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BETWEEN WESTERN IDEALS AND POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION:

Meaning and perceptions of higher education in the Western Balkans

INTRODUCTION

Post-socialist Europe followed the considerable expansion of higher education, as witnessed in most of the Western European countries in past decades, with a similar dynamic, but with a considerable delay. It is only recently reaching the steepest parts of the upwards sloping curve in countries of the Western Balkans. This part of Europe is a post-conflict region where tensions and conflicts of various types are still present in its societies. In addition, the region is undergoing a delayed transition from the socialist system to the liberal-democratic institutional arrangement based on a market economy. In such settings, higher education can play a specific role, especially when it comes to reconstructing society, resuscitating civil society, empowering democracy, fostering inter-ethnic reconciliation etc. (Miklavič 2012, 106).

Researching the evolution, role and characteristics of higher education in the post-conflict societies of the Western Balkans unequivocally contributes to a much needed understanding of this little known area of Europe. Little research that has been done in the region hints that there might be more regional idiosyncrasies in higher education than the mainstream higher education research in the West of Europe would account for. Besides moving the frontiers of what is known about the societies and institutions, this knowledge is essential for policy makers, development organisations, donors and implementers of projects/policies in the examined region.

In the study presented in this chapter the emphasis was put on understanding what the idiosyncrasies of the region are by letting the local actors express themselves and listening to their stories, priorities, narratives, perceptions and ideas.

DESCRIPTION OF DATA COLLECTION, METHODS AND CONCEPTUALISATION

The data was collected between February and June 2012 as part of a larger project dedicated to higher education reforms in the Western Balkans (CEPS 2012). The field material consists of 76 interviews conducted with university leaders, government representatives, quality assurance agency officials and national experts from the region. In addition, more than 15 other informants were included in the research through informal talks.

All eight countries of the region (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia) were included in the research; in each of them we focused on two public universities: (1) the biggest, capital city-based one and (2) a newer one, with the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the chosen two universities are based in two constituent parts of the country. In addition, we included two small, recently established private institutions - one from Montenegro and one from Slovenia (i.e. three institutions were examined in those countries).

The analytical approach for the interviews is based on grounded theory (Charmaz 1990, 2006) in an attempt to contribute to the understanding of the discursive meaning and role of higher education in the modern political and social settings of Western Balkans. The fieldwork was prepared and conducted on the basis of general research questions such as *what are the main discourses; what is the political, social, normative framework; what are the underlying ideas and issues in the region; what are the dominant political/economic rationales underpinning the policies and discourses both of this region and in individual identified social and territorial units.*

The analysis was set out from emerging terms turning into concepts – an extended process of constant comparison and iterative questioning whereby we (1) compared the accounts and issues raised by the various interviewees; (2) compared the interview data with the informants and the quantitative questionnaire data; (3) contextualised the issues, discourses and ideas in the local socio-political and historical context; and (4) discussed and compared the findings between the research team colleagues. After the key concepts had been identified and defined, we conducted theoretical sampling consisting of collecting new data to check, fill out and extend conceptual categories.

The parallel checking had been conducted within and between *substantive areas*. For the purpose of further analysis we needed some additional analytical tools and found some elements of the *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)* (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak, 2008; Krzyzanowski and Wodak, 2011; Krzyzanowski, 2010) as appropriate for our purpose. The analysis gained context-sensitivity relying on a multilevel definition of context and encompassing the influence of changing socio-political conditions on the dynamics of discursive practices. Besides the interviews and conversations with informants, considerable desk-based research was conducted (especially in historical background, society, higher education system, and related figures) in order to establish the context as thoroughly as possible.

The findings from the interviews were confronted and complemented with the analysis of the quantitative data collected at the higher education institutions chosen as explained above. An electronic questionnaire was sent out to academic staff (i.e. senior and junior professors, lecturers and assistants) with the purpose of collecting their opinions and beliefs regarding their institutions and higher education in their respective country. The total number of respondents was 2,019 and the share is never below 5% of academic staff at major universities (over 1000 academic staff) and below 10% at other universities in the sample. The two small private institutions from Montenegro and Slovenia were excluded from the quantitative part of analysis due to the negligible number of respondents. The –quantitative data used for this

chapter was statistically analysed checking for *mean* differences between groups based on (i) country of origin (total of 8 groups¹), (ii) higher education institutions (total of 14 groups²), (iii) study fields or disciplines (total of 8 groups³).

In order to reveal the mean differences we first used the Leven's test for homogeneity of variance. Based on the result the two standard approaches were used – in case of homogeneity of variance a one way ANOVA and Bonferroni post hoc test and in case of non-homogeneity of variance a Welch test and Games-Howell post hoc test. ANOVA and Welch tests reveal whether there are statistically important differences between groups, but they do not reveal between which groups differences are found. Therefore Bonferroni or Games Howell post hoc tests were used to see between which groups there are such differences. For all tests the confidence interval was 95%.

ON THE PATH TO CRYSTALLISING CONCEPTUAL CATEGORIES: THE RECURRENT ISSUES DERIVING THE CONCEPT

In the subchapters of the following section some of the most emblematic and representative cases of discursive topics and conceptual categories which emerged from the qualitative analysis are presented. The aim is to sketch the map of dominant ideas, discourses, normative backgrounds, imaginaries and policy trends in the examined region. In most of the cases we confronted the results from the qualitative analysis with the findings from the survey among the academic staff of examined universities.

The “West” as the referential model, and peripheral identity

In most of the interviews there is a strong explicit (sometimes also implicit) tendency to mention Western institutions, Western systems, Western practice as the reference and direction to move towards. This is understandable, since all of the examined countries relatively recently underwent the transition from centrally planned mono-party systems to a market economy based on liberal democratic arrangements typical of the countries of Western Europe and the USA. The latter are perceived as more

¹ Albania (AL), Bosnia and Herzegovina (BA), Croatia (HR), Kosovo (KV), Macedonia (MK), Montenegro (ME), Serbia (SR) and Slovenia (SI)

² University of Tirana, Albania (TIR AL), University of Elbasan, Albania (ELB AL), University of Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina (TUZ BA), University of Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BL BA), University of Zagreb, Croatia (ZG HR), University of Rijeka, Croatia (RI HR), University of Pristina, Kosovo (PRIS KV), The Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, Macedonia (SCM MK), SEE University, Macedonia (SEE MK), University of Montenegro (U ME), University of Belgrade, Serbia (BG SR), University of Novi Sad, Serbia (NS SR), University of Ljubljana, Slovenia (LJ SI), University of Maribor, Slovenia (MB SI)

³ Agriculture and veterinary (AGR), Education / teacher education (EDU), Engineering, manufacturing and construction (ENG), The humanities and arts (HUM), Science, mathematics and computing (SC), Services (SER), Social sciences, business and law (SOCS), Health and welfare (HLT)

developed countries with an advanced organisation of their systems and institutions, including higher education.

