Central and Eastern European Quality Assurance agencies in HE (further CEENQA) (Ministry of education, science and sport, 2003). However, interviewees have not reported strong influences coming from this network in relation to changing the QA system. This illustrates that participation in epistemic communities matters in cases when these networks offer access to knowledge that is directly created by them.

### **Period: 2005 onwards**

As the European initiatives of QA became more detailed and the European level landscape of stakeholders got richer (here referring to the rise of QA specialized organizations), the intensity of domestic changes rose. Slovenia introduced in this period significantly larger number of amendments related to QA mechanisms and bodies compared to previous periods.

While many of the changes were related to the desire to identify with the EU in the earlier years, promoted by an advocacy network which was already established in the previous periods mainly acknowledging trends through taking part of European epistemic communities, some innovations were also related to denouncing legacies and challenging the legitimacy of demands coming from European based organizations later on.

During the years, change of governments holding different ideological grounds affected developments in the QA sphere.

At the early years of this period, appearance of a new advocacy network created a confrontational political culture among stakeholders involved in the QA processes. This affected the implementation of some European recommendations. In recent years,

Slovenia's actors' participation in epistemic communities and programs increased, but this didn't always create positive connotations regarding the legitimacy of demands or processes of making rules at the European level. Additionally, the role of the QA body in creating rules, participating in discussions and translating European trends in the domestic context, got stronger and significant.

### ***Amendments 2006: Returning the power to the Council***

At the beginning, a new right-wing government discontinued the 12 year governing of the liberal political party, and the (almost uninterrupted) leadership of the Minister of Education for 10 years. This marked the beginning of the creation of a new advocacy network which approached European initiatives with its own rationales. Changes in the HE and QA system, but also other public sectors, was led by a newly established advocacy network consisting of members of the political party in power, academics and other stakeholders (such as religious organizations) (Interview no. 13).

One of the most discussed events in the interviews was the amendment of the LHE in 2006. Such changes returned the power of quality assurance to the Council, and abolished the idea of having an independent Agency, which was contrary to what European initiatives promoted. Namely, the QA related tasks were divided between three senates within the Council for HE in the Ministry. The number of members increased, just as the number of professors in the decision-making body.

These amendments contrasted Slovenia's strong drive for compliance with European trends, characteristic for the previous periods. Reasons for this can be structured in two main arguments demonstrated in interviewees' responses.

Firstly, denouncing legacies established by the previous government, secondly, opposing the traditionally strong position held by public universities. The latter is related to the dominance of the flagship university over other HEIs, a legacy inherited from Yugoslavia.

*‘There was this perception that we, the previous political establishment, are another package old regime, communism’ (Interview no. 13)*

*`The new coalition believed that everything that was done before them, everything that was done in the 90s, is wrong. In ideological sense. Economy, higher education...whatever, let's erase it` (Interview no. 23)*

*`That political option was always claiming that the public HE is privileged. And that because of the development of quality, we should introduce diversity in the system. We should introduce competition. There should be some number of private HEIS also in the system` (Interview no. 21)*

Actors involved in the work of the Council at this point, challenged the legitimacy of demands coming from European based organizations (here referring to ENQA).

*`Our agency, the previous Council, in the end of 90s fulfilled the criteria for being part of ENQA. Our criteria for accreditation back then, they were comparable with the ESGs. But we were not Agency and we were not, as the director of ENQA said, independent, because we were like part of the Ministry. But in reality, we were really independent from the Ministry` (Interview no. 22)*

On the other hand, an advocacy network created in the previous period, consisting mainly of people coming from the flagship university, either still working in the ministry or being back to academia, was still active. They were promoting a return to the old amendments which granted independence to the Agency. This persuasion process was either led through the internal structures in the Ministry, or to lesser extent, through the epistemic communities in which some of the actors participated, aiming to increase the pressure coming from the European side. Such an example is presented by ministry official in the following finding:

*`I prepared document on the full procedure for entrance in ENQA, in which we detected where we are not fulfilling the formal conditions. They [the ministry leadership] even established a group that went through it, and said that despite everything, we will be able to enter ENQA. They were stubborn about this` (Interview no. 21)*

Arguments about the negative consequences coming from this advocacy group mainly revolved around Slovenia's *`de-tour from European path`* (Interview no.13), which would further lead to rejection for membership in European organizations such as ENQA and EQAR.

These findings suggest the existence of a confrontational political culture between two advocacy networks consisting of professors from public universities, professors from newly established private institutions, former and current political parties' members and actors from other interest groups.

### ***Amendments 2008: Establishment of independent agency***

As a new central left oriented government was elected in 2008, the LHE was amended again. This time, the QA body was granted independency from the Ministry, and laid the ground for opening the National Agency for Quality Assurance (further NAKVIS) in 2010. The newly elected government returned the discourse of following recommendations primarily incorporated in ESGs. This was seen as a way for joining European based organizations operating in the field of QA.

Intentions to be part of international epistemic communities are clearly expressed in strategic documents such as the National Higher Education Programme 2011-2020, which proposed that in case of failure of obtaining membership in ENQA and EQAR, the legislature will be amended again and NAKVIS's work will be modified accordingly (Government of Slovenia, 2011).

Narratives regarding following European trends were revolving around the prestige of being part of European based organizations. Some of the interviewees working in the Council described this process as a political decision, which would aid the government to be perceived as successful in the domestic context, rather than change triggered by ideological reasoning.

*` There was big pressure to become member of ENQA. The political party in power didn't want any other government to bring Slovenia into this international organization ` (Interview no. 22)*

Parallel to this, in 2012 the Ministry of Education launched a project for strengthening the flagship university's QA system, which included activities related to advancing self-evaluation and obtaining international accreditations and evaluations (Faculty of social sciences, n.d.; University of Ljubljana, n.d.-b).

### ***Amendments 2016: Abolishment of study program reaccreditation***

The law was amended a few other times between 2010 and 2018 in relation to QA, but most of the changes were of minor technical nature. The most notable amendment abolished the reaccreditation of study programs in 2016. The initiative came from public universities. The rationales for such changes were related to the administrative burdens coming from demanding QA processes, but also some ideological differences between public HEIs and NAKVIS. Such opinion is presented in the following finding presented by former university leadership actor.

*'I don't understand how a university with strict criteria on creating study programs has to get permission by NAKVIS. University has to have the autonomy to open study programs without any interference from other entity' (Interview no. 14)*

Such findings suggest that some actors coming from HEIs challenged the legitimacy of demands coming from European initiatives which advice for third party interference in the quality assurance processes in HE. It also shows that while these stances might have been less notable in the previous periods due to actors' focus on other pressing issues in regard to HE reforms under the influence of European trends (such as the internal reorganization of HEIs), they re-appeared in the public discourse later on and caused change in the system despite European recommendations. Regarding these amendments, there was consensus between stakeholders that study re-accreditation should be abolished. However, in 2017, interviewees reported strong disagreement between the Agency, HEIs (mostly public ones) and the Government regarding new criteria for accreditation and evaluation. The basis of the confrontation was stricter and more bureaucratically demanding criteria proposed by the Agency.

Findings also suggested that future developments will lead to larger autonomy of HEIs and QA agency, something that is in the spirit of European recommendations. Namely, stakeholders expressed interest in granting a study accreditation role to HEIs rather than to the QA agency, and the adoption of new legislature which distinguishes NAKIVS' work from other public entities.

## ***Involvement in European programs and organizations***

Continuous work in the field of QA and participation in epistemic communities created a smaller domestic expert group. This group matched the advocacy network that pushed for adoption of European initiatives in the earlier years of this period. However, with the change of the government in 2004, some of those experts' voices were sidelined. Some of those actors continued participating in European based communities, despite the strong confrontational political culture between both advocacy networks. Such example is the involvement of the long-term General Secretary for HE in the liberal oriented government as rapporteur of BFUG Working Group on External Dimension of the Bologna Process in the period between 2006 and 2007.

This illustrates that domestic players' involvement in epistemic communities doesn't guarantee a smoother adoption of European trends, when other factors are present. The most notable example is the dispute over the Agency's independence status.

Going further, one of the milestones according to many of the interviewees was the Agency's membership in ENQA in 2015 (NAKVIS, n.d.-b). Regarding the process of becoming an ENQA member, some of the actors involved in the process of preparing the applications expressed skepticism towards the legitimacy of demands coming from European based organizations.

*`We came to ENQA and EQAR late. If we were there earlier, the criteria for membership wouldn't be that tough. We were asked to do so much more compared to Agencies coming from countries with longer traditions of doing QA in higher education` (Interview no. 24)*

In 2018, NAKVIS went through an external review process performed by ENQA, and extended its membership for 5 years in this organization.

Once these processes were discussed with some of the actors involved with the agency, some strong opinions which challenged the legitimacy of the demands and the procedures of making rules on European level were expressed. The arguments revolved around cultural differences between the `West and East`, challenging the positive resonance between the domestic and European ways of doing things.



*In the panels for site visits, there are always people from Western European rather than Eastern European countries. Their attitude is that they are coming from big countries, with colonializing past and history, and they are eager to teach us, a small country, how to operate. All of our progress is not enough, is not taken in consideration when they are accessing us. And there is always a tone that we should learn how to do it` (Interview no 24)*

Even though not discussed in earlier periods, some of the interviewees expressed negative resonance between domestic approaches and European ones. This is shown in the following quote, which discusses the correspondence between the QA agency and ENQA regarding the form and content of self-evaluation reports during the external evaluation process.

*`They do not understand that we don't do self-evaluation reports by the book as prescribed by ENQA. We have different kind of self-evaluation and they don't understand the point. We cover the content that is required by ENQA, but it's different kind of agency self-evaluation. It's not only factual, but it's also based on assessment, including responses from other stakeholders. We also have different questionnaires for HEIs, for students. We try to make this self-evaluation useful for us also. Our type of self-evaluation is not appreciated` (Interview no. 24)*

However, once asked about the future ways of doing things, actors discussed compliance and producing outcomes based on the demands coming from European based organizations, whenever this is demanded by these entities.

On another hand, interviewees that recently took part in epistemic communities consisted by actors working at HEIs (rather than epistemic communities consisted by administrative workers from QA agencies), expressed high level of trust and positive connotation in the process of learning and strengthening the QA mechanisms at their universities.

*`I have never thought about special strategy that one has to take in order to be heard at meetings at EUA. I always feel included. My recommendations have been taken in, and I feel understood` (Interview no. 18)*

Apart from participation in ENQA, NAKVIS continued its membership in other European associations such as CEENQ. In 2014, NAKVIS became part of the International Network

for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) (NAKVIS, n.d.-c). Even more, the Agency had strong presence in these communities, as their former president held leadership positions such as being two term vice president of CENQAA and Vice Chair of European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (European Consortium for Accreditation, 2015). This demonstrates presence and interplay between a few factors. Namely, while Slovenia remained active in some epistemic communities, this didn't prevent actors to challenge the legitimacy of European demands and recognize a confrontation between domestic and European ways of doing things. On another hand, more substantial and longer participation in epistemic communities might cause bigger doubts about the validity of ideas coming from abroad because of the development of the deeper understanding about the proposed changes.

During this period, the flagship and the second biggest public university went through second external evaluation performed by the EUA, while many of the newly opened public institutions obtained their first reports in 2015 (European University Association, n.d.; University of Ljubljana, n.d.-a).

