# Albanian Higher Education Quality Assurance Reforms and Policy Convergence within the European Higher Education Area (2014-2019)

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*Abstract: This article focuses on the quality assurance reforms that higher education in Albania has undertaken during the timeframe 2014-2019 in regard to implementing the standards and guidelines of the European Higher Education Area. Albania is a candidate country and it has been making a continuous effort to become a member of the EU; thus, Europeanization is been used as a theoretical framework to analyse policy changes. The research aims to analyse what Europeanization approach the domestic reforms have pursued, based on the mechanisms, veto points and the outcomes of the Europeanization process. Moreover, through empirical findings on the Albanian quality assurance system, it attempts to define the extent to which these reforms comply with European standards and guidelines (ESG). Europeanization of the educational policies is guided by causal mechanisms with non-binding stimuli; thus, socialization, much more in the terms of instrumental learning, is defined as the main mechanism of the Europeanization approach of Albanian quality assurance. The policy convergence is mostly happening as an internalization of the rules regarding changing the policy means, not the policy ends, which produces only a formal absorption of ESG and not a substantial transformation of the system.*

*Keywords: Europeanization, higher education policy, quality assurance, EHEA, candidate country, Albania*

### Introduction

Higher education system in Albania has already introduced a programme of quality assurance, a set of procedures, units, and agencies that will take responsibility to monitor and assess the quality of teaching and learning in each of the country's higher education institutions (HEIs). The goal is to converge with the standards and guidelines of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Since the country has long been in a continuous effort to become a member of the EU, Europeanization of the higher education field is been considered a step forward in this process and will certainly contribute as a positive achievement toward this aspiration.

It is, however, a relevant case for theoretical considerations as well. Albania is a candidate country and its educational policy has not yet achieved harmonization

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with the acquis communautaire, yet in a practical sense, the country is quite prone to be Europeanized via other mechanisms. In this paper, based on the theoretical consideration of the mechanisms of Europeanization in this policy area, we aim to investigate the Europeanization approach that Albania has pursued in the last five years (2014-2019) in the area of quality assurance reforms. The analysis will include the preliminary report on the reform of higher education from 2014, by the Albanian government, the adoption of the law on higher education in 2015, the institutional accreditation of public and private universities during 2017, and the start of the accreditation process for study programmes in 2018.

This paper seeks to answer to the following research questions:

Q1: In the context of reforms undertaken during 2014-2019, to what extent do the quality assurance policies in Albanian higher education comply with ESG?

Q2: Is there Europeanization going on and if so, what are the mechanisms, veto points and outcomes of this process?

The analysis will focus on the efforts made to properly meet the standards of quality assurance (QA) in higher education institutions. Additionally, it will describe how much has been achieved in the higher education system in terms of quality assurance and will discuss what kind of policy co-ordination approach applies to this case. Thus, the first part of the article will elaborate on the Europeanization approach, as a theoretical framework, which we will refer to in the following discussion of reforms undertaken by Albania with regard to the implementation and achievement of quality assurance in higher education.

In the next section, we will review the general context of how the quality assurance system has been developed and has been functioning within the EHEA, mentioning as well the recent standards and guidelines of QA in the EHEA. The next section will discuss the theoretical perspective of Europeanization as an explanation of domestic changes in higher education policy. In addition to explaining the concept, the theoretical analysis will investigate the mechanisms and outcomes of the process of Europeanization in this specific realm. Next, we will provide an analysis of the actual situation of QA in Albanian higher education, explaining the reforms undertaken in recent years. The last part will comprise a discussion of the empirical findings with reference to the mechanisms and outcomes of Europeanization, as well as concluding remarks based on this analysis.

### General European and Albanian context

In the Bologna Declaration of 1999, one of the six priorities of cooperation is the 'promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies'[2]. The quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Ministers committed themselves to supporting further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European levels. They stressed the

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[2] EHEA. Ministerial Conference Bologna. (1999). "Bologna Declaration". Retrieved from http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/Ministerial_conferences/02/8/1999_Bologna_Declaration_English_553028.pdf

need to develop shared criteria and methodologies on quality assurance[3]. However, the topic of quality assurance (QA) was a key factor to enhance the cooperation for EHEA before the Bologna Declaration was signed. In 1998, the European Council published a 'Recommendation on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education'[4], which stated that QA approaches (where available) had already some common points, e.g. an independent QA agency, a fit-for-purpose principle and a self-evaluation component[5]. Promotion of European cooperation on QA was one of the original Bologna action lines, further elaborated by the Prague Communiqué calling upon ENQA, national QA agencies and HEIs to 'collaborate in establishing a common framework of reference'[6]. In 2015, the Ministerial Conference in Yerevan adopted the revised Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) to guide institutions of higher education within the EHEA in implementing quality assurance standards.

At the European level, another realm of analysis and discussion has been promoted in higher education (HE). 'In principle any higher education system consists of three organizational levels, i.e. the basic academic units, the central institutional administration and leadership, and the system level governance arrangements and actors, or in other words, the understructure, middle structure and superstructure. In the case of European higher education an additional layer has been emerging that can be referred to as the suprastructure composed of all agencies and actors, including those representing national authorities, aimed at creating unity that links together the European higher education systems.'[7]

European standards and guidelines (ESG) of quality assurance within the EHEA are an example of this suprastructure as a new organizational level in HE. However, before the ESG were adopted, the Communiqué of Berlin in 2003 had pointed out that 'national quality assurance systems, as they have the primary responsibility for QA in higher education, should include:

- A definition of the responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved.

- Evaluation of programmes or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results.

- A system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures.