The attitudes towards the West are manifold and regularly expressed with the topos of the need to follow the Western example in order to recover from isolation, reconstruct the post-conflict society/economy and make general progress. There is an obvious tendency to copy policy solutions, take over ideas and refer to perceived successful cases. Often the reference comes from a personal experience of study visits to particular universities. These are usually universities from the USA and to smaller extent reputable universities from the UK and Germany.

The relation and attitude towards the European West and the USA implies a certain level of inferiority complex and self-marginalisation, creating a common *peripheral identity* of the region. This phenomenon increases as one moves southwards, where the EU membership is viewed as a distant future. The terms used for conceptualising the peripheral space and regional identity are concentrated in the references to terms such as *these lands of ours* (“ovi nasi prostori”) or *the surrounding countries* (“zemlje u okruženju”). In Albania, the peripheral and inferior self-perceptions are linked to the legacy of the decades in which the country was virtually isolated from the rest of the world.

The West is more attractive than the rest of the world also in terms of desired academic cooperation. The quantitative data reveal a substantial inclination of academic staff from the region towards cooperation with academics and institutions from the West in comparison to other world regions. The EU, USA, and Canada are the most preferred group of countries for cooperation by all academics regardless of the analysed country or disciplinary location. Moreover, the preference to cooperate with Western institutions is higher in the south (e.g. academics from Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia evaluate the preferred cooperation with institutions from the EU lower than academics from the rest of the analysed countries).

The concept of *neo-colonialism* was applied to education back in the times when the policies of industrialised nations attempted to maintain their domination over the Third World (Altbach, 1998, 30, 31). Today *neo-colonisation* could be put to good use when analysing the emerging EHEA and, in particular, the Western Balkans on both the material level in terms of the policy course, and in the construction of the social reality with the pertaining normative and value setting. In addition to the normative level, it is possible to observe a more technical/policy level of transfer coupled with the strong ideational background of the economic integration and competitiveness agenda of the EU which is presented in the next two sections.

Europe – the guideline for reforms and transformation

More specific than the concept of the West is the conceptualisation of *Europe*. Europe is seen as something external to the Western Balkans. The discourse contains a frequent reference to the relationship of ‘us and Europe’. From this conceptualisation it is possible to identify an outstanding peripheral identity. Europe is an abstract term which stands more for a destination than a geographical category. To a great extent Europe is a synonym for the EU. The latter appears as the widely

accepted and internalised political goal. The Bologna Process is often explained as being part of the necessary adjustment to the EU in the steps of formal accession (especially in Croatia) and as part of the political project of approaching the economic union. The topoi and discursive topics are relatively technical.

The orientation towards the EU appears as a common denominator amongst the academic staff of all examined countries and universities also in the responses of the quantitative survey where, for instance, EU member countries are seen as priority cooperation countries. The important differences between groups emerge only when academics express their inclination towards cooperation with higher education institutions from within the Western Balkans. Academics from Croatia and Slovenia are less interested in cooperation within the region compared to academics from the rest of the countries. This might be correlated to the notion of the West in the remaining six countries, since Croatia and Slovenia are already members of the EU (one became a member soon after the survey was carried out) and are therefore the front runners in terms of integration with Europe.

The impact of the EU's dominant political rationality of the knowledge economy

The influence of the EU and Bologna Process discourses reflects the power of the centre in relation to the periphery and the general normative consensus to follow the path towards the EU. The EU's ideas on the economic role of higher education are disseminated with an elaborated and powerful discourse (see Robertson 2008; Komljenovič & Miklavič 2012) and reach down to the micro level of imagining the future models of higher education in the examined region.

The interviews revealed surprisingly little direct reference to the EU's dominant discourse of the knowledge economy and the related EU economic strategies in the interviews, especially bearing in mind their presence in the written (official) documents. However, when scratching deeper beneath the surface of the discourse one can easily find all necessary components to construct the strong economic relevance attributed to higher education. The most prominent discursive topic is the need to boost the *employability* of graduates. The closely related argumentative device of the *relevance* of higher education to society (and therefore implicitly or sometimes explicitly to the economy) notably carries along an argument that sees the need running in both directions: (1) graduates have to be able to find jobs; and (2) employers need graduate employees to have certain competencies and skills. The interviewees who present this discursive line also stick to the ideas of reforming higher education as favoured by EU institutions, e.g. promoting excellence, increasing cooperation with industry, boost innovation and applied research etc.

Regarding the issue of employability of graduates, the quantitative survey revealed that academics from all of the countries evaluated this focus of their university highly (with the lowest mean being 4.31 on a 5 point scale). However, there are important differences between countries. More precisely, the question asked about the extent to which higher education institutions should emphasise the employability of graduates as its main focus. Academic staff from Albania, Macedonia and Serbia would like to see their university more dedicated to this issue than academics from the rest of the countries.

The resistance to these hegemonic economic discourses and imaginaries is neither considerable among the interviewees nor in the quantitative survey. But we could find an isolated reference to the endangered humanistic role of the university:

Institution does not need a philosophers and artists, but the society needs them (...) we need to get rid of the invasion of job seekers [people who go to University to find better employment]. (49A; 16/3/12)

This interviewee (a faculty level senior academic from Albania) would strictly separate the labour market preparation institutions from universities. In *part 3* we will return to the discourses and concepts related to equality and egalitarian values where this issue will be dealt with from another prospective.

Engineers' discourse and concerns

A very specific economic orientation is present in the discourse of the interviewees in the field of engineering. This area deserves special attention because of exceptionally high level of internal homogeneity and due to its distinction from the interviewees belonging to other disciplines (especially with those from the field of humanities and arts).

The engineers are particularly keen on *cooperation with industry*, especially on *innovation*. They perceive their subject areas as a basic, productive and tangible sector which is most important for economic growth or in some cases reviving a stagnating post-war economy:

In this need of society which is completely normal – to increase the number of educated people - it is pushed to the extreme in the sense that often the necessity for these higher education graduates [engineering graduates] is forgotten. The necessity is not forgotten in the sense of not producing this human resource [orig “kadar”] but it is forgotten in a sense that there is not enough investment in human resources which are primarily essential for society. This is the view from the point of view of a technical scholar [engineer]. We [higher education of today] create consumers, but what will we consume if we do not produce... (68A; 27/3/12)

This reasoning is often grounded in the concern for the lack of engineering graduates in comparison to those flocking to the social sciences, business and economics.

