

THE ERASMUS PROGRAMME AND EU LEVERAGE ON HIGHER EDUCATION REFORMS IN CROATIA

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ABSTRACT

According to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the Union can only support and complement member states' action in the area of education. In reality, the influence of the EU goes well beyond support and complementarity. Moreover, the EU has significant leverage on education policies of some non-member states as well. Of particular relevance is the influence of the EU on national policies and reforms in higher education during the accession process, insufficiently studied to date. The present thesis focuses on the case of Croatia and on the Erasmus programme to illustrate and analyze this reality. The special place of the Erasmus programme in Europe is widely acknowledged. The programme is pronounced as the EU's flagship initiative in education and training, fostering knowledge, new skills and personal life experience, as well as the European integration through mobility.

The research on the EU's leverage on national higher education policies, an area officially subject to the principle of subsidiarity, is scant, however, substantial. This situation encouraged me to devote this MA thesis to a study of the EU's passive leverage and Europeanization on Croatia's higher education reforms during the pre-accession period. My study, focusing on the implementation of the Erasmus programme, shows that as an enthusiastic candidate country, Croatia was very prompt to adopt changes favored by the EU, even when such changes had potential to provoke negative externalities and occasionally even harm for intended beneficiaries due to the lack of adequate capacities.

A qualitative survey of seven public universities in Croatia and of Croatian students' Erasmus experience provided findings about universities' lack of preparedness for the programme. The decision to implement Erasmus in Croatia was a result of strong EU passive leverage and Europeanization trends, rather than of domestic readiness for the programme and genuine appreciation for the value of the programme itself.

Key words: the Erasmus programme, EU passive leverage, Europeanization.

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INTRODUCTION

Since October 3, 2005, when the official negotiations between Croatia and the EU started, eyes of the general public and of political actors have been intensely focused on the prospect EU membership. Energetic efforts have been invested by the ruling parties or coalitions in order to close 35 negotiating chapters. EU membership has become a common and primary goal for all leading Croatian parties, regardless of their position on the political spectrum. As illustrated by Croatian case as well, adoption without hesitation of the Copenhagen political and economic criteria, as well as of the *acquis communautaire* by candidate countries witnesses the power of the EU to set mandatory requirements for membership, which according to Milada Anna Vachudova constitute the *EU's active leverage*. (Vachudova, 2005: 120) In this perspective, the asymmetry of power between the EU and the candidate countries is fairly obvious, indicating at the same time that the candidate countries identify EU membership as highly beneficial and worth of intense reforms.

The concept of the active leverage can be applied in the case of Croatia as well, since certain rules and standards set by the EU had to be adopted without questioning their cost. Moreover, the cost has been obviously evaluated by the Croatian government as inherently lower in comparison to all benefits which the desired EU membership would eventually bring, since tireless efforts have been invested in order to join the EU as soon as possible. The matter of the **active leverage** is officially recognized and publicly discussed. My thesis focuses on another type of EU leverage, the **passive leverage**, which I propose to study as applied to a particular, more autonomous area of domestic politics, the higher education. I will use Vachudova's concept of EU passive leverage in the case of Croatia's higher education reforms, particularly referring to the Erasmus programme's implementation.

With the Sorbonne Declaration, signed by the education ministers of four countries in 1998, the foundations for a project aiming at building a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) were set. This became an official goal of 27 European countries when they signed the Bologna declaration in 1999 (the number of signatory countries in 2011 is 47, including all EU member states; the EU Commission is also a full member). The long-term aim was to build a knowledge based society and economy on the European continent, globally competitive, by promoting strong convergence towards an integrated EHEA, based on a common structure of degrees across Europe, common quality assurance standards, easy recognition of qualifications and greatly enhanced intra-European mobility of students and staff, as well as labor. The new EHEA envisaged by the Bologna process was launched as a voluntary intergovernmental process and it was meant to include both member and candidate states, as well as a few other European states.

National autonomy in the area of HE on the one hand, and the wide-spread adoption of Erasmus (an EU programme) across EU member states and other European countries on the other hand, makes this a good case to study the strength and consequences of EU passive leverage, based on the EU's political and economic power. Hence, there are two reasons why the Erasmus programme is an adequate case in this context: first, education is an autonomous domestic policy-making domain, where the EU can interfere only through recommendations or guidelines, therefore, no country is forced to implement the programme; second, HE reforms initiated by the EU have been taken as inherently beneficial and adopted without much scrutiny in many countries. However, as this MA thesis discusses using the example of the Erasmus programme, reforms conducted uncritically at national level due to the EU's indirect pressure, rather than consciously and considering their immanent value and the system's preparedness to implement them successfully may be harmful for the intended beneficiaries.