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[3] Berlin Communiqué. (2003, September). „Realising the European higher education area" in *Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for higher education in Berlin on 19 September 2003*. http://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/2003_Berlin_Communique_English_577284.pdf

[4] EU Council. (1998). "Council Recommendation of 24 September 1998 on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education". https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/9ee49649-dc73-446d-9e39-cce2d6d231ce

[5] Vukasovic, M. (2013). „Change of higher education in response to European pressures: conceptualization and operationalization of Europeanization of higher education", in *Higher education*, 66(3), 311-324. Retrieved from https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-012-9606-4

[6] *Ibidem*.

[7] Elken, M., Gornitzka, Å., Maassen, P., & Vukasovic, M. (2011). „European integration and the transformation of higher education", in Oslo: University of Oslo, 57. Retrieved from https://www.uv.uio.no/iped/forskning/prosjekter/eie-utd2020forprosjekt/HEIK-Utd2020-Part1-EI_and_transformation_of_HE.pdf p.8

- International participation, cooperation and networking'[8].

Later, in 2005, the Ministers responsible for higher education adopted the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. This step was undertaken at the proposal and with the cooperation of the so-called E4 Group consisting of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Students' Union (ESU), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the European University Association (EUA). Although in the intervening years considerable progress was made in quality assurance in line with the Bologna requirements, in 2012 the E4 Group saw the necessity of revising the ESG of 2005. This was due to the changing context through the years and with the aim of improving the clarity, applicability and usefulness of the ESG, including the scope of standards and guidelines. Thus, in May 2015 a new ESG for the Quality Assurance in the EHEA was adopted.

**Table no. 1 European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance 2015[9]**

| Standards for Internal Quality Assurance | Standards for External Quality Assurance | Standards for Quality Assurance Agencies |
|---|---|---|
| Policy for quality assurance | Consideration of internal quality assurance | Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance |
| Design and approval of programmes | Designing methodologies fit for purpose | Official status |
| Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment | Implementing processes | Independence |
| Student admission, progression, recognition and certification | Peer-review experts | Thematic analysis |
| Teaching staff | Criteria for outcomes | Resources |
| Learning resources and student support | Reporting | Internal quality assurance and professional conduct |
| Information management | Complaints and appeals | Cyclical external review of agencies |
| Public information | | |
| Ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes | | |
| Cyclical external quality assurance | | |

[8] Berlin Communiqué. (2003, September). „Realising the European higher education area" in *Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for higher education in Berlin on 19 September 2003*. http://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/2003_Berlin_Communique_English_577284.pdf

[9] *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*. (2015). Brussels, Belgium. Retrieved from https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf

Promoting and implementing quality assurance in higher education has been discussed and put into action by several actors in Albanian higher education, such as institutions of higher education themselves, the national agency for quality assurance, and decision-making authorities as well. Albania has been part of the EHEA since 2003, when it became a full member of the Bologna Process. EHEA's standards, including the standards of quality assurance, have begun to be implemented in Albanian public and private universities, and the efforts to achieve them have brought into the system several reforms.

Higher education in Albania has been in a state of continuous reform since the 1990s. Most of the time, the reforms have been instituted by the governing majorities of the country over the years. This shows that the reform of HE has more to do with political will and the nature of experimental legislation, than with a clear, efficient and long-term vision for higher education. From 1994 to 2015, four organic laws of higher education have been enacted, with the addition of several amendments[10]. The latest series of reforms in HE began in January 2014, one year after a new party took power, with a new law adopted for HE and scientific research in 2015. Nevertheless, scholars argue that 'the political fragmentation of these societies (such as Albania), in turn, affects the sustainability of compliance decisions and carries the risk of non-implementation and even the reversal of some reforms when a switch of the ruling elites occurs'[11].

Officially, Albania is participating in the process and Europeanization of the standards should take place, but domestic concerns sometimes play the role of veto points hampering or compromising the process of Europeanization, which remains somewhat shallow[12].

### Europeanization of higher education policy

Europeanization as a concept and theoretical framework has become fashionable in discussing the impact of EU policies on the domestic changes in a country. In its substantive meaning, Europeanization is defined as 'a process of structural change, variously affecting actors and institutions, ideas and interests. Minimally, "Europeanization" involves a response to the policies of the European Union (EU)'[13]. However, Europeanization does not put into action the same mechanism in all policy areas of governing. This is related to the power of the EU being more binding in some policy areas and less in others. We can mention here the classical division of supranational and intergovernmental policies that EU, considering its power to intervene and impose on national policies, undertakes in its whole decision-making structure. Education is a

[10] Krasniqi, A. (2018). *Reform in higher edcuation 2015-2018: Innovations and problems*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326305365_REFORMA_NE_ARSIMIN_E_LARTE_2015-2018_RISITE_DHE_PROBLEMATIKAT

[11] Peshkopia, R. (2014). *Conditioning Democratization: Institutional Reforms and EU Membership Conditionality in Albania and Macedonia*. Anthem Press, p. 12.

[12] Börzel, T. A. (2011). *When Europeanization hits limited statehood: The Western Balkans as a test case for the transformative power of Europe*. Retrieved from http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/kfgeu/kfgwp/wpseries/WorkingPaperKFG_30.pdf

[13] Radaelli, C. M., & Featherstone, K. (2003). *The Politics of Europeanization*. Oxford: OUP Oxford, p. 3. Retrieved from https://eds-a-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.muni.cz/eds/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzI1Nzc4MF9fQU41?sid=adf620bc-a519-4997-95d9-afd8028308b0@pdc-v-sessmgr02&vid=1&format=EB

policy area, which remains primarily national in control and orientation, thus European co-operation in education policy has attracted relatively little attention from a policy perspective[14]. Nevertheless, contemporary scientific research on this theme includes a broad discussion regarding the impact of Europeanization through other mechanisms, softer in their influence, but with the intent to achieve the same outcome of changing national policies in the image of EU framework policies. Radaelli refers to such an impact as horizontal Europeanization through soft framing mechanisms strengthening the new governance architectures, which create the preconditions for the diffusion of shared ideas and policy paradigms[15]. Most of the time they are called causal mechanisms and are 'conceptualized as "entities" and the "activities", in which they engage and which produce particular types of change'[16]. The open method of coordination (OMC) is an instrument designed to achieve this soft Europeanization, and is often defined by the following characteristics: EU guidelines combined with specific timetables and action to be undertaken at the national or regional level; benchmarking and sharing of best practices; qualitative and, when appropriate, quantitative indicators; period monitoring, evaluation, and peer review organized as mutual learning processes[17].

