



Europeanization without Membership Perspective? The EU's Impact on the  
Implementation of Higher Education Reforms in Georgia

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## **Abstract**

The EU is actively involved in the everyday politics of Georgia. Bilateral cooperation significantly enhanced since the Association Agreement between the two sides officially entered into force in 2016. The Association Agreement covered different fields of cooperation including the higher education sector. Georgia started implementing European standards in higher education already in 2005 after it officially joined the Bologna Process at the Bergen Ministerial Conference. Although, the inclusion of the Bologna Process in the Association Agreement made it, as well as the EU's rules and practices in higher education legally binding on Georgia. This fact is supposed to foster the Europeanization of Georgia's higher education system.

In this MA thesis, I studied the impact of the EU's external governance on the higher education reforms in Georgia. It identifies the main mechanisms as well as limitations to the EU's role in this reformation process. For this purpose, I conducted six in-depth interviews with the higher education reform experts in Georgia. At the same time, I used different secondary sources to track the main developments in the higher education reform process and the EU's role in it. I used the External Incentives Model (developed by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004)) to explain my dependent variable. However, because of some specificities of Georgia's higher education reforms, the External Incentives Model proved to be problematic for the Georgian case. Therefore, I decided to develop a new Anticipated Rewards Model, which I argue, most efficiently explains Georgia's higher education reforms. As my findings show, Georgia's self-induced "credible" membership perspective has been the guiding incentive for its higher education reforms. At the same time, it became clear that the EU has had a significant impact on these reforms through different mechanisms. Moreover, I argue that the EU holds the key to the substantial domestic compliance to the Bologna requirements and other obligations in higher education inscribed in the Association Agreement.

**Keywords:** External Europeanization; Higher Education; Bologna Process; External Incentives Model; Georgia; Rationalist institutionalism; Anticipated Rewards Model

## **1. Introduction**

In June 1999, Ministers of Education of 29 countries met in the northern Italian city of Bologna and signed the Bologna Declaration. By doing so, they set foundations for the inter-governmental European cooperation in higher education that is well known worldwide as the Bologna Process. Broadly speaking, the Bologna Process intends to harmonize the higher education systems of its member countries by creating a European Higher Education Area (Kooij (2015)).

In particular, the declaration aimed at increasing the international competitiveness of the European higher education system and employability of citizens by adopting easily readable and comparable degrees; introducing two main degree cycles (initially undergraduate and graduate); establishing a common system of credits (ECTS – European Credit Transfer System); promoting the mobility of students, teachers, researchers, and administrative staff; promoting European cooperation in quality assurance and promoting necessary European dimensions in higher education (Bologna Declaration (1999)).

The decision-making of the Bologna Process takes place on the ministerial level and is developed in the form of ministerial declarations and communiqués. The main goals of the process are termed action lines, which have been developed and modified through ministerial conferences. The Ministerial conferences take place every two-three years' time. As Kooij (2015) notes, the action lines have an interdependent nature, resembling a “Spillover” effect. The development of the process is monitored by the Bologna Follow-up Group, which was officially installed at the Prague ministerial conference in 2001. The Bologna Follow-up Group is composed of member states' representatives, European Commission, and other stakeholders and is assisted by Bologna Follow-up Group Board and secretariat (Crosier and Parveva (2013)). At the Berlin ministerial conference in 2003, the ministers of education decided to assign a specific role to the Bologna Follow-up Group, respectively organizing stocktaking reports, which was set to monitor the member states' success in implementing Bologna measures (Berlin Communiqué (2003)).

The Berlin Communiqué (2003) is important also in the sense that it elaborates membership criteria to the Bologna Process. It established the membership to the European Cultural Convention as the only precondition for the application to the membership to the Bologna Process. Otherwise, the applicant countries are supposed to show their willingness to follow and implement Bologna

Process objectives in their higher education systems and show the concrete ways for doing so in their membership applications (Berlin Communiqué (2003), p. 8). There are two types - full and consultative membership status. Currently, it has 49 full member states and the European Commission with a full member status (Prague Communiqué (2001)).

At the same time, it is important to note that the Bologna Declaration was not the very first attempt at cooperation in higher education in Europe. According to Robertson (2009), the history dates back to 1958 when the ministers of the European Coal and Steel Community tried to establish a European University. Later in the 1970s, the will for cooperation met with fears of supra governmental developments in higher education at the expense of national sovereignty (Huisman, Adelman, Hsieh, Shams, and Wilkins (2012)). Consequently, putting the intentions into practice took some time until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 1990s, two major developments paved the way towards the Bologna Process: the signing of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) and the Sorbonne Declaration (1998) (Eva Maria Vögtle (2014)). The Lisbon Recognition Convention is a joint effort of the Council of Europe and UNESCO and it is the only legally binding document of the Bologna Process (Kooij (2015), p. 49). It forbids the discrimination of an applicant on any possible grounds and ensures that the qualifications acquired in one country will be recognized in any other signatory country (Council of Europe (1997). One year later in Paris, the ministers of education of France, Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom marked the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sorbonne University by signing the Sorbonne Declaration. The new document intended to harmonize the architecture of the European higher education systems (Huisman et al. (2012)). The focus of the Sorbonne Declaration was the international transparency of study programs and recognition of qualifications; facilitating the mobility of students and teachers and their integration into the European labor market and designing common degree levels (Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral) (Crosier and Parveva (2013)).

Nowadays, 49 member countries of the Bologna Process make up together the European Higher Education Area. The territory of the European Higher Education Area extends far beyond the borders of the EU or the European continent and includes Russia, Central and Eastern European Countries, Turkey, and even Kazakhstan. The Process suggests different reforms in higher education that can be grouped in the following action lines: mobility; degree structures, lifelong learning, the social dimension, and quality assurance (Kooij (2015)). Although, the above-

mentioned areas are not the only target of the process. At the London Ministerial conference (2003), the ministers adopted an external strategy of the Bologna Process with the intention to respond to the challenges of the globalized world. The main theme of the new global dimension was to promote the attractiveness and competitiveness of the European Higher Education Area worldwide (London Communiqué (2007)).

It came as no surprise that these developments in the higher education sector in Europe soon attracted the attention of many countries, including former Soviet republics, which after the collapse of the USSR, were going through drastic socio-economic changes. One of these countries was Georgia, which already in 2004 oriented itself towards the Bologna-inspired implementation strategy in its higher education reforms and in 2005 officially joined the Process (Emerson and Kovziridze (2016)). By joining the Bologna Process at the Bergen ministerial conference, Georgia intended to achieve European quality in the higher education system by modernizing its higher education according to the European Standards and Guidelines. Moreover, this decision can be understood as a substantive element of the Georgian government's general Westernization and Europeanization strategy (Emerson and Kovziridze (2016); Glonti and Chitashvili (2007); Lezhava (2016)).

Since becoming a member of the Bologna Process, Georgia successfully used Bologna-related reforms to eradicate the Soviet legacy in its education system and break away from its communist past (Glonti and Chitashvili (2007); Jibladze (2011); Lezhava (2016)). Subsequently, the scholars of the education sector widely assess the success of the reform implementation process as well as the importance of this process for Georgia. Glonti and Chitashvili (2007) unfold the benefits of the Bologna Process and argue that it not only offers access to the global labor market but also the way of political integration with Europe. Similarly, Lezhava and Amashukeli (2016) claim that the Bologna Process is a substantial part of Georgia's Europeanization strategy and means of European integration.

Although, this kind of reasoning raises the following relevant question: what does the Bologna Process have to do with the country's Europeanization and the EU in general? The literature about the Bologna Process contains some credible claims that it can no longer be understood as purely intergovernmental cooperation in higher education, especially since the European Commission joined the process in 2001 (Figuerola (2010); Friedman (2015); Robertson (2009); Tomusk (2004);

(2018); Zahavi and Friedman (2019)). It is argued that the Commission not only delicately aligned the Bologna Process to its economic and education ambitions (Keeling (2006)) but also equipped it with extreme Eurocentric discourse (Figueroa (2010)). I will discuss this further in the theoretical part.

So far, several studies of the Bologna Process in member countries show that this kind of Eurocentric discourse of the Bologna Process is translated into the EU-centric perceptions and expectations in the member states, as the process is broadly understood as the EU project. For example, Lučin and Samaržija (2011) argue that the higher education reforms were part of the general EU integration process in Croatia, whereas Polšek (2004) and Baldigara (2012) consider the Bologna Process to be an essential component of the integration process. This is when in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brennan-Krohn (2011) found that the public and academics understand the Bologna Process as part of general membership requirements imposed by the EU.

When it comes to Georgia, this EU-centric understanding of the Bologna Process is also apparent between scholars as they link it to Europeanization and EU integration prospects of the country. This is not surprising as article 359 (c) of the Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia makes direct reference to the Bologna Process: ‘promoting quality in higher education in a manner which is consistent with the EU Modernization Agenda for Higher Education and the Bologna process’ (Council of the EU (2014)).

Therefore, in this thesis, I argue that it is important to assess the role of the EU in the higher education reforms in Georgia implemented under the umbrella of Bologna reforms. For this reason, Europeanization literature serves as a valuable tool to study the domestic impact of the EU in Georgia. On the other hand, I consider the understanding and use of the term Europeanization in the Georgian context to be hollow as it lacks conceptualization and methodological application. It seems that in Georgia Europeanization is not a scientific but just a trendy term, which can be applied to any changes brought by the cooperation with the EU.

For the sake of scientific use of the term Europeanization in the Georgian context, some clarifications need to be addressed. Europeanization is one of the most broadly discussed, defined, and studied terms in the EU scholarly literature. In its traditional definition, Europeanization means interconnected processes of institutionalization of formal rules at the EU level as well as the incorporation of them into the domestic discourses (Radaelli (2000)). Therefore, the literature on

Europeanization studies top-down (how the EU triggers changes in its member states) and bottom-up (how the member states upload their preferences at the EU level) processes (Börzel and Risse (2000)).

The simple fact that Georgia is not a member country of the EU indicates that direct application of the term to study the EU's impact in Georgia is problematic. Although, it does not mean that our hands are tied up, and doing the research is impossible. The scholars interested in the impact of the EU beyond its borders developed a sub-field of Europeanization research, which applied mostly to candidate and neighborhood countries (Sedelmeier (2006), (2011); Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), (2005); Schimmelfennig (2012), (2015)). Studies in this context use the external governance approach in which Europeanization is understood as solely the “domestic impact of the EU” (Sedelmeier (2006), (2011); Schimmelfennig (2012), (2015)). The main difference between internal and external governance is that internal governance refers to the creation and implementation of rules inside the EU, whereas the external model deals primarily with the transfer of specific EU rules in non-member states (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), p. 661).

Subsequently, I prefer to use the external governance approach, as it is very flexible and encompassing. As Lavenex and Schimmelfennig (2009) argue, the EU external governance can emerge in different policy contexts and regions and it can be found in less constraining cooperation frameworks (p. 792). Georgian case sits well in this context, as the country is not a member of the EU but just an eastern neighbor. Moreover, I study the EU's impact on higher education reforms. This is when higher education does not belong to the EU competencies but constitutes its member states' sovereign right.

To study the EU's policy towards non-member states and its domestic impact, the scholars mostly use the external governance approach. The most prominent methodological frameworks in this sense are developed under the theories of Rationalist and Constructivist Institutionalism (Sedelmeier (2006), (2011); Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004); (2005); Schimmelfennig (2012), (2015)). Rationalist institutionalism posits that changes in the non-member countries (and therefore, Europeanization) can be brought by the EU through conditionality (by sanctions (non-compliance) and rewards (compliance)), whereas Constructivist institutionalism highlights the role of social learning and lesson-drawing (Schimmelfennig (2012)). Based on numerous study results,



Sedelmeier (2006) argues that Rationalist institutionalism best explains the EU's domestic impact in non-member states.

Subsequently, in my research, I will use the Rationalist institutionalist approach to study the EU's impact on the higher education reforms in Georgia. It is crucial to mention that this thesis will not evaluate and assess the effectiveness or success of higher education reforms in this context. Rather, it mainly focuses on the EU's role in it. Therefore, my research question is formulated in the following way: what explains the EU's influence on the higher education reforms in Georgia?

To answer this research question, I will test the External Incentives Model developed by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004). To put it simply, this model is built on the assumption that the EU uses different incentives to trigger its desired policy transfer into non-member states. These incentives can be diverse and vary depending on the level of cooperation between the EU and the non-member states. Therefore, the External Incentives Model was initially developed to study the mechanisms and conditions of the EU's influence at the domestic level of its neighboring countries. According to Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2020), the External Incentives Model keeps its robustness in course of time and can still best explain the EU's external influence on its neighborhood.

However, one might raise an objection to the use of the External Incentives Model in Georgia's case, as it considers the ultimate membership incentive to be the biggest motivation for non-member states' voluntary adoption of the EU's norms and rules. This argument in itself assumes that for successful rule transfer the membership perspective should be credible (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), (2005)). On the other hand, scholarly literature argues that limited Europeanization can be possible even without a credible membership perspective (Sedelmeier (2006), (2011)). Moreover, the objectivity of the ultimate membership does not seem to be a defining factor for the EU rule transfer to happen. Schimmelfennig (2012), based on the literature about the neighborhood states (including, Barbé, Costa, Surrallés, and Natorski (2009)), argues that non-member states may still adopt the EU rules if they hope that their voluntary Europeanization can convince the EU to grant them membership one day (p. 21).

In the literature, Georgia is included in the category of those states in which the hope for ultimate membership determines credibility and the success of the EU rule transfer. I suppose that the same pattern is present in the case of the higher education reforms in Georgia. Therefore, I expect

Georgia to incentivize its higher education reforms with its ultimate membership perspective. This kind of self-induced “credible” membership perspective can go even beyond the objective borders of critical reasoning. Moreover, this process can be strengthened by the fact that officially the EU is not closed to the new member states, as article 49 (TEU) enables Georgia to apply for the EU membership if it meets certain requirements. On the other hand, this ultimate membership perspective is so strong in the country that in January this year, the president of Georgia officially announced in Brussels that the Georgian government is preparing to apply for EU membership by 2024 (Lavrelashvili and Hecke (2021, January 28)). Considering these arguments, I think that objections to the use of the External Incentives Model for the sake of this thesis should be discarded.

When it comes to the methodology, I will conduct online in-depth interviews with the higher education reform experts in Georgia. I expect that these interviews will lead to interesting findings, as these experts are the watchdogs of the Bologna Process and higher education reforms in the country. At the same time, they have diverse experience and expertise on the decision-making as well as academic level. Subsequently, these theoretical and methodological approaches will enable me to answer several questions: what are the main characteristics of the EU’s influence on higher education reforms in Georgia, and which external governance mode it uses to pursue its preferred policy outcome at the domestic level.

Consequently, this thesis has the following outline: in the next part, I will discuss the role of the EU in the Bologna Process. Following this, in the several subchapters, I will present the most important developments in the EU-Georgia bilateral relations and look for the importance of higher education in subsequent bilateral agreements. The following subchapter will review the main developments in the higher education reform process in Georgia. Following this, in the next subchapter, I will outline the main theoretical research framework of this thesis. Then I will move to the discussion of the three main explanatory models to study the EU’s domestic influence in Georgia. This will be followed by a methodological part in which I will describe my variables and discuss my research method. Subsequently, in the analytical part, I will present the main findings of my thesis and finish with the concluding chapter summarizing the whole work.

## 2. Theoretical Part

In the scholarly literature, one can find vast discussion about the nature and characteristics of the Bologna Process. For the sake of a comprehensive understanding of it, it is important to ask the following question: what is the Bologna Process? Even after simple skimming of literature, it becomes obvious that there is not a unanimous answer to this question in the academy. Some authors believe that the Bologna Process is a framework for intergovernmental cooperation that only prescribes the structure of higher education (Eva Maria Vögtle (2014)). Others see it as a multi-level and multi-actor policy process (Lažetić (2010)). Furthermore, it is also understood as an international platform of policy transfer, which operates through joint processes of lesson-drawing, transnational problem solving, emulation, and international policy promotion and produces a considerable degree of cross-country policy convergence in the absence of binding legislative measures (Eva M. Vögtle, Knill, and Dobbins (2011)).

On the other hand, some authors evaluate the development of the Bologna Process and raise concerns about its future. Damro and Friedman (2018) argue that the Bologna Process, with its expanding external dimension, is changing its nature and it can no longer be understood as a simple intergovernmental process. Other authors go more extreme in their assessments and claim that the Bologna Process is a “post-colonialist” strategy with a dominant European discourse (Figueroa (2010), p. 248). Robertson (2009) raises similar concerns and claims that the use of the Bologna Process in the framework of the EU’s materialistic and strategic purposes gives it a colonialist and imperialist narrative.

Furthermore, there is a rising trend in the literature assigning the regime theory to the Bologna Process and discussing it as an international Regime. Zahavi and Friedman (2019) argue that the Bologna Process (and its outcome, European Higher Education Area) is an international regime led by the European Commission as a policy entrepreneur. Asderaki (2019) also describes the European Higher Education Area as a complex international regime in which strategic interplay between its actors determines its external effectiveness. Klemenčič and Galán Palomares (2017), who understand the European Higher Education Area as a transnational governance regime in higher education, share the same attitude. Similarly, Friedman (2015) claims that the Bologna Process is the EU-led international regime, which serves to promote the worldwide appeal of the EU as a normative power.

As mentioned in the introduction, in this thesis I consider the Bologna Process as the EU's policy framework through which it intends to achieve its policy preferences in the higher education sector. This line of argumentation can be seen to be problematic by some critics. Although, in the following paragraphs I will seek to support my position with some credible arguments that exist in the scholarly literature.

As a starting point, one could raise legitimate concerns against this approach and question this possible relationship between, on one hand, the intergovernmental Bologna Process and, on the other hand, a well-settled political union with legally binding legislation and policy-making. Opponents can also go further by arguing that it is wrong to establish this connection simply because higher education does not fall into the EU's policy competencies. This is a legitimate argument as the Maastricht Treaty (also known as the Treaty on European Union – TEU) (1992) clearly stated that the Commission would not interfere in the national education policy of its member states but only encourage cooperation by respecting the responsibility of the member states for the content, structure of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity (TEU (2008), article 126, p. 47); Also the same argument is discussed in (Huisman and Van Der Wende (2004)). This is a clear reference that the education policy is subject to the subsidiarity principle and therefore the higher education policies are made at the national level ((Huisman & Van Der Wende, 2004); Tomusk (2004), (2018)).

Despite this strong legal argument, scholarly literature broadly discusses the role and the influence that the European Commission has on the Bologna Process. As Robertson (2009) argues, for the EU it has been like moving on a delicate path of constructing the European higher education system without accusations of intervening in the national policy domain. This is when some scholars consider the Bologna Process as an intergovernmental policy framework but, at the same time, recognize the Commission's growing interests and interference in it (Eva M. Vögtle et al. (2011); (Eva Maria Vögtle (2014); (Neave and Maassen (2007)). Moreover, some academics and researchers scrutinize the role that the Commission is playing in the Bologna Process and argue that for the Commission, the Bologna Process is a substitute for its lack of a political mandate in the higher education sector (Tomusk (2004)).

Furthermore, Keeling (2006) claims that the Commission not only managed to connect the Bologna Process to its Lisbon Agenda, but it also aligned its activities with it, which in the end

defines its success in constructing the wider European project. The author further claims that the Commission has developed a new attractive concept of Europe, which is economically powerful and internationally significant. (p. 213) The Europe-centered approach is also argued by Figueroa (2010) who identifies the Bologna Process as a “Trojan horse” of the Commission by which it spreads the norms, ideas, and languages of the European countries worldwide (p. 249).