## **Case study: North Macedonia**

### **Period: 1991-1998**

Looking at the timeline of events in North Macedonia (Annex 2), during this period there were no innovations nor developments in higher education in the legal sense. This also applies to the QA sphere. The first legislature that regulates the area was introduced in 2000.

During the first years of the independence, the reasons behind this are context related. North Macedonia was the only former Yugoslav republic that gained independence in a peaceful way in the early 1990s, while other republics (i.e. Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) were engaged in long armed conflicts ending in early 2000s. However, the country was imposed to an economic embargo by its southern neighbour, Greece, in 1994, due to a political dispute over the usage of the term `Macedonia` in the name of the newly established country and flag symbol that Greece claimed historic ownership

over. This caused severe economic losses for the country, which struggled with satisfactory amounts of substantial products such as oil. While the northern neighbours were involved in wars, the country's western neighbour, Albania, was in a process of dismantling a dictatorship oriented communistic regime, which got replaced by a somewhat other authoritarian government. These events led to a civil war in Albania in 1997. These circumstances created political and economic instability of the region which affected the internal functioning of North Macedonia.

While facing these challenges, the country was also going through reforms of the system and the introduction of a market economy and multiple political party system.

*'The country had serious security issues. We had wars and very unstable context around us. We were also going through process of denationalization and decentralization of the governance. Education was the last thing that anyone thought of'. (Interview no. 9)*

An additional moment was the lack of expertise in the educational domain, but also interest among the policy makers once some initiatives appear.

*'I took an initiative to make a strategy for elementary, pre elementary and secondary education. When I went to talk about it, Ministry of education representatives weren't interested at all' (Interview no. 9)*

In the later years, some internal discussions about the necessity of new legislature and drafting of texts that would follow the new societal arrangements appeared. Such discussions were mostly initiated by actors involved in the civil society sector and public universities, but these voices weren't vocal. The prevalent discourse was keeping the status quo (i.e. letting the HE system be in legal vacuum). This was supported by the universities which enjoyed the lack of regulations on their functioning allowing them room to manoeuvre.

The leadership of the ministry changed very often (5 ministers were appointed in the period between 1991 and 1998), and this caused an absence of a strong strategical position regarding the HE sector. Even though, most of the appointed ministers were professors at the flagship university.

Parallel to this, the question of the language of instruction in schools and universities was raised by the Albanian minority in the country. This came at a relatively sensitive moment as Serbia and, at that time, autonomous region, Kosovo (both bordering North Macedonia) entered in an armed conflict, causing a refugee crisis in 1998 and 1999. In those times, North Macedonia hosted 13 000 ethnical Albanians coming from Kosovo (United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, 2000).

Introducing a law on HE started to become a matter of national concern in the late 1990s, as it interfered with the process of the re-building of the ethnical identity of the newly established nation.

*‘Albanians asked for education in their language. They couldn’t agree on the article related to the language of instruction in the new legislature. The narrative was that they are asking, and we are not allowing. Them vs us. Adopting new law on higher education was a very sensitive question, and there was general rejection in the society’ (Interview no. 8)*

One of the most notable events in the HE sector occurred earlier on, when an illegal university which supposed to hold lectures in Albanian opened, in the western part of the country in 1995. The university was closed after two days, after violent clashes between the police and 2000 Albanian students, with one person being killed. This event was a trigger for the introduction of QA mechanisms in later periods.

*‘We sent tanks to confront students, instead of defining rules and asking HEIs to comply if they want to keep on working. This was historical opportunity to set the QA system, but at that time we weren’t mentally prepared or had any consciousness about QA. We didn’t even have knowledge about QA mechanisms’ (Interview no. 8)*

*‘The events with the university of Mala Rechica, gave us additional strength to speed up the introduction of quality assurance in the legislature in later years’ (Interview no. 3)*

In absence of an upgraded QA system (faculties were still reporting to the Ministry), the role of monitoring the status quo in HE was divided between the Ministries and, to large extent, to the State Educational Inspectorate.

### ***Involvement in European programs and organizations***

In the middle of political, social and economic instability, North Macedonia started participating in EU funded programs for stimulating academic mobility TEMPUS (Secretariat for European Affairs, n.d.).

Participants described involvement in TEMPUS projects as *‘light at the end of the tunnel’* (Interview no. 9), and as *‘enthusiastic beginnings for introducing Bologna reforms’* (Interview no. 3). For actors at public universities, these programs aided the access to knowledge about the innovations in HE in EU countries and learning about concepts which were slowly created and soon incorporated in the Bologna declaration.

*‘When you enter that game, you start thinking a bit pro-European’* (Interview no. 9)

On this point, the Ministry of Education (2003) recognized the participation in such project as main precondition for faster reforms in higher education.

In 1998, both universities participated in a project which introduced QA mechanisms at the institutional level (Uzelac, 2003). This project was initiated by the second public university in North Macedonia.

*‘It all started very enthusiastically by few professors. It’s not like there was a clear picture. Those professors though were teaching subjects related to industrial management. They thought that principles from the industrial sphere can be directly applied to education. Their understanding was limited’* (Interview no. 8)

This project was a crucial turning point for the introduction of QA mechanisms in the domestic context in the later period. This shows that participation in epistemic communities was a very important factor in acknowledging the new concept for the domestic actors which further initiated some changes at home.

### **Period: 1999-2004**

While North Macedonia remained relatively peaceful compared to the surrounding environment in the previous period, in 2001, an armed conflict between an Albanian militant group and the Macedonian army occurred. These events created instability in the country, and delay in adoption of Bologna declaration. At the same time, this period

marked the introduction of the first legislature on HE, and the establishment of a QA system. While narratives were revolving around discontinuing legacies from Yugoslavia, some of them remained being nourished in the new system too.

European trends weren't popular among majority of stakeholders, and the drive for pro-European aligned HE was led by a relatively weak advocacy network consisting of civil society representatives, public universities leadership actors and some individuals from the Ministry of Education.

Participation in epistemic communities was mostly taking place through EU based programs, and those were crucial for the process of persuasion and acceptance of the new approaches regarding QA, which were initially opposed by the stakeholders.

### ***First legislation on HE***

In the dawn of the Bologna declaration and increased participation of HEIs in EU funded projects in late 1990s, policy makers started recognizing the necessity for new legislature which would reform the higher education sector (Uzelac, 2003).

The first law on HE was adopted in 2000. Discussing about the process of legislature drafting, there has been strong narratives of denouncing legacies from the previous system and introducing new arrangements in the HE sector. Some of the individuals taking key positions at public universities at that time discussed these aspects.

*`We had this narrative that Macedonia is a new country and we have to do something new. Instead of seeing what didn't work fine from the previous system, and fixing some aspects, we strived to come up with new solutions for many things` (Interview no. 3)*

*`There was a trend to criticize everything that is old and to praise everything that is new. Without offering any organic solutions about how to transfer from the old system to the new. Universities were called the `fifth column`, and we were perceived as someone working against their own country, institution of the previous system` (Interview no. 9)*

Legislature was drafted mainly by the ministry administration. Content wise, the legislation did not follow strictly recommendations coming from the communiques and the Bologna recommendations.

*`Instead of seeing what the universities are doing in Europe, they were seeking for new solutions at home` (Interview no. 3)*

An example of this was the continuation of the strong position of faculties and keeping the university status as a weak federation of faculties, which contrasted some of the European recommendations that suggested strengthening the role of universities as united entity (Uzelac, 2003). This is a legacy from Yugoslavia, and actors were striving to keep that tradition alive.

The abovementioned illustrates that despite public narratives about discontinuing legacies, some of them were also incorporated in the new system.

### ***Introduction of accreditation and evaluation***

New legislature introduced accreditation and evaluation as mechanisms for QA in the domestic system (Article 23). Suggestions about introducing these mechanisms mostly came from public universities, specifically from leadership actors. This QA system was seen as a tool for protecting the HEIs' position, as the legislature allowed opening private universities too. For actors that promoted establishing a QA system, the opening of the illegal university in 1995 in the western part of the country was a sign that some tools have to be introduced to prevent similar events in the future.

*`Some people were saying that we are insisting so much with this quality thing, and protecting it as `the English queen`, but we were really on the run` (Interview no. 3)*

*`The foreigners were pushing a fast solution of the question for education in Albanian language. Also, at that time there were so many visits by foreigners working on the founding of the Shtul university<sup>16</sup>. The whole situation was so mixed up, so they [public universities] thought that it would be for the best to protect what is already existent` (Interview no. 8)*

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<sup>16</sup> South East European University (i.e. Shtul University) is first private HEI in North Macedonia that offered education in Albanian language. Opened in 2002, it was strongly supported by international donors. More at: <https://www.seeu.edu.mk/en/about/history>

While some actors had clear intentions with the introduction of a QA system in the domestic context, other actors' motives were related to the desire to identify with the European countries.

*`There wasn't understanding why we need this. The narrative was that it is something that exists everywhere, and we should also introduce it. Or it's something that Europe demands from us` (Interview no. 8)*

However, these novelties caused strong rejections among the academic community. In the heat of the discussion were self-evaluation reports and the questionnaires for evaluating professor's work by the students.

Arguments were based either on ideological stances which rejected the possibility of HEIs, and professors being accessed by a third-party entity or students themselves (i.e. collision with domestic way of doing things), or existence of informal institutions. On the latter, there was widespread fear that QA tools will threaten professors' professional career progress. On this point, professors traditionally enjoyed very safe working conditions in Yugoslavia, which were rarely discontinued before their retirement.

*`There was animosity towards these activities, especially towards this system of QA. The main question was what kind of consequences there will be on professors' careers. That was a psychological barrier that had to be removed. We had to go slow. Otherwise, the law wouldn't have been adopted` (Interview no. 3)*

Looking at the specificities of the QA system, the accreditation involved institutional and study program approval by the Board for accreditation. This body consisted of professors only, who were nominated by HEIs, the Government and the Academy for Arts and Science. The evaluation involved external evaluation performed by Agency for evaluation, self-evaluation (i.e. institutional evaluation) and dissemination of student questionnaires. The agency also consisted of professors only, all nominated by HEIs. Both bodies were working in close relation to the Ministry of Education.

Provisions in the legislature are quite broad in their nature, abstaining from further arranging the specifications. While this might be an outcome from the lack of signals about



the details of the mechanisms coming from the European side, this decision was also taken because of the heavy criticism coming from academia.

### ***Adoption of Bologna declaration***

North Macedonia signed the Bologna declaration in 2003. The involvement of an international donor (i.e. Open Society Foundation) was a `stepping stone` of the introduction of this European initiative in the domestic context.

*`Bologna?! That was out of question. The government and professors weren't interested in any of it, even though the processes began earlier on European level` (Interview no. 3)*

*`Bologna in Macedonia didn't come through the state and governmental initiatives, but through the civil society sector. Such projects included trainings for understanding Bologna for professors and leadership personnel, i.e. rectors, deans` (Interview no. 9)*

This lack of initiative among the stakeholders in adopting Bologna and introducing European trends in the domestic context was related to three main factors. Firstly, there were strong tendencies to keep the old way of doing things (i.e. keeping some legacies from pre independence times). Secondly, findings suggest the presence of widespread passivity among all stakeholders.