The distinctive disciplinary perceptions and preferences emerged also in quantitative data. Academics coming from the fields of engineering and science feel that their university is currently putting higher effort on innovation and cooperation with industry than academics from the fields of education, humanities and social sciences⁴ (see Figure 1). This may also be the case as academics from technical and

⁴ The statistically important difference to mention ($W=0.000$) is between the groups of engineering and science on one side and humanities, social sciences and education on the other. (Engineering and education ($G.H.=0.004$), engineering and humanities ($G.H.=0.000$), engineering and social sciences

natural science faculties in fact have more cooperation with industry which is not seen or noticed by academics from the fields of social science and humanities.

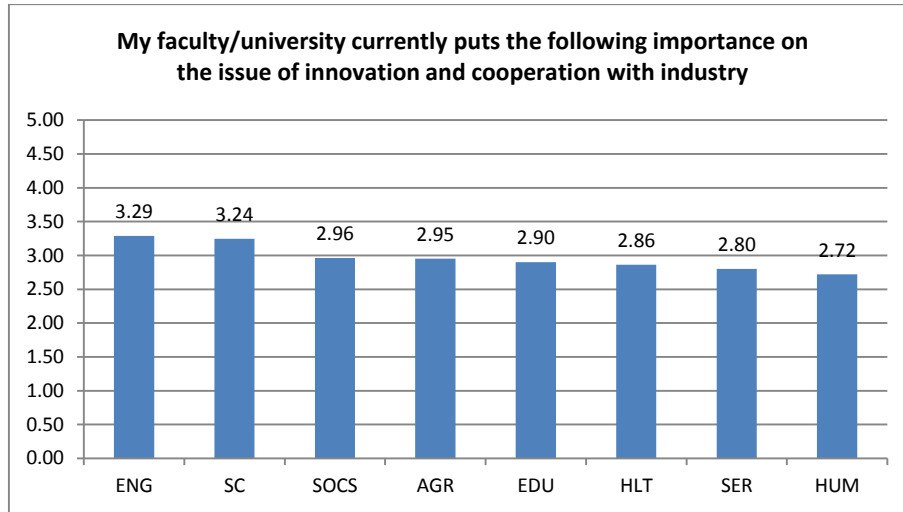


Figure 1. Means of groups of disciplines on the question of higher education institutions' actual focus on innovation and cooperation with industry ($N=1.606$).

We found a similar, but not identical situation when we asked academics how much they think their university should focus on innovation and cooperation with industry. Academics from the humanities and arts importantly differ statistically to academics from all of the other disciplines except from services (see Figure 2). Interestingly they differ also to academics from the fields of education and social sciences. It is, however, possible to form two groups of disciplines that are different to each other. Thus academics from the disciplines of agriculture, engineering and science value this focus of their university more highly than academics from education, humanities and social sciences.

($G.H.=0.008$), science and education ($G.H.=0.023$), science and humanities ($G.H.=0.000$), science and social sciences ($G.H.=0.048$).

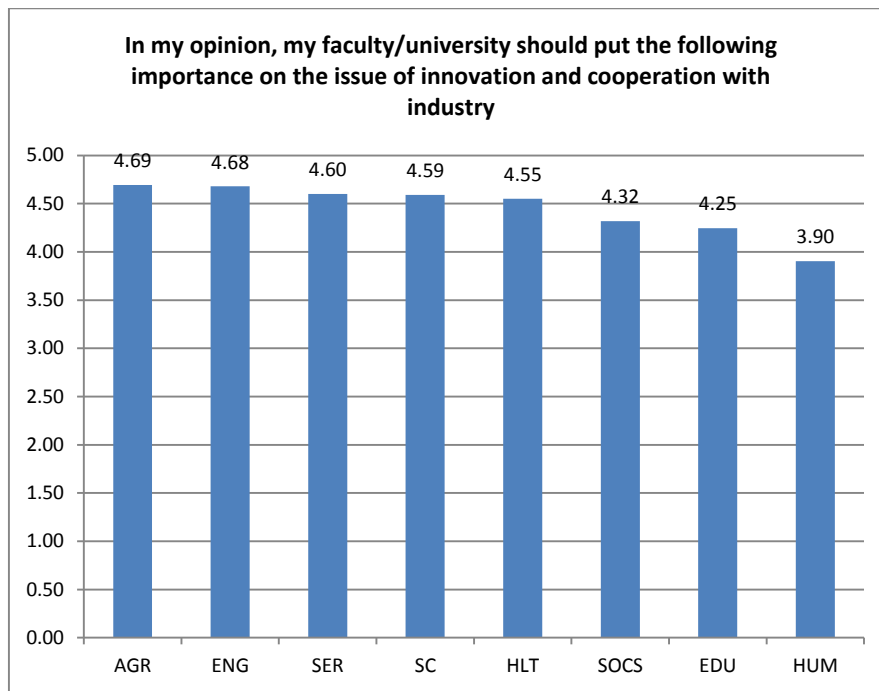


Figure 2. Means of groups of disciplines on the question of higher education institutions' desired focus on innovation and cooperation with industry ($N=1.606$).

The discourse of the engineering field distinguishes itself also in some other aspects of higher education. For example, it is predominantly input-oriented and teacher-centred. There is a strong resistance and reaction to the Bologna cycles by advocating the return to long cycles or opting for 4+1. This is strengthened by their establishing a common-sense situation with the topos of *it is impossible to produce a good engineer in 3 years*. There is little consideration of an utterly changed higher education as a consequence of massification. The discourse and conceptualisation of bad and good students is very present in the case of engineering interviewees from all across the region, to which we will return later (in part 3). In the countries of former Yugoslavia, engineering interviewees tend to understand autonomy as the decentralised organisation of the university with faculties as separate legal entities managing funds independently from each other and the rectorate. At those faculties of engineering where the institution underwent an integration (centralisation) process with the university, there was a strong discursive inclination to complain about the detrimental effect of the central governance on flexibility, financial autonomy (especially in managing the funds earned through cooperation with industry) and the *administrative efficiency* of the faculty.

Moreover, the engineers' discourse is noticed in academics' attitude to the range of roles of the university (Figures 3 to 7). When asking about how academics see the current importance of preparing young people for active citizenship at their institution (Figure 3) statistical tests reveal several important differences between

groups. Academics from the fields of education, humanities and social sciences in comparison to the academics from engineering and agriculture disciplines stated that their university better serves this role. Interestingly, the academics from across the spectrum of disciplines believe that their institution is not particularly dedicated to preparing youth for active citizenship (see Figure 3). Moreover, when asking about the preferred focus of their institution on these issues, academics from the fields of engineering and science importantly evaluated them lower (see Figure 4). It is thus both — the engineers’ opinions on the current situation as well as their idea on how their university should act — that distinguishes them from the rest of the academics.