EHEA, since its beginnings, is an area where all the member countries enhance their collaboration through transnational communication in the field of higher education. It is an area of cooperation and mutual interaction and the use of non-binding mechanisms in fulfilling the standards. EHEA is not a genuine EU initiative. Since in its more expanded membership there are countries that are not EU members; however, the European Commission being a full member of BFUG (the Bologna Follow-Up Group) indicates that the Bologna Process is not a separate process, but has become an important part of EU policy. Moreover, the Bologna Process is to an extent similar to the EU's Lisbon Strategy in terms of its reliance on OMC-like mechanisms[18].

In this respect, the research on Europeanization lays out three fundamental questions: to what extent the EU influences national-level policy, how this occurs (mechanisms), and what types of change actually occur (outcomes)[19]. According to Borzel and Risse, the domestic impact of Europeanization can be analysed in all three different dimensions: policy, polity and politics[20]. Analysing the impact on the

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[14] Bache, I. (2006). „The Europeanization of higher education: Markets, politics or learning?" in *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 44(2), pp. 231-248. Retrieved from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2006.00621.x

[15] Radaelli, C. M., & Featherstone, K. (2003). *The Politics of Europeanization*. Oxford: OUP Oxford, p. 43. Retrieved from https://eds-a-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.muni.cz/eds/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzI1Nzc4MF9fQU41?sid=adf620bc-a519-4997-95d9-afd8028308b0@pdc-v-sessmgr02&vid=1&format=EB.

[16] Moumoutzis, K., & Zartaloudis, S. (2016). „Europeanization mechanisms and process tracing: A template for empirical research" in *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 54(2), pp. 337-352. Retrieved from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/jcms.12294

[17] Radaelli, C. M., & Featherstone, K. (2003). *The Politics of Europeanization*. Oxford: OUP Oxford, p. 43. Retrieved from https://eds-a-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.muni.cz/eds/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzI1Nzc4MF9fQU41?sid=adf620bc-a519-4997-95d9-afd8028308b0@pdc-v-sessmgr02&vid=1&format=EB.

[18] Elken, M., Gornitzka, Å., Maassen, P., & Vukasovic, M. (2011). „European integration and the transformation of higher education" in *Oslo: University of Oslo*, 57, p. 6. Retrieved from https://www.uv.uio.no/iped/forskning/prosjekter/eie-utd2020forprosjekt/HEIK-Utd2020-Part1-EI_and_transformation_of_HE.pdf.

[19] Ladrech, R. (2010). *Europeanization and national politics*. Palgrave Macmillan. p. 22

[20] Börzel, T. A., & Risse, T. (2003). „Conceptualizing the domestic impact of Europe" in *The politics of Europeanization*, pp. 57-80. Retrieved from https://gs.uni.wroc.pl/files/BOERZEL%20-%20RISSE%20Conceptualizing%20the%20domestic%20impact%20of%20Europe.pdf

policy dimension involves discussion about standards, instruments, problem-solving approaches, and policy narratives and discourses.

### Mechanisms of Europeanization in the sphere of non-binding measures

Unlike other Europeanization processes, the Bologna Process, and the EHEA it created, is based on 'soft' governance mechanisms, as national policymakers voluntarily set common standards as benchmarks for national reforms. Several authors have elaborated on the mechanisms that are put into action by policy-making actors in order to achieve Europeanization. When the national sensitivities are high in specific issues such as education, then 'socialization' and 'learning' have been identified as the primary mechanism of Europeanization. Martina Vukasovic distinguishes two different perspectives in the Europeanization of higher education: Europeanization through external incentives, and Europeanization through social learning. 'Within the external incentives perspective the overall hypothesis adapted for higher education states that a higher education entity will adopt European rules if, from its own point of view, the benefits of rewards exceed adoption costs. This implies that the rules should be clear and should be set as conditions for benefits: the larger the benefits are and the faster they can be expected to be realized, the more likely the institutionalization of rules will be. Benefits can be in the form of European funding, access to cooperation partners, or prestige connected with participation in networks'[21]. Europeanization through social learning 'puts focus on actors being socialized to accept the appropriateness of European rules, or to be induced into the norms and rules of a given community. The rules need to be seen as legitimate by relevant actors, either in terms of their content or in terms of the process through which they were developed. The legitimacy of content is connected to stronger resonance with existing entity rules. Finally, Europeanization in this perspective is facilitated by increasing internationalization of the sector, in terms of participation of foreign experts in the decision-making processes or reference to foreign models.'[22].

In the same line of discussion, Moumoutzis and Zartaloudis present a more detailed view of the causal mechanisms of Europeanization with non-binding stimuli. They refer to four different explanations: 1) instrumental learning, 2) social learning, 3) naming and shaming, and 4) peer pressure[23]. The table below presents each of their explanations:

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[21] Vukasovic, M. (2013). „Change of higher education in response to European pressures: conceptualization and operationalization of Europeanization of higher education" in *Higher education*, 66(3), pp. 311-324. Retrieved from https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-012-9606-4

[22] *Ibidem*.