*`Macedonian academic community always avoids debates which are of a great importance for them. It's partially because they didn't know about Bologna and all of those trends, but in majority of cases they don't care. In the ministry there was no political will, no commitment, and no one was interested` (Interview no. 8)*

Thirdly, professors challenged the legitimacy of demands coming from Bologna, based on ideological grounds, as these trends were perceived to downplay the role of HE to its instrumental role. This is illustrated in the following quote presented by an, at that time, university leadership actor.

*`I was and I am still sceptical about Bologna. I don't want to make students `homo faber`, `fah idiot`. I want as professor to also help the student to be a citizen, good parent, person that knows how to communicate, to have some values` (Interview no. 8)*

For the actors that promoted the introduction of Bologna oriented innovations, including the QA system, the main motivation was related to the desire to be `closer to Europe`, or to identify with Europe. Adopting European HE trends was perceived to be part of the country's path towards EU membership.

*`We also had these excuses (narratives) that one day we are going to become a member of EU, and we, as HEIs, have to be compatible with those institutions. Just as we are entering EU, we need to enter this area first` (Interview no. 3)*

The weak advocacy network which was promoting synchronization of the domestic legislature with European documents in this period consisted mainly of civil society representatives, flagship university leadership and some professors coming from public universities.

The following quotes demonstrate a lack of support by the government in the earlier stages of the implementation of the Bologna declaration too.

*`The state didn't give a penny for these processes. We were alone. You can't work like that. You need the state/government to back you up. They left everything on the Universities` (Interview no. 9)*

*`The ministry at that time didn't take any active role to help these processes. Not substantially, at least` (Interview no. 3)*

*`As Ministry, we started implementing the ECT system more actively after 2005...` (Interview no. 10)*

Due to inapproachability of some of the key actors working in the Ministry currently it is challenging to access reasons for the lack of involvement of the government in these processes. However, it should be noted that in 2001, an armed conflict between an Albanian terrorist organization and the Macedonian army occurred, resulting in human victims and population displacement in the western part of the country. Following this, in 2004, the government introduced a new administrative territorial division changing the ethnic balance in some municipalities. This process went through heavy public criticism and caused administrative burden for public entities. In such a context, the reform of education wasn't a priority for state actors.

### ***First accreditation and evaluation processes***

Parallel to this, in 2003 the Open Society Foundation started a project which offered financial support for the first institutional accreditations, self-evaluations and external evaluations by international panel. Just as in Slovenia, the accreditation body approved most of the institutional and study program applications. Such step was described by some of the interviewees as an attempt to protect faculties and public universities from the upcoming wave of privately established HE institutions. Self-evaluations were performed by panels consisting of domestic and foreign professors from EU countries. Faculty deans were choosing members and some of the choices were based on close friendships or past collaborations with other deans or professors gained through EU funded projects, participation in international conferences or other activities during the times of Yugoslavia.

However, interviewees that were part of these processes, reported a lack of enthusiasm after the first cycle of accreditations was completed. The reasons behind this were, as suggested earlier, a lack of support from the government, but also some contextual related aspects such as accrediting new private universities.

*‘First cycle was closed probably because OSF pressured and paid for it. We said, since we paid there has to be an outcome. We have to receive reports from the activities and publish them’ (Interview no. 8)*

*‘You put so much effort in it, but there is no governmental support. Some new universities with low quality were opened, the standard failed. There was devaluation of HE, and of our motivation to do anything further’ (Interview no. 9)*

This shows that the presence of civil society support was crucial for the implementation of European initiatives in the domestic context.

### ***Involvement in European programs and organizations***

Professors from public universities continued to participate in EU funded programs, and these mobility exchanges were used by the HEI leadership to educate professors about the benefits of introducing QA mechanisms in the domestic context.

*`We took our professors to Lund, Gottingen, Ghent. They were asking deans about the system of appointing professors. They explained to them that the QA system can sometimes intervene in the choice of academic cadre. Our professors got scared. They were always saying that the students are too subjective, that they are strict. But, when they saw how other professors in those European countries work, they realized that is normal for the students to evaluate you for example (Interview no. 3)*

As part of the project, both public universities went through the Institutional evaluation program of the European University Association, which included an external evaluation by an international panel of professors. Actors taking part in these events reported positive opinions about the processes, demonstrating a lack of scepticism towards the legitimacy of demands coming from European initiatives and organizations such as EUA.

Participation in programs which offer access to European epistemic communities was positively accepted partially because the processes were led by actors who had the same professions as the domestic actors, but also because they strengthened the legitimacy of attempts of the advocacy network in implementing European driven policies.

*` The commissions that did the external evaluation were consisted by professors, so they understand what we were talking about. ` (Interview no. 3)*

*`...with the first external evaluation we got international recognition. We made an example in front of the faculties, how the university is doing it. It was a sign that they have to align with the university` (Interview no. 3)*

### **Period: 2005 onwards**

As the signals coming from the European side regarding how national HE and QA systems should be arranged got stronger, North Macedonia introduced numerous novelties in legislative sense, leading to two new laws which were heavily amended

during the years<sup>17</sup>. This period was marked by a 10-year right wing government ruling and the formation of a strong advocacy network initiated by the political party in power. This caused a stronger involvement of the government in HE and decision making processes, leading to strong opposition by non-formal student initiatives and flagship university professors.

While the QA system engaged the main tools promoted by European recommendations, additional mechanisms which are not characteristic for European standards were introduced. Such tools were negatively perceived by many actors. Legacies that collided with European trends were kept, slowing down the pathway towards a more European oriented HE system, but also participation in European based organizations such as ENQA.

### ***National program for education 2005: Re-claiming legacies***

The year 2005 marks the creation of the European Standards and guidelines which created very visible and specific expectations about how QA systems should be structured in the European higher educational area. The same year, the Ministry of Education introduced the first National program for education, supported by the Open Society Foundation. This strategic document expressed strong commitments towards European trends in higher education, channelled through the Bologna declaration. It also stated that changes in the education system would be made having in mind the desired EU membership. In the domain of QA, the program announced the inclusion of students in the QA processes, merging of the two separate bodies for accreditation and evaluation in one, and denounced the role of the State Educational Inspectorate in the evaluation processes in higher education (p. 64).

The Ministry claimed responsibility over the quality of HE, along with the Board for accreditation and evaluation (p.64). This illustrates that that despite European trends' slow turn towards more university-based responsibility for the quality of HE, stakeholders in North Macedonia were still holding onto the concept of state as the guarantor for the

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<sup>17</sup> For example, the 2008 law on HE, was amended 21 times in 10 years. Annex 1 presents all legislature changes regarding QA

quality of services in this sphere. This is a legacy from the communistic way of approaching public sector in Yugoslavia.

The ESGs are not explicitly mentioned in this document. This demonstrates a lack of knowledge about the newest trends on the European level, despite ME representative's participation in Bologna related groups.

### ***Second legislation on higher education: Bologna reforms 2008***

In 2006, a new right-wing government was elected, starting a 10-year long reign. The election of the new government in this period created a strong advocacy network organized mostly through the political party in power. This network engaged political party members or supporters holding leadership positions at public universities, administrative workers at ME, professors and student representatives organized through the Student parliaments.

In 2007, a process of drafting a new legislature on higher education was initiated by ME, justifying by the need of arranging the system according to the newest European trends, mostly referring to Bologna declaration and follow up communiques. The legislature, adopted in 2008, strongly advocated the implementation of ESGs, through explicit formulations such as:

*‘The evaluation will be performed according to...accepted procedures and standards of the guidance for evaluation adopted by the European institutions for evaluation of HE, and other organizations and associations which have a role of establishing and applying European standards and guidelines for evaluation of EHEA’*

For actors that took active part in the legislature drafting, the ESGs did not cause a negative resonance with the domestic regulations or traditions of QA. Incorporation of these standards in the domestic system was seen as a way to secure the autonomy of the universities against the state interests in securing quality.

*‘I think that those standards are great. They collide with the ‘etatism’ approach to HE enforced by the Government. Following them can help*

*us in creating more autonomy for HEIs and professors, because they promote bigger individual responsibility for HEIs (Interview no. 4)*

QA provisions weren't vocally opposed by the stakeholders, as they were in the first legislature for HE in 2000, as this legislature introduced other innovations which were considered to be of much bigger concern mainly for the professors at public universities. An example is the re-organization of the university structure which took away faculties' legal status aiming to strengthen the role of the university as united entity (just as in Slovenia) and changing the system of obtaining academic profession titles. In this sense, legislature drafters, mainly professors coming from the flagship university, expressed a lack of interest for the QA system.

*`The westerners came up with so many declarations, new organizations, documents and regulations. I am okay with all of those QA processes. I am okay with all of it, because I am simply not interested in it` (Interview no. 1)*

Despite professors' involvement in the creation of the legal text, the content of the final legislature was heavily dominated by provisions imposed by the Ministry of Education. Some of the suggestions that were aligned with the European recommendations, such as professionalization and independence of the QA body were deleted.

*`The proposed legislation differed so much from the final version. It passed so many commissions, discussions, that it really didn't look like something we had on mind`. (Interview no. 9)*

*`The state representatives didn't want to professionalize the evaluation part, so they [the Government] can do internal evaluations. Internally, they wanted to keep the control` (Interview no.3)*

Analysing the novelties in the QA system, the legislation in 2008 kept the same QA mechanisms (i.e. program and institutional accreditation, self and external evaluation and dissemination of student questionnaires). While this legislature didn't offer any substantial changes regarding mechanisms, there have been some alterations regarding structure and obligations of the bodies responsible for QA. Most notable changes were the ones related to the increase of members appointed by the government in both bodies, while the number of members appointed by HEIs bodies decreased. The President of the Board

for accreditation was appointed by the Government. Additionally, the legislature introduced inclusion of students and employers' representatives in one of the bodies. The Board for accreditation was obliged to report to the Ministry of Education regarding each approved accreditation, unlike previous prescriptions, which gave freedom to the Board to notify the Ministry whenever they find it necessary.

While procedures became more specific, this law promoted bigger involvement of the government in the QA processes, despite European trends that recommended increased autonomy and independency of the QA bodies. Narratives about such mismatch between the national and European approaches towards QA, vary depending on the stakeholders' stance. On the one hand, the Ministry of Education saw these changes as necessary for fixing the dysfunctional QA system. Findings illustrate that ME's officials were aware that this is against European trends.

*‘Previous accreditation and evaluation processes didn’t give good results. Most of the requests for accreditation are approved. We, as state representatives, had to step in and do something about it. We had to take bigger role in these processes if we wanted to improve the quality assurance processes. Let them think that it threatens their autonomy, let them think it’s overregulated and against European trends. We have to do this now, and once the quality is really improved, we are going to loosen the control’ (Interview no. 10)*

On the other hand, civil society representatives active in the advocacy network pushing for more European oriented reforms of the HE sphere and professors expressed concern for increased control over the public universities, which were considered as either descendants from the pre-independence times (i.e. legacy holders) or places where critical mass and opposition supporters was concentrated.