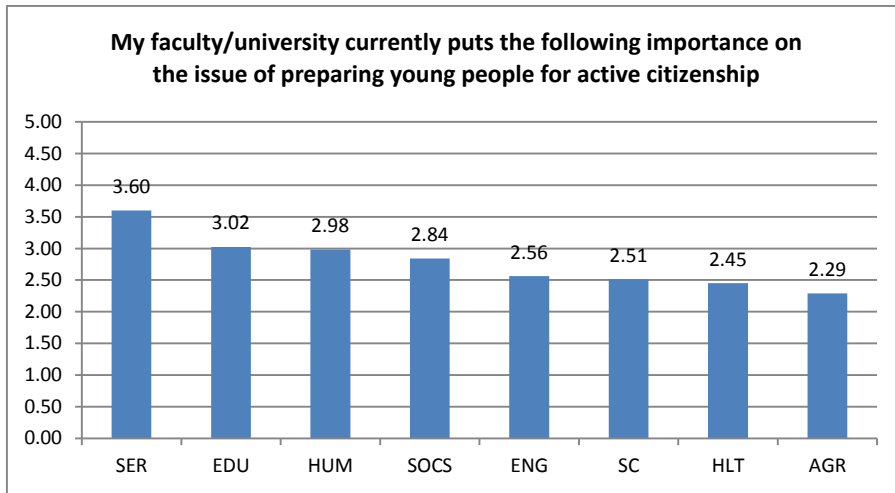


Figure 3. Means of the groups of disciplines on the question of higher education institutions’ actual focus on preparing young people for active citizenship (N=1.606).

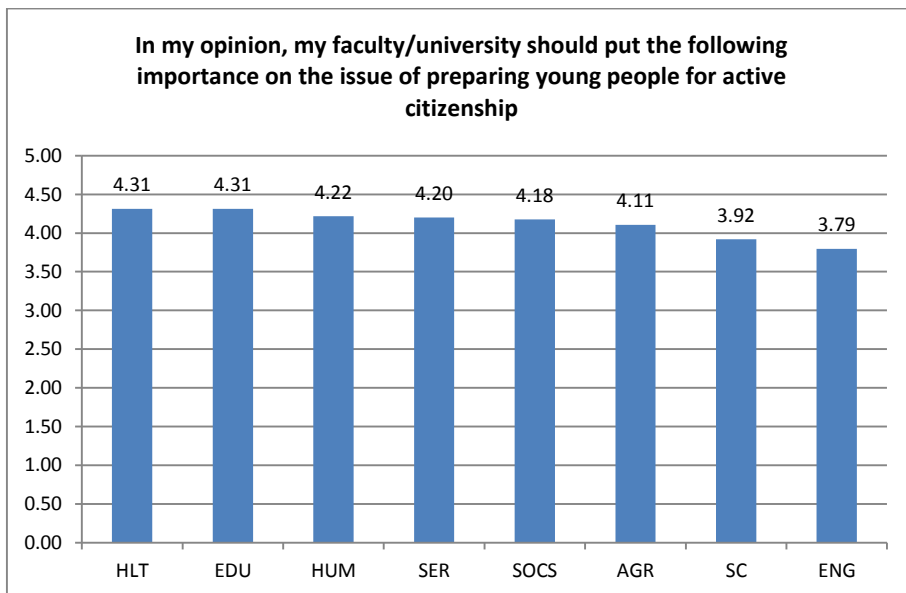


Figure 4. Means of the groups of disciplines on the question of higher education institutions' desired focus on preparing young people for active citizenship (N=1.606).

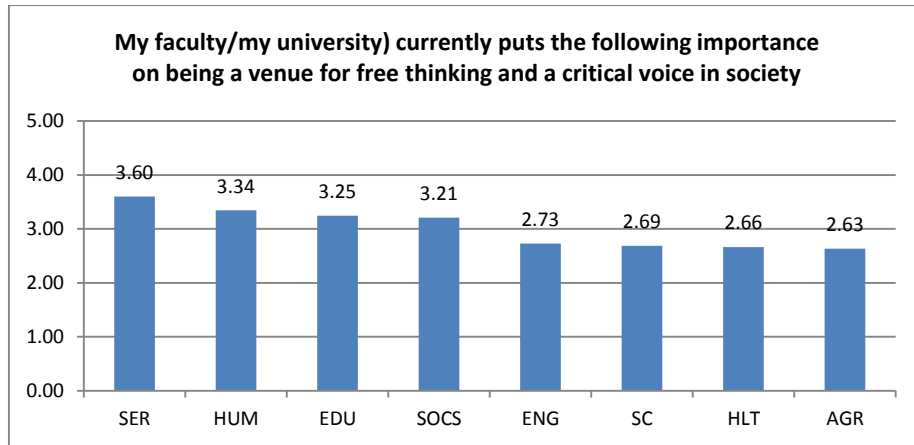


Figure 5. Means of the groups of disciplines on the question of higher education institutions' actual focus on being a venue for free thinking and a critical voice in society (N=1.606).

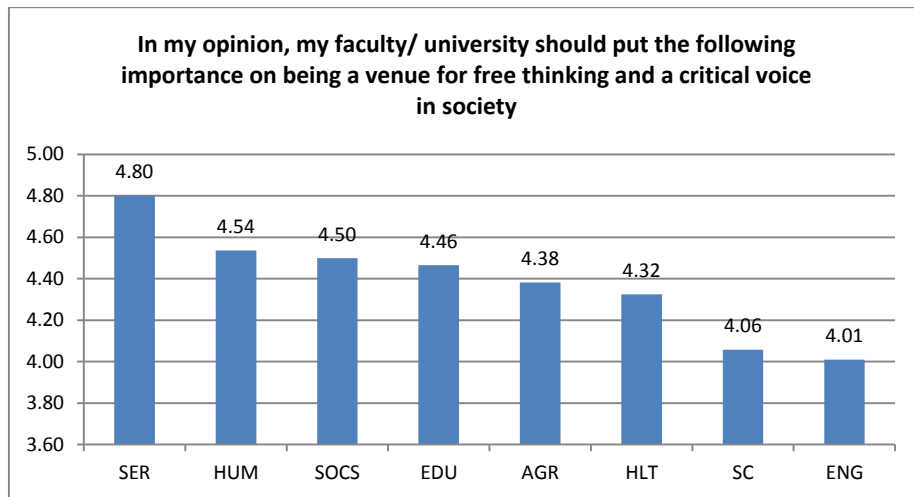


Figure 6. Means of the groups of disciplines on the question of higher education institutions' desired priority of being a venue for free thinking and critical voice in society (N=1.606).