[23] Moumoutzis, K., & Zartaloudis, S. (2016). „Europeanization mechanisms and process tracing: A template for empirical research" in *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 54(2), pp. 337-352. Retrieved from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/jcms.12294

**Table no. 2 Europeanization causal mechanisms with non-binding stimuli**

| Instrumental learning | Social learning | Naming and shaming | Peer pressure |
|---|---|---|---|
| 'Adaptive' learning which results in a change of policy means | 'Reflexive' learning which results in a change of policy ends | Pursue policy change to avoid the 'informal sanction' of other actors | Political determination of community members to use it against recalcitrant countries |
| Accessing new information related to the cost-benefit calculation of policy instruments | Accessing new information related to the policy objectives | Publicity, embarrassment of under-performing in policy change and risk of reputational losses make it function effectively | Policy change according to the logic of appropriateness |

*Source: own elaboration based on the analysis of Moumoutzis & Zartaloudis[24]*

### Outcomes of Europeanization

In addition to the questions 'what is Europeanized?' and 'in what manner?', it is important to discuss to what extent does Europeanization make a difference. The first question attempts to analyse the domains in which the effects of the Europeanization process are supposed to materialize. The second is more concerned with explaining the activities (mechanisms) that are undertaken to implement the process. The last question tries to show how Europeanization takes effect and the changes it makes to national policy. According to Borzel and Risse, national-level changes in response to Europeanization pressures can be weak or strong, and there are three degrees of domestic change: absorption, accommodation and transformation[25]. Claudio Radaelli offers a similar, yet more subtle, categorization of potential outcomes of Europeanization. He lays out almost the same outcomes of the Europeanization process, but he distinguishes among them even in cases when, there is a lack of change in domestic policies, or when there is an attempt to retreat from the initial steps taken towards Europeanization. He says that 'four possible outcomes of Europeanization can be discerned: inertia, absorption, transformation, and retrenchment. Taken together, they cover both the magnitude of change and its direction.'[26]. In terms of a linear policy change, the four proposed outcomes of Europeanization by Radaelli can be figured as follows:

[24] Vukasovic, M. (2013). „Change of higher education in response to European pressures: conceptualization and operationalization of Europeanization of higher education" in *Higher education*, 66(3), pp. 311-324. Retrieved from https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-012-9606-4

[25] Börzel, T. A., & Risse, T. (2003). „Conceptualizing the domestic impact of Europe" in *The politics of Europeanization*, pp. 57-80. Retrieved from https://gs.uni.wroc.pl/files/BOERZEL%20-%20RISSE%20Conceptualizing%20the%20domestic%20impact%20of%20Europe.pdf

26 Radaelli, C. M., & Featherstone, K. (2003). *The Politics of Europeanization*. Oxford: OUP Oxford, p. 37.

**Figure no. 1 Direction of policy change**[27]

| Retrenchment | Inertia | Absorption | Transformation |
|---|---|---|---|
| — | 0 | + | ++ |

**Operationalization of the research**

This research was conceptualized as an attempt to trace the entire process of reforming the QA system in Albanian higher education during 2014-2019. Following this timeframe of reforms, we will determine whether the policy changes were caused by Europeanization mechanisms, and if so, which of them. The collection and analysis of empirical data and evidence relied on primary resources, such as official documents and other secondary resources. The necessary information was gathered from policy documents, legislative frameworks, reports and other monitoring studies in the field of higher education. Methodologically, this paper follows a qualitative research design based on document analysis that seeks to analyse and explain the mechanisms used to implement the actual QA system in Albanian HE. The purpose in the end is to explain sufficiently the effects of Europeanization on QA policies in this case study, considering as well the outcomes and the level(s) of domestic policy change. Operationalizing the Europeanization of QA policy, as a process of domestic policy change, means that the effects should be empirically proved and the following indicators and mechanisms systematically demonstrated in action[28]:

- Institutionalization of European rules in the domestic context
- European rules developed through a process that is seen as legitimate by the actors relevant for adaptation
- Acceptance and implementation of European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG)
- Higher clarity of the model of reforms
- Bigger rewards for adopting the model
- Lower density of veto players
- Stronger domestic administrative capacity
- Weaker domestic institutional legacies
- Higher legitimacy of the model of reform
- Higher resonance between the European model and the domestic context
- More identification with the European model
- Higher domestic participation in European epistemic communities or issue networks, e.g. joint projects, thematic networks in higher education, European stakeholder organizations etc.
- Higher internationalization of the domestic policy arena

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[27] *Ibidem*, p. 35.

[28] The listed mechanisms in this section are adapted from two articles:
- Elken, M., Gornitzka, Å., Maassen, P., & Vukasovic, M. (2011). „European integration and the transformation of higher education" in *Oslo: University of Oslo*, 57.
- Vukasovic, M. (2013). „Change of higher education in response to European pressures: conceptualization and operationalization of Europeanization of higher education" in *Higher education*, 66(3), pp. 311-324.

Thus, for each of the three parts of the QA system that the document of ESG of QA foresees for higher education (internal QA, external QA and agency for QA), the empirical data of the case study are collected and presented, so as to examine whether they are in alignment with the standards. The information provided by the official documents is supplemented by evidence from secondary sources. These sources are used to analyse the specific activities and entities that pushed forward, positively or not, the settlement and reforming of the domestic QA system according to ESG. The description of the domestic situation aids to identify and distinguish which mechanisms mentioned in section 3.1 above are put into practice to follow (or not) the QA model and standards at the European level and the EHEA. Finally, the discussion analyses the types of Europeanization approach that can be seen in the reform of Albania QA assurance policy, relying on what was presented earlier about causal mechanisms of Europeanization. Do we witness in Albania an approach to Europeanization through social learning, instrumental learning, naming-and-shaming, or peer pressure? The overall analysis at the end attempts to make a concluding assessment about the extent of the policy change, referring to Radaelli's outcomes of Europeanization (retrenchment, inertia, absorption, transformation).