Some scholars point at the EU’s profound incentives to achieve long-term policy goals through higher education. Hartmann (2008) connects the role of the Commission in the Bologna Process to its incentives defined in the Lisbon Strategy. The Lisbon Strategy was introduced by the European Council in 2000 to make Europe “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” by 2010 (European Council (2000); (Huisman et al. (2012))). The focus of this strategy was to cope with new challenges imposed by globalization that could become possible by the radical transformation of the European economy. As regards the role of education in this process, it was expected to respond to the demands of the knowledge-based economy and to improve the level and quality of employment. The existence of the same rhetoric in the Bologna Declaration enables Keeling (2006) to claim that similar economic incentives helped the Commission to pool the rains of the Bologna Process towards its broader economic project.

Damro and Friedman (2018) follow the same reasoning when they discuss the externalization of higher education in terms of the Market Power Europe theory (MPE). The authors claim that the externalization strategy helped the EU to exercise its power in higher education in which it did not have any legal mandate. In the case of higher education, it needs to be clarified what the EU tries to externalize with the help of the Bologna Process to influence the field of higher education in Europe and beyond. In the opinion of Damro and Friedman (2018), the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) play a decisive role in this case. The focus of the ESG adopted by the Ministers of Education in 2005 was to assist and guide higher education institutions to develop and enhance their quality of education by providing them with easily understandable working guidelines based on a common language (ENQA (2005)). It is also crucial to note that these guidelines were not meant to dictate or enforce but only to assist and promote the quality of national higher education.

It is also important to know what tools the Commission has to intervene in the Bologna Process and divert its development in accordance with its pragmatic political or economic incentives. Eva

Maria Vögtle (2014) argues that the role of the Commission in the Bologna Process can be enhanced through its coordination measures, impact on the higher education policy agenda, and the financial support it offers (p. 20). For Tomusk (2018), the EU successfully exerts its influence on higher education by spreading best practices and using its open method of coordination as well as its funding of different educational and mobility projects. Talking of financial support, Keeling (2006) notes that the European Commission not only invests in the international mobility of students and staff but it also funds numerous Bologna promoters and information activities at the national level (p. 208). Although, strong economic and political incentives of the European Commission are not the only factors to mention when it comes to developing higher education as an EU policy agenda. Huisman and Van Der Wende (2004) argue that the national governments also realized the need for internationalization to cope with the challenges brought by the general process of globalization.

Scholarly literature discusses further incentives for the EU's involvement in the higher education area through the Bologna Process. Figueroa (2010) addresses the problem in terms of the EU normative power approach and argues that the Bologna Process is an imperialist strategy of the EU through which it spreads its norms. In the opinion of Hartmann (2008), the EU uses the Bologna Process to change the minds of new generations of its member states in favor of the EU project. Moreover, Robertson (2009) claims that the EU pursues the internationalization process of higher education based on regionalizing and globalizing strategies to successfully compete with the educational cooperation developments in different regions of the world. Other authors follow the line of argumentation that claims that higher education and particularly the Bologna Process serves as a foreign policy tool for the EU to achieve its economic, cultural and political goals and establish itself as a successful global player (Damro and Friedman (2018); Figueroa (2010); Moscovitz and Zahavi (2019); Robertson (2009); Zahavi and Friedman (2019)).

These arguments make their point that since the Commission's accession as a full member, the main direction of the Bologna Process and the EU's policy priorities in higher education significantly converged. Although, I have to make one thing clear that in this thesis I am not going to engage in a normative assessment of the EU's role in the Bologna Process. My main point is not to study whether or not the EU breaks the principle of referral by utilizing the Bologna Process to achieve its policy ambitions. Rather, my thesis explores the EU's influence far beyond the

member states by studying the mechanisms through which it affects the non-member countries' domestic level. In this sense, the Bologna Process constitutes a framework, which I use to study the EU's role in the reformation of Georgia's higher education system.

To assess the effectiveness of the Bologna Process as a policy tool, studying only the EU's incentives is not enough. For the sake of a more detailed analysis, one should also explore what motivations and expectations its member states have. It is crucial to know why they engage in the Bologna Process and commit themselves to implement different education policies when they do not have to do so. Different scholars suggest some explanations for this voluntary Europeanization by the member states.

The first line of argumentation highlights that member states identify the Bologna Process as the EU project and try to use it for their foreign policy aspirations. Already in 2004, in his article about the institutionalization of the European higher education systems, Voldemar Tomusk argued that not only the Commission hijacked and misused the Bologna Process, but also the member states, as they saw the membership to the Bologna Process as the way leading to the full membership to the EU (Tomusk (2004)). This argument highlights the fact that some member states might perceive the Bologna Process as the EU project, membership to which can considerably advance their level of cooperation with the EU and consequently lead to full membership.

Tomusk further claims that former socialist countries participated in the Bologna Process with specific political goals, such as drawing considerable economic resources and political legitimacy from Brussels (p. 90). Moreover, Huisman and Van Der Wende (2004) concluded that the national governments have used successful implementation of the Bologna policies to strengthen their national power positions in their competition in the European arena (p. 353). Although, it has to be mentioned that the implementation of the Bologna reforms is a very uneven process and it varies across countries. Therefore, while studying the Bologna implementation process, one should take into account different national contexts (Zgaga (2006)). As Huisman et al. (2012) argue, different starting points, different domestic problems, and government arrangements force countries to follow different trajectories, thus leading to differentiated implementation. Similarly, this differentiated implementation is the main point of Zmas (2015), who argues that non-European countries accept the Bologna principles, because they think it will enable them to maintain their

leading role in international higher education or they simply do not want to stay isolated from the developments in the international education system.

The second line of reasoning considers the Bologna Process as the main solution for the national problems in higher education. It becomes obvious that not only the post-Soviet or Eastern Partnership countries joined the Bologna Process with specific political or economic objectives but also western European states found their relief in the creation of a harmonized higher education system in Europe. Witte (2006) argues that, while signing the Sorbonne Declaration, the ministers of the UK, Italy, Germany, and France realized the potential of the higher education reforms inscribed in the declaration in solving mounting problems in their national higher education systems. Moreover, Välimaa, Hoffman, and Huusko (2007) analyze the Bologna Process in Finland and show how the Finnish government tried to convince higher education institutions to join the Bologna Process by focusing on the core problems in Finnish higher education that the Bologna Process could solve. Similarly, Gornitzka (2007) concluded that the Bologna Process served as the menu of solutions to national problems in Norwegian higher education.

As we have seen so far, the motivations to join the Bologna Process can vary, depending on the target state's national needs or their projected material and political incentives. Hartmann (2008) claims that one of the main motivations of the Eastern European countries to participate in the Bologna Process was the hope that being a member of the European Higher Education Area would widely open the door of the EU labor market to their highly skilled labor forces. This is when, in their discussion of the Bologna Process as an international higher education regime, Zahavi and Friedman (2019) argue that the countries are willing to accept the self-restraint mechanism of the Bologna Process because they understand that in the age of globalization the role of academia can be better realized by an international collaboration.

The impact of the Bologna Process on non-member states' incentive formation is widely discussed in the external dimension literature as well. Respectively, Zahavi (2019) argues that Israel's interest in the Bologna Process is a reflection of its perceptions of the EU and the European Higher Education Area. The fear of isolation from the developments in international higher education and the use of the Bologna Process as an external solution to the national problems seem to be apparent in the case of Israel as well. However, what Zahavi finds as an additional characteristic of Israel's case is the fact that its perceptions of the Bologna Process are linked to perceptions of the EU as a



global normative power, and the participation in the Bologna Process is considered to be beneficial for the EU-Israel economic and political relations (Zahavi (2019)). Back to the case of non-European Bologna Process member countries, Tomusk (2018) claims that non-European countries expected that membership to the Bologna Process would enable them to increase funding for their higher education systems. He further asserts that in the case of some countries, the membership to the European Higher Education Area was projected as a way of selling European diplomas to foreign students and thus, the means of drawing the attention of the fee-paying students from abroad (p. 106).

As we already saw, the motivations of specific countries can depend greatly on their national contexts that consequently leads to the differentiated implementation of the Bologna policy objectives. This is especially true when the Bologna Process does not have an enforcement mechanism to produce an even implementation of its policy perspectives. After establishing the link between the incentives of the EU and its subsequent role in building the European Higher Education Area, it becomes clear that member countries realized the role that the European Commission plays in the Bologna Process and started utilizing it to achieve different economic or political goals.

This diverse scholarly literature supports the main argument of my thesis that the borderlines between the Bologna Process and the EU's ambitions and policy practices in higher education have faded or even vanished. The Bologna implementation research in its member, as well as non-member states, prove that the EU uses it as an effective tool for policy change at the domestic level. On the other hand, the Bologna Process is one of the main Europeanization strategies for its member and partner countries, Georgia not being an exception. Although, before I discuss Georgia's strategic use of the Bologna Process for its European aspirations and the EU's domestic impact on the higher education reforms, it is important to review the most important developments in the EU-Georgia bilateral relations and the higher education reforms in Georgia. For this purpose, in the next subchapters, I will track the developments in Georgia-EU cooperation with the focus on higher education and discuss Georgia's subsequent commitments to the relevant reforms in the higher education sector.

## ***2.1. EU-Georgia relations***

Georgia-EU bilateral relations started very soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Georgia's declaration of independence in 1991. Already in 1992, Georgia started participating in the TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States, later as EuropeAid) program the aim of which was to aid newly independent states in their transition to democracy and market-oriented economies. Within the TACIS framework the European Commission assigned 400 million (in 1991) and 450 million (in 1992) Euros to the target countries 25 million of which was allocated to the 'Support for economic and legislative reform; training and education in market economics; economic research and information-gathering, and institution building' (European Commission (1992)).

Later in 1996, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between Georgia and the EU was signed in Luxembourg, which officially entered into force in 1999 (Cappucci (2013)). Article 54 of this agreement covers the areas of education and training. It obliged Georgia to conduct several reforms in higher education, including updating education and training systems; teaching community languages and European studies; certification of higher education institutions and their diplomas, etc. (European Communities (1999)). In 2003, the European Council appointed its special representative for the South Caucasus, which in 2011 changed in European Union's Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia.

Although, in general, in the 1990s the EU was not actively interested in South Caucasus for several reasons. First of all, South Caucasus was not the EU's immediate neighbor and second of all, the EU did not have the ambition to become a global player (Chkhikvadze (2013)). The big picture considerably changed after 2004, when the biggest enlargement in EU's history moved its borders to the east and the Black Sea became the EU's sphere of security interests. Especially 2008 Russian military aggression in Georgia made it clear for the EU that war and instability in its neighborhood could have a direct impact on its general well-being (Chitadze (2014); Khidasheli (2011)).

EU-Georgia Relations rapidly intensified after the 2003 "Rose Revolution" in Georgia, when the western-oriented government of Mikheil Saakashvili came to power (Chitadze (2014); Khidasheli (2011); Chkhikvadze (2013)). In 2004, a new office for State Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration was created, which was tasked to coordinate and deepen cooperation with the

EU and NATO, and Parliamentary Committee on European integration was entrusted to oversee fulfillment of Parliament's obligations in the cooperation process (Khidasheli (2011)). In 2004, Georgia joined the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) initiative. Later, in 2006 the first Georgia-EU ENP Action Plan was adopted, which involved enhancing cooperation in eight priority areas, including foreign and security policy; transport and energy; peaceful resolution of internal conflicts; strengthening rule of law, etc. (European Commission (2007)). Together with other required reforms under the Action Plan, Georgia committed itself to foster cooperation with the aim of reforming its higher education in the context of the Bologna Process (p. 7).

Already, in 2005, the National Security Concept was adopted by the Parliament of Georgia which defines Georgia as “an integral part of the European political, economic and cultural area, whose fundamental national values are rooted in European values and traditions [and who] aspires to achieve full-fledged integration into Europe's political, economic and security systems ... and to return to its European tradition and remain an integral part of Europe” (Kakachia (2013), p. 47). This was a clear message sent to the west by President Saakashvili that Georgia would pursue Euro-Atlantic and European integration even at the expense of worsening relations with the Russian Federation (Khidasheli (2011), p. 96).

Although, 2008 was a turning point in Georgia-EU relations in many respects. At the Bucharest NATO summit in April, Georgia got disappointed after NATO refused to grant it the Membership Action Plan (MAP) (Khidasheli (2011)). Later in August, Russian military intervention and its subsequent occupation of the Tskhinvali region (also known as South Ossetia) turned Georgian security hopes from NATO to the EU. Soon after the war, the Council of Europe established and deployed European Monitoring Mission to Georgia (EUMM), which currently is the only civilian mediation source acting in a country torn by two conflicts (Abkhazia (1992) and South Ossetia (2008)).

Since 2008, bilateral relations have significantly advanced to a higher level. From now on, Georgian political elites envisaged and portrayed the EU as a security provider in the country but at the same time, got disappointed by its limited enforcement capacity in conflict resolution; (Bolkvadze, Müller, and Bachmann (2014); Bolkvadze and Naylor (2015); Cappucci (2013)). In 2009, Georgia officially joined the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative. The EU-Georgia cooperation under the Eastern Partnership covers four core priority areas – stronger economy;

stronger governance; stronger connectivity, and stronger society. The crucial instrument for the Eastern Partnership cooperation framework is the European Neighborhood Instrument, which provides financial support to reform initiatives in different policy areas, including the higher education sector. At the same time, it must be said that the Eastern Partnership became a strong motivation for necessary reforms in Georgia as it felt that it was no longer treated by the EU just as a neighbor but more as a partner (Khidasheli (2011)).

Bilateral relations between the EU and Georgia expanded especially after July 2016, when the Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia officially entered into force, which also includes establishing a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DC FTA). Later in November, both sides adopted a revised Associated Agenda for the period of 2017-2020 with the aim of closer and broader policy convergence. The new agenda also includes commitment to further reforms in higher education in the context of Georgia's membership in the Bologna Process (Delegation of the EU to Georgia (2017)). The last biggest development in bilateral cooperation between two parties took place in March 2017, when the EU granted Georgia a visa-free regime to the Schengen area. The country stays committed to its foreign policy perspectives in which Euro-Atlantic integration is the first and foremost priority.

I already mentioned a strong Europe-centered narrative of the Georgian foreign policy strategy. Although to get a complete picture of Georgia's western political and ideological orientation, I should mention a couple of words about the role of identity building in Georgia's foreign policy. By claiming to be historically a European country, Georgia highlights the necessity to be reintegrated back into its European family. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and regaining independence was seen to be the first big step towards Europe (Cappucci (2013)). In 1992, the speaker of Georgian Parliament and later the Prime Minister of Georgia, Zurab Zhvania famously uttered the following words at the Council of Europe upon Georgia's accession to it: "I am Georgian, and therefore, I am European" (Kakachia (2013)). This narrative has been further advanced and intensified by Saakashvili's government and subsequently managed to turn public opinion overwhelmingly in favor of the European integration and country's Euro-Atlantic future (Bolkvadze et al. (2014); Bolkvadze and Naylor (2015); Cappucci (2013); Müller (2011)).

This strategic idealism, which sometimes goes against geopolitical reality or a common sense (Kakachia (2013)), made Müller (2011) argue that Georgian's are in the "EU-phoria". Even though

this European idealistic narrative looks to be elite-driven, it should be said that it has its historical foundations. A long history of a Christian state caused Georgia to develop an identity different from its Muslim neighbors and forced it to look for closer ties with Christian Europe. At the same time, constant disappointment from its Orthodox neighbor (Russia), enhanced this process (Beacháin and Coene (2014)). Consequently, after independence, this pro-western narrative drives Georgian foreign policy, which portrays Europe as a source of security as well as economic and democratic development (Kakachia and Minesashvili (2015)).

## ***2.2. Higher Education Reforms in Georgia***

Extreme centralization and futile policy planning characterized the Soviet-times educational governance in Georgia. All crucial policies were taken in Moscow and local governments did not enjoy any right to discuss their credibility and efficiency. Rather, they were entitled to mere supervision of the implementation of these decisions (Glonti and Chitashvili (2007)). At the same time, education was used as a means of political indoctrination and critical thinking was not a common thing for the Soviet-style teaching strategy.

Subsequently, after the fall of the USSR Georgia, like other post-Soviet countries, was exposed to extreme pressures to modernize its economic and social life (Dobbins and Khachatryan (2015)). At the same time, political and economic hardships together with civil war and the war over Abkhazia posed unprecedented difficulties in different fields of the political and social life of the newly independent state. These hardships triggered by the transition period caused several problems in the higher education system as well. High levels of unemployment (Sharvashidze (2005)), deep-rooted corruption (Shelley (2007)), and low quality became an everyday reality of the Georgian higher education system.

Already in 2002, the government of Georgia started assessing the role of higher education in the globalized world and developed specific guidelines for the modernization of higher education. The parliament of Georgia passed the decree that aimed at solving severe societal problems through the reformation of the higher education system. Even though the Bologna Process is not mentioned in the main text of the decree, it is obvious that the government already oriented itself towards the European standards in higher education as the text mentions the following: ‘It is important Georgian higher education to become part of the European Higher Education Area through the

partnership and cooperation with international organizations and leading universities' (The Parliament of Georgia (2002)).

At the same time, the text of the decree also mentions specific priority areas of this modernization strategy, which can be considered as Bologna-inspired reforms. These areas are liberalization of the higher education sector; Lifelong learning; establishing credit systems at universities; giving broader autonomy to higher education institutions, etc. For the sake of clarity, it must be said that already in the 1990s Tbilisi State University (TSU) introduced some changes based on the Anglo-Saxon model, such as degree systems or ECTS based evaluation but new reforms had mostly formal nature and were characterized with realization problems (Glonti and Chitashvili (2007)). At the same time, these changes were introduced only in specific universities in the capital and they did not have a countrywide nature.

The situation considerably changed since 2003, when the new western-oriented and reformist government of Mikhail Saakashvili came to power. (Lezhava (2016)). The new government adhered to the idea of substantial reforms in higher education as it realized the role of the modern and competitive education system in the political and economic development of Georgia and its foreign policy aspirations (Glonti and Chitashvili (2007)). President Saakashvili mentioned in his inauguration speech that "...Georgia must become a state, wherein the knowledge and education become the most precious fortune; wherein the education of [our] children becomes the highest priority" (Civil.ge (2004)).

Georgia officially joined the Bologna Process at the Bergen ministerial conference in 2005. Although, the new government committed itself to fundamental reforms in higher education already in 2004 (Emerson and Kovziridze (2016)) with the aim to eradicate its Soviet legacy and reorganize the higher education system according to the European standards (Dobbins and Khachatryan (2015); Glonti and Chitashvili (2007); Lezhava (2016)). These reforms covered different aspects of higher education and they are mostly termed by many scholars as successful.

In 2004, Georgia adopted a new Law on Higher Education, which introduced different strategies, like degree programs, European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), Quality Assurance mechanisms, etc. (Lezhava (2016)). Even though the Bologna Process is not explicitly mentioned in the new law either, it states that to achieve the main tasks of higher education the

state shall ensure “full participation of teaching, learning and scientific training in the European Education and Research Area as well as other international systems” (The Parliament of Georgia (2004)). This is also a clear indication of Georgia’s orientation towards the European Higher Education space.

Some of the successful reforms belong the establishment of an independent National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement Accreditation (NCEQA), which in 2019 became the member of the European Association for Quality Assurance (ENQA). This institution is mainly responsible for quality assurance and enhancement in higher education. One of the most successful reforms was the establishment of the National Examination Centre (NAEC) in 2005, which introduced the new system of Unified National Exams together with a merit-based funding scheme for students. This reform abolished the Soviet-style highly corrupt admissions procedures at the higher education institutions and established the system based on unified, transparent, and fair selection principles (Dobbins and Khachatryan (2015); Emerson and Kovziridze (2016)).