The distinction of engineering (and to a great extent also natural science) academic staff can partly be attributed to the takeover by the dominant economic rationality pertaining to the knowledge economy imaginary, but partly also to the role of the engineering faculties in the industrialisation and modernisation process during the socialist period in both Albania and former Yugoslavia. Perhaps there is

a good match between the modernisation discourse and the knowledge economy imaginary where so-called productive knowledge is valued more highly than, for example, in the humanities (Skulasson 2008). Despite the considerable distinction found in the case of engineering and science and in the perception of the meaning and role of higher education in modern society, there are no differences between them regarding the role in individual's personal development and the competitiveness (within the country and internationally).

State-, nation- and economy-building: the grand projects

One of the region's outstanding specific features is the understanding of the role of higher education in the *reconstruction of a post-conflict and transitional society/economy*. There are a few discursive lines indicating a constitutive role of higher education in *state-building* or *nation-building*. Such discursive elements are not surprising in a region which recently went through an escalation of tensions in society culminating in several armed inter-ethnic conflicts.

Even though the above outlined categories are present throughout the region, the discourse varies between the countries. For example, in Kosovo there are both the argumentative device of national emancipation and the one on statehood-building, whereas in Croatia there is a stronger presence of the argumentative device of nation-building and the economic competitiveness of the country. There is variation also within countries. For example, in Republika Srpska (BA) there is a strong view of higher education as the constitutive element of a fully functioning state, whereas in the Federation of BA and on the state level they view HE more as the nation-building and economy-resuscitating role of universities. The usual nation-/state-building discursive topic views the capital city university as the frontrunner and the institution which should be developed into the knowledge flagship of the nation, whereas the other universities should diversify into regional or field-specific institutions. This is also well in line with the ideational background model preferred by the European Commission for organising universities in a vertical hierarchy with only a few excellent, world-class research universities (Komljenovic & Miklavic 2012).

The survey among academic staff also included some questions that can be associated to the category of state and nation building. For example in comparison with the academics from other countries, the academics from Albania and Kosovo attribute higher priority to preparing people (students) for active citizenship (see Figure 8). It is difficult to claim a direct correlation, but at least this result represents a good indicator in the direction of civic and social concerns of the academic staff in the young and unstable institutional settings.

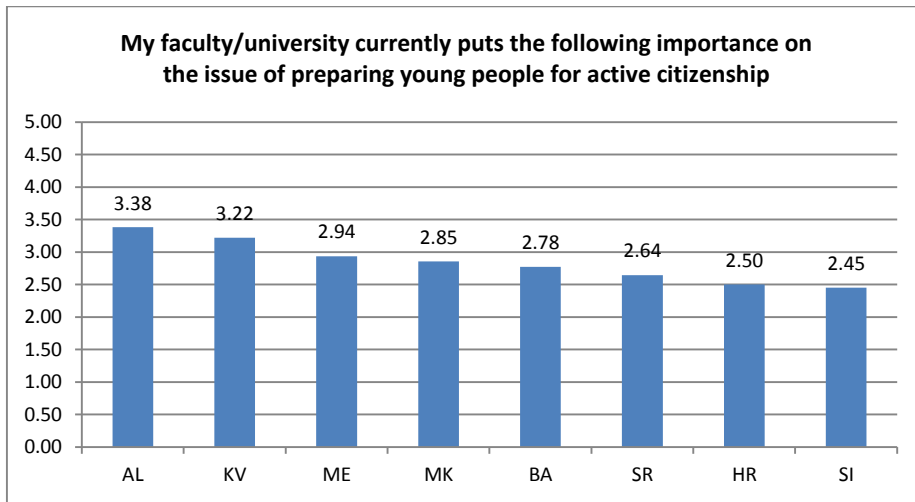


Figure 8. Means of the groups of countries on the question of higher education institutions' actual concern for active citizenship (N=1.678).

On the contrary in the more stable North-Western part of the region the preoccupation with citizenship is lower. Academics from Croatia and Slovenia are importantly less inclined towards the idea that their institution should prepare people for active citizenship (see Figure 9). This could be explained by the fact that the new system/state building project is phasing out and the new challenges and ideas are now flowing into the political space, especially in the context of joining the Euro-Atlantic integrations.

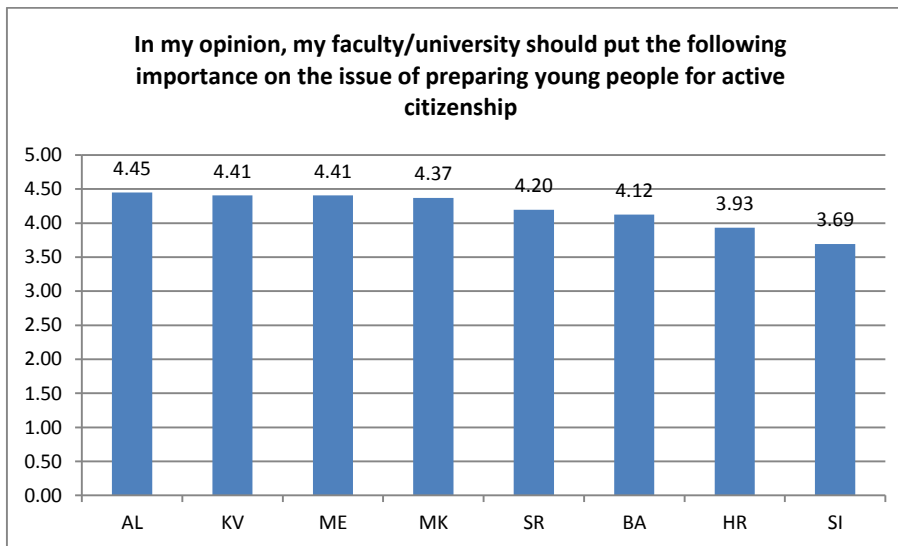


Figure 9. Means of the groups of countries on the question of higher education institutions' desired dedication to encouraging active citizenship (N=1.678).

Academics from Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia wish for their university to be a venue for free thinking and a critical voice in society more than academics from Croatia and Slovenia (see Figure 10). This can be correlated with the unstable structures and internal processes in the societies, where university represents a certain safe space for the opposition to the politics of newly forming political elites, not always in line with the opinion of the social groups that are most represented among the academic staff.