### Albanian Quality Assurance in Higher Education

The empirical studies on Europeanization of higher education show a change in organizational structures and public policies. Thus, this section concentrates on displaying what has happened in HE policy, and specifically the QA of higher education, in the recent years in Albania. Throughout the timeframe 2014-2019, Albanian higher education indeed went through many changes. There was a great discussion about the priorities and the mission of higher education in the country. In 2014, the political actors initiated another round of reforms beginning with the establishment of a Commission for Higher Education and Scientific Research. The work of this commission was completed in July 2014 with the Final Report on Reformation of Higher Education and Scientific Research, and this document preceded the new Law No. 80/2015 on Higher Education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions of the Republic of Albania[29], adopted in 2015. The new law on higher education abrogated the law of 2007, which itself had several amendments before its abrogation.

The final written report on the higher education and scientific research reform includes all the aspects of higher education, such as improvement of the governing architecture of higher education, the functioning and organization of higher education institutions, methods of funding, changes in learning and scientific research, and a vision regarding the future of higher education. This reform aims to better integrate the teaching process with scientific research, improve and assure the quality of higher education in compliance with contemporary standards, and to make education labour market oriented[30]. The report points out that the first and main aim of the reform is 'to

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[29] Law on Higher Education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions of the Republic of Albania, No.80/2015. Retrieved from https://arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/AKTET_NENLIGJORE.pdf
[30] Published on the official page of Eurydice. Retrieved from https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice

maintain the quality of education according to the EHEA standards'[31]. Moreover, in Article 1 of the current law, among other goals, it is strongly highlighted that the mission of higher education in Albania is 'to establish sustainable quality assurance mechanisms in higher education institutions in line with European standards'[32]. Apparently, both of the official documents indicate that the decision-making actors see these standards as legitimate and relevant for adoption. Thus, formally, there is a general agreement on the institutionalization of European rules in the domestic context; what is needed to be explored is the level of resonance that these rules have in the implementation of national QA policy for higher education.

This law is the most recent official document that governs the policy field of higher education in Albania. There is no specific strategy that guides the process, as was the case with the 'National Strategy for Higher Education' during 2008-2013. The law itself aims at defining the role of the state in higher education, the mission and key objectives of higher education and scientific research, and the rules for the establishment, organization, management, funding and closure of higher education institutions. It also aims to create a unified system of higher education, scientific research in higher education institutions, and contemporary and competitive innovation, all in compliance with European Higher Education Area standards. There are four articles (nos. 103, 104, 105, 106) that specifically describe how internal and external quality assurance should be provided, as well as the accreditation process; Article 106 mentions a document called the Quality Code of Higher Education. 'The Quality Code of Higher Education is the key document for all quality assurance processes and procedures in higher education. It sets state quality standards, mandatory for implementation by higher education institutions. It is drafted by the Agency of Quality Assurance in Higher Education and the ministry responsible for education and approved by decision of the Council of Ministers.'[33]. This document appears as a novelty of the law regarding the standards of QA because the code 'is being updated with the European quality standards and instructions in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)'[34].

### Quality assurance agency and external quality assurance

Quality assurance in higher education in Albania is carried out through the Agency of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (AQAHE) and the Accreditation Board (AB). AQAHE is the only institution in the country, which oversees and assesses quality in higher education. It is a central public institution sponsored from the state budget, as well as its own revenues. AQAHE is independent in composing and enforcing its own procedures, criteria and review forms, in selecting review experts and teams,

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[31] Republic of Albania, Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth (2014), The final report for the reformation of higher education and scientific research. Tirana. Retrieved from https://arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Raport_Final_Ministria_Arsimit.pdf

[32] Law on Higher Education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions of the Republic of Albania, No.80/2015. Retrieved from https://arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/AKTET_NENLIGJORE.pdf

[33] *Ibidem*.

[34] Published on the official website page of Eurydice. Retrieved from https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice

and writing the content and results of academic quality review reports[35]. Reflecting on independence as one of the ESG for QA agencies, we can add that in the Albanian case this standard is partly fulfilled because of the close relation that the agency has with state actors. The fact that the agency is financed from the state budget and that the director of the agency, who organizes and directs all the activity of the institutions, is nominated by the prime minister with an initial proposal from the Minister of Education, Sport and Youth, indicates that state actors can influence the process and the activity of the agency.

In regard to its mission, 'AQAHE performs the prior assessment of quality for HEIs, their units and study programs for the three cycles of study in the framework of their licensing procedure as well as external evaluation in the framework of institutional accreditation and study programs. Also, the Agency carries out analytical and comparative assessments of HEIs, programs and areas of study.'[36]. The process of quality assurance has been one of the aspects that has brought Albanian higher education closer to meeting the requirements of the Bologna process and has enabled an approach to follow the procedures and to fulfil the standards required by EHEA. Quality is the key word used in every report that AQAHE requires from universities. We must not forget that the quality assurance package administered by AQAHE is intended to be in conformity with the standards of ESG. This can be considered as an effort of AQAHE towards putting into practice the Europeanization processes in HE. Nevertheless, there is more left to be done in regard to the daily activity of the agency, in order to fulfil the standard that 'agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities'[37]. Although a QA agency in Albania was first established in 1999, and efforts for quality assurance were subsequently made, actually there were very few reports published on external quality assurance activities, except the latest reports on institutional accreditation that took place in 2017 and they were published by an external QA agency in cooperation with the national QA agency.