In September 2014, the Association Agreement was signed between the EU and Georgia and it entered into force in July 2016. The new agreement intensified bilateral relations between the EU and Georgia, including cooperation in the higher education area. It provides the bases and guidelines for cooperation in the areas of education, training, and youth (Chapter 16) and also contains a direct reference to the Bologna Process. Paragraph 3 of Article 359 of the Association Agreement says that the cooperation between Georgia and the EU in the field of education and training shall focus inter alia on “promoting quality in higher education in a manner which is consistent with the EU Modernization Agenda for higher education and the Bologna Process” (Council of the EU (2014)). Under article 361 of the Association Agreement, Georgia took the responsibility to develop subsequent policies “consistent with the framework of EU policies and practices” (Council of the EU (2014)).

Following this, in 2017 the government of Georgia approved the Common Strategy of Education and Science (2017-2021) developed by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia (MES). The new comprehensive strategy document can be seen as a direct response to the fulfillment of the responsibilities undertaken within the Association Agreement. This document mentions that it “...fully envisages the obligations under the Association Agreement between Georgia and the EU

and the relevant Annexes in the field of education, advanced training, and youth, as well as science, research, and technological development. It also conforms to the requirements of the Bologna Process, the recommendations of the European Parliament and the Council of Europe in the direction of lifelong learning, the activities agreed within the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which Georgia has undertaken to fulfill” (MES (2017)). The main point of this long direct citation is to show that the government assigns high importance to the Association Agreement and it commits itself to align its higher education policy priorities to the EU’s policy frameworks and the Bologna Process. Even though that the assessment of successful fulfillment of these commitments is a matter of time, it must be said that it gives new impetus to the higher education reforms in Georgia and can further advance its harmonization with the European Higher Education Area.

On the other hand, several studies show that there are enduring problems in higher education when it comes to the content and quality of reforms. 2013 study of The International Institute for Education Policy, Planning, and Management (EPPM) shows that the absence of long-term strategic development and policy planning, as well as the disconnect between the higher education and labor market, are recurrent problems of the Georgian higher education system (EPPM (2013)). Based on the review of Quality Assurance reforms in Georgia, Jibladze (2011) argues that these reforms failed in a general sense, as they have a rather superficial nature and lack a substantial system-wide impact (p. 24). Similarly, Amashukeli, Lezhava, and Chitashvili (2020) share the same view and further argue that the sustainability of Quality Assurance reforms is under serious threat.

Moreover, the state seems to be slow in implementing the Association Agreement requirements in the field of education and training, including higher education. Sanikidze (2019) found that the state failed to meet the deadlines to organize legal bases for the implementation of Article 358 and 359 of the Association Agreement as well as the European Council and the European Parliament recommendations regarding the establishment of the Qualification Framework for the Lifelong Learning. Furthermore, a recent Impact study of Erasmus+ Capacity Building in the field of Higher Education (CBHE) identified the lack of financial resources and national higher education strategy to be the fundamental problems in Georgia’s reality (National Erasmus+ Office Georgia (2021), p. 28).



The above-mentioned arguments raise several questions about the main characteristics of the higher education reforms in Georgia. On the one hand, it is important to know what was the guiding incentive for a rapid reformation process since 2004 that resulted in significant adjustments at the legislative level. On the other hand, I will be looking for reasons for the façade nature of these adjustments that raise significant concerns about the quality and sustainability of these reforms. I am convinced that my theoretical and methodological approaches will lead to interesting findings. However, before moving to the analytical part, in the next subchapter I will outline the main theoretical framework and research strategy of this paper.

### ***2.3. Theoretical Framework and Research Strategy***

As Kozma (2014) argues, the Bologna Process coincided in time with the general social and political transition processes in Central and Eastern Europe and therefore, it should be studied as a political process in the region. One should not find this claim to be exaggerated if we take into account the above-mentioned diverse arguments found in the literature, which prove that the Bologna Process is an important carrot in the EU's hands by which it pursues its desirable policy change way beyond its borders. On the other hand, it is also clear that after realizing the EU's role in the Bologna Process, different countries started accepting this carrot, while keeping an eye on far-reaching political goals that also go far beyond simple cooperation and partnership.

As the literature about Georgia's Bologna-related higher education reforms shows, the scholars of higher education in Georgia assign great importance to the Bologna Process as they consider the fulfillment of Bologna requirements to be essential for a successful Europeanization process. At the same time, a clear European narrative of the government's higher education modernization strategy indicates that the government has also shown its will to commit itself to the Bologna requirements, as it realizes the extent to which the EU is involved in the process, and it couples its reform success to its strategic political goals. Although, this thesis will go beyond the simple assessment of certain government directives or the speeches or interviews of political leaders. My study aims to examine the EU's impact on higher education reforms in Georgia. This means answering such questions as what impact does the EU have on higher education reforms in Georgia? What means does the EU use to achieve its preferred outcome of policy change? What are the mediating factors of the EU's successful influence over Georgia's reform direction? Why and how has Georgia used the Bologna framework for its higher education reforms?

However, to achieve these ambitious goals, one needs a proper theoretical and methodological framework. As I already mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, I go in line with the Georgian scholars of higher education and approach the Bologna Process reforms in Georgia in the frame of Europeanization literature. However, at the same time, I think that their use of the Europeanization concept is superficial and does not involve proper scientific definition and operationalization of the term. Therefore, in the following paragraphs, I will look for the definition of Europeanization that applies well to non-member states and higher education field at the same time, as the latter does not simply fall into the EU's legal competencies.

We find one of the first attempts of defining the process of Europeanization in the 1994 article of Robert Ladrech, who studies the process of Europeanization in France. He defines Europeanization as “an incremental process reorienting the direction and shape of politics to the degree that EC [European Community] political and economic dynamics become part of the organizational logic of national politics and policy making’ (Ladrech (1994); p. 69). As it is clear from this definition, Europeanization, in this case, refers only to the impact of the European Community on the domestic level.

Later, based on Ladrech's definition, Radaelli (2000) offered a new conceptualization of the term in which he refers to Europeanization as “Processes of (a) construction (b) diffusion and (c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things’ and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU decisions and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures, and public policies” (p. 30). Radaelli's definition significantly broadened the concept and gave it two-way nature according to which the processes of uploading (supranational level) and downloading (domestic level) work at the same time. In other words, the member states not only passively download the EU policies at the domestic level but also upload their preferences at the EU level (Börzel and Risse (2000); Radaelli (2006)).

Subsequently, the classical definition of Europeanization refers to the impact of the member states' domestic preferences on the supranational decision-making as well as the impact of these decisions on the member states' level. Therefore, in its general sense, Europeanization is understood as the process that simultaneously has both top-down and bottom-up directions (Börzel (2005); Börzel

and Panke (2016)). However, at the same time, it becomes clear that the classical understanding of Europeanization exclusively applies to the EU-member state relationship. Therefore, it makes using the concept in the Georgian case problematic, as Georgia is not an EU member state.

For this reason, the following definition of Europeanization looks more promising: “a process of incorporation in the logic of domestic (national and sub-national) discourse, political structures and public policies of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, “ways of doing things” and shared beliefs and norms that are first defined in the EU policy processes” (Moumoutzis (2011); p. 612). This is a somewhat revised version of Radaelli’s initial definition of Europeanization and it best fits the purpose of this thesis for a couple of reasons. First, it focuses on policy processes and thus indicates that legally binding rules are not a precondition for Europeanization (Moumoutzis (2011)). Second, its scope is not limited to only the member states and it can be successfully applied to non-members as well.

In a general sense, to study the EU’s domestic impact on non-member states, the scholars of European integration use the external governance approach (Lavenex (2004); Lavenex and Uçarer (2004); Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), etc.). While discussing the EU’s influence on European Neighborhood Policy countries, Lavenex (2004) argues, that in this case, the external governance “consists in the (selective) extension of the EU’s norms, rules and policies, i.e. its legal boundary, while precluding the opening of its institutional boundary, i.e. membership” (p. 694). This definition exposes specific characteristic of the EU’s external governance in its neighborhood when the EU rules and policies are transferred and adopted by its neighboring states without a credible membership perspective (Sedelmeier (2006), (2011)).

It is exactly non-member state status that differentiates Europeanization of neighborhood countries from the classical understanding of Europeanization and thus contributes to the development of a separate stream of research (Sedelmeier (2006)). Another important characteristic of non-member states’ Europeanization is that they did not participate in the making of the EU laws and policies. Hence, they never uploaded their domestic preferences at the EU level but they only have to download already fixed laws, rules, and practices at the domestic level. Because of this power asymmetry, the Europeanization of neighborhood countries has a distinctive top-down nature (Sedelmeier (2006)).

The external governance approach has its merits for the purpose of this thesis as well. The concept is flexible enough to include non-member states; it applies not only EU policies but also different EU rules and practices, and it can also occur under different circumstances (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig (2009)). This is when Georgia, as a neighborhood state, is in the EU's external governance area and hence, the most likely case of Europeanization (Schimmelfennig (2012), (2015)). Therefore, when dealing with the impact of the EU's external governance in Georgia in the case of higher education, I mean the Europeanization of Georgia's higher education sector.

Subsequently, because of this kind of Europeanization, Georgia's higher education policies become Europeanized through the EU's external governance mechanisms. To put it in other words, the Europeanization of Georgia's higher education is defined as a process when the EU's external governance methods in higher education cause convergence of Georgia's higher education policies to the European standards and practices in higher education. Although, as I already mentioned, Europeanization in the case of this thesis differs from its classical understanding (EU-member state relationship). Therefore, for the sake of conceptual clarity, I argue in favor of merging these two terms. Consequently, I consider the concept of "External Europeanization" (Lavenex and Uçarer (2004); Börzel and Lebanidze (2017)) to fit well into the study of the EU's external governance impact on Georgia's higher education reforms.

Before I discuss the analytical framework of the thesis, I should make some further remarks. As I already mentioned in the introduction, in this thesis I am not going to engage in a normative discussion of the Bologna Process. Nor will I critically assess my dependent variable – success or failure of the Bologna-related reforms in Georgia, as it is a very broad topic and requires a separate study to be done. That study would need to cover both the governmental and institutional levels as different aspects such as lifelong learning, mobility, and social dimension do not fall into the government competencies and they need to be implemented by the universities themselves (Lezhava (2016)). It is without a doubt that these reforms are not complete and a lot more needs and can be done. Instead, in this thesis, I focus on the implementation process at the state level and rely on the findings of different scholars who argue that substantial changes have been made in different directions of Georgia's higher education since the inception of the Bologna Process (Dobbins and Khachatryan (2015); Emerson and Kovziridze (2016); Lezhava (2016); Lezhava and Amashukeli (2016)).

Moreover, my research focus is not the substance of the EU's external governance either. In this case, the substance refers to the Bologna Process itself and its different requirements. As discussed in the introduction, these requirements can vary for example, from diverse education or youth policies to the European Standards and Guidelines when it comes to quality assurance. Instead, my focus lends on the mode of this external governance (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004)) through which the EU transfers its policies to Georgia.

After defining the main concepts and the focus of this thesis, it is time to turn to the analytical framework in the following paragraph. The scholars of European integration use two fundamental analytical approaches to study the domestic impact of Europe – Rationalist and Sociological institutionalism (Börzel and Risse (2003); Börzel and Risse (2000); Börzel (2005); Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004)). Rationalist institutionalism is a bargaining model based on the logic of consequences and cost-benefit calculations (Schimmelfennig (2003), (2012)); Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), (2005)). According to this approach, the EU tries to bring changes at the domestic level by using rewards (in case of compliance) and sanctions (in case of non-compliance). One of the premises of the Rationalist institutionalist approach is that the actors involved in a bargaining process try to maximize their power. For this reason, they actively exchange threats and promises during a bargaining process (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), (2005)).

By contrast, Sociological institutionalism follows the logic of appropriateness and it highlights softer measures of influence, such as social learning and persuasion (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), (2005); Börzel and Risse (2000)). This approach discards any forms of manipulation and “punishment” and instead, assumes that the EU tries to persuade and teach its policies (Schimmelfennig (2012)). It further posits that actors in a given rule structure are united around a shared collective understanding of proper and socially acceptable behavior (Börzel and Risse (2000)).

These approaches are the most commonly used analytical frameworks to explain the EU's domestic impact at the member state level. Although, when it comes to the non-member states, scholars argue that Rationalist institutionalism explains best the EU's rule transfer to non-member states (Sedelmeier (2006), (2011); Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), (2005)). Here, the fact

that the EU does not deal with its member states, makes it change the instruments through which it intends to transfer its policies and thus, prioritize softer measures over treaty-based tools (Sedelmeier (2006)).

Moreover, scholars with the focus on the EU's relations with its neighboring states, argue that the general and the most efficient policy tool of the EU towards its close neighbors is the one of conditionality (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), (2005), (2020)); Sedelmeier (2006), (2011)). Conditionality is derived from the Rationalist institutionalist approach and considers the EU-non-member state relations as a bargaining process in which reinforcement is strengthened by rewards (Schimmelfennig, Engert, and Knobel (2005)). Simply speaking, conditionality means that the EU offers its rules and policies to its neighbors for adoption and motivates their compliance by means of external incentives (Schimmelfennig (2012)). This approach enables the EU to use its carrots instead of sticks, thus making the adoption process more appealing.

Although, by drawing on the literature about the conditionality policy in the EU's neighborhood, Sedelmeier (2006) and Schimmelfennig (2015) argue that the efficiency of the conditionality considerably varies across target countries and policy areas. At the same time, Schimmelfennig (2015) claims that conditionality works best when it is placed on the policy level. In general, the effectiveness of conditionality depends on several intermediary factors out of which size and credibility of rewards and target government's cost-benefit calculations are most important (Schimmelfennig (2012)).

In this thesis, I refer to the EU's influence on higher education reforms in Georgia in terms of the conditionality approach. I expect it to best explain Georgia's case as it is already well tested on the neighboring states. Moreover, here I apply it to specific higher education policy reforms. Thus, to study the EU's policy instruments and their domestic impact on Georgia's higher education reforms I use the external incentives model (or Rationalist institutionalist model) developed by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004). Therefore, in the following, I will discuss this model, apply it to Georgia's case, and develop subsequent hypotheses. At the same time, for a thorough understanding of my research topic, I will additionally test social-learning and lesson-drawing models also developed by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004).

### ***2.3.1. External Incentives Model (Rationalist institutionalist model)***

The external incentives model is based on the abovementioned conditionality principle according to which the EU uses external incentives to bring its desired policy changes at the non-member state level. In this case, getting rewards is conditional upon the state's compliance with the rules or policies offered by the EU. Self-evidently, not meeting the EU's conditions results in the EU withholding its rewards. (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004)).

Before I move further, it is important to understand what rewards the EU can offer to a non-member state in order to achieve the ultimate policy change. According to Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), these incentives can vary from “trade and cooperation agreements via association agreements to full membership” (p. 663). As we see, the EU can offer a very diverse menu of rewards to states facing conditional cooperation. Although, the biggest incentive for a non-member state to meet the EU's conditions is the prospect of its final membership to the Union.

Moreover, conditionality can work directly (effecting the target government) or indirectly (changing opportunity structures of the change-oriented domestic actors) (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), (2005)). Although, because of the fact that the final decision is always up to the national governments and it is always guided by their cost-benefit calculations, for the success of conditionality the size of rewards should exceed domestic adaptation costs (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), (2005), (2020)). Following this, I generally expect that *the Georgian government adopts the Bologna directives if its projected benefits of the rewards considerably exceed their adoption costs.*

In other words, the absence of considerable domestic costs will be an indication that the expected benefits of the Bologna implementation should be higher and therefore, the government should turn to a successful rule adoption process. On the other hand, if domestic costs of rule adoption are high in Georgia's successive governments' cost-benefit calculations, we can expect that the conditionality will not work and the state will engage in only formal compliance to the EU rules.

At the same time, there are a couple of factors that can mediate this cost-benefit analysis. The first factor is the *determinacy* of the conditions, which primarily indicates their clarity. In other words, clarity means two things. First, the conditions should be set as official rules. Second, they have to

be clear in the sense that the state fully understands what it needs to do to meet these conditions (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), (2005)). Moreover, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2020) add to this point that the EU should provide constant feedback and the states should understand that these reforms are salient for the EU. Hence, I expect *the effectiveness of the Bologna policy transfer to increase if its requirements are officially set as conditions for rewards and the more determinate they are*. This indicates the need for a clear link between the Bologna policies and their conditional rewards.

This indicates that the conditionality should be clearly set in the higher education sector. To make it clear, the Bologna principles are already officially set as rules according to which a target country should harmonize its higher education system with the European Higher Education Area. However, in terms of the external incentives model, this is not enough for the successful conditional rule transfer. In addition to this, the EU should link these rules and principles to the subsequent rewards and run permanent monitoring of the target state's compliance with these rules. On the other hand, the absence of these conditions in Georgia's case would speak against the explanatory power of the external incentives model.

The second mediating factor refers to *the size and speed of the rewards*. The size of the rewards can serve as one of the most important predictors for the outcome of the government's final decision. As mentioned above, membership is the biggest carrot in the EU's hand (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2020) but not the only one. The promise of association and assistance can also serve well to the ultimate goal. At the same time, the more distant the membership perspective is the lower incentive for compliance can be expected as well (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), (2005)).

Although, here arises another problem that the membership perspective is not tangible for non-member states. Even though the EU door is officially open for states willing to join, different factors affecting its enlargement decision make membership perspective very unclear and even unimaginable. Hence, one should expect that the membership perspective should not be the main incentive for Georgia to implement the Bologna reforms. However, some studies show that states still adopt the EU policies without a credible membership perspective (Sedelmeier (2006), (2011)). What matters here is that they commit themselves to meet the conditions with the hope that their



voluntary adaptation will make the EU pay the ultimate reward (Schimmelfennig (2012)). In addition to this, the EU has never officially shut the door for Georgia's membership perspectives. For the sake of a successful membership to the Union, there are certain rules and practices written in different types of cooperation agreements that the target country needs to implement. I argue that this is exactly what Georgia does - it implements the EU rules voluntarily to show its readiness for the ultimate membership.

Taking into consideration the very pro-European narrative of the modernization strategy of Georgia's successive governments and their desire to implement the commitments taken under the association agreement, I argue that it is the ultimate goal (joining the community) that drives Georgia's higher education reforms. Consequently, I frame my main hypothesis in the following way: *the stronger the Georgian government's commitment to the EU membership, the more intensive the reform implementation should be*. It also assumes that the enhancement of the cooperation should strengthen the membership expectations and thus enhance the reform implementation process.

Following this, if Georgia's successive governments strongly commit themselves to the idea of final membership to the EU and use different means to achieve this goal, we can expect that the Bologna Process will be utilized as one of these means. On the contrary, if the commitment to the membership perspective is not strong in Georgia, we can expect that the governments will try to hinder the reform implementation process, procrastinate it or engage in facade compliance.

Another mediating factor that the external incentives model identifies is the *credibility of conditionality*. Simply speaking, the EU threats in case of non-compliance and rewards in case of compliance should be credible. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004) assert that for the sake of credibility, the EU should have superior bargaining power *Vis a Vis* a non-member state (which is crystal-clear in the case of Georgia) and the target state should be certain as well that it gets its rewards. On the other hand, these rewards should be consistent and the target country should not have another alternative rather than the EU (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2020)).

Following this, power asymmetry is relevant in this case to the extent that it strengthens the EU's bargaining power and position in the implementation process. Georgia is in many aspects very dependent on its bilateral cooperation with the EU. This places the key to the successful rule

adoption process in the EU's hands. At the same time, it can assure the elites that the EU is a very important partner for Georgia and therefore, further cooperation and compliance can mean bigger and better rewards on the way to EU integration. Moreover, considering the level of Georgia's dependence on its cooperation with the EU and elites' strong pro-European foreign policy, we can assume that Georgia does not have a better alternative partner rather than the EU. Therefore, in this sense, the EU rules can be considered as the only legitimate ones as implementing them can potentially lead to the final membership.