*‘The reasons were strictly political. The aim was to delegate members from the Government in the QA bodies, which will further help the political party on power to arrange the HE sphere and interfere with universities’ work’ (Interview no. 6)*

The abovementioned demonstrates strong confronting narratives between stakeholders who have been involved in the creation of the legislature. Such discourses continued in the following years, as polarization between ministry, HEIs and civil society sector



increased significantly. This period was characterised by strong a confrontational political culture between professors from the flagship university and the Ministry of Education. The leadership of the flagship university mainly remained passive, while student representative organizations (i.e. Student parliaments) mostly supported governmental initiatives.

On this point, a long term flagship representative described the university's passive position in this period:

*` We don't want order, we don't want results. There is no impulse for change, no interest to oppose. We like the instability because it helps some of us to benefit from such status quo` (Interview no. 11)*

These circumstances led to a high level of mistrust among actors, leading to negative beliefs about governmental policies by any mean.

### ***Amendments 2010: Introduction of national ranking lists as tool for QA***

In 2010, a national ranking of HEIs was introduced as an additional mechanism for quality assurance. Such mechanism is not characteristic for the European initiatives expressed through the ESGs, Bologna declaration and the communiques. The novelty was mostly negatively perceived among the interviewees, describing it as *` incompatible with the small HE system`* (Interview no. 8) and *` introduced by councillors who don't know the domestic context`* (Interview no. 3).

The introduction of rank lists is also seen as a tool for introducing competition and challenging public universities. In some narratives, public universities are still perceived as institutions which aided and supported the communistic system, ones that continue the legacies of the *`old times`*.

*`Oldest public universities, the one in Skopje and the one in Bitola, are perceived as inheritance from the old system. And they should be downplayed first. Introducing competition with other HEIs will do that, but also improve the system` (Interview no.6)*

### ***Amendments 2011: Changes the structure of QA body***

In 2011, both bodies responsible for accreditation and evaluation merged into one body, the Board for accreditation and evaluation of HE (further OAEVO). According to the Ministry of Education, such step was taken after recommendations from ENQA. These suggestions were related to lowering the costs for maintaining two separate bodies and assigning the role to one body which will take care of both, accreditation and evaluation processes.

Participants in this study didn't demonstrate any confrontation to these legislature changes.

The newly established QA body consisted mostly of professors who were members or supporters of the political party in power. Getting a position in the OAEVO's board was considered prestigious, as the legislature prescribed high salaries.

### ***Amendments 2015: Introduction of state exam as tool for QA***

The turning point for introducing reforms in the HE system in North Macedonia, but also changing the political context, was the Minister of Education's press conference statement about the introduction of new QA mechanism in 2014 called state exam. In essence, the concept included testing of student knowledge every two years of their studies, performed by OAEVO. The amendments prescribed fines for students, who did not pass the exam, live streaming of the exam presented on the Ministry's web page and monitoring performed by OAEVO, Ministry of Education and HEIs. While such a mechanism is not promoted by the ESGs or other European driven initiatives, policy makers reported learning about such tools from some European Union countries.

*‘Initially we looked at the Danish HE system. The idea was to have some kind of external control, not towards the students but towards professors’ (Interview no.10)*

This innovation caused an appearance of the student movement ‘Student plenum’ the same year. As a response to that, a group of professors, mainly based at the flagship university, formed the group ‘Professors’ plenum’, aiming to support the student movement. While European initiatives weren't at the heart of the discussions, the QA

system was considered as an important aspect by the plenum. The initiative mostly challenged the work of the OAEVO and questioned its independence.

Additionally, another group of professors, mostly members or supporters of the political party in power or holding positions in the QA body, established a non-formal initiative named as `Counter plenum`. Some of the most publicly vocal promoters of this QA mechanism were OAEVO's board members. Along with the Student parliament, this group supported the governmental proposal.

Despite the strong opposition from the student movement expressed through massive student protests in 2014 and 2015 (some gathering up to 10 000 people in the capital city, and smaller ones in several other in the country), state exam amendments were adopted in 2015. However, the state exam implementation was postponed for two main reasons. Student plenum was applying constant pressures for the abolishment of this amendment which included protests, legal appealing and occupation of public universities' buildings. These attempts resulted in an agreement between the Students' and Professors' plenum, and the government for drafting completely new legislation on HE which would address problematic aspects of the old legislature and offer better solutions for improving the quality of HE in general, in 2015.

While negotiations took place, the country faced a wiretapping scandal which included high level politicians and state institutions representatives<sup>18</sup>. These events caused a deep political crisis in the country (Office for Democracy of Institutions and Human Rights, 2016), which resulted in a change of the political party in power in 2016.

Earlier on, in 2013 the World Bank started with the implementation through its local office aiming to strengthen the QA system. Two of the main aims related to QA sphere in this project are achieving affiliate membership status of the OAEVO in ENQA and performing an external evaluation of the public universities (World Bank, 2013). This project ends in

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<sup>18</sup> The leader of the biggest oppositional party announced possession of 20 000 voice recordings containing wiretapped conversations between high level politicians, including the Prime Minister and other members of the government. According to him, the recordings were made available by whistle-blowers from the Administration for Security and Counterintelligence. Some of the recordings that were publicly announced, famously known as `The Bombs`, presented conversations about committing corruptive activities by high level governmental officials.

2019, and only the second component was achieved so far (September 2019). This shows that in general, the modernization of QA system in this and past periods was heavily dependent and initiated by international donors and civil society organizations, rather than HEIs and state institutions.

### ***Third legislation on higher education 2018***

As an outcome from the events related to the Student plenum, the new government elected in 2016 opened the process for drafting new law on higher education in 2017, which was adopted by the Assembly in 2018. The QA mechanisms didn't go through any substantial changes. The system includes institutional and study program accreditations and external and internal evaluation. Despite heavy criticism, ranking lists were included as a tool for QA in the new legislature. The state exam was not included in the new legislature. Discursively, the legislature keeps supporting the appliance of EGSs. Even more, it requires that most of the members of external evaluation commissions are professors at universities based in ENQA member countries. However, despite the strong discourse in the legislature, stakeholders expressed scepticism towards these trends. Firstly, there is widespread belief that such mechanisms are misused by actors for personal gains, rather than strengthening the quality of the education.

*`These European rules are cherished by the younger staff, to be honest. The older staff sees these QA systems as a chance to do harm to other professors. For example, if some of my colleagues oppose me, I will connect with the [student] parliament through the political party on power. I will ask them to find 10 students which will evaluate my colleague with very low grade in the student questionnaires, so later on they have troubles with keeping their position at the faculty` (Interview no.1)*

Secondly, European recommendations are perceived as too administrative and not leading to improvement of quality of teaching. This demonstrates ideological differences of how quality can be achieved and improved, challenging the legitimacy of demands coming from Europe. Such opinions were also expressed in the previous period, at times when North Macedonia was accessing Bologna.

*`All of these QA novelties and new approaches are constantly upgraded and are too burdened with administrative requirements. But you know, European administration has to justify their salaries. They try to look like they are inventing something revolutionary, but in the core none of those inventions can really help in improving HE system` (Interview no. 6)*

However, such beliefs did not prevent decision makers from introducing QA mechanisms as prescribed in the Bologna documents in the newest legislature. Going further, the legislature prescribes that the new QA structures will be independent public bodies, instead of being administratively related to the ministry. The reasons behind this are not intrinsic, but such changes are introduced because of the demands from European based organizations.

Even though such demands coming from European based organizations are questionable for some stakeholders, the aspirations to be part of them and to identify with EU, prevail.

*`It will be easier for us to prove that this body is independent in front of EQAR and ENQA this way. Even though the Board was independent until now, it was hard to prove this because ministry was technically supporting OAEVO and this causes suspicion among European organizations. Ministry employees can't intervene in the decision-making processes. They send letters, invitations, organize the meeting...I don't understand how they can influence the work, but in front of those bodies is hard to prove this` (Interview no. 10)*

Additionally, a new public entity, the National Council for HE, should draft new rulebooks for accreditation and evaluation. Until the completion of this study, none of the abovementioned bodies was established. The accreditation processes are still performed by the OAEVO.

### **Involvement in European programs and organizations**

Participants rarely discussed their participation in epistemic communities in this study. North Macedonia's QA bodies are not members of any network for QA on European or broader international level (CEENQA, n.d.; ENQA, n.d.-c; INQAHE, n.d.). Some QA body members recently have taken part in events organized by ENQA, as part of a World Bank project on strengthening the QA system. Stakeholders mostly have positive

attitudes towards participation in these epistemic communities, but also lack of self-confidence once they join some meetings.

*`I went there with a World Bank representative. Yes, I learned a lot, but I was feeling so bad, because...people there were directors of agencies and similar positions. I went there as member from the Governing board and I didn't know much` (Interview no. 2)*

Through this project, five out of six public universities also went through IEP program of the European University Association. Looking retrospectively, the flagship university did 3 external evaluations through the IEP program in this period (2011, 2015 and 2017). This represents an increased participation of HEIs in European level programs compared to earlier periods. Just as in the previous period, actors that were directly involved had positive responses towards these processes and didn't express doubts towards the legitimacy of demands. Such activities are mostly performed as sign of modernity and prestige in the domestic arena. HEIs consider these evaluations as an opportunity to enhance their visibility in the domestic or international sphere.

Reports are rarely used for institutional strategical planning (which is rarely performed by HEIs in North Macedonia), and there are no follow up activities once the external evaluation reports are delivered by the international panel delegated by EUA. Such evidence was demonstrated by some of the interviewees who hold long term mandates at the leadership positions at the university and board members.

*`External evaluators really know their job and I have very positive opinions about these activities. But to be honest, when we receive the final reports, we only focus on the positive comments rather than the negative. We show around with positive results. I don't remember performing any strategical planning related to the external evaluation` (Interview no. 11)*

*`We, as Board members, were invited at the presentation of the findings of the external evaluation done by EUA. We distributed the findings further, but no one was interested to discuss` (Interview no. 2)*

## Chapter 7 Discussion

This thesis looked at 5 mechanisms which exercise influence over actors' opinions and beliefs regarding acceptance or rejection of ideas that come from a supranational entity, i.e. the European union, through processes of learning and internalizing such ideas among decision makers. The findings presented in the previous chapter give complex answers to the question what motivated actors in two post communistic countries to introduce innovations and to change quality assurance mechanisms in national higher educational systems once these were being exposed to influences coming from Europe.

Generally, the findings show that single factors are important, but what is even more important is the interplay between them and the constraints and opportunities they create between them. Additionally, the presented findings show that not all factors are equally important.

Even though the two case countries shared significant commonalities in their educational, political, social and economic arrangements in the past, which can influence similarities in the pathways to more Europe aligned systems (Heinze & Knill, 2008), the study's process tracing approach showed two somewhat different stories after their independence. Nonetheless, some similarities are also notable. For example, both countries have introduced more changes in the legislature that arranged QA systems as European initiatives were gaining more clarity, showing that this is an important aspect to be taken into consideration when doing research on similar topics. In addition, in both countries the academic fella expressed doubts about the Bologna recommendations, and such opinions were responsible for a confrontation between HE actors at some point in the past 30 years.

Answers to both research questions are given in the following section, and they present factors that influenced actors' beliefs which led to legislature creation and modification.

The issue of the *legitimacy* of European initiatives was approached through two dimensions: (1) Whether European ideas were considered as valid by actors, and (2)

Whether the process of making the rules (i.e. European recommendations) was considered as appropriate.