Another mechanism that indicates Europeanization is taking place is efforts taken to meet the standard of higher internationalization in the domestic policy arena.

`The impact of internationalisation can be perceived in a number of developments related to quality assurance – including cross border activity, and cooperation in relation to joint programmes. One of the most significant indicators that are sensitive to these developments is the level of international participation in external quality assurance. This indicator considers four criteria. The first is that quality assurance agencies are members or affiliates of the European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies in Europe (ENQA). ENQA is the major organisation gathering quality assurance agencies in Europe, promoting exchange of information and good practice, and implementing projects to take forward European cooperation. Other criteria for this indicator are that international peers/experts participate in the governance of national QA bodies, as

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[35] Published on the official website page of Eurydice. Retrieved from https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice

[36] Official website page of Agency of Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Albania. Retrieved from https://www.ascal.al/sq/rreth-nesh/misioni-dhe-veprimtaria

[37] Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). (2015). Brussels, Belgium. Retrieved from https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf pg. 23

members or observers in evaluation teams and in follow-up procedures.`[38]

AQAHE has not fully adhered to ENQA, but it is only an affiliated member of this association[39]. 'Before being accepted or being re-confirmed as a member, an applicant agency must satisfy to the Board that it meets the criteria for membership: the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).'[40]. This demonstrates that the AQAHE has not passed a process of external review by ENQA, which, as the sole criterion for membership, requires full compliance with ESG part 2 and 3, which focus on standards of external quality assurance and standards for the QA agency. Affiliation and aspirations for full membership could be interpreted as an effort by Albanian authorities to identify more with the ESG and European QA approach, as well as the will to participate in the epistemic communities in the framework of internationalization of this policy area.

In terms of fulfilling external quality assurance standards and the reaching the stage of developing an external quality assurance system, the Bologna Process Implementation Report of 2018 categorizes the Albanian external QA as among those countries where a quality assurance system is in operation nationwide, but has not (yet) been fully aligned to the ESG[41].

The most important external QA activity undertaken during 2014-2019 was the institutional accreditation of HEIs in the country.

`In December 2014, Ministry of Education Sport and Youth (MoESY) signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Quality Assurance Agency of the United Kingdom (QAA-UK) aiming at quality review and quality certification of all HEIs operating nationwide, as well as capacity building of HEIs themselves and national institutions which review and assure quality in the higher education. Since then AQAHE and QAA-UK started a successful cooperation and in February 2016 MoESY and QAA-UK signed an Overall Project Contract for the provision of quality assurance expertise to support the external review of 35 HEIs in Albania. As a first step, AQAHE has compiled the succeeding approach with the backing of QAA-UK taking into consideration the Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).`[42]

[38] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018. The European Higher Education Area in 2018: Bologna Process Implementation Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved from https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/sites/eurydice/files/bologna_internet_0.pdf

[39] ENQA Affiliate status is open to bodies worldwide that have a demonstrable interest in the quality assurance of higher education. Affiliates, as opposed to members, are not required to demonstrate compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Affiliates are subject to approval by the ENQA Board and endorsement by the ENQA General Assembly. Retrieved from https://enqa.eu/index.php/enqa-agencies/affiliates/how-to-become-an-affiliate/

[40] Official website of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). Retrieved from https://enqa.eu/index.php/enqa-agencies/members/how-to-become-a-member/

[41] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018. The European Higher Education Area in 2018: Bologna Process Implementation Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved from https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/sites/eurydice/files/bologna_internet_0.pdf

[42] Published on the official website page of Eurydice. Retrieved from https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice

**Internal quality assurance**

Fulfilment of internal quality assurance standards encompasses an extensive discussion on the processes that directly occur and affects the institutions that provide higher education in Albania. This discussion begins with the structural changes for QA, up to the evaluation of the quality of higher education. Empirical data demonstrates a convergence in structures and processes of internal quality assurance, but a lack of substantive compliance in achieving a higher quality of HE. Albanian public and private universities have established within their own structure Internal Quality Assurance Units (IQAU), which are in constant contact with AQAHE. 'Internal quality assurance is a legal obligation of higher education institutions being responsible for drafting quality assurance policies and procedures. The IQAU compiles internal quality assurance standards in accordance with the Quality Code. The unit conducts periodic assessments of teaching and research activity. An integral task of this unit is also to conduct a student questionnaire at the end of each semester on the quality of teaching for the subjects of each program offered by the HEI.'[43]. However, several challenges impede the evaluation of this element of quality assurance, as being in full accordance with ESG. The first standard that ESG highlights on internal quality assurance is: 'Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.'[44]. Albanian higher education institutions have the legal obligation to draft QA policies and procedures but do not have the obligation to make their QA policy public. This leads to a lack of transparency and inhibits a formal application of quality assurance procedures in universities as long as the achievements, difficulties, or failures in different areas of the institutions are not made public. Moreover, the formal implementation of internal quality assurance procedures turns the IQAU into a more bureaucratic instrument, rather than a promoter of quality improvement, which is actually the model for the activity of this unit in many European universities. In this regard, the Europeanization approach has produced an instrumental learning mechanism, which results in a change of policy means, rather than policy ends, as explained above.

Part of the internal evaluation of higher education institutions involves assessment of the quality of teaching. A key instrument that measures this standard are the survey questionnaires conducted with students at universities at the end of each semester. Conducting a student questionnaire is a duty of the HEIs themselves and most of have put into place such an internal quality assurance activity. Even professors themselves are involved in this activity, by gathering information at the end of their courses, which from the other side as a practice has its own weak points. Practically, the data from these questionnaires have not gone through a thorough analysis, and there have been no concrete interventions in order to improve the quality assurance in universities.