Considering this, if the EU is constantly rewarding Georgia's progress in the harmonization of its higher education system with the European standards and practices in higher education, we should expect that the state will commit itself to the reforms for the sake of better and bigger rewards. On the other hand, if the state is not certain that it will get rewards in case of the successful implementation, we can assume that it will procrastinate implementing reforms or engage in facade compliance.

The last factor that directly mediates the EU's influence at the domestic level is the *veto players and adoption costs*. It is argued that the higher number of domestic actors, that have the power to block the government's decisions, decreases the likelihood of the rule adoption. However, if we take into account the argument of Dimitrova (2002) and Schimmelfennig, Engert, and Knobel (2003), we should not expect Georgia to have veto players when it comes to the higher education sector. Therefore, I should expect *the absence of veto players in Georgia and thus the higher likelihood of the rule adoption*. When it comes to the domestic adoption costs, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2020) insert some additional aspects in their updated model and argue that domestic costs will be high if compliance threatens the government's power or if the target state has very scarce financial and administrative resources.

Although, the external incentives model is not universal and its explanatory power varies from case to case (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004)). However, it still keeps being the best-suited model to explain the EU's external influence on its neighborhood states (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2020)). Moreover, to avoid negligence of some corroborating variables, I will employ two additional "social learning" and "lesson-drawing" models (originally developed also by

Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), (2005)). Subsequently, it should increase the external validity of the final findings.

### ***2.3.2. The social learning model***

The social learning model is based on the Sociological institutionalist approach and considers the logic of appropriateness to be the driving force of the EU-non-member state relations. According to the social learning model, a non-member state adopts the EU rules if it shares the EU's collective identities, values, and norms and therefore, considers the adoption process to be appropriate (Schimmelfennig (2003); Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), (2005)). Accordingly, the social learning model would consider Europeanization to be initially the process of socialization with Europe. Therefore, according to this model, I expect *Georgia's government to adopt the Bologna requirements if it is persuaded of their appropriateness.*

Although, several factors can influence if the state considers the EU rules and policies to be appropriate. First, the EU rules must be legitimate. It means that the rules are considered to be legitimate if they are formal, the EU member states have to comply with them as well, and they are shared by other international organizations (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), (2005)). Second, it is important that the target government and society identify themselves with the EU community. Finally, the EU rules should not conflict with the domestic ones but tie together well (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), (2005)).

Following this, the social learning model is deemed to explain Georgia's higher education reform process if the formality of the Bologna Process is well realized in Georgia, the state and society identify themselves with Europe, and share the same values. On the contrary, if it is considered that the European rules and practices do not fit the domestic rules, norms, or values, we should see the public resistance to the Bologna Process and government abstention from the reform initiatives.

### ***2.3.3. The lesson-drawing model***

The cases beyond the external incentives and social learning model belong exactly to the lesson-drawing model. This model allows the rule adoption to happen without EU incentives and persuasion (the two standpoints of social learning and external incentives models) (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), (2005)). In this case, governments, disappointed by their

domestic status quo, search for external solutions to their domestic problems. I already presented this kind of attitude of different states in the literature review about the Bologna Process. Accordingly, *I expect that the Georgian government adopts the Bologna policies if it considers that these policies effectively solve domestic problems of higher education.* In principle, the Bologna Process in Georgia coincided in time with the general transformation process in the country. This fact makes it relevant to test the possible explanatory power of the lesson-drawing model as well.

However, the lesson-drawing model can be a little confusing as it incorporates the tenets of both external incentives and social learning models. In the case of the lesson-drawing model, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004), (2005) identify four mediating factors. First, policy dissatisfaction should guide the government's decision to look for alternatives abroad. Second, different epistemic communities should provide the policymakers the links to the EU. Third, these rules to be transferred should be working well in the EU and they should be compatible with the national context. Finally, veto players should not be able to negatively affect the rule adoption process (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005)).

Following this, if Georgia's successive governments understand the Bologna Process as primarily an external solution to the national problems in higher education and utilize it to achieve their domestic policy goals, the implementation process is expected to work successfully even without EU incentives and persuasion. At the same time, the implementation process will be effective if some epistemic communities provide the government with links to the EU rules and practices in higher education and the government is open and welcoming to their ideas and initiatives. On the other hand, absent or weak epistemic network and inconsistency of the Bologna Process to national practices would speak against the lesson-drawing model.

### **3. Methodology**

The abovementioned explanatory models bring up several variables that can mediate the EU's domestic effect at the target state level. These variables can be derived from international settings. In this case, they relate to the differences in the strategies and instruments that the EU uses, and how the EU uses them. Other variables directly mediate the EU's domestic influence on the non-member states. These independent variables are presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Conceptual framework: main independent variables**

	<b>Rationalist institutionalism</b>	<b>Sociological/constructivist institutionalism</b>
EU strategy	Conditionality	Socialization
Facilitating international factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determinacy of conditions</li> <li>• credibility of conditionality</li> <li>• size of rewards and speed of rewards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• legitimacy of EU demands</li> <li>• legitimacy of the process through which the EU formulates demands and promotes rules</li> </ul>
Domestic facilitating factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• domestic costs of adaptation</li> <li>• administrative capacities</li> <li>• veto players</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identification with the EU</li> <li>• positive normative resonance with domestic rules</li> <li>• epistemic networks</li> </ul>

*Based on Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, (2004) and Sedelmeier (2006)*

To test the effect of these variables, I conducted six semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interview respondents were selected through the purposive sampling method. The aim of this purposive sampling was to select respondents with different backgrounds albeit with good knowledge and expertise not only of the Bologna Process but also the main developments in higher education reforms in Georgia. In general, ten emails were sent to the possible respondents four out of which either did not respond at all or did not have time for the interview.

Subsequently, six respondents have been selected three out of which are members of the Erasmus + National Team of Higher Education Reform Experts. At the same time, one out of them has served as the minister of education and science of Georgia and the director of NCEQE. Another respondent is the coordinator of the National Erasmus + Office (NEO) Georgia. The rest of the respondents not only take academic positions in different universities in Georgia but are also actively involved in different higher education research activities and serve as the watchdogs of the Bologna Process and higher education reforms in general.

On the other hand, one can argue that conducting interviews with current and former government officials would be appropriate for this study. This is a legitimate argument, as interviewing people engaged in political decision-making should bring up answers that are more “genuine” and closest to reality. However, reaching political elites can be a time-taking and very bureaucratic task as well. Moreover, bearing in mind the current political crisis in Georgia and preparation of the

political parties for the upcoming elections discouraged me to choose the political elite as my target group. In addition to this, limited time and resources, as well as different restrictions caused by the pandemic, made me decide on higher education reform experts with a broad understanding and expertise of the Bologna-related reforms in Georgia.

Subsequently, my interview respondents were invited for an online interview, which took place on the Zoom online meeting platform between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of July 2021. The interview questions were formulated in a way that they could test the main variables of my explanatory models presented above. The questions had a pre-arranged structure albeit not very strict and respondents were welcomed to develop the conversation further and add their examples and career experiences. At the same time, the formulation of these questions changed following the second interview after observing that certain questions seemed to be vague to the respondents or I considered that they were not relevant to the profile of the expert. The interview material can be accessed in the Annexes part of this thesis. Hereby, I have to mention that the questions the respondent could not answer or answered in an irrelevant way are not included in the annexed interview material.

The interviews were conducted in the Georgian language and then translated and transcribed into English. The notes were organized by questions that allowed me to record some additional remarks related to the questions. These remarks were later coded and identified as additional variables. The whole interview transcript was coded; categories and subcategories were assigned and analyzed by using a qualitative content analyses method. The whole interview material was merged into a single Microsoft Word document.

Considering the fact that the interviews followed pre-determined questions, the whole text was categorized by questions' thematic topics. Subsequent categories included \*linkage between the Bologna Process and the EU\*, \*domestic costs\*, \*effectiveness of the Bologna monitoring\*, etc. Respective subcategories included \*effectiveness of the Bologna Process\* → \*effective on the European and not the domestic level\*; \*descriptive and formal\*, etc. These categories and subcategories were later sorted and the frequency of each subcategory was counted. Subsequent analyses were summarized following the above-mentioned methodology. As expected, these interviews led me to diverse and comprehensive analyses. The main findings of this thesis will be outlined in the following chapter.

#### 4. Analyses

The main findings of my research show that the external incentives model explains the main developments at the state level in the higher education sector better than the other two models. However, because of certain limitations to its successful establishment and utilization in Georgia's case, as well as specific characteristics of Georgia's Bologna implementation, I decided to develop a separate explanatory model, which I call an Anticipated Rewards Model. At the same time, it seems that the EU's impact on Georgia's Bologna implementation process is limited with different factors that derive from both the supranational and the domestic levels. In addition to this, the interview analysis shows that the attitudes of Georgia's successive governments towards the Bologna Process have been changing since its inception in 2005. I will systematically discuss my main findings in the following paragraphs.

To begin with, the external incentives model assumes that the formality and clarity of a rule that is to be adopted determine its successful adoption. When we talk about the formality of the Bologna Process rules and principles, some clarifications need to be made. On the website of the EU's Publications Office, it is written that the Bologna Process is not legally binding but a voluntary process between countries to reform their education systems (Publications Office (2015)). However, I argue here the following: the fact that the Bologna Process is included in the Association Agreement makes the process legally binding on a third country. According to Article 216 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), the Association Agreement is a legally binding type of international agreement between the EU and third-country (TFEU (2012)). Consequently, since 2014 the Bologna requirements became legally binding on Georgia under the Association Agreement.

On the other hand, determinacy means that the state should clearly understand the rules it needs to implement. In the case of the understanding of the Bologna Process at the state level, the study shows that the decision to join the Bologna Process in 2005 was a well-realized step. In this sense, a rapid and successful reorganization of the domestic legislation for the Bologna implementation supports this argument. As one of my respondents stated:

“There are many proofs that the importance of the Bologna Process was well realized. Many things changed both at the legislative and implementation level. The whole system

was reorganized. I think at the system level, the main requirements are already met, such as three-cycle degrees; ECTS, and so on. Therefore, I would not say that the government did not take the Bologna process seriously. Important steps have been taken to fulfill the obligations that we undertook” (T. Sanikidze, personal communication, July 15, 2021).

As argued above, the determinacy of the rules increases if the EU gives constant feedback to a target country and clearly signals that these rules are salient for it. In case of the higher education, this argument has several limitations. First, in order to produce proper feedback, the EU should have an effective monitoring mechanism of the higher education reforms in Georgia. In the case of the Bologna Process, the main source for the Europe-level monitoring are the country-based stocktaking reports preparation of which happens at the domestic level. It is based on the survey type research, which uses the scoreboard indicators to show the success of each member country in comparison to other members. My respondents think that these reports are very descriptive in nature and they do not show the real state of the art of the Bologna implementation process at the domestic level:

“If we talk about stocktaking reports that existed so far, I can say that they served their purpose. They show well where we have success as well as some problems. Although, this “yes” “no” type of assessment can be misleading as well. In general, this kind of assessment is important to see where we are in comparison to other countries and it increases the country’s attractiveness for international projects. However, if we really want to know how well these reforms are actually implemented, we should use some other methods than just simple checks. This monitoring should not be based merely on fact-checking and its quantitative assessment. Rather, we also need some qualitative research. Therefore, I can conclude that we need a different monitoring system that will be based on qualitative assessment” (L. Glonti, personal communication, July 19, 2021).

Considering this, some of my respondents think that it will be better if the EU does independent external monitoring of higher education reforms in Georgia (D. Lezhava, personal communication, July 16, 2021; also I. Darchia, personal communication, July 19, 2021). This is a logical scenario if we consider that the Bologna Process is part of the Association Agreement and therefore, monitoring of the higher education reforms should be subject to the general monitoring of the Association Agreement implementation process. Subsequently, one should look into the annual



Association Implementation Reports to see the EU-level feedback and remarks concerning the state and needs of higher education in Georgia. However, none of the concerns of the scholars and experts of higher education reforms, such as procrastination implementing of the Association Agreement requirements or the façade nature of the reforms, are mentioned in any of the six implementation reports. Here, one of my respondent's arguments can fit this context well:

“When it comes to the monitoring of higher education reforms under the Association Agreement monitoring schemes, it might not be in the donor's interests to do the qualitative research. Doing qualitative research should be in our own interests, as recipients of these programs. I should be interested whether all these efforts and funding I use is actually productive” (L. Glonti, personal communication, July 19, 2021).

In addition to this, as argued above, for the sake of a successful rule adoption the EU should send clear and direct signals to the target country that the rules constitute its priority area in bilateral cooperation. This is where one of the limitations to the EU's successful impact at the domestic level arises. One should consider that inclusion of the Bologna Process in the Association Agreement already signals that harmonization of the domestic higher education system with the European Higher Education Area is one of the EU's priorities. However, it seems that this is not enough. The majority of my respondents think that the EU does not prioritize higher education enough. This has a direct impact on the pace and quality of higher education reforms, as the state seems not to bother itself with the implementation unless the EU demands to do so (D. Lezhava, personal communication, July 16, 2021; also E. Jibladze, personal communication, July 20, 2021; also). Moreover, my respondents think that the quality and the speed of higher education reforms will enhance if the EU activates conditionality in this area, like in other areas of cooperation, and makes harmonizing domestic higher education system with Bologna principles precondition for the membership eligibility (D. Lezhava, personal communication, July 16, 2021; also I. Darchia, personal communication, July 19, 2021).

This leads us to draw several conclusions. First, despite the fact that the EU obliged Georgia to implement the Bologna reforms and its higher education rules and practices under the Association Agreement, it does not prioritize this sector enough. This is when the key to Georgia's domestic compliance is in the EU's hands as it has the capacity to link Georgia's compliance to clear and attainable rewards and do effective monitoring. In other words, there seem to be favourable

grounds for the EU to activate conditionality in the higher education sector and thus boost further implementation process in Georgia. At the same time, in deference to my respondents, I think that more effective monitoring should be in the EU's interest as well if it wants to know how its financial assistance in Georgia is used in reality and if it can cause the anticipated convergence.

Second, the Georgian political elite does not prioritize higher education properly either. Even though it should be in the interests of the Georgian government to use the EU resources to balance domestic costs of compliance and achieve further harmonization and convergence with the European standards in higher education, it does not bother itself to do so if the EU does not demand compliance and constantly monitor the implementation process. This is another proof to what extent can the EU cause genuine convergence of the Georgian higher education system to its rules and agenda in higher education if it really wishes to do so.

Another important factor that the external incentives model identifies is the credibility of the conditionality. Taking into account the fact that this model considers the EU-target country cooperation a bargaining process, power asymmetry proves to be an important precondition for a successful rule transfer. There are many proofs that there is a distinct power asymmetry present in the EU-Georgia cooperation and the EU has superior bargaining power. Georgia gets more than 100 million annual financial assistance from the EU through the European Neighborhood Instrument. This money is used to support the fulfillment of the EU-Georgia Association Agenda goals (Delegation of the European Union to Georgia (2018)).

At the same time, the EU is Georgia's one of biggest trading partners with a share of 27% of its total foreign trade (European Commission (2020)). In addition to this, the EU is Georgia's considerable partner and donor in different policy areas such as environment, governance, education, etc. Considering this, it is clear that Georgia consistently gets rewards (mostly financial assistance) from the EU to meet different requirements under the Association Agreement and advance its cooperation with the EU. Considering this, Georgia does not have a closer partner rather than the EU, with so many fields of social life strongly dependent on its bilateral cooperation and assistance. However, the problem of conditionality is still present here as in the case of higher education, none of the financial rewards is conditional upon Georgia's successful compliance. For the sake of conditionality, these rewards must be clearly attached to further implementation of the EU rules.

On the other hand, power asymmetry is relevant to the extent that it strengthens the EU's bargaining power and position in this process. It means that the key to the successful implementation process is in the EU's hands. Georgia is very dependent on the EU in many aspects that substantially strengthens the EU's credibility and importance. At the same time, it makes the elites realize that the EU is a very important partner for Georgia and further cooperation and compliance means more rewards and approximations on the way to EU integration.

When it comes to the domestic level, as argued in the theoretical part, a number of veto players and domestic costs can significantly mediate the EU's impact on the reform implementation process. As regards veto players, there is an interesting situation in Georgia. There are no veto players in the country that can stop proposed reforms in higher education. In the Georgian reality, the parliament decides on the main direction of higher education and, together with the MES, is responsible for organizing the legal framework for the reform implementation process. The new law in education is deemed to be adopted if it secures one-third of the total amount of votes (Parliament of Georgia (1995)). This means that all ruling parties in the history of independent Georgia had a one-third majority in parliament and could adopt their preferred laws and amendments in higher education. On the other hand, the president officially holds the veto power but it has never been used in the case of higher education reforms.

However, some of my respondents mention that at the beginning of the Bologna inception, there were some resistance groups, mostly academics from the university sector, mobilized to stop or divert the government's Bologna implementation strategy. This was because of the fact that the introduction of new standards and rules in higher education caused a drastic reorganization of the whole sector and it threatened the academic offices of many professors (D. Lezhava, personal communication, July 16, 2021; I. Darchia, personal communication, July 19, 2021). Although, the government managed to convince some of these Bologna skeptics that new reforms were necessary. In other cases, the reforms were conducted anyway at the expense of some academics losing their jobs. On the other hand, the findings show that higher education experts can adopt the role of veto players and make the government abstain from arbitrary behavior (Darchia, personal communication, July 19, 2021).

Following this, in Georgia's case, the president and different parliamentary fractions can use their mandate to block legislative initiatives in higher education. However, at the parliament level, the

veto player should belong to the coalition fraction without whose support the initiator of the legislature will not pass its desired law. Moreover, the president has never used his/her veto power in higher education. On the other hand, there seems that different social groups have acted so far against certain Bologna reforms or the governments' arbitrariness. However, their impact stays very limited.

In addition to this, domestic costs of rule adoption are the factors that deserve specific attention in the case of Georgia. At the same time, understanding domestic costs is crucially important as it directly affects the decision-makers' cost-benefit calculations and thus, mediates the successful rule adoption process. Moreover, it can explain different accusations of some researchers and experts of higher education why the government procrastinates or engages in the façade implementation process. My respondents equivocally agree that the higher education reforms did not have significant costs in the sense that the state did not invest considerable financial resources in the implementation process. One of my respondents, who also served as the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia, when asked about the costs of Bologna reforms, mentions:

“There is quite a weird situation in Georgia in this way. All these reforms so far have been done with very scarce resources. For many countries, doing the same reforms with such scarce resources could be unimaginable. Although, it was possible in Georgia. We did everything with minimal expenses, from annual budgetary expenses. On the one hand, we were able to do all these reforms because they required changes only at the legislative level, such as working on the content of the reforms; adjusting different procedures, etc.” (T. Sanikidze, personal communication, July 15, 2021).

The reason my respondents call these reforms “miracle” (also I. Darchia, personal communication, July 19, 2021) is that even though the state had extremely limited financial resources, it managed to organize a domestic legislative system for the successful implementation of the main principles of the Bologna Process. Another obstacle for the Bologna-related reforms in Georgia seems to be the administrative capacity and expertise to implement reforms. This is not surprising as in 2005 Georgia was still going through a transition to democracy and the institutionalization process was in its making. One of my respondents, who was initially involved in the Bologna implementation process, gives a clear insight into the challenges Georgia faced right after the Bologna inception:

“The only donors that Georgia’s higher education had were Tempus and Erasmus in terms of capacity building. Therefore, what we achieved with these scarce resources is a real miracle. Otherwise, it is impossible to do these things with such scarce resources. Another thing is that the staff was not ready for these reforms. We were only five or six people who started the Bologna implementation process. When I was first invited to take part in these reforms, the only thing I knew was that Bologna was a beautiful city in Italy. We did not have so many resources by then. We were also studying all these at the same time 24/7” (I. Darchia, personal communication, July 19, 2021).