Regarding the first dimension, in both case studies, the validity of QA underpinnings, as promoted in European documents was challenged by actors (mostly professors) at some point in the past 30 years. Such beliefs slowed down adoption ideas in the domestic context or rejection of some QA mechanisms. An example is the introduction of a QA system in the first Law on HE in the period between 1999 and 2004 in North Macedonia, which caused resistance among the academic community. These objections led to ambiguous provisions in the legislature regarding QA arrangements.

In Slovenia, most recently, study program reaccreditation was abolished, and some findings showed that it was partially due to challenging the idea of having a third entity (the QA agency) which will check the quality of HEIs' work. However, the challenged validity of European recommendations did not stop their adoption in in the national legislature. Going further, an increase in the clarity of European initiatives led to challenged legitimacy. Some voices among the academic community and QA agency in Slovenia in the most recent years, presented in this study, demonstrated such claims. This is because more detailed rules led to more obligations that should be followed by HEIs.

As QA is part of the broader Bologna package, which embodies other types of changes for the two case countries, challenging the legitimacy of the whole package can influence the implementation of QA reforms. That was the case with Slovenia in the period between 1999 and 2004, in times when a Bologna inspired reform was negotiated among HE actors. With respect to this issue, even though some legal changes regarding QA might go unchallenged because actors focus on other topics that they find more important (Vukasovic, 2013), actors might go back to these ideas at a later stage.

Regarding the second dimension, the study's findings suggest that most of the time, stakeholders did not question processes of making European recommendations and such attitudes stimulated the adoption of European ideas in the national contexts. In the Slovenian case, this is also related to their direct involvement in the decision-making



bodies starting from the late 1990s, which further helped actors to acknowledge and transfer ideas created at the European level to their country. However, as Slovenians increased their participation in European networks in the period between 2005 and nowadays, some doubts regarding the rule creation were expressed by actors in this context. Narratives are based on two main arguments: (1) obtaining membership status in such networks and organizations nowadays is bounded with stricter rules, and older members are more privileged in this sense as they had lower adjustment pressures over them; (2) rules are made by representatives coming from countries and universities with different traditions and underlining approaches towards higher education (i.e. Western European countries), and therefore European approaches do not comprehend regional specificities in the local environments.

Therefore, it can be concluded that (un)challenged legitimacy of European ideas has some influence on downloading processes in both countries. However, negative beliefs towards European ideas do not prevent decision makers from including such initiatives in the domestic legislature.

Going further, *identification with the EU* plays a very important role in the adoption of European ideas among HE actors. The most exemplary proof is Slovenia's strong drive to be part of the EU in both periods between 1991 and 2004, resulting indeed in membership in 2004. During this time, Slovenia introduced legislation which introduced QA mechanisms in HE, established QA bodies and started the first processes of accreditation and evaluation, and introduced QA innovations even before such recommendations were officially codified in the Bologna related documents. The latter was many times justified by the narrative that is part of the country's pathway to EU membership or the desire to be successful like Western European countries. Such findings suggest coercive influences (i.e. existence of role model figure) (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Even more, this mechanism is a powerful means for the acceptance of ideas, even in times when other factors suggest a slower adoption or even resistance towards European initiatives. This is illustrated by recent confrontations between the Slovenian QA agency and European networks regarding the creation and implementation of demands coming

from the European level (i.e. challenging the legitimacy of recommendations). The study's findings suggest future compliance with such rules, despite disagreements among some HE actors, driven by the desire to stay part of such entities.

On the other hand, a lack of identification or interest in EU initiatives can slow down adoption and implementation of such ideas. This is demonstrated by the findings in North Macedonia in all three periods. Narratives about the EU were rarely present among stakeholders in this study.

***The existence of change actors***, their beliefs and actions towards transfer and translation of European ideas in the domestic contexts has mixed influence as a factor in this study. Here we must look at specificities of the findings as a clear-cut answer would not be justified. As a reminder, I looked at three different groups of actors: participants in international epistemic communities, actors in advocacy networks bounded by similar beliefs and international experts in the domestic context.

For newly established countries that have no experience with `the new way of doing things`, participation *in epistemic communities* plays a very important role in the socialization process. Both Slovenia and North Macedonia took part in programs which facilitated their access in both periods between 1991 and 2004, and the findings suggest that actors that took part in such communities, worked actively on implementing some of the acknowledged approaches at home.

For example, EU aided mobility programs started the process of introducing QA processes in North Macedonia in 1998. These findings confirm previous findings presented in Vukasovic (2013), that in absence of governmental support and participation in European initiatives, in times of unstable conditions, such programs can offer opportunities for actors to acknowledge European trends. However, findings in this study offer new insights into the influence of this factor in Slovenia and North Macedonia. Firstly, it matters in which epistemic communities' domestic actors take part. Participation in networks and organizations that are closely related to the creation and dissemination of European recommendations (i.e. rulemaking) (such as ENQA) have a more significant

influence over domestic developments. These are the places where domestic actors mostly learn about European trends and get clear ideas of further tendencies.

Secondly, actors have more positive experiences in communities and networks that are populated by actors from the same or similar professions. In both countries, stakeholders which are mostly professors at public universities, go through smoother learning processes in networks such as the European University Association, a network of universities in which university leadership and management representatives hold regular meetings, rather than other organizations that support the implementation of European initiatives but are populated mainly by administrative workers. This is what DiMaggio & Powell (1983) defined as normative isomorphism (i.e. organizational change under influence of the professional standards).

Thirdly, in periods characterized by a strong confrontation between HE actors, participation in epistemic communities and programs that are implemented by them, can be used as a demonstration of prestige and a tool for strengthening the position of some actors, rather than learning tool. This is illustrated by the findings that show the impact of North Macedonia's participation in EUA's evaluation programs. Namely, the flagship university did 4 external evaluations through EUA's program, but reports from these evaluations show little or no progress in the domain of QA.

Fourthly, it matters which individuals participate in epistemic communities, and whether learned lessons are further shared with the rest of the domestic actors. On this point, North Macedonian representatives in QA networks in most recent years, expressed unease as they lacked knowledge and expertise which prevented them in understanding or participating in discussions. Even though the participation in epistemic communities in relation to QA is low in this country, actors that do take part rarely disseminate lessons or implement activities in the local environment. On the other hand, Slovenian actors that took part in epistemic communities in the early periods, later got involved in the domestic decision making and implementation processes, resulting in faster adoption of European trends in Slovenia, compared to North Macedonia.

The presence of vocal *advocacy networks* that consisted of broader sets of actors that support or oppose European initiatives was found to be an influential mechanism which affected the transfer of ideas between the European and domestic level. In both countries, this factor has been present at some point and influenced the developments in the QA sphere, but details matter. Such influences are notable from a number of perspectives.

Firstly, advocacy networks that are consisted of individuals that primarily come from the same nucleus (i.e. worked together at some point in a same institution or organizations and later took leading positions in different institutions and organizations) can be a powerful force for introducing changes. Slovenia's fast start and quick adoption of European initiatives in the domestic system in the first period between 1991 and 1998 is partially due to such a network, consisting of individuals coming from the flagship university.

Secondly, advocacy networks that are organized around shared ideological stances, or other non-formal institutions that share beliefs that oppose European initiatives can also be a prevailing mechanism. What both countries have in common is the establishment and maintenance of strong advocacy networks by right wing political parties in power that affected the developments in the QA systems in the latest period, starting from 2005. Such networks included Ministry of Education representatives, professors at public universities (and private ones in Slovenia), QA bodies' members and students organized through the student representative organization (with more notable presence in North Macedonia though).

The effects of these networks on the adoption and implementation of European initiatives have been similar both in Slovenia and North Macedonia, resulting in a delayed adoption or implementation of European recommendations.

In Slovenia, some European recommendations have been adopted in the legislature later because of the advocacy network's beliefs that collided with European ones in the earlier years of the period starting in 2005. In North Macedonia, European initiatives in the area of QA were adopted formally in Bologna inspired legislature, but certain details of legal provisions were contrasting European recommendations. In Slovenia, however, this

period lasted for 4 years, while in North Macedonia, it lasted almost 10 years. Such arrangements caused obstacles for countries' participation in European networks and involvement of actors in epistemic communities specializing in QA (even though the latter is more symptomatic for North Macedonia, rather than Slovenia, which already had some earlier access to other Bologna related groups).

Thirdly, even smaller advocacy networks (i.e. consisting of lower numbers of individuals or stakeholders) can have some influence on the adoption of European ideas in the domestic context. An example is the advocacy network that pushed and succeeded for the introduction of QA mechanisms in North Macedonia in the period between 1999 and 2004, despite general passivity or rejection among many stakeholders in the country. Another example is the appearance of a student movement, which in recent years in North Macedonia pushed for adoption of new legislature, which will follow European trends and will discharge QA mechanisms which are not promoted by the European initiatives.

Fourthly, participation in epistemic communities can inspire the formation and strengthening of advocacy networks at home. An example is the involvement of Slovenian HE actors in mobility programs which aimed at improving their knowledge about European initiatives, and QA systems, and their further involvement as strong promoters of European ideas later on at home in the first two observed periods (i.e. between 1991 and 2004). This is also indicative for some of North Macedonia's HE actors in the first decade after the independence, but not for later phases.

Fifthly, findings suggested the involvement of other actors in the HE dynamics in relation to European initiatives, such as religious organizations, that previous research has not taken into consideration. While this has not been a prevailing narrative among participants, these findings suggest the need for a further exploration of this issue.

The Involvement of *foreign experts and representatives from European organizations* has debatable effects and depends on the period and characteristics of the individuals coming in the domestic context. Firstly, in both countries foreign expertise has been consulted and present in all three time periods. In the first period, foreign expertise was present in

legislature drafting processes or in educative activities such as holding trainings for domestic actors. In both countries, socialization processes that included foreign experts, mostly professors at Western European universities, were focused on conventionalizing the idea of QA and assuring their colleagues that QA is beneficial for their work. During the second period, expertise was offered in relation to EU accession and modifying the system, and the socialization process was more related to coercive forces (i.e. presence of authority and alignment of the unit with organization that is perceived to be successful) (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The third period differs. In Slovenia, foreign expertise is mostly related to the fulfillment of European organizations' membership criteria. In North Macedonia, foreign expertise is still offered in the field of building the system and finding an adequate national model. On this point, deeper analysis of the way ideas were negotiated between domestic and foreign actors is needed, and further research should be done.

Secondly, affiliations matter. Slovenia hosted teams of observers and evaluators from the EU as part of its accession process. Findings suggest that recommendations about the QA system were also present in the EU's accession recommendations. This influenced a quicker reform of the QA system which was aligned with the European recommendations. This confirms previous findings that in the region, reforms in the HE system are found to be important step towards EU membership, but also demonstrates that the EU monitoring of the accession process indeed takes into consideration these aspects when evaluating a country's progress towards the union.

Thirdly, the nationality of experts and the region they come from can make a difference for domestic actors. In the region of interest there are still strong narratives of division between the East and the West, and they can influence domestic actors' approaches towards European initiatives once they are presented or supported by foreign experts coming from Western European countries.