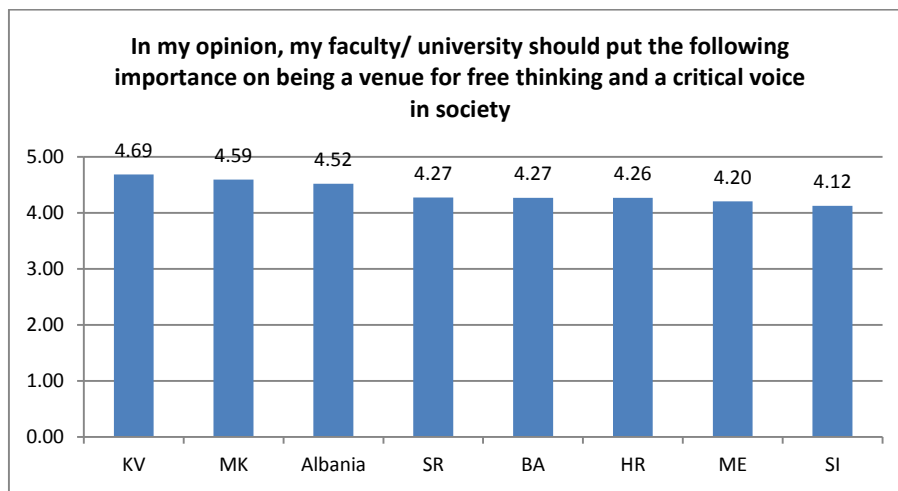


Figure 10. Means of the groups regarding countries on the question of higher education institutions' desired focus on being a venue for free thinking (N=1.678).

There is another ideation of the role of the university, included in the quantitative survey that can be correlated to the category of nation building - the conceptualisation of the *national university*. The origins of this can be found in the grand narratives/ideas of 19th and 20th centuries related to the European national project, with university as one of the constitutive institutions of the nation state. The examined countries have a relatively short statehood and national sovereignty tradition (in the modern era). The universities played a tremendously important role in the process of forming the nation and in the changes and transformations of the 1990s. The university as a national institution was most present in the discourses of academics from Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia. Albania stands out, differing to all countries but Kosovo (Welch=0.000) with the highest mean on a 5 point scale. In Bosnia and Herzegovina academics least feel that their university is fulfilling this purpose and this group is statistically importantly lower than Albania, Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia.

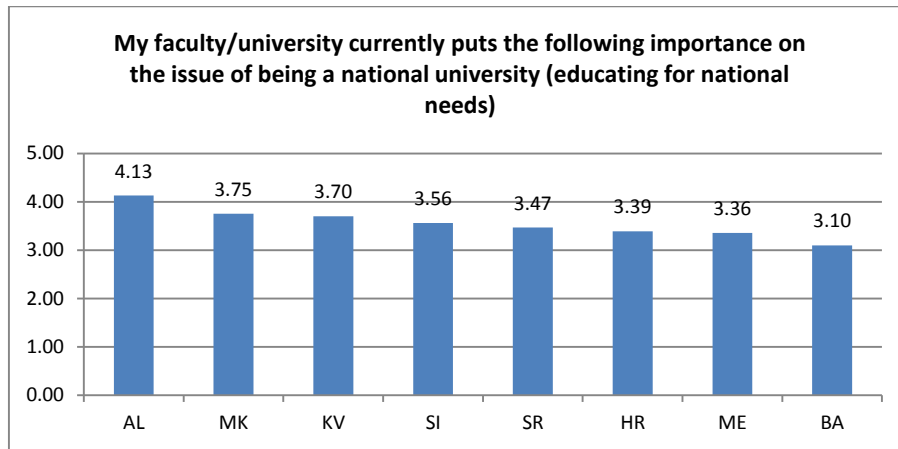


Figure 11. Means of the groups of countries on the question of higher education institutions' actual focus on representing a national university (N=1.678).

When asking academics about how much importance their institution should give to being a national university, we found that most academics from Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia feel that their university should play this role. On the other hand, academics from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia gave the lowest preference in relation to this.

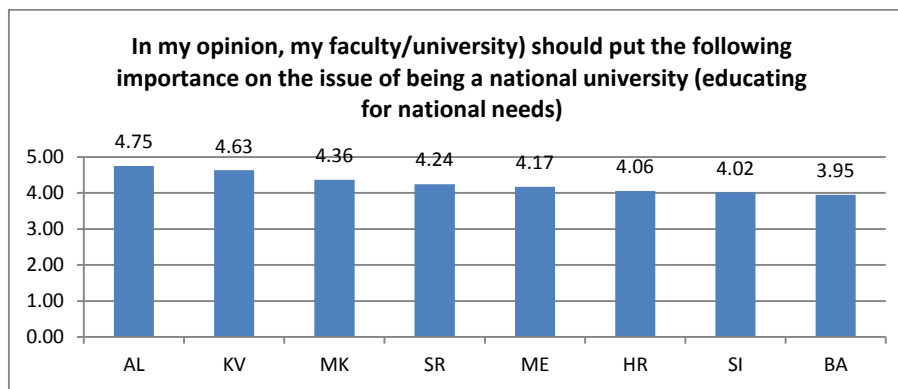


Figure 12. Means of the groups regarding countries on the question of higher education institutions' desired importance of being a national university (N=1.678).

The low importance of the national role of the university in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be explained by the ill-functioning state and absence of a unitary national identity. On the other hand, academic staff from Croatia and Slovenia appear least concerned with these issues as the countries with the most stable state

institutions and the EU membership which pushes the nation building project lower on the political and public agendas.

Fragmentation of the universities and dominance of the capital city university

The discussion on the *integration of the university* is indeed the common denominator among the interviewees from the area of former Yugoslavia. The idea of integration is external to the region. It can be considered one of the strongest and in the same time highly controversial external policy guidelines that made their way to the agendas of policymakers, academics, experts and sometimes also the general public. The idea to integrate (centralise) the university belongs to the larger model of the institutional management proposed by the EU and some other European actors. According to this model the competences of governance should be concentrated in a relatively *autonomous managerial leadership*. In turn, this is expected to increase the agility of the management, accelerate the decision making process, and enable the development of an overall institutional strategy. Thereby the universities would improve their comparative advantages and consequently better *compete* with the growing number of higher education institutions in the world (Robertson 2008; Komljenović and Miklavič 2012). Where proposed, this model encountered strong resistance, which is not surprising given the institutional practices and tradition in the region. Namely the formerly *loosely bound faculties*, with their own legal entity status, have tremendous difficulties giving up their autonomy in administrative and financial issues in favour of a centrally administered and strategically run university. One of the main arguments against integration is the feared inefficiency and bureaucratisation of central administration which slows down the *agility of the faculties*.