Such a deficiency in quality assurance was seen during the student protests

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[43] Official website page of Agency of Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Albania. Retrieved from https://www.ascal.al/sq/sigurimi-i-cilesise/njsbc

[44] Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). (2015). Brussels, Belgium. Retrieved from https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf pg. 11

that took place in December 2018. A massive engagement by the students, from the vast majority of public and private universities, protested against the lack of quality and standards in the higher education institutions, opposed to what the internal quality assurance documents of these institutions reported. Among the many demands from students, several directly related to QA in HEIs, where we can mention:

- Construction of university libraries according to European standards and access to free online university textbooks for students.
- Review of academic titles and verification of plagiarism in doctoral research work and other scholarly publications.
- Assessment of the teaching and research performance of lecturers, online publication of the results, and lecture registration.[45]

These demands are directly related to some of the internal quality assurance standards of ESG, which requires institutions to fulfil the standard of learning resources and student support, meaning that 'institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided'[46]. In addition, the ESG requires fulfilling standards for the teaching staff, which means that 'institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.'[47]. These requirements indicate that students should in fact be important actors in the quality assurance policies of universities. If formally, the situation in public and private universities appears healthy and without deep problems, the boycott of teaching process for almost three weeks showed a different reality.

The government of Albania drafted an official document titled 'Pact for University'[48] which, for each of the students' demands during the protests, specified the reforms that would be undertaken by the government to fulfil them. This document, as an expression of the government's will, indicated a redefinition of the state's relationship with universities and their autonomy, violating this autonomy guaranteed by the law approved in 2015. At the same time, the document paved the way to fulfil each of the demands through the realization of several decisions by the Council of Ministers, at a time when these requirements could very well have been resolved by higher education institutions themselves simply by consistently applying the higher education law.

The 'Pact for University' as a government engagement resulted in the creation of a National Survey of Students, which was electronically available for students and aimed to gather data from them concerning higher education. Data would afterwards be analysed by AQAHE. However, this survey is arguably redundant in terms of the internal quality assurance of HEIs, because it aims to monitor and control for a second time the validity and reliability of surveys that are conducted by the HEIs themselves. The partial publication of the results of National Survey of Students, conducted in April-

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[45] Republic of Albania, Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth (2019), *Pact for university*. Tirana. Retrieved from https://arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/DRAFT-PAKTI-PER-UNIVERSITETIN.pdf

[46] Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). (2015). Brussels, Belgium. Retrieved from https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf pg.25

[47] *Ibidem*, p. 25

[48] Republic of Albania, Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth (2019), *Pact for university*. Tirana. Retrieved from https://arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/DRAFT-PAKTI-PER-UNIVERSITETIN.pdf

May 2018, was done by the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth in October 2019. The Ministry presented the data as follows: '52% of students stated that the institutions where they study did not meet their expectations, while 45% of students declared that there were no regular questionnaires regarding quality of teaching'[49]. These data and statistical results indicate a lack of commitment by HEIs to regularly organize and conduct this activity in the framework of internal quality assurance. However, the percentage of students who completed the National Survey of Students was 31.2% of the 89,000 questionnaires distributed; while according to official data released by the Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) in Albania for the academic year 2017-2018, 129,394 students attended higher education in all academic programmes[50].

The national survey was conducted in the framework of the 'Pact for University' and its main purpose was to gather students' opinions on six main issues, such as: organization of the institution; the institution's resources; course curricula and content; teaching and learning; research activity; and student support. The AQAHE, as the lead implementer of this national survey, also issued reports on the various areas of assessment for the institutions. Specifically: a) management and functioning: average or poor level; b) infrastructure for teaching: poorly evaluated; c) curricula: average or good; d) teaching and learning: average or good; e) research activity: average or not good; f) institutional support for students: average or not good. These findings were published unaccompanied by explanations and interpretations that would contextualize the survey's credibility for improving the quality of education[51]. Expectations are that HEIs in Albania possess the autonomy to improve themselves, but this is contradictory when contrasted with numerous decisions of the Council of Ministers aimed at orienting and managing aspects of the internal quality assurance of Albanian higher education.

### Discussion

Higher education in Albania has a history of changes and reforms that of course have redesigned its overall structure and organization since the country's participation in the Bologna process and EHEA. These two entities have definitely got the system of higher education on the track to implementing Europeanization and its mechanisms, though there are still lingering legacies and other veto points. The Europeanization of higher education policies is taking place in the sphere of non-binding mechanisms, which implies activities that are not directly imposed to the country, but that take place on the level of cooperation and coordination. Standards and guidelines at the European level are those that move the process of change forward on the domestic level. ESG is the best example of these in the realm of QA in higher education. As Ian Bache mentioned, patterns of Europeanization differ not only in various policies, but as well in various countries and both formal and informal mechanisms can play a crucial

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[49] Marini, M. (2019, October 1). „Pact for University / Findings from the National Student Survey, conducted for the first time, are published" in *Albanian Telegraphic Agency*. Retrieved from https://ata.gov.al/2019/10/01/pakti-per-universitetin-publikohen-gjetjet-nga-sondazhi-kombetar-i-studenteve-kryer-per-here-te-pare/

[50] Official website page of the Institute of Statistics in Albania. Retrieved from http://www.instat.gov.al/media/4621/statistika-t%C3%AB-regjistrimeve-n%C3%AB-arsim-2017-2018.pdf

[51] Verca, E. (2019, October 3). „Students/ 1 of 3 professors, incompetent in teaching" in *Shekulli Newspaper*. Retrieved from https://shekulli.com.al/studentet-1-ne-3-pedagoge-i-paafte-per-mesimdhenie/

role[52]. We can observe the same thing in the case of Albanian QA policy, where there is certainly institutional change and reconfiguration of agencies and procedures to be followed, but less has been done in embracing the values of the process. This means that 'quality culture,' which entails not only formal institutionalization of standards but also a commitment to quality and improvement, remains underdeveloped. The Albanian case confirms York's observation that changes and improvements are not a product of declarations by institutional leaders but rather result from permanent practicing and engagement via the embedding of 'quality thinking'[53].