Therefore, this raises a very interesting question: how come that the country implemented crucial reforms when there were no favorable conditions for that but does not follow the same pace when financial and administrative resources, as well as expertise, are more accessible nowadays? The right answer to this seems to be the fact that education remains to be one of the most politicized issues in the country. Considering the fact that reforms of the education sector involve many people, the governments try to manipulate the public with groundless pre-election promises (L. Glonti, personal communication, July 19, 2021; also I. Darchia, personal communication, July 19, 2021).

The politicization of higher education is the process of utilization of higher education for political contestation, when certain political parties try to win public support and subsequently the elections by giving beautiful and ambitious promises that they will ensure a better education system, such as free education, etc. All political parties discuss problems in higher education and use them for their partisan goals and ambitions. Although, these promises are in most cases groundless. A good example of this is the 2020 election document of the ruling party in which it promises that Georgia will become a member country of the Erasmus + (Georgian Dream, 2020). Even though Georgia is not yet ready for this (L. Ghlonti, personal communication), it might sound very attractive for the voters.

This kind of politicization results in several problems that are characteristic of the decision-making process in Georgia. First, using the education sector for the narrow political interests of certain parties eradicates political consensus on the general reform directions and common strategy in higher education. Moreover, it makes ruling parties focus mostly on the short-term reforms or engage in only formal compliance to the Bologna requirements. Therefore, when education

requires a long-term development strategy, there is no political will for it (L. Glonti, personal communication, July 19, 2021; also D. Lezhava, personal communication, July 16, 2021). My respondent summarizes this situation in the following way:

“Education has always so long-term outcome visibility that current costs will always be higher than benefits. Let us say, if I start reforms in quality assurance at the university level, that I have to close down some programs, change curriculums, etc. All these require lots of time and financial resources. It is impossible to get immediate benefits right away. Nevertheless, these benefits will be visible for the country in 20 years. Today the costs are way higher than they will be tomorrow. Therefore, governments do not want to do it because their office lasts only for four years, a maximum of eight years. If the government does all these reforms, it upsets many parts of the chain, including University professors, students, and their parents. Therefore, nobody will vote for them for another four years. They find it difficult to convince people that all these reforms are not for them, but their generations. Therefore, it is not worth it for the governments to risk their power. Therefore they prefer to turn to the formal fulfillment of the requirements. As long as this kind of attitude will be present, the reforms will always have a façade nature” (D. Lezhava, personal communication, July 16, 2021).

This raises another legitimate question: if education is so much politicized in Georgia and a victim of narrow party interests, how did the Saakashvili’s government managed to do so crucial reforms without risking their political power? The simple answer is that political context was different by then. There was no connection between education and the job market and the whole sector was sinking in corruption. Therefore, even though that complete reorganization and reformation of the education sector were necessary, there was public consensus around the reform initiatives. Moreover, because of the general reform euphoria and public trust in political leadership, the government committed itself to series of reforms not only in education but also in other fields of social life. On the other hand, when the government risked political power because of their unpopular deeds and their public popularity decreased, the government stopped the reformation process (D. Lezhava, personal communication, July 16, 2021). This leads me to conclude that this kind of shortsightedness and utilitarianism is not characteristic only for the current political elite. Rather, it is a general pattern in the country albeit dependent on the favorable political context. If

the government holds public trust and support, it commits itself to the reform implementation process no matter how severe it can be. Otherwise, if reform implementation puts the government's political power at risk, then it refrains itself from these reforms or engages in formal and façade compliance.

Another factor that can mediate the EU's domestic impact and, at the same time, is directly linked to the politicization of education is the lack of strategic planning and sustainability of decision-making. The absence of consensus between political parties in Georgia about the main directions of higher education makes developing a common, nationwide education strategy impossible. It was the first time in 2017 when the government of Georgia adopted a common strategy in education and it was directly derived from the EU-Georgia Association Agenda. This could enhance our expectations about positive developments in higher education and its further harmonization with the Bologna Process. However, the analyses show that this document is another attempt at formal compliance and not a well-analyzed strategic goal (D. Lezhava, personal communication, July 16, 2021; I. Darchia, personal communication, July 19, 2021). At the same time, it seems that this document stays locked at the state level and not many higher education institutions are familiar with the government's strategy (L. Glonti, personal communication, July 19, 2021).

Moreover, this strategy already expired in July this year and the MES is planning to develop a new strategy without analyzing how the existing strategy was implemented and if it was successful at all or not (D. Lezhava, personal communication, July 16, 2021). This leads me to the next problem, which is called the lack of sustainability of decision-making. Because of the high politicization of education, the management changes very fast to adapt to short-term goals and political interests of certain political parties. Since the "Rose Revolution", in seventeen years the country changed twelve Ministers of Education and Science. This is when, during this period, the government changed only twice. Therefore, new management always brings new ideas and promises better reforms without evaluating already existing achievements and challenges. In addition to this, this superficial attitude results in disorientation and sometimes dysfunction of state institutions responsible for the development of higher education. This creates a situation when institutions do not work according to their constitutional duties and fulfill their obligations (T. Sanikidze, personal communication, July 15, 2021).

After discussing domestic mediating factors, it is time to move to the next set of factors that directly affect successful rule transfer at the target state-level – size and the speed of conditional rewards. Because the membership perspective is the biggest but not a tangible reward for Georgia, one should expect that it would not be the guiding incentive for the successive governments' commitment to the implementation of the EU's rules and practices in higher education. However, on the contrary to this, I expected that the membership perspective has been exactly the guiding incentive for Georgia's higher education reforms since the inception of the Bologna Process in 2005. Subsequently, the findings of this research support my main hypothesis and show that this is clearly the case. Although, for the sake of clarity, this argument requires a detailed explanation.

First of all, I agree with Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004) in that different intervening factors at the supranational level make membership a very distant reward for a country like Georgia. The case of the Western Balkan accession countries strengthens this argument. Therefore, the objectivity and credibility of this reward are questionable in Georgia's case. However, I also argue that this objectivity does not forbid the subjective development of the ultimate membership perspective. Therefore, when I talk about the Europeanization of Georgia's higher education, I mean the process of harmonizing the domestic higher education system with European rules and practices in higher education guided by exactly this self-developed "credible" membership incentive.

Accordingly, on the contrary to Sedelmeier (2006), (2011), I argue that the membership perspective can be credible in the subjective narrative of the Georgian political elite. This subjectivity in itself can be the result of certain developments at the domestic level. Several studies show that Georgian political elites have tried hard to develop some kind of a national narrative in which membership in the EU serves as the ultimate goal of the country (Bolkvadze et al. (2014); Bolkvadze and Naylor (2015); Müller (2011)). It has to be mentioned that this kind of narrative does not have a partisan dimension and it is the policy objective that unites quite a diverse political spectrum in Georgia.

As a result, the EU is portrayed as an organization membership to which is almost like a sacred goal of the nation. Therefore, European integration became an agenda of almost all political parties in Georgia, and diverting from this foreign policy objective is considered to be "pro-Russianism". Hence, both opposition and ruling parties challenge each other on the success of integration with



Europe and accuse each other of being pro-Russian (and therefore, betrayer of the nation) if any of them divert from this goal. Although, it must be mentioned that this kind of narrative is supported and strengthened with the help of the EU's level of engagement in Georgian domestic politics. A good example of this is the current political crisis in Georgia and the EU's mediation to solve it. Several attempts of the President of the European Council, Charles Michel to solve the months-long political crisis in the country (Gotev (2021)), made all political parties believe that Georgia is at the center of the EU's political agenda.

Moreover, officially the EU's door is not closed for Georgia. If the EU never officially announced that Georgia would become the member state in a foreseeable future, neither did it deny this opportunity. Contrary to this, the EU decided to sign Association Agreement, including DFTA and it continues to commit itself to further assist Georgia on its way forward. In addition to this, mostly positive tone of the Association Agreement Implementation Reports and joint Association Council press releases serve as smaller but important EU rewards that ultimately strengthen the membership perspective. Naming Georgia as the EU's key partner in the South Caucasus region and active participant of the Eastern Partnership initiative (Council of the EU (2021)), makes political elites believe that their voluntary Europeanization pays back.

At the same time, when it comes to the credibility of the EU's rewards, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005) argue that the target country's membership hopes increase when it sees the success of accession countries and thus, believes that the EU is serious about its enlargement promise. This factor seems to play its role in the Georgian political elite's membership expectations as well. For Georgia, the accession success of Western Balkan states constitutes a good example, and hope that its voluntary Europeanization will result in an ultimate accession to the Union. A good example of this argument is the state visit of president Zourabichvili to the republic of North Macedonia, where she, together with other government officials, signed a visa-free agreement between the two countries. In her Skopje press conference speech, she highlighted that the experience of North Macedonia is important for Georgia's EU integration success and added that "The process of integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union is an example and hope for [us]" (President of Georgia (2021)).

Therefore, it should not be surprising that the ultimate membership perspective has been the guiding incentive for the reform implementation process, including harmonization of Georgia's

higher education with the Bologna Process and the EU's rules and practices in higher education. Moreover, it becomes clear that joining the Bologna Process at the Bergen ministerial conference in 2005 was a political decision as well, as part of the general modernization and Europeanization strategy of Saakashvili's government. One of my respondents puts this in the following way:

“It is unambiguously like that. For the policymakers, that [ultimate membership] was the guiding incentive and strategic decision in 2005. To strengthen its European foreign policy, the government used different platforms. In higher education, it was clearly done by means of the Bologna Process. The governmental elite did not refrain from clearly stating that joining the Bologna Process in 2005 was not just a strategic decision in the education sector but also a political one. Moreover, it could be a political decision in the first place. The general guiding incentive by then was Georgia to show up on Europe's political radars. It was a quite smart decision I would say” (E. Jibladze, personal communication, July 20, 2021).

This argument supports the narrative of Kozma (2014) that the Bologna Process in Central and Eastern Europe should be analyzed as a political process as well. It seems that the government assumed that joining any kind of initiative having anything to do with Europe could strengthen its foreign policy agenda:

“Joining Bologna in 2005 was a well-realized step by the revolutionary government. This decision was part of the general foreign policy strategy. Westernization and Europeanization that started in 2004 covered many fields of social life, including the education system. All these reforms took very good pace by then” (D. Lezhava, personal communication, July 16, 2021).

If these reforms in higher education were guided by the ultimate membership incentive, then we should logically see the enhancement of the pace of reforms in line with the advancement of the cooperation process with the EU. This seems to be the case if we consider that the Association Agreement brought Georgia the very first common strategy in education and science. This document claims that it envisages all requirements in higher education under the Association Agreement in the framework of the Bologna Process. At the same time, my respondents agree that the Association Agreement was a good booster for higher education reforms in the country and the government should use this opportunity to pursue a genuine implementation process (D.

Lezhava, personal communication, July 16, 2021; E. Jibladze, personal communication, July 20, 2021; T. Sanikidze, personal communication, July 15, 2021; L. Glonti, personal communication, July 19, 2021).

Further analyses show that the government assigns great importance to the Association Agreement and it realizes the possibility of positive rewards in case of compliance. A good example of that is the fact that it gives a green line to bottom-up initiatives that are proposed under the EU label (L. Glonti, personal communication, July 19, 2021). On the other hand, Association Agreement seems to be a good instrument in the hands of reform experts, who try to remind the government to stick to its obligations. One of my respondents illustrates this with a clear example:

“When we introduced new standards of authorization and quality assurance, some universities were closed, as they could not meet the requirements. The Education Minister and the head of the parliament’s education committee by then were lobbying some private universities that had quality assurance problems. Subsequently, they proposed new amendments according to which implementing these quality assurance standards had to be stopped. At the same time, these reforms were important to the extent that they would enable us to become a member of ENQA and get the EQAR registration. There was a big scandal going on about that. We, higher education experts wrote a letter to the speaker of the parliament, and finally, we managed to stop these propositions. We had two big arguments on our side in that. First, there were huge Quality Assurance reforms that they were trying to stop. The second argument was the Association Agreement in which quality assurance standards were mentioned. Exactly our reference to the Association Agreement saved these reforms. We managed to tackle this private lobbying with the help of the Association Agreement” (I. Darchia, personal communication, July 19, 2021).

At the same time, it is obvious that the EU’s financial assistance significantly supported the reform implementation process. Erasmus + Capacity Building projects played important role in the institutional development of higher education institutions as well as improving the skills and capacities of academic staff and students (National Erasmus+ Office Georgia (2021)). In addition to this, only in 2020, Georgian students and academic staff got 2,888 International Credit Mobility scholarships and Georgia managed to keep its place in the top 10 Erasmus + partner countries (European Commission (2021)). The EU supports numerous research and innovation projects as

well. By 2020, Georgia has received 6.5 million Euros of direct EU contributions for different research and innovation projects (European Commission (2021)). However, when it comes to the financial aid, my respondents prefer the EU to fund higher education reforms directly rather than under general budgetary aid, as very little money is spent on higher education from the country's annual budget (T. Sanikidze, personal communication, July 15, 2021; D. Lezhava, personal communication, July 16, 2021).

On the other hand, together with financial assistance, the EU plays a crucial role in strategic planning and linkage of higher education to other fields of social life in Georgia. It makes sure that the target state understands what knowledge-based economy and knowledge society mean and how to achieve these long-term goals. Therefore, in the absence of strategic long-term planning of Georgian decision-makers, the EU seems to be a strategic promoter and developer as well:

“Current policymakers do not understand well what knowledge-based economy and the knowledge society means. At the policymaking level, the link between education and societal development is not visible. This is apparent in many fields, including strategic documents. Nowadays, the ministry is writing a new 10-year education strategy. It makes the impression that the ministry is writing this strategy for itself, as the linkage between education and other sectors of social life is absent in it. At the same time, if you check some government strategy papers, there this linkage is somehow visible. Although, this is only because of the fact that, different EU funding programs require this money to be used in different ways. It is exactly because of this donor pressures that the government links the development of the education sector to the development of other fields of social life” (E. Jibladze, personal communication, July 20, 2021).

As it seems, many aspects of the external incentives model fit well to Georgia's higher education reform case. The analyses show that the Bologna implementation process was driven by the EU membership perspective of Georgia's successive political elites and the EU played a decisive role in successful domestic rule transfer with the help of different financial incentives. However, the absence of conditionality in the EU's influence on the higher education reforms in Georgia largely limits the explanatory power of the external incentives model.

To put it in another way, the EU has had every means at its disposal to set Georgia's compliance to its rules and practices in higher education conditional to better rewards. There are numerous

potential sources of conditional rewards, including different financial and capacity-building assistance and grants in education and research under Erasmus, Horizon 2020, and Creative Europe. On the other hand, Georgia has been getting these rewards anyway since it successfully organized the legislative side for different projects to work properly. This makes the impression that there is some compliance and subsequent rewards from the EU's side.

Therefore, at first glance, one might consider that the external incentives model can be well suited for Georgia's Bologna implementation process. However, we should not forget that the external incentives model requires rewards to be officially made by the EU conditional upon the target country's compliance with its rules. In the case of Georgia, none of these abovementioned rewards has been set as conditions to Bologna compliance. Moreover, here we talk about the membership perspective as the biggest incentive that has been guiding Georgia's Bologna implementation process. In this case, the EU has never officially given a clear and attainable membership perspective to Georgia. So far, it has just promised Georgia its commitment and further assistance on the way to the EU approximation. Even though, the EU signed the Association Agreement with Georgia, there is no clear hope that Georgia will become a member in a near future. This is when Western Balkan states have better chances to be included in the next enlargement but they have no clear deadline when this enlargement will take place.

This leaves us in an interesting situation. Georgia has been abiding by the EU rules in higher education and strengthening its Bologna implementation process with the membership incentive, which has never been officially promised by the EU. However, this did not stop the Georgian political elite from developing a strong pro-European foreign policy supported by a cultural-identitarian narrative in which membership to the EU serves as a sacred ultimate goal. Subsequently, the strong commitment of Georgia's successive governments to this ultimate goal has been driving the reformation process in the country after the "Rose Revolution" part of which are reforms in higher education as well. Therefore, I can conclude that the findings support my main hypothesis albeit not in the context of the external incentives model.

After discussing a limited explanatory power of the external incentives model in Georgia's case, it is time to refer to two other models and their part in explaining the main developments in higher education. It will not be correct to argue that only the external incentives model explains the governments' motivation to reform the higher education system, especially when the attitudes of

the political elite towards the Bologna Process have been changing in course of time (I. Darchia, personal communication, July 19, 2021). Already 2002 parliament's decree shows that the political elite realized the unfavorable status quo of the education system and started looking for foreign successful models according to which they intended to modernize higher education. Although, this plan did not have a long time span, as in 2003 the "Rose Revolution" resulted in the change of political power. Consequently, the revolutionary government immediately started developing a European narrative for the country's foreign policy and pursued its Europeanization strategy with membership to the Union as the ultimate goal. As I already discussed, the Bologna Process has served as one of the platforms to realize new Westernization and Europeanization strategy.

However, this should not be understood in a way that the government saw the Bologna Process just as a European initiative and decided to adopt it unconditionally. On the contrary, at the same time, the Bologna Process was a well-tested foreign model of modernizing higher education. Therefore, the government used it to draw lessons and practices and use it to cope with mounting problems at the domestic level. This is not surprising, as I already discussed this kind of attitude of different governments worldwide, including the founders of the Bologna Process. Accordingly, the government successfully used the Bologna Process to give public legitimacy to their severe and unpopular reforms (D. Lezhava, personal communication, July 16, 2021; I. Darchia, personal communication, July 19, 2021) and utilized it as a means of fast and efficient systematization (E. Jibladze, personal communication, July 20, 2021).

Considering this, it seems that there were enough grounds at the domestic level for the lesson-drawing model to work successfully. The government was extremely dissatisfied with the status quo of the education system and it was desperately looking for foreign models to solve the national problems. At the same time, the Bologna rules had very transferable value, as they were European and there were literary no sustainable domestic rules in higher education with which the Bologna rules could clash. On these favorable grounds, the government managed to adopt the Bologna practices with no significant domestic costs. Therefore, it is obvious that the lesson-drawing model also explains the government's initial strategy. Although, if not the ultimate membership perspective, only the lesson-drawing motive would not be enough to pursue these crucial systemic changes in higher education (T. Sanikidze, personal communication, July 15, 2021). A good example of this is that reforms continued successfully even after Georgia organized its legislation

and finished institution-building. Moreover, these reforms even accelerated after the signing of the Association Agreement. Moreover, the lesson-drawing model assumes that the EU rule adoption is possible even without EU incentives and persuasion. Therefore, I conclude that the lesson-drawing model explains Georgia's initial reform strategy to some extent but it cannot be considered as a single explanatory model.

When it comes to the social learning model, it must be said that the narrative of the successive political elites has always contained a strong cultural-identitarian dimension. This tendency started in 1992 when the late Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania officially announced in the Council of Europe building that Georgia claims to be part of the European civilization and it strives to reintegrate into its European family. Later in 2004, Mikheil Saakashvili used this narrative as a "state doctrine" in his inauguration speech: "...today, we have not raised European flag by accident - this flag is Georgian flag as well, as far as it embodies our civilization, our culture, the essence of our history and perspective, and vision of our future" (Civil.ge (2004)). On the other hand, this narrative should not be understood only as an obsession of the previous government. On the contrary, the current ruling party's 2020 election program reads: "the EU serves as an essential space for preserving and developing our identity and ensuring decent living conditions of each of our citizens" (Georgian Dream (2020)).