However, the opposition to integration of the university is far from unanimous. It is possible to detect two blocs in the issue of integration. The interviewees from the ministries, the experts and the state administrative workers tended to follow the European trends in institutional governance. Sometimes the members of the university leadership took the idea over as well. On the other side (resistance to integration) it was possible to find Faculty Deans or interlocutors from the teaching staff (particularly from the engineering fields). The cleavage was visible also between the old teaching staff and the young ambitious scholars. The preference for the integration of the university was especially openly expressed by latter.

The flagship university in the capital city

The fragmentation is also connected to the map of public universities in the region where the classical national configuration consists of the oldest, capital city university and other universities. The exception is Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the political reasoning and ethnic identity might influence the definition of the capital city. The capital city university is also the biggest in all cases, therefore covering the largest range of disciplines and thus subject to a higher degree of fragmentation.

The role of universities in the capitals emerged in the quantitative survey e.g. when academics evaluated the tendency for national competition (see Figure 14).

Typically the academics from the ‘second’ university in the country do not view their university pursuing the status of the first university in the country. The analysis of statistical differences between universities reveals that there are important differences between universities within in Croatia and Slovenia. In both cases universities from the capitals attribute more importance to being the “first in the country” than the other university in each country. This is not surprising since the question refers to the role of being the best in the country and universities of Zagreb and Ljubljana perhaps undisputedly hold this position. Interestingly, it is not so in other countries including in Serbia with similar configuration of universities.

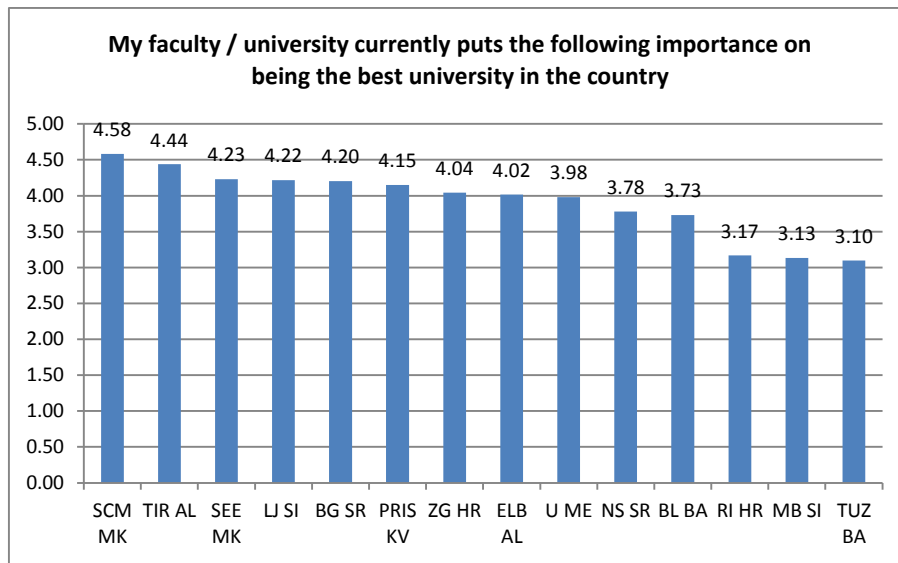


Figure 14. Means of the groups of higher education institutions on the question of higher education institutions' focus on national competitiveness (N=1.653).

Academic staff from all of the examined countries evaluated the necessity of their university to compete on the national scale highly (see Figure 15). Moreover, it is possible to conclude with statistical relevance that academics from Croatia and Slovenia are importantly less interested in their university becoming the best university in the country in comparison to academics from elsewhere, which adds to the hypothesis of the higher EU influence and its ideation of global competition as opposed to national one.

The examination of differences between higher education institutions shows a trend of the second university in the country not aspiring to this role as highly as the first university in the country. Interestingly the University of Ljubljana and the University of Zagreb (both flagship universities in the country) are positioned rather low.

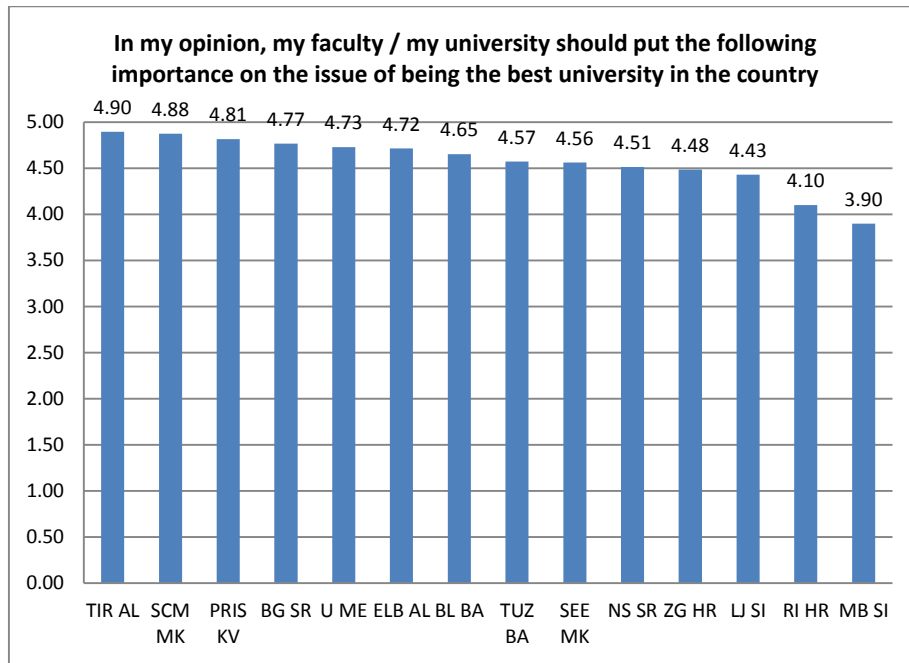


Figure 15. Means of the groups of higher education institutions on the question of higher education institutions' desired focus on national competitiveness (N=1.653).

Egalitarian values subdued to quality and excellence – the role of prestigious institutions

Eventually we tackle equality – a highly normative category, that can be considered geographically transversal, at least in Europe, but yet it resonates differently in various regional and national settings. In the Western Balkans the issue of equality reflects the normative setting and some social characteristics of the previous political system as well as recent turbulent transitions. Below are exposed some elements that emerged from the grounded approach.