In terms of outcomes, this process of tracing changes within the timeframe 2014-2019 verified that among the standards that ESG foresees for QA, Albanian QA policy in higher education has institutionally followed the steps. There is an agency for QA, there are established units of internal QA in every HEI, and a Quality Code is in place, trying to conform as much as possible to the ESG for QA. All these instruments have developed through a process that is seen as legitimate by the key actors in the field, and the standards are widely accepted as relevant to be included in official documents and policy discourse. In this regard, we can accept that Albanian QA policy is implementing a policy change following the logic of appropriateness – but not fully, since socialization in the community rules can be realized only through that kind of social learning that internalizes the rules. So far, we observe only the changing of the policy means, not the policy ends. Moumoutzis and Zartaloudis defined this as instrumental learning, who explain that in the interactions of policy-makers at the EU-level, the acquired information is later used at the domestic level only to alter strategies, but not preferences[54].

Moreover, the analysis reveals a growing legitimacy of the QA standards, but not a weakening of domestic institutional legacies. As mentioned above in the theoretical part, Borzel and Risse underlined as an important element of Europeanization lens for policy analysis, the discussion of the problem-solving approaches that a country follows, especially standards, instruments and the policy narrative and discourses. Therefore, the approach that domestic actors chose to solve a problematic situation, such as the extended protests by students and the boycott of university instruction, reveals the traces of domestic legacies that still have not been left behind. Quality assurance policy turned once more into a responsibility and competence of the respective ministry and the government itself. This is exactly the contrary of what the new law and the reforms have tried to change from the past, by establishing the independent QA agency. The quality of HE, which was put into question during these protests, would be monitored also by mechanisms that the ministry or the government demanded. This kind of problem-solving approach points to a legacy trail that can be considered as veto point in whole process of Europeanization, which itself requires much more autonomy. This also indicates that the system currently lacks strong domestic administrative capacity,

[52] Bache, I. (2006). „The Europeanization of higher education: Markets, politics or learning?" in *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 44(2), pp. 231-248. Retrieved from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2006.00621.x.

[53] Yorke, M. (2000). „Developing a Quality Culture in Higher Education" in *Tertiary Education and Management*, 6(1), 19-36, p. 24. https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1023%2FA%3A1009689306110.pdf.

[54] Moumoutzis, K., & Zartaloudis, S. (2016). „Europeanization mechanisms and process tracing: A template for empirical research" in *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 54(2), 337-352, p. 341. Retrieved from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/jcms.12294.

in both external and internal QA, which can also take the role of veto players in implementing a substantial QA policy according to EHEA standards.

Additionally, since Albania aspires to the EU membership, the whole process of reform in higher education, adopting the Bologna process and aligning to EHEA QA standards, is enthusiastically seen as part of the country's integration into the EU. This could characterize the Europeanization approach of QA policy as being driven by a peer pressure causal mechanism. In each of the annual progress reports from the recent years (2015, 2016, 2018, and 2019) in the section on progress in education, it is highlighted in bold that 'Albania is **moderately prepared** in the field of education'[55] and more has to be done in this field. Concretely, the progress report of 2015 highlighted that 'the country should in particular implement the new law on higher education with the aim of improving quality'[56]. An under-performance in this regard is not preferable, thus in the latest report of 2019, it is again re-emphasized that 'Albania should in particular implement the higher education reform, with a focus on ensuring inclusive and quality education.'[57].

### Conclusions

The main purpose of this research was to analyse the Europeanization approach in the quality assurance policy of higher education in Albania. The inquiry aimed at finding how the quality assurance system is organized in the context of ongoing reforms, and whether there is a convergence with what the EHEA requires for the fulfilment of quality assurance in higher education, and to what extent. Relying on the theoretical framework of Europeanization as an approach explaining domestic change, the scope was to explore the mechanisms pushing forward the European dimension of QA and those that in specific situations intersect with the reforms and sometimes reorient the path of development. As long as Albania is ranked among the countries where, according to the latest Bologna process report, 'a quality assurance system is in operation nationwide, but has not (yet) been fully aligned to the ESG'[58] and taking into consideration what it was discussed above, we can conclude that the country is experiencing what in Radaelli's terms would be called an absorption of the EHEA model in QA for higher education. Radaelli explains that absorption as an outcome of policy changes is accommodation of policy requirements without real modification of the essential structures and changes in the 'logic' of political behaviour[59]. This is an accurate description of the situation, which means that the dynamic of policy changes could exhibit other facilitating or impeding factors in the future toward the Europeanization of HE. Institutional convergence alone could not lead to policy convergence; it can show more about the same procedures but not the same policy ends and outcomes.

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[55] European Commission. (2015) Albania 2015 Progress Report. Brussels SWD (2015) 213 final. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_albania.pdf
[56] *Ibidem*, p. 66.
[57] European Commission. (2019) Albania 2019 Progress Report. Brussels SWD (2019) 215 final, p. 87. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-albania-report.pdf.
[58] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018. The European Higher Education Area in 2018: Bologna Process Implementation Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved from https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/sites/eurydice/files/bologna_internet_0.pdf
[59] Radaelli, C. M., & Featherstone, K. (2003). *The Politics of Europeanization*. Oxford: OUP Oxford, p. 37

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