In addition to this, Georgia officially abided by the European norms and values when it joined the European Cultural Convention in 1997, which at the same time is the only precondition for joining the Bologna Process. On the other hand, my analyses support the argument of the above-mentioned researchers that this kind of cultural-identitarian narrative has been an elite-driven project. My respondents recall some Bologna resistance movements at the time of its inception that claimed that the Bologna Process was threatening traditional values and "Georgianship" (D. Lezhava, personal communication, July 16, 2021; I. Darchia, personal communication, July 19, 2021). At the same time, it seems that this kind of narrative is fading away in course of time (L. Glonti, personal communication, July 19, 2021) and the Soviet legacy is still quite strong in society (M. Karchava, personal communication, July 21, 2021). Consequently, my findings show the following: despite the fact that there have always been favorable grounds for the socialization to work, it has never been the guiding incentive for the government to harmonize the Georgian higher education system with European rules and standards. Therefore, it leads me to conclude that the

social learning model has the weakest explanatory power and cannot be considered to be able to shed light on the main reform dynamics in the country.

Subsequently, my findings conclude that the external incentives model explains the case of Georgia's Bologna implementation process most albeit not completely. More clearly, its reasoning does apply to my case study, however, the fact that conditionality is absent in higher education and a credible membership perspective is distant, makes it problematic to accept the external incentives model as a single powerful explanation. Therefore, this arises a logical question: how can we then explain Georgia's higher education reform process? For this purpose, I decided to develop an Anticipated Rewards Model that, I argue, explains the main dynamics of the Bologna implementation process in Georgia.

Anticipated Rewards Model resembles the external incentives model; however, it has its own qualifications that are peculiar for the Georgian case. This new model will try to give a name to the case of voluntary Europeanization discussed in Schimmelfennig (2015) and contribute to the work of Sedelmeier (2006, 2011). Similar to the external incentives model, in the case of the anticipated rewards model the ultimate membership to the EU is the main guiding incentive for the domestic political elite. However, in this case, the external credibility and objectivity of the country's membership perspective to the Union are not as problematic as in the case of the external incentives model, as this incentive does not need to be officially offered by the EU. In other words, despite the fact that Georgia's EU membership in the near future lacks credibility and prospect, it did not forbid the political elite to voluntarily abide by the EU norms and practices in higher education with the hope that playing an obedient and reliable partner would convince the EU to award Georgia with a credible membership perspective. This means that in the eyes of the domestic political elite, playing a "good student" should make the ultimate membership perspective credible.

In addition to this, various financial and capacity-building support are important incentives for successful rule transfer at the domestic level, as they motivate and support further approximation with the EU rules and standards. However, these incentives have supplementary nature and further support from the EU is not conditional upon successful compliance. Moreover, in case of no effective EU monitoring, the word successful is questionable in this case, as experts of higher education broadly criticize the governments' superficial Bologna implementation process. When



the government sees that the EU does not require qualitative assessment of the domestic rule adoption and it relies mostly on fact-check-based national monitoring, it turns to compliance mostly on the paper level and abstains itself from the deeper and more genuine implementation.

The reason for the governments' superficial rule transfer is that the politicization of education raises the domestic costs of the Bologna implementation. Despite the fact that deep and comprehensive reforms require a long-term strategy and planning the government focuses on the short-term goals to win the hearts of its electorate, as long-term reforms have longer outcome visibility. When the quality assurance reforms require some severe changes at the institutional level, the government might turn to superficial compliance as it might upset different groups with these reforms and end up with lesser public support because of its unpopular initiatives. However, in the case of Georgia, this formal compliance is not properly assessed and responded to. On the contrary, this façade compliance is rewarded by the EU and promises for further support are given.

Based on this, I argue that in the anticipated rewards model, lack of effective monitoring gives favorable grounds for the superficial EU rule transfer. However, this does not mean that it excludes the possibility of real compliance. This model explains the situation when the target state government is torn between its narrow political interests on the one hand and the ultimate membership perspective on the other. In the case of Georgia, the domestic costs outweigh distant benefits albeit these benefits are considered to be very important as well. Therefore, by turning to formal compliance successive governments of Georgia have been trying to pursue the ultimate membership perspective with the minimum domestic costs of the reform implementation process.

At the same time, this formal compliance enables the government to signal its obedience and willingness for further rule transfer for the sake of better and bigger rewards. By formally complying with the EU rules and practices in higher education, the governments of Georgia have been sending a clear signal that Georgia abides by the EU rules voluntarily in return for a credible membership perspective. On the other hand, these false signals of "excellence" are accepted and rewarded by the EU, as it does not use an effective control mechanism to decode and analyze these signals. Therefore, the anticipated rewards model entails a win-lose situation, when Georgia engages in façade compliance with the EU rules and practices in higher education and the EU blindly accepts these signals and promises further assistance.

Consequently, my findings make it clear that the Bologna implementation process has been primarily a political decision. If the governments were genuinely interested in the modernization and reformation of the domestic education system then the state would run qualitative research of these reform outcomes, develop an effective long-term education strategy, and ensure actual approximation with the EU standards and guidelines. However, contrary to these expectations, the state has utilized the EU support and assistance to pursue its membership goals with minimum expenses that in most of the cases resulted in formal compliance on the paper level.

In conclusion, the analyses show that the EU has had a significant impact on the higher education reforms in Georgia. Since the inception of the Bologna Process in 2005, the EU has supported different reform initiatives financially through different funding mechanisms. However, when it comes to the quality of these reforms at the domestic level, this impact seems to be limited by different factors that are characteristic of the Georgian case. At the same time, it is clear that the country's ultimate membership perspective has been the guiding incentive for the successive governments' modernization strategies. This tendency took place right after joining the Bologna Process and continues to be the main motivation up to now. On the other hand, social learning and lesson-drawing have not been strong enough incentives for Georgia's successive governments. If not its anticipated ultimate membership reward, as well as the EU's commitment to further assistance and association, already achieved reform success would not simply be possible.

Subsequently, Georgia's Bologna implementation can be better understood in terms of the anticipated rewards model. In this case, Georgia anticipates that closer cooperation and approximation with the EU rules and norms will pay off and result in a tangible EU membership perspective. Moreover, this model does not require this perspective to be objective and credible. In the case of the anticipated rewards model, voluntary bottom-up Europeanization of a target state is expected to give credibility to this perspective, as it intends to convince the EU to grant this ultimate reward.

In addition to this, for the anticipated rewards model rewards do not need to be conditional upon the target country's successful compliance. In this case, rewards are anticipated and not officially offered. At the same time, the absence of an effective EU monitoring of a target country's compliance enables that target state to manipulate and send false signals of "excellence" to the EU. This is because the domestic costs of compliance are high albeit the value of an ultimate

reward is greater. Therefore, to balance this “cognitive dissonance”, the state turns to formal compliance and signaling with the hope that in the absence of effective external monitoring, its formal compliance will result in better and bigger rewards.

Following this, I consider that Georgia’s higher education reform implementation since joining the Bologna Process in 2005 should be understood as a bottom-up process when Georgia voluntarily implemented some reform initiatives with the hope that this would enhance its general European foreign policy. Between 2005-2016 time span, these reforms had voluntary nature, as there was no external enforcement mechanism. This situation could potentially change in 2016 when the Association Agreement entered into force and the Bologna Process became one of Georgia’s international obligations. However, my analyses show that the EU does not yet set conditionality in higher education. This gives a bigger advantage to the Georgian political elite to use formal compliance, signal its “excellence”, and anticipate better rewards in return. Therefore, I argue that in the case of the higher education system, we see a formal bottom-up voluntary Europeanization in Georgia.

## **5. Conclusion and Discussion**

In this MA thesis project, I studied the impact of the EU’s external governance on the higher education reforms in Georgia. For this purpose, I used the Europeanization literature on the EU’s neighboring states as my main theoretical framework. In this literature, Europeanization refers to the EU’s domestic impact on the non-member state level through different mechanisms of its rule transfer. Moreover, I argued that this impact could be framed in terms of external Europeanization. Subsequently, my main research question asked the following: what explains the EU’s influence on the higher education reforms in Georgia? This meant answering such interrelated questions as what mechanisms could the EU use to exert its influence on Georgia’s higher education reforms; what are the mediating factors for the EU’s influence at the domestic level, etc.

At the same time, doing this research has been challenging from the beginning for several reasons. First, I intended to study the EU’s influence in the policy area, which does not fall in its traditional competencies. However, I think I argued convincingly enough that the Bologna Process has served as quite a successful tool in the EU’s hands to extend its rules and practices in higher education way beyond its traditional borders. Second, in this thesis, I used the external incentives model as

my main guidebook to study the mechanisms and outcomes of this domestic impact. In doing so, I had to challenge my chosen theoretical approach and argue that Georgia's self-induced "credible" ultimate membership perspective has been the guiding incentive for the main dynamics of higher education reforms. Subsequently, I developed a new anticipated rewards model, which I think explains the characteristics of Georgia's higher education reform process the best. Third, by focusing on a small group of higher education reform experts, I challenged the generalizability value of my research findings.

Consequently, my "unconventional" research strategy paid off and I ended up with very diverse and interesting research findings. This study proves that the EU's impact on higher education at the target state level can be analyzed in the framework of its external governance approach. It becomes obvious that the EU tries to externalize its practices and agenda in higher education to its neighboring states. To do this, it incorporates the Bologna Process and its Higher Education Agenda into the bilateral Association Agreements it signs with its neighboring countries, thus making its rules, standards, and practices in higher education legally binding on the target state. At the same time, even if it does not promise its neighbors clear deadlines for enlargement, its commitment and pledge for further assistance makes a target country incentivize the adoption of the EU rules, and dock hopes that its voluntary Europeanization will result in a real membership one day.

This seems to be the case of higher education reforms in Georgia. Not surprisingly, the inception of the Bologna Process in 2005 happened as a result of a change in political power following the "Rose Revolution". The new government adopted the western and European way of state development and foreign policy as the only "orthodox" political strategy and decided to use every available platform to bring Georgia closer to Europe. The Bologna Process gained a crucial role in this highly ideologically driven struggle as introducing the European standards in higher education could pay back in terms of Europeanization of the public. Moreover, it meant opening the European space to the new generation and thus, changing the public opinion in favor of European integration. On the other hand, the Bologna Process was the right tool for the government at the right time to tackle mounting problems in higher education and to systematize it. Therefore, the government managed to pave the way for the successful implementation of the Bologna

reforms with almost no financial costs and give legitimacy to their unpopular reforms by shifting the blame game abroad.

At the same time, the successful utilization of this strategy was highly dependent on the main incentive of these crucial reforms. It was realized that these reforms were important to reach the ultimate goal – to become a member of the European Union. Analyses of the main reform dynamics since 2005 show that it is exactly the ultimate membership perspective that has been driving higher education reforms in Georgia. Either my respondents directly agree to this argument or their broader reasoning supports this claim. On the other hand, as I already argued, if the external credibility and objectivity of this incentive are questionable, internal credibility seems to be quite strong in the Georgian case. This internal credibility is strengthened with the EU's level of involvement in Georgia's everyday politics and its promise of further association and assistance. In addition to this, the success of accession countries makes the political elite believe that the EU is serious about its enlargement promise.

Moreover, these reforms continued even after Georgia successfully organized legal grounds and implemented the main principles of the Bologna Process at the domestic level. The fact that these reforms accelerated after the Association Agreement, supports the main hypothesis that the ultimate membership is the real guiding incentive of these reforms. This is because the Association Agreement brought the implementation process to a higher level and harmonization of domestic higher education with the European Higher Education Area became a legal commitment. This enabled me to conclude that the anticipated rewards model explains best the main milestones in the Georgian higher education reformation process.

On the other hand, as I already argued, the lesson-drawing model can also explain the very beginnings of the reform process, as coping with existed problems in higher education was one of the government's priorities. However, it becomes clear as well that this success would not be possible if Georgia's political elite did not commit itself to the EU membership strongly and use this ultimate foreign policy goal to incentivize higher education reforms in the country. Moreover, my findings also shed light on the fact that even though the legitimacy and credibility of the EU have always been high in the eyes of the Georgian political elite, merely socialization has not been strong enough incentive for the successive governments to introduce these severe and in some cases, unpopular reforms.

Research findings also show that the EU had a significant impact on the higher education reforms in Georgia. Since the introduction of the Bologna Process, the EU has supported these reforms through different mechanisms. Tempus and Erasmus projects helped the country to train experts of higher education reforms, develop, and modernize higher education institutions. Erasmus + credit mobility scholarships enabled thousands of students and academic staff to experience the European standards in higher education and draw lessons from the best practices. These developments were important in a way that they had significant bottom-up influence as well. In addition to this, the EU supported numerous scientific and research activities that are crucial for the development of quality of the higher education. At the same time, it seems that the EU plays a significant role in the strategic development of higher education as well.

Another important finding is the limitation to the EU's domestic impact. If we look at the reform implementation at the official level, it seems that everything is in order. However, my respondents raise several concerns regarding the quality of higher education reforms in the country. The factors that outline these concerns are the mediating variables of the EU's impact at the domestic level. I united these domestic factors under the term of politicization of the Georgian higher education system. As analyses show, the Georgian political elite seems to be torn between its international obligations and its narrow political interests at the domestic level. This kind of politicization not only hinders the EU's successful influence but also makes a long-term strategic development of the higher education sector impossible. The worst outcome that this politicization has is that the state turns to procrastination of fulfillment of its obligations or engages in a formal and façade compliance to the Bologna principles.

On the other hand, my research suggests that there is a remedy for this situation to change. The key to the better prospects of the higher education system in Georgia is both in the EU's hands and at the domestic level. There are many proofs that the EU can change the behavior of the Georgian political elite through different mechanisms. It already made a big step forward by including the Bologna Process and its Higher Education Agenda in the Association Agreement. By doing this, it legally obliged Georgia to implement all necessary rules and requirements in its national legislation. Now it is time for the EU to prioritize higher education better and signal the Georgian government that the big brother is watching. For this, the EU should use a better monitoring mechanism rather than simple quantitative Bologna Stocktaking Reports and level up its

sanctioning power in case of no or façade compliance. As current Association Agreement monitoring reports show, the EU does not yet engage in better assessment of the quality of the higher education reform outcomes. If it is interested in the harmonization of Georgia's higher education system with the standards of the European Higher Education Area, it should use more effective monitoring tools and link better compliance to stronger rewards.

In addition to this, I argued that the new anticipated rewards model explains the most of Georgian case. After the "Rose Revolution", the political elite determined Georgia's pro-European foreign policy the ultimate goal of which is Georgia's membership to the Union. Therefore, successive governments used different platforms to achieve the ultimate goal one of which was an approximation of the Georgian higher education system with the European rules and standards. Accordingly, the governments anticipated that implementing the Bologna Process could show the EU that by voluntarily adopting the EU rules and practices, Georgia was pursuing Europeanization strategy. This means that, playing a "good student" is meant to pay off and make the membership reward tangible for Georgia. Subsequently, the political elite has been introducing quite severe higher education reforms and successfully bypassing attempts of some veto players to block reform initiatives. However, this lasted as long as the government kept popularity in public. When the popularity of the ruling elite decreased and continuing unpopular reforms threatened their political power, the state started to procrastinate these reforms or engage in façade compliance.

Despite the fact that the Association Agreement is yet the highest level of bilateral cooperation with the EU, the government continues formal compliance as it finds itself restrained with its narrow political interests. This means the following: despite its strong commitment to the ultimate EU membership, domestic costs (not necessarily financial) play significant role in the cost-benefit calculations of the political elite. On the other hand, because of the superficial EU monitoring of the reform process and the absence of conditionality in higher education, Georgia manages to send false positive signals of "excellence" to the EU and show its desire for bigger rewards. Moreover, it is possible that higher education is not the only field in which the Georgian political elite uses formal compliance. In this sense, effective EU monitoring and the use of clear-cut conditionality have great importance.

On the other hand, political consensus is needed at the domestic level to finally develop a common sustainable plan in higher education. Moreover, political polarization and politicization of higher

education are the biggest problems of the Europeanization of Georgia's higher education. As my respondents mention, higher education always has long-term outcome visibility. Therefore, if political parties sacrifice higher education to their short-term political interests, reforms will not have any positive outcome visibility in a near future. Moreover, international obligations should be a unifying factor for the political spectrum if parties genuinely invest their resources in the European future of the country.

Furthermore, if there is no clear public demand for a better higher education system, political parties will always continue to utilize this issue to win the hearts of specific societal groups. For this purpose, academics and epistemic communities should invest their resources in explaining public the importance of a knowledge-based economy and knowledge society for a sustainable future. In addition to this, higher education experts should invest more in the domestic monitoring of higher education reforms. As this research showed, they contributed already a lot to the successful implementation of the Bologna Process. On the other hand, it is also clear that their engagement and utilization of the Association Agreement can change the government's arbitrary behavior. Therefore, they should become stronger reform watchdogs and make their voice be heard.

As regards the method of this research, I consider that impartiality and generalizability of my findings should not be questionable. Despite the limited sample size, my respondents have a very diverse background and expertise in higher education. When some of them have been directly involved in the Bologna implementation process, others have long academic expertise in it. Therefore, I think that my findings are impartial and they reflect the main challenges and the state of the art of the higher education system in Georgia. At the same time, I consider that this research should be a good motivation to study the EU's impact on the other fields of interest.



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## **Annex one - Interview Material**



**Respondent T. Sanikidze**

15.07.2021

**Question 1.** What is your opinion, how does the government of Georgia (decision-making bodies) understand the Bologna Process in general? How does it understand what the Bologna is all about, what requirements it has, and what it needs to do for the proper implementation? How well is the Bologna Process understood in Georgia?

There are many proofs that the importance of the Bologna Process was well realized. Many things changed both at the legislative and implementation level. The whole system was reorganized. I think at the system level, the main requirements are already met, such as three-cycle degrees; ECTS, and so on. Therefore, I would not say that the government did not take the Bologna process seriously. Important steps have been taken to fulfill the obligations that we undertook.

One of the proofs is the fact that the mobility of our students continues without impediments. It is without a doubt that there is a lot more to do when it comes to the content of these reforms. Although, we should not see this as like only we have these problems. There are many countries, with better education systems, who are consistently working on Bologna. This is because the Bologna Process is primarily a process and not just a single indicator, which you achieve once and is done.

**Question 2.** To what extent do you think that a national-reports-based monitoring system is a problem to have a big picture of the reform implementation process?

These reports are valuable in a way that they show where we are at the international level, in comparison with other countries. In this regard, Georgia was part of the Bologna Follow-Up Group for a long time but we had problems with visibility. I think Georgia's representation would be more complete if the Ministry of Education was a member of the Bologna Process and not the Quality Assurance Agency. If the Ministry were present at the Bologna, then it would be easier to collect and process all the information. Ministry could do it better because it is in a better position to collect all necessary information for reports in a more efficient way. I would not say that the validity of the information that the ministry can produce should be questioned. I would ask more

about how complete information we give to the monitoring group. The Ministry will be responsible for the validity and comprehensiveness of the information that these reports contain.

**Question 3.** What do you think, how well is it realized in Georgia that the Bologna Process and higher education is one of the most salient priorities of the EU?

Because of the Bologna Process, the European Higher Education Area was created. This was not done by chance and a lot is meant by that fact. We, as a country claim that we want to be part of that area. We do not only claim that we want to be part of it, but we also did some things and deserved to be an actor in that area. We should remember that Bologna Process is a process in which the countries engaged themselves, without external coercion. It was based on a common will. If you want your education system to be compatible with the Bologna Process to be able to export your own good and import the good of the others. If we did not realize it or did not do enough for this, our students would not be able to continue their studies abroad. If not Erasmus +, our students would be able to go abroad but they would not have money to do it.