On the one hand, when domestic actors have internal beliefs that they lack knowledge and/or they maintain a positive image of the EU as a successful model (i.e. desire to

identify with EU), lessons that are transferred by experts are taken for granted, and their involvement is cherished. This was an element present in both countries after the independence until 2004. On the other hand, as presented earlier, when European initiatives become more detailed and signals on what is the preferred model are stronger, domestic actors challenge the legitimacy of European demands more often. Findings suggest that this can also affect how domestic actors perceive foreign experts too. In this study, domestic actors in Slovenia expressed skepticism towards some of the international experts taking part of QA related activities.

While this hasn't been shown to influence developments in QA significantly, it is a notion that should be taken into consideration, especially in the future, as the engagement with European networks will intensify.

Fourthly, in the absence of governmental support, many QA developments of North Macedonia, such as educating professors about Bologna and QA activities, suggesting legislation aligned with European initiatives and aiding QA agency to become part of European networks, has been dependent on the expertise and financial support of international organizations such as the Open Society Foundation and the World Bank. This aligns with previous findings (Dolenec et al., 2014; Petkovska, 2011). This puts groups and individuals who work in such entities as important nodes in the socialization process of the domestic actors. On this point, I would suggest that future research should be done regarding the specific motives of these organizations in improving domestic systems.

Going further, findings also suggest mixed influences coming from the **political culture** factors among HE actors in the national context. Political culture, seen as either confrontational or consensus oriented in both case studies was mostly observed through the relations between stakeholders, rather than political parties with the right to vote in the assembly. This was because in the process tracing, vetoing provisions in assemblies in both countries regarding QA was not noted (Annex 2).

A strong consensus-oriented culture among HE actors in Slovenia in the first decade after the independence, based on mutual trust, led to a very early adoption of European

initiatives in the domestic context and the implementation of such reforms with no opposition from the HE community. However, as the European initiatives became more complex and detailed and new advocacy groups appeared, some stronger confrontational tendencies appeared in both countries in the period between 2005 and today. In Slovenia such confrontations regarding the independence status of the QA body led to later adoption of European initiatives.

On the other hand, in North Macedonia the study's findings confirm previous findings by other authors (i.e. Galevski (2014) and Pecakovska (2019)) which show strong animosity between HE actors in the past decade. What this thesis' findings add to the bulk of knowledge is that despite this, adoption of European initiatives in the domestic legislature hasn't been postponed nor threatened. This is because these confrontations have not spilled over in the decision-making bodies (i.e. the assembly), and legislature changes have been passed (almost) swiftly by the ruling political party. In this case, participants expressed mistrust in government, but also among other involved actors. This resulted in the rejection of ideas coming from the government by any means and a low level of communication between actors.

An additional characteristic of the political culture that was demonstrated by participants in North Macedonia in both periods between 1991 and 2004 is a high level of passivity among HE actors, including professors at public universities and Ministry representatives. Such occasions led to either delayed adoption or ambiguous provisions regarding European initiatives in the domestic legislature. On the other hand, Slovenia's HE actors have been increasingly involved and proactive in the introduction and development of QA systems at the national and European level. This is demonstrated not only by the higher number of individuals involved in European initiatives, but also through Slovenia's participation in the foundations of regional mobility networks and even the EHEA (as Bologna initial signatory country).

According to the findings, elements of political culture such as passivity and (mis)trust seem to play a somewhat important role in both countries, but future research should be performed regarding how culture and other informal practices affect developments.



Lastly, results in this study confront Vukasovic (2013) findings which suggest *legacies* as factor were not present when actors were making decisions on acceptance or refusal of some of the recommendations contained in the Bologna related documents. Namely, European trends that promoted evaluation of the quality of work of HEIs through reporting were perceived as an already existing mechanism for quality assessment in the Yugoslavian HE system. These legacies facilitated the introduction of evaluation QA mechanisms in the first legislature in 1993 in Slovenia. In North Macedonia they created oppositional attitudes towards QA innovations at the end of the 1990s leading to more ambiguous provisions in the first legislature.

Looking at the legacy of a strong involvement of government in quality control processes, and the general planning of higher education, this is still a prevailing rationale most of the time in both countries. Despite the adoption of European initiatives which promote a primary role and responsibility of HEIs in guaranteeing the quality in the legislature, in North Macedonia for most of the time between 1991 and nowadays, strong state involvement has dominated. In the Slovenian case, only in the last period (i.e. post 2005) such legacies are diminished in a legislative sense.

At the very end of this chapter, I would like to highlight a few other important aspects that were demonstrated in the findings. Firstly, even in federations in which republics share very similar societal arrangements, pre-independence contexts matter. Slovenia's stakeholders already thought about reforming their HE system and introducing policies from Western European countries almost a decade before Yugoslavia's dissolution in 1991. The adoption of such ideas in the first legislature after proclaiming independence was just a continuation of the process that started in Yugoslavia and therefore the independence point shouldn't be approached as a sole turning reference for this country. On the other hand, North Macedonian HE stakeholders did not initiate large scale activities related to reforming the HE sector when the country was still part of Yugoslavia in relation to Western European models. Therefore, European ideas arrived relatively later in this context (almost 10 years after Slovenia's advocacy network started analyzing QA models in HE in European countries). Differences in pre-independence outcomes can be related to Yugoslavian government limited control over HE, which granted relatively

large autonomy to republics to create HE policies in 1970s. On this point, future research would be useful to determine the different approaches republics took, despite being part of a joined federation.

Secondly, in Slovenia, learning processes regarding QA were accompanied by few financial instruments initiated by the government. Such circumstances supported the operationalization of legal provisions and stimulated HEIs to adjust to the innovations. In North Macedonia, financial support was coming from international donors. However, such projects haven't been ongoing. Therefore, many of the activities which were started through such projects, were not continued by domestic stakeholders once such projects ended. Following this, financial support is very important in legislature implementation.

Thirdly, results show that the political context, looking at which political party is in power, its ideology and inclinations regarding foreign politics in both countries played an important part in how European ideas were perceived and translated. In this sense, I would suggest that further research should offer deeper insight regarding how political parties, as important stakeholders in both contexts perceive, translate and implement European initiatives.

## Chapter 8 Conclusion

This thesis aimed to answer two main research questions.

The first one is related to the historical developments of QA systems in HE in two (post) transitional countries in SEE which differ in their candidate status. What this thesis presented is that it is beyond debatable that the EU, both through accession processes and through European organizations, has a strong influence over national higher education systems in SEE despite their candidate status. Developments in both countries, expressed through legislature formation and change, were mostly related to following European trends. On this point, in the past 30 years, Slovenia and North Macedonia introduced mechanisms for QA such as accreditation, internal and external evaluation, agencies for QA, and (to some extent) shifted the responsibility for good quality of education from the government to HEIs. However, looking at the details of the legislature changes, many of the amendments in both countries were related to maneuvering QA body responsibilities and decision-making bodies' membership criteria, sometimes even against what is promoted by European initiatives. This signals that governments and other HE actors in both countries found QA bodies as an important institution. This is mostly because of the power these bodies have over the processes of issuing accreditations for opening new HEIs and study programs.

Additionally, signals coming from European side become clearer and more intense, the number of legislature amendments is increasing, demonstrating that these countries are trying to catch up with the newest trends.

Second research question was related to the factors that influence domestication of European initiatives in national contexts. I explored 5 main factors that interfere with the processes of socializing and educating domestic actors about European trends, and further inspire them to introduce novelties in relation to QA. Through decision makers' prism, this thesis looked how (1) actors' perceptions about legitimacy of European initiatives (i.e. validity of demands and the ways rules are made), (2) their identification with the EU, (3) existence of change actors (i.e. individuals that take part of international

communities, self-organize in the national context or are coming from abroad offering expertise), (4) political culture (which can be consensus or confrontationally oriented) and its elements (such as trust among actors), and (5) legacies from the `old system` which embedded governmental responsibility over quality of education and lack of QA mechanisms in the present sense, affected legislature change.

What this thesis found is that despite the challenged legitimacy of European models and philosophies which (sometimes) contrast traditions in South Eastern European countries, stakeholders in higher education adopt these ideas in national legislatures.

One of the most important factors in these processes was the national actors' positive correlation with the EU and their desire to be part of it. On this point, in countries in which actors have strong drive to be part of the union and nourish positive image about it (i.e. Slovenia), changes in QA system are occurring earlier and legislature strictly follows European recommendations (most of the time). On the contrary, in countries in which actors are more passive regarding this question (i.e. North Macedonia), European initiatives are adopted with some delay and developments also include elements which are not characteristic for the European initiatives.

Another aspect that should be taken into consideration is the actors' linkage with international communities which create and maintain knowledge about European trends. For smaller countries that do not (substantially) participate in the making of those rules, these are the places where key actors socialize and internalize European practices. The presence of foreign experts in contexts where the main actors are still learning about the preferred model, can be of great importance, as these experts transfer ideas and raise morality in times of uncertainty and dubiousness. In countries (such as North Macedonia) in which there is absence of governmental support, international organizations and donors to take a leading role in implementing reforms in higher education (and in introducing quality assurance).

Political contexts play a very important role, and confrontations between stakeholders can cause (slower) adoption of European initiatives. But, despite this, European ideas are translated in national higher education laws in countries that aspire to be part of the EU

sooner or later. However, underneath the formal legal arrangements, countries might still hold on to the `old ways` of doing things, i.e. approaches inherited from previous (political) systems. Most notable are governments' aspirations to keep their strong position in planning and organizing higher education matters (including quality assurance), and the academic oligarchy to keep their HEIs' strong positions against other (new and/or private) HEIs.

Lastly, countries that were united in a political entity for almost half a century and had similar socio-political contexts, sharing many common features until today, demonstrate similarities in their approaches towards European initiatives. However, different factors support and perplex adoption of European ideas in different periods in each country. Therefore, it is important to take national specificities in consideration.