Probably the most outstanding construct found region-wide is the conceptualisation of good (the best) and bad students. Based on this presumption the academic staff strongly believes in meritocracy and is consequently convinced in the necessity for performance-based selection. Well elaborated criteria for the examination are supposed to ensure social justice and academic quality at the same time. The presence of this rationale in the interviews and the discourses analysed is so strong that it is possible to talk about a sort of *meritocratic elitism*.

The reference to equality was however present through the interviews, even if only on declarative level. For example, on the question of whether there are downsides to entrance selections, an interviewee showed his consideration of equality in the context of selection at the entrance to the university:

Rural regions have a lower level of knowledge, even if they have the same programmes – but the quality of the students is lower. It maybe seems to be an injustice for such categories of students, but we are working on quality (58A 23/3/12).

Thus, some interviewees were aware of the exclusion caused by entrance exams, but subdued the issue of justice (equality) to quality. The discursive use of the *excellence* and reference to *good and bad students* is notably stronger in Albania and Kosovo and was present throughout the region, especially in the field of engineering.

Particularly in Kosovo, the interviewees connected the meritocratic exclusion to the state- and nation-building process (see also above). In their view Kosovar society needs an educated elite in order for the social structure to take shape and in order to develop institutions in the process of building a “European state”. University becomes the core institution in this process since it is conceptualised as a generator of the nations’ elite. The discourse of constructing the state and reconstructing the economy (as part of state building) is very powerful and overshadows the concern for egalitarian values – ‘*there is elitism but we get high quality in return*’ (63E; 21/3/12).

Even though the hidden social selection and reproduction of social classes through the meritocratic selection mechanisms is a well known phenomenon in sociology scholarship, this issue does not figure as relevant in the discourses in the Western Balkans. Particularly among the senior academic staff the concern for equality gave way to other values and priorities.

Within the same rationale (the necessity for quality and elite building), tolerance to economic exclusivity also emerged. Improving quality and outcomes justifies high (exclusive) tuition fees. An illustrative case is the role of the expensive and highly reputable private (trans-national) institutions in Kosovo, notably the American University of Kosovo (AUK) – a private institution, run under a contract with the Rochester Institute of Technology from the USA. According to the interviewees and informants the graduates of this university (unlike the other private institutions) are well accepted by the labour market and stand a good chance of vertical progression in society. The entrance filter is primarily represented by the relatively high tuition fee⁵. Consequently the enrolment is to a great extent contingent to one’s economic background (confirmed by the informants, including members of the AUK’s teaching staff).

One interviewee was very outspoken on this matter. He viewed tuition fees as a guarantee for quality. Accordingly, limiting tuition fees would in his view surely lead to decreasing quality and reducing the AUK to mediocrity like the other private HEIs. The discourse of normality provides an unapologetic argument for the *elitist* role of the institution:

⁵ During the field research it was not possible to ascertain the sum, but the interlocutors whose children study there reported a tuition fee of several thousand Euros.

Usually in every country we have the richest people, that's it. The richest people go to the best institutions to study (...) Like in your country [referring to the interviewers homeland] (63E; 21/3/12).

In this case, it is possible to observe a defensive attitude and at least two types of discourse: (1) the class-specific apology that being rich is not in any way bad and that it is logical that rich people will school their children in the *best institutions* and (2) the argument of Kosovo being the same as the other countries, of course referring to the Western liberal democratic capitalist countries.

To conclude on egalitarian values, the concerns for equality were residual or absent in the accounts of interviewees regardless the country or institution. Instead, the concern for access is more present in the governments' discourses and policies in Macedonia and Kosovo where higher education assumed an outstanding role in the reconstruction of post-conflict society and in emancipation of the remote rural areas. The policymaking groups in these settings are faced with increasing interest in studying resulting in the process of rapid massification where the education occupies a high position in the normative and value scale of the society.

CONCLUSION

In many aspects the region of the Western Balkans reflects the main thoughts, ideas and perceptions of the rest of Europe. However, the seemingly faithful West-following countries in the outskirts of the Old Continent reveal a different reality when one scratches the surface of the mere written and declared policies and programs.

On the discursive level the West is idealised as the advanced part of the world. In the accounts of the academics, policymakers and experts, the reference to the West, Europe and the EU typically stands for the developed liberal democracies of Europe and northern America. The hegemonic Western ideas and imaginaries are substantially present in the local discourse. The ideations of Europe and EU are forming an external entity - the *centre*, thereby implying the peripheral status of the Balkans. Europe represents a political goal and a normative model for these countries. The self-imagined *peripheral* identity stimulates the process of emulation, at least on the discursive level. This process is not necessarily induced by transfer of models from Western countries; it is more likely reflecting the ideas originating from the regional and international platforms (e.g. EU, Bologna Process).

On the other hand, the observed region is characterised by strong idiosyncrasies and controversies stemming from long isolation, conflicts, political instability, tensions between social/ethnic groups and not least the post-conflict condition that most of the region is still facing today. Higher education is not immune to these circumstances. Its role and meaning relates closely to the region-specific processes and conditions and therefore differ substantially from what the researchers usually find in the stable liberal democracies. For the very same reasons the "western" ideas, policy recipes and discourses encounter *resistance* and infertile ground for the *Europeanization* reforms.

Especially in the countries that suffered most from the armed conflicts and internal restructuring of societies (Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Albania (which started the transition after a several decades-long isolation) higher education plays a significant role in the imagined state or nation construction. Both, political and academic communities subscribe to this narrative. One of the aspects of higher education possible to attribute to the liberal-democratic ideas on nation state building is safeguarding and cherishing critical thought (expressed particularly in Albania and Kosovo).

The differences between the discipline faculties and their perception of higher education might in many ways resemble those in other European countries. However due to the distinctive nature of social processes and because higher education is often one of the most stable and therefore crucial social institutions, the disciplinary distinctions have deeper reaching repercussions. To a large extent the disciplinary division and the outstanding institutional fragmentation (in the countries of former Yugoslavia) are mutually constructed. The latter represents a strong academic and institutional identity and as such acts as the major force of resistance to the idea of an integrated university much promoted by the EU and other European organisations. The comparison of the findings from the qualitative enquiry with the quantitative survey proved especially beneficial in these matters.

The inductive approach was found beneficial for exploring and understanding this relatively poorly known region of Europe, especially in terms of processes, norms, values of the local socio-political environment and overall characteristics of higher education and its role in the local societies. This was for example very obvious in the case of the attitude towards egalitarian issues and equity. The reconstruction of society, formation of intellectual elites and nation building are often given priority over the issues dear to the stable Western settings. These have often too little in common with the region examined in this research.

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