I think Georgia does not look at the Bologna Process like a single program. If it was understood just as a program, so many changes at the legislative level and these whole processes would not take place. The single question that we should have here is how well we fulfill the obligations that we willingly took under the Bologna Process. In addition, we should see that these processes accelerated last times, especially after signing the Association Agreement as a result of which the fulfillment of these obligations moved to a higher level. With the Association Agreement, we have a new incentive to do things that we need to do faster. This is when the country officially declares that its main aim is the ultimate membership in the EU.

**Question 4.** What do u think, to what extent does the ultimate membership incentive guide the higher education reform implementation dynamics in Georgia?

The dynamic of reforms that we took after the Association Agreement, was very good. If it does not stop and fulfill its goals, then we can say that Georgia's higher education system is ready for the complete EU membership, with regards to higher education of course. In 2016, 17, and 18, these legislative changes carried out in higher education and quality enhancement law were

directly derived from the Association Agreement. If this ultimate membership agenda reinforces these reform dynamics, we will be in a better position.

At the same time, globalization and global job market plays important role in the reform implementation process as well. Even if not Bologna Process, we would have to do changes anyway because of the globalization demands. These Bologna reforms are also derived from the global labor market demands. However, globalization exists already for a long time. However, the dynamic and the pace of reforms in higher education in Georgia is mostly connected to the EU integration process. Even though, I would not say that these two things are mutually exclusive. They should be understood as complementary processes to each other.

**Question 5.** What do u think, to what extent should we expect an acceleration of the higher education reforms in Georgia, after the Association Agreement, and Georgia's further approaching to the EU?

Association Agreement is directly linked to the acceleration of reforms in higher education. I would like to mention once again that, Association Agreement was a good booster that accelerated many reforms in Georgia, especially in areas such as quality assurance, qualification framework, diploma recognition, lifelong learning, etc. If not for the Association Agreement, all these reforms would be significantly delayed. The Association Agreement brought many target projects funded by the EU. At the same time, these projects will be followed by thorough monitoring from the EU. All these things are strongly interconnected. It will be a big mistake if the new membership agenda, which will be proposed soon, do not use this chance to continue the reforms in higher education.

**Question 6.** What domestic costs exist in Georgia that can negatively affect the reform implementation process?

There is quite a weird situation in Georgia in this way. All these reforms so far have been done with very scarce resources. For many countries, doing the same reforms with such scarce resources could be unimaginable. Although, it was possible in Georgia. We did everything with minimal expenses, from annual budgetary expenses. On the one hand, we were able to do all these reforms because they required changes only at the legislative level, such as working on the content of the reforms; adjusting different procedures, etc.

My feeling is that sometimes big-scale reforms are announced but they mostly lack enough financial resources for real implementation. So far, all these reforms did not require big financial resources.

At the same time, we have also another big problem connected to the sustainability of decision-making. What it means is that the management in the education sector is changing very quickly and the reform implementation process is not finalized. This is one of the reasons what hindered the implementation of many other reforms.

On the other hand, when it comes to the EU money is not a targeted financial aid. Rather it is budgetary support. This money goes to the central budget. This money is mostly directed to vocational education and the results are visible there. This kind of support is not directed to the higher education development projects.

**Question 7.** Should we expect that EU monitoring of the higher education reforms under the Association Agreement would further enhance the reform implementation process? (Changing the type of monitoring to a more official and credible one).

Monitoring is a good mechanism for the acceleration of the reform implementation process. Although, not the primary one. If these obligations are not realized well at the domestic and on the institutional level, like parliament, ministry, and the government, and so on, the monitoring will not be helpful.

**Question 8.** To what extent is the domestic status quo of higher education in conflict with the Bologna principles and requirements? To what extent can this status quo affect the reform implementation process?

It is easily visible that there is no consensus around the necessary reforms in higher education in Georgia. At the same time, the state institutions do not work according to their duties. When the new law is adopted, the parliament is entitled to the monitoring of its implementation. How many parliament reports do you know that show what has been or has not been done in the education system? Another thing is the quality of these changes in the law. I will tell you a simple example from 2019. The law on teacher's qualifications was finally organized and suddenly in one year so that nobody had realized it, the new management comes and amends this law once again.

Therefore, the sustainability of the reforms is a serious problem. Decision-making lacks logical grounds. These are serious problems. At the same time, the Association Agreement, budgetary support monitoring helps us not to go too far in decision-making. Although, we manage anyhow to damage everything from inside.

The parliament is not responsible for the quality and implementation of reforms. According to the law, education policymaking is the parliament's mandate. The executive is responsible for the execution. This is when, nowadays in Georgia, the executive writes the education strategy and nobody knows where the parliament is. Institutional arrangements and conducting their duties according to this arrangement are not visible in Georgia.

**Question 9.** What role do the Europe-oriented organizations (epistemic communities) have in the higher education decision-making process? How open is the government for their ideas?

That is one of the weaknesses in Georgia. The NGOs working in the education sector are not strong and well-financed in Georgia. The NGOs working on the elections, the rule of law, human rights, etc. are more developed and well funded. I would not say the same about the NGOs working in the education sector. Association Agreement directly mentions that society should be actively involved in the reform implementation process. This is one of the biggest weaknesses in the education sector. The NGOs do not have proper funding in the country to work normally. We have to engage in different international grant projects, from which we can take and use some grants. There are not enough financial resources to build your capacity and work on the monitoring, engage in analyses of the reforms, write policy briefs, etc.

**Question 10.** What do you think, to what extent do the infrastructure, institutional arrangement, and human resources affect the reforms process? If lack of resources can be considered as one of the biggest problems?

The number one problem for Georgia is a consistent decision-making process in higher education. It is a bigger problem than financial resources. Because of this lack of consistent political decision-making, even good reform initiatives, unfortunately, have not a long life. The laws are not developing or elaborating further but they are just changing fast. The resource is a problem for sure. Although, one can plan resources well if there is consistent decision-making.

**Question 11.** To what extent do you think that other incentives can also guide the reform implementation process in Georgia? Such as socialization and lesson drawing?

I would not exclude any of them. So far, I can see the elements of both. I would add another one. These international obligations are a good tool to avoid domestic party polarization. Otherwise, domestic political conflicts significantly affect the development of such long goals as the higher education reformation. Therefore, our problem is that we could not agree on the “must-dos” in the education system. Without this kind of common sense about the necessity and the direction of reforms, we will not be able to achieve anything. This fast pace of changes even under the same government, not to say anything about the change in governments, just ruins everything.

## **Respondent D. Lezhava**

16.07.2021

**Question 1.** What is your opinion, how do the government of Georgia (decision-making) bodies understand the process in General? How does it understand what the Bologna is all about, what requirements it has, and what a state needs to do for the proper implementation? How well is the Bologna Process understood in Georgia?

I have some kind of ambivalent feeling about that. I think the state knows what the Bologna Process is about. However, at the same time, I think it does not. Joining Bologna in 2005 was a well-realized step by the revolutionary government. This decision was part of the general foreign policy strategy. Westernization and Europeanization that started in 2004 covered many fields of social life, including the education system. All these reforms took a very good pace by then. These reforms organized legal grounds for the education system. Another proof is that these reforms keep a good pace until now. They include introducing European reforms, Quality Assurance standards introduced in 2016-17, ENQA membership was also realized step. Although, the problem here is that many reforms at the state level have a very superficial nature. Many things are façade.

The reason why these reforms do not have depth is that there is no political will for that. When you have such a big frame for reforms like the Bologna Process, which later became part of the Association Agreement, if you do not pursue fundamental implementation of these reforms and put financial capital in them, this just makes me feel that the reforms are not deliberately implemented, as it is needed.

There might be some other reasons though. Because of the fact that the education system involves many people, governments try to politicize it. Without politicization of the education system, it would probably be difficult to win elections. Therefore, my impression is the following: everyday politics is so much deep-rooted already in education, and the decision-makers realize it well that if they do not lose reigns on education, it will help them to win elections. It means that the education policy is sacrificed to the narrow political interests of some politicians. This is a very sad reality. I cannot find any other reason for that.

Otherwise, we have enough resources for our education system to be working well. What we do not have is strategic thinking. The first education strategy that Georgia adopted was in 2017. After 30 years of the country's independence, and more than 15 years since the Bologna Process, we first time adopted an education strategy in 2017. Although, very ambitious and lacking grounds. Let alone its ambitiousness, do we know how this strategy is implemented? No. The new strategy was adopted in December 2017. Already in spring 2018, the new minister of Education came, and in September, not even in a one-year time, the new minister announces that we need a new strategy. It is good proof of how senseless sometimes these decisions are. At the same time, we have everything written in the Association Agreement under which we took responsibility. We know that it needs to be done, but we do it only for the sake of formality, so it is written in the paper that the parliament approved the education strategy. 2021 is almost over and there is no assessment of the new strategy anywhere. The role of the EU is the only hope that something can be done with this system.

**Question 2.** To what extent do you think that a national-reports-based monitoring system is a problem to have a big picture of the reform implementation process?

These national reports are important in a way that Bologna-wide reports need to be based on some information from its member countries. In this way, these reports play an important role. It would be better if the EU does an independent assessment of these reforms by its own delegation.

**Question 3.** What do you think, how well is it realized in Georgia that the Bologna Process and higher education is one of the most salient priorities of the EU?

It is well realized that a well-working education system is necessary. Everybody mentions that. However, we do not realize what the knowledge-based economy means. Therefore, a short reply would be that we do not understand it.

**Question 4.** What do u think, to what extent does the ultimate membership incentive guide the higher education reform implementation dynamics in Georgia?

When we joined Bologna in 2005, we used this opportunity well to conduct severe reforms in the education system. The main rhetoric with the political establishment at that time was that we could not do anything; Bologna obliged us to do all these reforms. In reality, Bologna did not oblige us



anything, it was a voluntary process. In the beginning, Bologna did not have anything to do with the EU. It happened later that the EU integration and Bologna Process intermingled as the EU supported the Bologna Process and became its biggest contributor. Therefore, Bologna became European Agenda.

At the same time, we should admit that the EU to the same extent does not use conditionality in higher education as in the other fields. Education and science do not have that much importance in the Association Agreement as let us say, agriculture and so on. Education has never been such a strong source of conditionality that without reforms in education nobody would accept us as members. I personally would like to see that the EU makes education such a strong conditionality component. At the same time, it would be better if we realized that what we do is in the first place, good for our development and then for the EU membership. Unfortunately, we do not see things like that.

**Question 5.** To what extent do you think that other incentives can also guide the reform implementation process in Georgia? Such as social learning and lesson drawing?

Well, I think joining the Bologna process was a bottom-up decision as we realized how important it was. Although, at that time there was a different context. Education, in general, was crumbling, there was corruption going on. So, that time, together with general foreign policy direction, Bologna was seen as the way out of this troubling situation. Therefore, we ended up in a proper situation at a proper moment. In addition, most importantly, there was a political will.

Unfortunately, we are always focused on doing things that will bring results in a short time perspective. When it comes to the long-term results, we do not want to do the things that will be visible in let us say, 20 years. If you look at the Association Agreement, the most short-term reforms were written there were Authorization-Accreditation and Quality assurance standards, and the government did it and subsequently got a reward for that (NCQA's membership to the ENQA in 2019).

**Question 6.** Which mediating incentives would you name from the EU that can positively affect the implementation process? What role do these incentives have?

Erasmus + plays a very important role. Some targeted financial incentives can work well as well.

**Question 7.** What domestic costs exist in Georgia that can negatively affect the reform implementation process?

Education has always so long-term outcome visibility that current costs will always be higher than benefits. Let us say, if I start reforms in quality assurance at the university level, that I have to close down some programs, change curriculums, etc. All these require lots of time and financial resources. It is impossible to get immediate benefits right away. Nevertheless, these benefits will be visible for the country in 20 years. Today the costs are way higher than they will be tomorrow. Therefore, governments do not want to do it because their office lasts only for four years, a maximum of eight years. If the government does all these reforms, it upsets many parts of the chain, including University professors, students, and their parents. Therefore, nobody will vote for them for another four years. They find it difficult to convince people that all these reforms are not for them, but their generations. Therefore, it is not worth it for the governments to risk their power. Therefore, they prefer to turn to the formal fulfillment of the requirements. As long as this kind of attitude will be present, the reforms will always have a façade nature.

If the first government (Saakashvili) took the same attitude, they would not achieve everything that we have already. At that time the government had unanimity support and nobody doubted that education was in swamps. Therefore, even though the reforms were severe, everybody realized that they were necessary. Although, these reforms stopped in 2007-2008 when public support of the government and their legitimacy significantly decreased and they faced losing political power. After that, they started tightening reigns to higher education.

At the same time, there is no public will to order the government to make the education system working. If the public does not order the government to do the reforms, the governments will not bother themselves. Government inaction is also strengthened by the fact that education is not one of the preconditions for EU membership.

**Question 8.** Should we expect that EU monitoring of the higher education reforms under the Association Agreement would further enhance the reform implementation process? (Changing the type of monitoring to a more official and credible one).

I think if the pressure on the government from the EU increases, some things might change well. At the same time, higher education is a direct responsibility of the universities. Therefore, these responsibilities should be balanced both on the government and the universities. Only the EU monitoring will not be able to do many things if the responsibility is not undertaken at the individual level. This is when some professors also understand accreditation as the punishment measure.

**Question 9.** What role do the Europe-oriented organizations (epistemic communities) have in the higher education decision-making process? How open is the government for their ideas?

There are some of these kinds of organizations. There are many reports done by these organizations and researchers. However, to what extent does the state care about them? I can tell you that they do not care less. Some of them try to reach the Ministry of Education, but sometimes it is impossible. The immediate impact of these organizations at the state level is not possible.

## **Respondent I. Darchia**

19.07.2021

**Question 1.** What is your opinion, how does the government of Georgia (decision-making bodies) understand the Bologna Process in General? How does it understand what the Bologna is all about, what requirements it has, and what a state needs to do for the proper implementation? How well is the Bologna Process understood in Georgia?

It is well realized in Georgia that the approximation with the EU will not be possible without the Bologna Process. On the political level, we understand that the Bologna Process is an important tool. Although, when we talk about the Bologna Process, we cannot have a single opinion about it as the attitudes towards it were changing since its inception, in the last 16 years. Therefore, this was more like a global decision rather than on a single governmental level. Moldova and Ukraine became members together with us. Therefore, it was this kind of the same context. At that time the necessity of reforms was well-realized and the government took many important steps in this regard. In 2004-07 the reforms had a very pro-European or pro-Bologna nature. Then it changed a little bit and from 2008-10 the government claimed that they preferred more American system than the European one. (It means to prefer the system that does not exist in nature).

In the beginning, it was the government's correct political step to join the Bologna Process. Although, they claimed that it was their own initiative. This is not true, as Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan were included in the Bologna Process in the Eastern Partnership framework.

Then, from 2012, the Bologna narrative strengthened again, especially in the framework of the Association agenda. At the same time, the ministers of education did not actually understand the meaning of the Bologna Process. Nowadays we are so much used to the Bologna Process that we claim that we want to strengthen the integration and harmonization process with the European Education and Scientific area. These main political narratives and messages were changing since 2005.

One thing is what the government was saying. The other thing is how society was looking at it. At the societal level, it was perceived that the Bologna Process was a disaster imposed by the masons. It was argued that they were taking out "Georgianship" from us. There were demonstrations

against the Bologna Process going on in front of the Tbilisi State University. Opponents argued that the Bologna initiators were imposing on them such terrible words as syllabus and curriculum. The reason was this was the fact that many reforms were framed in the words of the Bologna Process, even if they did not have anything to do with it. The government used it to justify its unpopular deeds publicly.

**Question 2.** To what extent do you think that a national-reports-based monitoring system is a problem to have a big picture of the reform implementation process? At the same time, do you think that new monitoring mechanisms under the Association Agreement can deepen the reform implementation process?

National reports are very important but double-checking is necessary as well. I think that sometimes Bologna Process trusts the national reports more than it should. For example, there have been some cases that we were very green in these reports when we should not have been. On the other hand, sometimes we had some criteria already but some people who were writing these reports did not know it and we had worse color. Therefore, this kind of reporting is never fully trustworthy. In this case, considering that the Bologna Process is part of the Association agenda, it has its own action plan, and indicators, it is very enough if the Bologna Process monitoring will be done under the Association agenda context. This is when under the Association agenda the monitoring is done more seriously.

**Question 3.** What do you think, how is it understood in Georgia that the Bologna Process and higher education is one of the most salient priorities of the EU?

On the political level, it is well realized. We know that the Bologna Process is very important but we do not know well what the Bologna Process itself means. Although, it must be said that we understand it better today than we did 15 years ago. The progress is very big even on the political level.

**Question 4.** What do you think, to what extent does the ultimate membership incentive guide the higher education reform implementation dynamics in Georgia?

Yes, it was exactly like that. Nothing would be done if it was not realized that the Bologna Process is important to become part of something and our diplomas will be recognized abroad. This was

the main enforcement mechanism that if I want to enter the EU I need harmonization everywhere including education. That I need my diploma to be recognized in order to study and find a job abroad. If not this attitude, reforms were not possible. There is no doubt about that. You know, sometimes we look for links with the EU in many ways to increase the motivation. Especially, the change resistance is strong in Georgia. Although, not only in Georgia. It can be even stronger in Europe than here. Therefore, yes, it is a big motivating force for the reforms.

I can give you a good example of that. When we introduced new standards of authorization and quality assurance, some universities were closed, as they could not meet the requirements. The Education Minister and the head of the parliament's education committee by then were lobbying some private universities that had quality assurance problems. Subsequently, they proposed new amendments according to which implementing these quality assurance standards had to be stopped. At the same time, these reforms were important to the extent that they would enable us to become a member of ENQA and get the EQAR registration. There was a big scandal going on about that. We, higher education experts wrote a letter to the speaker of the parliament, and finally, we managed to stop these propositions. We had two big arguments on our side in that. First, there were huge Quality Assurance reforms that they were trying to stop. The second argument was the Association Agreement in which quality assurance standards were mentioned. Exactly our reference to the Association Agreement saved these reforms. We managed to tackle this private lobbying with the help of the Association Agreement.

**Question 5.** What do you think, to what extent can the reform implementation process be driven by cultural and identity closeness with Europe? (We share the same values and culture, therefore European standards and rules in Higher Education can fit well to the Georgian reality?)

Yes, it played some role but it has never been the guiding narrative for the reforms. It was the other way round. Some used a kind of pro-Russian narrative that the Bologna Process was taking our values, nationality, and traditions from us. This was the main reason why we had the resistance against the Bologna Process at the beginning (2005-2007).

**Question 6.** What do you think, to what extent can we consider that Higher Education reforms have been carried out according to the Bologna Process just because of the fact that it worked as the best solution to the domestic problems in higher education?

It was like that when we started reforms. We were very deep into the swamp of corruption and nepotism. In this sense, the reforms dragged us from that swamp, albeit not completely. However, interesting thing is that Bologna Process itself does not have anything to do with nepotism or corruption. The Bologna Process was used as an excuse to tackle these problems and do the severe reforms. Although, I would say it was more like a secondary tool.

**Question 7.** What domestic costs would you name that exist at the domestic level that can hinder or negatively affect the reform implementation process?

All reforms carried out until now were mostly paperwork and had more façade nature. Although, at the implementation level, these reforms go very badly. Only 1/3 is done of what should have been done. At the same time, very scarce financial resources were invested. The only donors that Georgia's higher education had were Tempus and Erasmus in terms of capacity building. Therefore, what we achieved with these scarce resources is a real miracle. Otherwise, it is impossible to do these things with such scarce resources. Another thing is that the staff was not ready for these reforms. We were only five or six people who started the Bologna implementation process. When I was first invited to take part in these reforms, the only thing I knew was that Bologna was a beautiful city in Italy. We did not have so many resources by then. We were also studying all these at the same time 24/7.