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# Annexes

## Annex 1 Higher education legislature changes regarding quality assurance in Slovenia and North Macedonia between 1991 and 2018

### Slovenia

Legal act/ Amendment	Law on Higher Education 67/1993	Amendment 63/2004	Amendment 96/2006	Amendment 64/2008
<b>Main changes</b>	<p>1. Accreditation (Article 32)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Publicly accredited program must be first approved by Senate of university</li> </ul> <p>2. Quality control (Article 80)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Quality is evaluated commission for quality higher education</li> <li>* The Commission must consult the opinion of students;</li> <li>* The Commission reports once a year to the Senates of HEIs, the Council for HE of the Republic of Slovenia and the Council of Science and Technology of the Republic of Slovenia</li> <li>*The report shall be made public</li> </ul> <p>3. HE council (Article 48, Article 49, Article 50)</p> <p>Responsibilities: Provides opinion on the fulfillment of conditions for the establishment of higher education institutions and the introduction of new programs; sets criteria for monitoring and evaluating quality and effectiveness of educational,</p>	<p>1. Accreditation procedures modifications (Article 32)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Process for program accreditation is initiated by the Senate of university, by proposition of Uni. Member</li> <li>* HE Council is re-accrediting every 7 years</li> <li>* HE Council should collaborate with experts and accreditation agencies from abroad</li> </ul> <p>2. Public Agency for HE (new Article 51a, new Article 51b, new Article 51c)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Responsibilities: does advisory work and external evaluation of HEI; encourages self-evaluation; organizes training of external evaluation commissions and self-evaluation groups of higher education institutions; collects and analyzes reports on self-evaluations of HEIs and external evaluations; publishes reports on external evaluations</li> </ul>	<p>1. Accreditation procedures' modification</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* performed by Accreditation senate within Council for HE</li> </ul> <p>2. External evaluation procedures modification (Article 12 changes Article 80)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Evaluation is done through the Evaluation senate at CHE (not through Council for evaluation of HE)</li> </ul> <p>3. Council for HE modifications (Article 4 changes Article 48; Article 5 changes Article 49)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Government establishes CHE as constitutive, accreditation and evaluation body</li> <li>* Responsibilities: Gives consent to study programs and changes in their mandatory components; at least every 7 years re accredits, takin in consideration findings from evaluation; organizes trainings for external</li> </ul>	<p>1. Council for HE modifications (Article 4 adds to Article 50)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Technical and administrative tasks are performed by Secretariat</li> <li>** Their work is arranged by the Council itself</li> <li>* A director is chosen by the president of CHE, after opening a public call</li> <li>* Financing of the council is provided from the budget of Slovenia as direct budgetary user</li> </ul>

	<p>scientific, research, artistic and professional work etc.</p> <p>* Established by Government</p> <p>* The President and eleven members are appointed by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia, by profession are university rectors and president of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts.</p> <p>*Mandate: 4 years</p>	<p>* Structure: Governing board (5 members, appointed by Government), director and Council for evaluation</p> <p>*Council for evaluation establishes criteria, gives opinions and prepares reports on external evaluation</p> <p>*Council for evaluation is consisted by 15 members (6 from HEIs, 1 member appointed vocational colleges; 2 members appointed by employers' organization; , 2 members appointed by Government; 4 members appointed by students)</p> <p>* Deans and rectors are prohibited from participating</p> <p>*Mandate: 6 years (professors), 2 years (students)</p> <p>3. Quality assurance (Article 36 changes Article 80)</p> <p>*QA is done trough self-evaluation and external evaluation</p>	<p>evaluation commissions members; conducts external evaluation; Collects and analyzes reports on self-evaluations and external evaluations; appoints commissions for external evaluation of higher education institutions and vocational colleges etc.</p> <p>4. Council for HE modifications (Article 6 changes Article 50)</p> <p>* 12 expert members from each field of study, 1 expert member proposed by vocational colleges, 4 members proposed by students, 3 members proposed by employees and employers</p> <p>* Appointed by Minister for education (</p> <p>* President is appointed by Minister for education</p> <p>* Mandate: 6 years (professors) 2 years (students)</p>	
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		<p>* Findings from both evaluations are taken in consideration when institutions are reaccredited</p> <p>* Based on the findings, ME can set a deadline for HEI to correct irregularities</p> <p>4. Council for HE modifications (Article 26 changes Article 49; Article 27 changes Article 50-<a href="#">4</a>)</p> <p>* Specifies responsibilities: Sets criteria for accreditation and reaccreditation; gives consent to study programs; give consent to study programs at least every seven years etc.</p> <p>* President and max. 15 other members are appointed by the Government (7 members proposed by HEIs; 3 members proposed by employers' organization; 3 members proposed by students; 3 members proposed by Government)</p> <p>* Mandate: 6 years (professors); 3 years (students)</p>	<p>5. Public Agency for HE modifications (Article 7 changes Article 51)</p> <p>* The Agency is abolished</p> <p>* External evaluation is performed by Evaluation Senate within the Council for HE</p> <p>6. (Article 13)</p> <p>* Organizational and administrative services the National Commission for the Quality of Higher Education are carried out by Ministry of Education</p>	
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<b>Legislature/ Amendment</b>	<b>Amendment 86/2009</b>	<b>Amendments 78/2011; 109/2012; 85/2014</b>	<b>Amendment 75/2016</b>
<b>Main changes</b>	<p>1. Evaluation procedures modifications (Article 17 changes Article 80)</p> <p>* External evaluation is performed by Agency for QA (further NAKVIS), instead of accreditation senate</p> <p>2. Council for HE modifications (Article 11 changes Article 48; Article 12 changes Article 49; Article 13 changes Article 50)</p> <p>* Government establishes CHE as consultative body</p> <p>* Administrative tasks are performed by ME</p> <p>* Consisted by 23 members (4 rectors; 1 member appointed by, SASA, 1 member appointed by NAKVIS; 1 member appointed by Agency for Engineering of Slovenia; 16 members appointed by government)</p> <p>* Mandate: 4 years; 2 years (students)</p> <p>* Senates are abolished (Article 14)</p> <p>3. Establishment of NAKVIS (Article 15 adds to Article 51)</p> <p>* NAKVIS is founded by Government as autonomous and independent body</p> <p>* Direct budgetary user</p> <p>*Responsibilities: Performs external evaluation; issues study program and institutional accreditations; takes</p>	<p>Introduction of Electronic system for higher education (register of HEIs and programs)</p> <p>Technical changes</p>	<p>1. Accreditation modifications</p> <p>* Shortened regular institutional re-accreditation from 7 to 5 years</p> <p>* Abolishing study program re-accreditation</p> <p>* HEI should inform NAKVIS for substantial changes in compulsory components in study programs (in <b>sp</b>)</p>

Table 4 Higher education legislature changes regarding quality assurance in Slovenia between 1991 and 2018



Legal act/ Amendment	First Law on Higher education 62/2000	Amendment 42/2003	Second Law on Higher Education 2008 35/2008	Amendment 115/2010	Amendment 17/2011
<b>Main changes</b>	<p>1. Introduction of evaluation (institutional and external) and accreditation (study program and institutional) as tool for QA (Article 23)</p> <p>2. Board for accreditation (Article 24, Article 25, Article 26, Article 27)</p> <p>* Consisted by 15 members (9 appointed by Interuniversity conference; 2 by MANU, 4 professors appointed by the Government)</p> <p>* Boards chooses president</p> <p>* Mandate: 4 years, 1 re-election</p> <p>* Can establish commissions; regulates matters with internal rulebook confirmed by the government; other</p>	<p>1. Prevents HEIs' deans and rectors from participating in QA bodies' decision-making bodies</p> <p>2. The organization of the Agency for evaluation is regulated by rulebook which should be approved by ME (new Article 30-a)</p>	<p>1. QA system is consisted by: Accreditation, evaluation, and other mechanisms (Article 68)</p> <p>2. Board for accreditation [ Article 69, Article 70, Article 71, Article 72]</p> <p>* Consisted by 15 members (8 members appointed by Inter University conference, 1 member from MANU, 6 members appointed by the Government (of which at least half are professors)</p> <p>*Mandate: 4 years, 1 re-election</p> <p>* Members can't be revoked, except in enlisted number of cases</p>	<p>1.Introduction of rank lists on national level as tool for QA (new Article 77-a)</p> <p>* Performed every 2 years</p> <p>*Includes all HEIs that are registered in official HEI register</p> <p>* Ranking is performed by legal entity chosen by ME, trough public procurement procedure</p> <p>*Finances are provided by the state budget</p> <p>* Results are should be published at ME's web page</p>	<p>1. Merging of Board for accreditation and Agency for evaluation in one body (Board for accreditation and evaluation of higher education) (Article 68, Article 70, Article 71, Article 72)</p> <p>*Consisted by 23 members (9 members appointed by Interuniversity conference, 2 members from MANU, 1 member appointed by employers association, 2 student member from interuniversity student parliament and 9 members appointed by the Government (at least 6 are professors))</p> <p>* Prevents HEIs' deans and rectors to be members</p> <p>* President is elected by the Government</p>

	<p>arrangements are subjected to agreement between the Board and the Government</p> <p>3. Agency for evaluation (Article 28, Article 29, Article 30)</p> <p>* 9 members (All elected by the Interuniversity conference)</p> <p>* Mandate: 4 years, 1 re-election</p> <p>* Regulates matters with internal rulebook proposed by the Interuniversity conference</p> <p>* Every 5 years assesses work of HEIs and proposes continuation or dismissal of the accreditation to the Board</p> <p>4. Internal evaluation (self-evaluation) (Article 31, Article 32)</p>	<p>* President is appointed by the government</p> <p>*Max. every 5 years, based on the reports from the Agency for evaluation, continues or revokes HEI's accreditation</p> <p>* Criteria for accreditation are arranged in Rulebook, brought by the Board, approved by the Government</p> <p>* Financed by state budget and its own means</p> <p>* Administrative matters are performed by Ministry services</p> <p>4. Agency for evaluation (Article 73, Article 74, Article 75, Article 76)</p>		<p>*Internal matters are arranged by rulebook, prepared by the Board, approved by the Government</p> <p>*Financing is done through state budget and own means</p> <p>* Administrative tasks are performed by ME</p> <p>2. Institutional evaluation (self-evaluation) (Article 77)</p> <p>* Content, form and approaches in using State Electronic system for self-evaluation are prescribed by the Minister for Education</p> <p>*Results should be published at HEI's web page</p>
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	<p>* Performed by university/faculty commission consisted by professors and students which are not part of the university senate</p>	<p>* Evaluation is performed in a form of external evaluation, self-evaluation and the system of assessment of quality of the academic cadres</p> <p>* External evaluation is performed by commissions established by the Agency, consisted by professors from internationally recognized universities</p> <p>* Work is arranged by rulebook, drafted by Rectors' conference, adopted by the Agency</p> <p>* Evaluation should be performed by following ESGs and other recommendations proposed by European and international organizations</p>		
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		<p>* Agency is consisted by 11 members (5 members appointed by Interuniversity Conference, 4 members appointed by the Government, 1 member appointed by employers' association, 1 student member from interuniversity student parliament)</p> <p>* Mandate: 4 years, 1 re-election</p> <p>* President elected by the Government</p> <p>* Does evaluation of HEI every 5 years</p> <p>* Internal matters should be arranged by internal rulebook, approved by the Minister for education</p> <p>5. Internal evaluation (self-evaluation) (Article 77)</p>		
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		<p>* University/Each faculty establish self-evaluation commission</p> <p>* Senate/faculty decision making body elects the members</p> <p>Mandate: 4 years (professors), 2 years (students)</p> <p>* Each university adopts own guidelines for self-evaluation</p> <p>* Performed every 3 years</p>			

<b>Legislature/ Amendments</b>	<b>Amendment 15/2013</b>	<b>Amendment 10/2015</b>	<b>Amendments 20/2015; 98/2015; 127/2016</b>	<b>Third Law on Higher Education 82/2018</b>
<b>Main changes</b>	<p>1. Establishment of data base (new Article 77-b)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Contains quality indicators</li> <li>* ME should establish the data base</li> <li>* HEIs should submit data to ME, which will be further disseminated in the data base</li> <li>* HEIs should work consult and work with OAEVO regarding data submission</li> </ul> <p>2. Changes in conditions for being member of OAEVO (Article 70, 71, 72)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* OAEVO takes responsibilities regarding evaluation according to rulebook which is confirmed by Minister for education</li> </ul>	<p>1. Introduction of state exam as tool for QA (new Article 69-a)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Implemented by OAEVO</li> <li>* Includes students in first and second cycle of studies</li> <li>* Is implemented every two years</li> <li>* Contains multiple choice questions</li> <li>* State exam questions are public. Students can consult them from public database</li> <li>* Performance of state exam is live streamed at ME's web page</li> <li>* In case of failure, student's obliged to pay fine ranging from 1000 to 12 000 denars</li> <li>* Successful passing of state exam is a condition for continuation of studies</li> </ul>	<p>1. Postponing the implementation of state exam (Article 69-a)</p> <p>2. Postponing rearrangement of the work of OAEVO according to Amendment 10/2015</p>	<p>1. System of QA includes (Article 40):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Accreditation, Evaluation</li> <li>Other activities and mechanisms</li> </ul> <p>2. Maintenance of system for QA is done through the National council for HE and Agency for quality of HE (Article 40)</p> <p>3. Agency for quality of HE (Article 45, Article 46)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Organs of the Agency are: Board for accreditation, Board for evaluation and Director of the Agency</li> <li>* Agency has administrative service which does all the logistical tasks (and works according to rules prescribed in rulebook brought by the Director of the Agency)</li> </ul>