Human resources is a lot today. Today it is better readiness, although there is no political will for the reforms. This is because some unpopular reforms need to be done and there is not a proper political context for that nowadays. Nowadays, education is much politicized. Therefore, the education system is stagnating because its faith is decided at the election ballots. If you take the election program of political parties, all of them promise free education. Although, they do not understand that free education does not exist unless the state pays for it. As a result, they promise free education when the state does not have money to invest in it. If you look at the reform dynamics, you can see that it is directly connected to the election cycles.

**Question 8.** Which mediating incentives would you name that can positively affect the implementation process? What role do these incentives have?

Mostly I would name financial incentives. Although, at the same time, the message should be clearer that if we want to be in the EU we should not only on paper but also, in reality, become the member of the European Higher Education Area. Currently, we are only on the paper level. The EU should demand more also in terms of education. It should not only be that your economy is good and you cannot become a member of the EU, or we are afraid of Russia and cannot accept you. Society is not ready either for membership. Therefore, if the EU utilizes this factor more and makes messages clear (that we need a better education system to be part of the EU) it will help us a lot. Otherwise, it cannot be a bottom-up process as there is no political will and resources for the fundamental reforms.

**Question 9.** Should we expect that Association Agreement would further enhance the reform implementation process? (Changing the type of monitoring to a more official and credible one).

The EU needs to push the implementation requirements harder. It is not ready for that from inside.

**Question 10.** What do you think, to what extent do the infrastructure, institutional arrangement, and human resources affect the reform process? If lack of resources can be considered as one of the biggest problems?

In 2004-2005, there was a great political will for the reforms. We have not had this kind of will since then. There were very scarce resources but a lot could be done with the help of the political will. Today these resources are a lot but there is no political will.

**Question 11.** To what extent do you think that other incentives rather than the ultimate membership perspective can also guide the reform implementation process in Georgia? (Such as social learning and lesson drawing?)

I would say that the membership perspective is the primary incentive for the reforms. Otherwise, socialization and lesson drawing play only secondary roles.

**Question 12.** What role do the Europe-oriented organizations (epistemic communities) have in the higher education decision-making process? How open is the government for their ideas?

I can name only three NGOs that did three projects in higher education. Only Tempus and Erasmus national offices are working in this direction. The main reason for that is that the donors are not



interested. Higher education and science are not a focus for donors. They are more focused on general and vocation education. If money shows up then NGOs will also show up and start working in the education sector.

## **Respondent L. Glonti**

19.07.2021

**Question 1.** What is your opinion, how does the government of Georgia (decision-making bodies) understand the Bologna Process in General? How does it understand what the Bologna is all about, what requirements it has, and what a state needs to do for the proper implementation? How well is the Bologna Process understood in Georgia?

To start with, none of the support and assistance will be effective if the state does not know what it wants to do. Participating in the Bologna Process does not mean that we fulfill all the requirements. Other members like Azerbaijan, Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan are also members of the Bologna Process and I cannot say that they are shining members. Another aspect is, you might meet the Bologna Process requirements but it can be done mostly on paper and it might not be realized well by the main stakeholders. These two factors are very important.

When it comes to Georgia, the second aspect is very apparent. We formally fulfill almost all requirements, but when it comes to the content of the reforms, one can see that not everything is perfect. We should understand that no matter how much support we get from the EU if there is no political will, clear strategy with its action plan, responsible agents, and budget planning, we will not have particularly high results.

My recent report also intends to show that, if something important happens, it is mostly a bottom-up process in which the universities try to solve their own problems with the help of these programs. When it comes to the impact on the national level, it is always indirect, derived from the impact on the university and individual levels. This means that we do not understand what we want to do and how to use the EU support to achieve these goals. Infrastructural projects are the most successful because they are the simplest ones. When they gave me money, I built a new education center, buy new computers, organize a laboratory, etc. For example, there is an impressive infrastructure already in the vocational education sector. Although, if you go deeper, not many people have capacities to use this infrastructure properly. This is when many regulations on the legislative level, Quality Assurance, and Assessment aspects are not organized.

However, if not for this EU support, we would be in a worse condition. Consequently, I would say that the EU support is very important in a way that it affects the views and qualifications of certain actors as well as certain institutions, and subsequently, it affects the system level. Although, this effect would be higher, more long-term, and sustainable if we had a well-realized strategy on how to use this support properly.

**Question 2.** To what extent do you think that a national-reports-based monitoring system is a problem to have a big picture of the reform implementation process? At the same time, do you think that new monitoring mechanisms under the Association Agreement can deepen the reform implementation process?

If we talk about stocktaking reports that have existed so far, I can say that they served their purpose. It shows well where we have success as well as some problems. Although, this “yes” “no” type of assessment can be misleading as well. In general, this kind of assessment is important to see where we are in comparison to other countries and it increases the country’s attractiveness for international projects. However, if we really want to know how well these reforms are actually implemented, we should use some other methods than just simple checks. This monitoring should not be based merely on fact-checking and its quantitative assessment. Rather we also need some qualitative research. Therefore, I can conclude that we need a different monitoring system that will be based on qualitative assessment.

When it comes to the monitoring of higher education reforms under the Association Agreement monitoring schemes, it might not be in the donor’s interests to do the qualitative research. Doing qualitative research should be in our own interests, as recipients of these programs. I should be interested in all these efforts and the funding I use is actually productive. At the same time, this has its political context as well. With so much funding and support, the EU wants to show us that it wants us to be on its side. This is not to say that we are doing badly. What I want to say is that we can do things better and it is very pity that we do not. I think that the EU monitoring system under the Association Agreement might not change at all. Although, it should be in my interest to do qualitative research.

**Question 3.** What do you think, how is it understood in Georgia that the Bologna Process and higher education is one of the most salient priorities of the EU?

There is quite a pragmatic attitude towards this matter in Georgia. For example, one of the aspects of Georgian Dream's election campaign was that Georgia should become an Erasmus program country. This is written in their election manifesto and there are pushing this idea. Therefore, these kinds of topics are well utilized for certain political interests. At the same time, the country has so many problems that neither the ruling elite either the opposition is interested in education. Political parties promise reforms and changes in the education sector only in the pre-election period and these promises are far from reality. On the other hand, universities do not put enough pressure on the government either to take education problems more seriously. Therefore, I would say no.

**Question 4.** What do you think, to what extent does the ultimate membership incentive guide the higher education reform implementation dynamics in Georgia?

There was this general "I am Georgian and therefore, European" narrative but it has not been leading education reforms. Although, most specifically, this narrative was present in higher education. The biggest harmonization and approximation happened in the higher education sector with the help of the Bologna Process. Therefore, I would not say that joining the Bologna Process was understood as a pre-condition for EU membership. This is because the countries like Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan also became Bologna members and they would not even think to become part of the EU by this. The Bologna Process is not a precondition for EU membership. Although, we can still utilize this fact and use it for our own purposes.

**Question 5.** What do you think, to what extent can the reform implementation process be driven by cultural and identity closeness with Europe? (We share the same values and culture, therefore European standards and rules in Higher Education can fit well to the Georgian reality?)

I think this kind of narrative became worse in the last times than it was before. Especially after the 5<sup>th</sup> of July processes. This kind of narrative is fading nowadays and it is broadly part of the political manipulations. Current developments show that we have serious problems in the part of the common values. At the same time, we have serious problems in the information sector. Here I also blame myself and our funded projects that we failed to deliver clear messages to society. The EU is giving so much money and support in so many ways and we still do not want it and prefer Russia who does not help us but rather is occupying us. We have a lot of work to do in the value part.

**Question 6.** What do you think, to what extent can we consider that Higher Education reforms have been carried out according to the Bologna Process just because of the fact that it worked as the best solution to the domestic problems in higher education?

It was like that. I remember well that in 2005 we were arguing that we needed the Bologna Process for the reforms and Europe was the only way out of the problem. We were also arguing that the Bologna Process could help us introducing crucial reforms and eradicate post-Soviet remnants in education. From today's point of view, I want to tell you that the reforms in the higher education sector were successful anyway.

**Question 7.** What domestic costs would you name that exist at the domestic level that can hinder or negatively affect the reform implementation process?

Our government did not have many expenses because of these reforms. At the same time, we should mention that the biggest amount of money is spent on school education as it is directly connected to the election cycle. Most of the population has to do with the school as most of the families have their children at school. When it comes to higher education, it is not as politicized. The government never invested a big amount of money in it. The science funding is just ridiculous. This is exactly the main reason why we do not have high quality in higher education. Therefore, the universities have to find some funding on their own from different sources. Otherwise, they have to lower their quality to attract many students as students bring money to universities. The state does not have any financial strategy for higher education. On the other hand, who should develop this strategy? We changed five ministers of education in five years. Therefore, there has not been any sustainable strategy adopted.

**Question 8.** Should we expect that Association Agreement would further enhance the reform implementation process? (Changing the type of monitoring to a more official and credible one).

It would be logical to expect that. Although, I cannot certainly say what and how it will be. I have some positive expectations about this new 10 years strategy. At least it should be official what we intend to do. The previous strategy, which expired in July, was a pretty well-written document. Although, no university is familiar with that document. If there is a proper political will, then things happen differently. My hypothesis is that the government has no time for education. At the

same time, the EU membership perspective can be used as a booster for these reforms. Although, the EU does not instrumentalize higher education. The EU can say that you are a member of the Bologna Process and take care of it. In the same Association Agreement, it is not so clearly written that we have to use Bologna Process. We have to utilize it ourselves.

**Question 9.** What do you think, to what extent do the infrastructure, institutional arrangement, and human resources affect the reforms process? If lack of resources can be considered as one of the biggest problems?

Infrastructure is the least prominent problem in Georgia and it can easily be solved. A lot of financial support has been invested in infrastructural development projects. We have a shortage of academic staff and sound management. At the same time, we do not have a sound funding system for research, which worsens the quality of teaching.

**Question 10.** What role do the Europe-oriented organizations (epistemic communities) have in the higher education decision-making process? How open is the government for their ideas?

There is no objection to anything from the state that is called “funded by the EU”. This is the biggest plus. We have a green light for everything that we do under the EU label.

**Question 11.** To what extent do you think that other incentives rather than the ultimate membership perspective can also guide the reform implementation process in Georgia? (Such as social learning and lesson drawing?)

External incentives model and lesson-drawing model I think. Although, I would say that the lesson-drawing model works better in Georgia’s case.

## **Respondent E. Jibladze**

20.07.2021

**Question 1.** What is your opinion, how does the government of Georgia (decision-making bodies) understand the Bologna Process in General? How does it understand what the Bologna is all about, what requirements it has, and what a state needs to do for the proper implementation? How well is the Bologna Process understood in Georgia?

The EU funding that we get for higher education is linked to the Bologna Process. I would say that there is not information vacuum regarding the Bologna Process in Georgia. Although, I cannot say how well the Bologna Process is understood. I would say there is soft nudging going on in this way, as the state understands that it will not get much financial aid from the EU if it does not meet certain requirements in the higher education sector. In the last years, it only refers to vocational education. When it comes to the five-year grants that we get from the EU, there are some components of higher education in it in terms of certain requirements. Although, this does not mean that it is directly targeted to higher education. This is linked to the Bologna Process. Even though the Bologna is not an EU product, it utilizes it well as an instrument.

If something happens at the formal level, and especially if we look at the first wave of reforms since 2005, it is clear that the Bologna Process was a guiding tool then. Moreover, I can say that the components and nature of the Bologna Process were better realized and perceived then than now. However, I would not say that it is like that only in Georgia. Bologna already reached its pick and now its popularity is significantly decreased in many countries. In 2005, Bologna Process was a very important dimension in higher education as it was a very fast and efficient way of systematization. By then, the policymaker would not come up with a better idea rather than organizing our higher education according to the European standards. Therefore, since 2005 we have not had the same precedent of Georgia's engagement in the Bologna Process.

**Question 2.** To what extent do you think that a national-reports-based monitoring system is a problem to have a big picture of the reform implementation process? At the same time, do you think that new monitoring mechanisms under the Association Agreement can deepen the reform implementation process?

I would say that this annual reporting under the Bologna traffic lite monitoring system is not a serious thing. It cannot measure the real situation well. This monitoring is based on the assessment of the legal side and more decision-making process. Therefore, in this case, a simple quantitative assessment is easy to get good color in the final Bologna Report. It is more descriptive and therefore, less realistic.

If the monitoring system changes, the current one should be replaced by a more effective one. I would say that this existing monitoring is useful to show where we are at the international level. Although, when it comes to the domestic level, this monitoring is not that much useful. It does not motivate further reforms.

**Question 3.** What do you think, how is it understood in Georgia that the Bologna Process and higher education is one of the most salient priorities of the EU?

The political elite does not look at education as a profession. Therefore, there are not many academics involved in the policymaking process. This is the reason why education is not deeply prioritized. Current policymakers do not understand well what the knowledge-based economy and the knowledge society mean. At the policymaking level, the link between education and societal development is not visible. This is apparent in many fields, including strategic documents. Nowadays, the ministry is writing a new 10-year education strategy. It makes the impression that the ministry is writing this strategy for own itself, as the linkage between education and other sectors of social life is absent in it. At the same time, if you check some government strategy papers, there this linkage is somehow visible. Although, this is only because different EU funding programs require this money to be used in different ways. It is exactly because of these donor pressures that the government links the development of the education sector to the development of other fields of social life.

At the same time, when it comes to higher education, it must be said that it is not prioritized and properly funded by international donors. This is itself very well reflected in the government's deeds. If the international donors do not fund higher education, the state itself does not invest in it as it is mostly focused on general education. Moreover, we follow these Bologna developments as much as they do not require significant financial investment from the government.



**Question 4.** What do you think, to what extent does the ultimate membership incentive guide the higher education reform implementation dynamics in Georgia?

It is unambiguously like that. For the policymakers, that was the guiding incentive and strategic decision in 2005. To strengthen its European foreign policy, the government used different platforms. In higher education, it was clearly done by means of the Bologna Process. The governmental elite did not refrain from clearly stating that joining the Bologna Process in 2005 was not just a strategic decision in the education sector but also a political one. Moreover, it could be a political decision in the first place. The general guiding incentive by then was Georgia to show up on Europe's police radars. It was a quite smart decision I would say.

**Question 5.** What do you think, to what extent can the reform implementation process be driven by cultural and identity closeness with Europe? (We share the same values and culture, therefore European standards and rules in Higher Education can fit well to the Georgian reality?)

I would not say that it was a guiding incentive in terms of education.

**Question 6.** What do you think, to what extent can we consider that Higher Education reforms have been carried out according to the Bologna Process just because of the fact that it worked as the best solution to the domestic problems in higher education?

It could have played an important role as well. In 2005, there was a general narrative that we were far beyond the developments in Europe. Therefore, we had to do fast and efficient reforms. In this sense, using already readymade and well-tested reforms had great importance. At the same time, this is a very reciprocal attitude as the donor also utilizes this kind of attitude well. I would say that in our case, the first and third models explain our situation best. Although, currently I would say that there is a more utilitarian approach in this sense. We already made our decision, Georgia is already on the European political map and now the government tries to use the Bologna Process as the main model to do reforms with fewer expenses by using the knowledge that already exists and develop ourselves a fast and efficient way.

At the same time, I think that Europeanization is a co-product of globalization. I would say that Europeanization is the operationalization of globalization at the European level. Therefore,

Bologna is one of its products in terms of education. Consequently, I think that there is a hierarchical relationship between globalization and Europeanization.

**Question 7.** Should we expect that Association Agreement would further enhance the reform implementation process? (Changing the type of monitoring to a more official and credible one).

We will definitely see enhancing reforms in course of time. It will be very good if we utilize this process well. Initially, Bologna Process was a source of opportunities and it was up to governments which opportunities they would grasp. This kind of attitude is not visible in Georgia as some things happened by chance. Considering the fact that the education system was crumbling in 2005 when we joined the Bologna Process we had to focus on different reforms. Since then we missed the momentum to prioritize certain dimensions in this reformation process. Based on these specificities we could then negotiate with the EU in the partnership framework. It would then lead not only to discussions about the approximation with the Bologna Process but also to specific benefits for the country. In this case, we could use the example of Croatia. Today there is still a chance to improve the higher education system as long as the Association Agreement contains concrete and targeted actions in this way. One good example is that it is very important to develop a research component. However, these kinds of discussions are not yet visible. Therefore, I think the reforms will accelerate in course of time. However, this will not do any good if we will be occupied mainly with the façade reformation process. These kinds of opportunity cycles show up every now and again. Negotiations about the 5-year grants can be such a kind of opportunity.

**Respondent M. Karchava**

21.07.2021

**Question 1.** What is your opinion, how does the government of Georgia (decision-making bodies) understand the Bologna Process in General? How does it understand what the Bologna is all about, what requirements it has, and what the state needs to do for the proper implementation? How well is the Bologna Process understood in Georgia?

One of the initial reasons for the creation of the Bologna Process was advancing the integration process in Europe. Integration, together with other components, includes mobility of people for different reasons: study mobility, labor mobility, etc. In 2005, our diplomas were not recognized in Europe. I remember there were many problems in this regard. Therefore, in 2005, Bologna Process showed up as a brilliant opportunity and one of the credible ways of European integration.

I think that government also looks at the Bologna Process as a good opportunity on the way to EU integration. It required the education system to be reorganized on the new model. It meant complete reformation of the education system. At the same time, this process did not have a bottom-up nature. Despite the fact that we had a desire to integrate with Europe, the need to reformate the education system had to come from the top. Therefore, it was more like an imposition rather than a bottom-up desire to develop the education sector. Because it was not a bottom-up process, my personal view is that many aspects of the Bologna Process are understood on neither the decision-making nor the university level.

**Question 2.** To what extent do you think that a national-reports-based monitoring system is a problem to have a big picture of the reform implementation process? At the same time, do you think that new monitoring mechanisms under the Association Agreement can deepen the reform implementation process?

These stocktaking reports are very important in a way that it shows where we are on the international level, in comparison to other countries. Although, if it showed the real situation in member countries, it would be a very useful tool. In this sense, I think it could be improved.

**Question 3.** What do you think, how is it understood in Georgia that the Bologna Process and higher education is one of the most salient priorities of the EU?

On the formal level, it looks that, it is well understood. Although, I am not sure how well it is realized in reality, on a substantial level. Although, the education strategy officially says that our aim is to become part of the European Higher Education Area.

**Question 4.** What do you think, to what extent does the ultimate membership incentive guide the higher education reform implementation dynamics in Georgia?

I think it is probably not the primary but a secondary guiding incentive.

**Question 5.** What do you think, to what extent can the reform implementation process be driven by cultural and identity closeness with Europe? (We share the same values and culture, therefore European standards and rules in Higher Education can fit well to the Georgian reality?)

I do not think so. It seems to be a very artificial reason for me. The Soviet legacy is still strong in Georgia. I do not think we look at this matter in a sense of common culture and values. On the other hand, Europeans do not look at us in that way either.

**Question 6.** What do you think, to what extent can we consider that Higher Education reforms have been carried out according to the Bologna Process just because of the fact that it worked as the best solution to the domestic problems in higher education?

It means that that is the de-facto guiding incentive for reforms in Georgia. If not that, what were we doing before 2005? Before then, nothing was happening on the state level. Otherwise, there were some differentiated attempts by different universities to implement some aspects like ECTS, degree cycles, etc. Then the Bologna Process was introduced which was followed by tons of requirements.

**Question 7.** What domestic costs would you name that exist at the domestic level that can hinder or negatively affect the reform implementation process?

I would not say that there were significant domestic costs. Probably there was even none. This is because the state invested very scarce financial resources in education.