		<p>2. Changes in OAEVO</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Members are chosen through public announcement, confirmed by the Assembly</li> <li>* 11 members (3 professors from firstly ranked HEI, 2 professors secondly ranked HEI, 1 professor from thirdly ranked HEI, 1 professor from highest ranked private HEI, 2 professors who are foreign citizens teaching at one of the 500 highest ranked HEI at Shanghai ranking list, 2 high profile academics)</li> <li>* Board's members' monthly salaries equal 7 and a half monthly average salaries</li> <li>* 5 members should be full time employed in the board, not performing other activities</li> <li>* Prohibits deans and rectors from being members in the decision-making body</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Agency is independent body, financed by state funds and own means</li> <li>* The Agency has its own budgetary account</li> <li>4. Board for accreditation of HE (Article 47, Article 48, Article 49)</li> <li>* 15 members (6 members appointed by Interuniversity Conference, 6 members appointed by Government (holding professor position), 1 member appointed by employers' organization, 1 member appointed by MANU, 1 student member appointed by Interuniversity conference)</li> <li>* Deans and rectors of HEIs are prohibited from participation</li> <li>* Mandate: 4 years (for professors), 2 years (for students), no re-election</li> <li>* Responsibilities:</li> </ul>
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		<p>* President of OAEVO is chosen by the members of OAEVO</p> <p>* Mandate: 4 years, 1 re-election</p> <p>* Administrative tasks are performed by general secretary, 5 secretaries and 3 vice general secretaries</p> <p>* Administrative workers are appointed by the Assembly of Macedonia, chosen through public open call</p> <p>* General secretary monthly salary equals 5 average monthly salaries, while secretaries' salaries equal 4 average monthly salaries</p> <p>* Salary budget for members of the Board and administrative workers are covered through state budget</p> <p>* OAEVO should submit report for its work to the Assembly annually</p>	<p>Accredits HE institutions (both private and public); Accredits study programs; Re-accredits study programs every 5 years; Accredits PhD mentors; Revokes accreditations based on reports from external evaluation; Creates database for accredited institutions and programs etc.</p> <p>* Internal working is arranged by rulebook brought by the Board</p> <p>* President of the Board is chosen by the members of the Board</p> <p>* The Government calculates the costs for accreditation</p> <p>* Government calculates salaries of Board's members, based on their meetings' presence and monthly performance</p> <p>5. Evaluation procedures (Article 50, Article 51)</p>
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		<p>* Work of OAEVO should be aligned with ESGs</p>	<p>* Evaluation system is consisted by external and internal (self) evaluation</p> <p>* External evaluation is performed by commissions consisted by professors from universities coming from countries which are members of ENQA</p> <p>* Evaluation standards should be aligned with ESGs and other ENQA's recommendations</p> <p>6. Board for evaluation of HE (Article 52, Article 53, Article 54)</p> <p>* 15 members (6 members appointed by Interuniversity conference; 6 members appointed by Government (holding professor's status); 1 member appointed by employers' organization; 1 member appointed by MANU; 1 student member appointed by</p>
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Interuniversity conference)	* Deans and rectors are prohibited from being elected in the decision-making body	*Mandate: 4 years (professors), 2 years (students), no re-election	* Responsibilities: Evaluates HEIs work every 5 years; Proposes continuation or revocation of accreditation based on evaluation reports etc.	* Board is obliged to report to the Ministry every 6 months	* Board members choose Board's president	* Government calculates salaries of Board's members, based on their meetings' presence and monthly performance																																																																																																																																																																						

<p>6. Internal evaluation (Self-evaluation) (Article 55)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Performed by commission selected by the Senate/faculty board</li> <li>* Performed at least every 3 years</li> </ul>	<p>7. Director of the Agency for quality of HE (Article 56, Article 57)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Elected by the Assembly of N. Macedonia</li> <li>* Selection of candidates is done through open call</li> <li>* Mandate: 4 years, 1 re-election</li> <li>* Responsibilities: Represents the Agency; leads the administrative team; is responsible for the legality of work of the Agency etc.</li> </ul>
<p>8. Rank lists (Article 58)</p>	

Table 5 Higher education legislature changes regarding quality assurance in North Macedonia between 1991 and 2018

*Annex 2 Activities related to quality assurance in Slovenia and North Macedonia between 1991 and 2018*

Slovenia

<b>Year</b>	<b>Process</b>
<b>1985 (approx.)-1993 (approx.)</b>	Drafting new legislature about HE leaded by Center for development of university at University of Ljubljana Project for exploring QA mechanisms in HE in other European countries
<b>1991</b>	Slovenia proclaims independence from Yugoslavia
<b>1992</b>	Slovenia joins TEMPUS program
<b>1993</b>	Adoption of Law on Higher Education Founding member of CEEPUS
<b>1994</b>	Council for HE (QA body) starts operating First accreditations and evaluations processes start
<b>1996</b>	White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia National Commission for QA starts operating Two Slovenian universities participate in EUA's Institutional Evaluation Pilot program
<b>1999</b>	Signatory country of Bologna declaration Slovenia joins Socrates-Erasmus program Assembly opens discussion about Higher Education Master Plan
<b>2001</b>	MA launches a project for creating models and criteria for internal evaluation of HEIS (lasts until 2006)
<b>2002</b>	Adoption of Higher Education Master plan
<b>2004</b>	Slovenia joins the European union Adoption of Bologna related amendments to Law on Higher Education

	Adoption of criteria for accreditations and external evaluations of higher education institutions and study programs
<b>2006</b>	Adoption of amendments which return status of Council of HE as governmental body
<b>2008</b>	Adoption of amendments which promote establishment of independent National Agency for QA in HE (NAKVIS)
<b>2010</b>	NAKVIS starts operating  Adoption of National Higher Educational Program 2011-2020  Changes of criteria for accreditations and external evaluations of higher education institutions and study programs
<b>2011</b>	White paper on Education in Republic of Slovenia  One HEI is externally evaluated by EUA
<b>2012</b>	ME launches project for strengthening internal evaluation processes at HEIs
<b>2013</b>	NAKVIS joins European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR)  NAKVIS joins European Consortium for Higher Education Accreditation (ECA)  One HEI is externally evaluated by EUA
<b>2014</b>	NAKVIS obtains full membership status in International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)  Changes of criteria for accreditations and external evaluations of higher education institutions and study programs
<b>2015</b>	NAKVIS becomes part of ENQA  Four HEIs are externally evaluated by EUA
<b>2016</b>	Adoption of amendments which abolish study program re-accreditation
<b>2017</b>	Changes of criteria for accreditations and external evaluations of higher education institutions and study programs

<b>2018</b>	NAKVIS is externally reviewed by ENQA and extends membership in ENQA for 5 more years
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Table 6 Activities related to quality assurance in Slovenia between 1991 and 2018

### North Macedonia

<b>Year</b>	<b>Process</b>
<b>1991</b>	N. Macedonia proclaims independence
<b>1996</b>	N. Macedonia joins TEMPUS program
<b>1998</b>	Start of a project for development of internal evaluation mechanisms at HEIs
<b>2000</b>	Adoption of first Law on Higher Education
<b>2002</b>	Agency for accreditation adopts Rulebook for assurance and assessment of quality of HEIs and academic cadres in Republic of Macedonia
<b>2003</b>	Adoption of Bologna declaration  Open Society Foundation launches project for aiding QA processes at public HEIs  Two public HEIs are externally evaluated by EUA
<b>2005</b>	EU grants candidate status to N.Macedonia  Adoption of National program for education 2005-2015
<b>2008</b>	Adoption of second Law for Higher Education
<b>2010</b>	Adoption of amendments which introduce rank lists as QA tool
<b>2011</b>	Adoption of amendments which promote merging of two QA bodies in one (OAEVO)  One public university is externally evaluated by EUA
<b>2012</b>	OAEVO adopts Rulebook arranging accreditation and evaluation procedures
<b>2013</b>	World Bank launches a project for improving QA in higher education (lasts until 2019)

<b>2014</b>	One public university goes through EUA's external evaluation program
<b>2015</b>	Adoption of amendments which introduce state exam as tool for QA One public university is externally evaluated by EUA
<b>2017</b>	Three public universities go through EUA's external evaluation program
<b>2018</b>	Adoption of third Law on Higher Education Adoption of National Strategy for Education 2018-2015 One private university is externally evaluated by EUA

*Table 7 Activities related to quality assurance in North Macedonia between 1991 and 2018*

### Annex 3 Interviewees codes

#### Slovenia

<b>Interview no.</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Period</b>
Interview no. 12	Former QA body leadership; Consultant in QA related activities	2005 onwards
Interview no. 13	Former Ministry of education leadership	1991-1998; 1998-2004
Interview no. 14	Former flagship university leadership	2005 onwards
Interview no. 15	QA body member	2005 onwards
Interview no. 16	QA body member; Former flagship university leadership	1991-1998; 1998-2004; 2005 onwards
Interview no. 17	Consultant in QA related activities	2005 onwards
Interview no. 18	Flagship university administrative staff	2005 onwards
Interview no. 19	Former Ministry of education leadership; Consultant in QA related activities	1998-2004; 2005 onwards
Interview no. 20		
Interview no. 21	Ministry of education administrative staff	1991-1998; 1998-2004; 2005 onwards
Interview no. 22	QA body administrative staff	1998-2004; 2005 onwards
Interview no. 23	Former Ministry of education leadership; Consultant in QA related activities	1991-1998; 1998-2004; 2005 onwards
Interview no. 24	QA body administrative staff	2005 onwards



North Macedonia

<b>Interview no.</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Period</b>
Interview no. 1	Consultant in QA related activities	2005 onwards
Interview no. 2	QA body member	2005 onwards
Interview no. 3	Former flagship university leadership	1991-1998; 1999-2004
Interview no. 4	QA body leadership member	2005 onwards
Interview no. 5	Former Ministry of education leadership	1991-1998; 1999-2004; 2005 onwards
Interview no. 6	Consultant in QA related activities	2005 onwards
Interview no. 7	Consultant in QA related activities	2005 onwards
Interview no. 8	Consultant in QA related activities	1991-1998; 1999-2004; 2005 onwards
Interview no. 9	Former flagship university leadership; Consultant in QA related activities	1991-1998; 1999-2004; 2005 onwards
Interview no. 10	Ministry of Education Administrative staff	2005 onwards
Interview no. 11	Flagship university leadership	2005 onwards
Interview no. 25	Flagship university leadership	2005 onwards