The research question of this thesis is whether Croatia and its higher education institutions have adopted Erasmus because of their true readiness for it, or because it was rather a political game, supported by political elites and used to clinch EU standards, values, funds and full membership as the ultimate political goal. I assume that due to Croatia's long pre-accession period, its inclusion in the Erasmus program was not solely the result of the existing capacities to implement the programme, but also an identified mechanism to approach the EU community faster. Many higher education institutions lacked institutional, financial, administrative and academic capacities to conduct trans-European mobility successfully. However, compatibility with the grand European educational objectives is what could have been perceived by the political elites as a step closer to EU membership. Furthermore, the EU funds that came with Erasmus could have been an important incentive as well. The study of EU passive leverage and Europeanization in this light is equally important from both a scholarly perspective and a "real life" policy perspective. Hence, the importance of this research is two-fold.

First, it provides further knowledge about the EU's influence on candidate states through exercising passive leverage, even in areas such as education, officially subject to the principle of subsidiarity. It is relevant, for example, to recognize, as in the case of the Erasmus programme in Croatia, what are the main incentives for a country to adopt EU models, policies, or programs very promptly, even when it is known that the possibility of such reforms or changes to be successful is at best minimal. Perhaps more importantly, the question regarding the possible costs of such hasty implementation needs to be addressed. There has not been any serious research conducted encompassing the link between EU initiatives and practices in higher education and the drawbacks they may generate within the candidate states, at least in a short term, as it is the case with the Erasmus programme in Croatia.

Second, this thesis contributes to identifying aspects of the Erasmus programme which may require further improvement so that the country concerned, Croatia in this case, could achieve its specific objectives, as well as more general objectives such as those comprised within the notion of *knowledge based society and economy*, which is a core concept of the both the Bologna process/European Higher Education Area and the Lisbon process (now extended as Europe 2020). This thesis also provides insight into the efforts invested to develop an effective approach to lifelong learning in Europe, as a part of the European knowledge society project. The Erasmus programme is a part of the Lifelong Learning Programme of the EU, and its implementation in Croatia illustrates the efforts trying to address the reality that lifelong learning is as yet severely underdeveloped in European higher education.

More narrowly, the objective of the present thesis is to analyze political elites' attitudes towards HE reforms in Croatia, as illustrated by the Erasmus programme's implementation, taking into account HE institutions' capacities to undertake these reforms, to implement Erasmus in particular, exploring their actual preparedness and trying to identify consequences of this process for the quality of education among Erasmus beneficiaries. My research is limited to students and student mobility only¹, which is the basic Erasmus activity. To achieve this objective the research has been organized and conducted as presented in the four chapters of the thesis, which are summarized bellow.

Chapter 1 provides an insight into the Lifelong Learning Strategy and the Lifelong Learning Programme, of which the Erasmus programme is an integral part. Referring to the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy of the EU, it analyzes how European HE goals have

¹ "Erasmus actions include support for students (studying abroad, doing a traineeship abroad, linguistic preparation); universities/higher education institution staff (teaching abroad, receiving training abroad); universities/higher education institutions working through intensive programmes, academic and structural networks, multilateral projects; business (hosting students placements, teaching abroad, participating in university cooperation projects)." (European Commission, 2010a)

been incorporated into the Croatian strategic framework related to HE; to what extent and how successfully. Furthermore, a summary presentation of the Erasmus programme development in Croatia is included. Finally, an overall assessment of Croatian pre-accession reforms is provided, as justification for a critical discussion regarding the quality of education reforms, including those brought about Erasmus. Chapter 2 emphasizes the authority demarcation between the EU and nation states, explaining why and how the concepts of *EU passive leverage* and *Europeanization* can be applied for the purpose of this research and to the field of education. Chapter 3 elaborates the methodological framework, explaining how the questionnaires have been designed, administrated, and then processed. Finally, Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the implementation Erasmus in Croatia in order to address the research question of this thesis, using information gathered through questionnaires and document analysis (documents, archive records, etc.), followed by discussion and conclusions.

CHAPTER 1 – THE ERASMUS PROGRAMME

In this chapter I will present the context for my research, that of higher education (HE) reforms that have taken place as major developments in Europe in the last ten years at three levels: the general European level, EU level and national level (Republic of Croatia case study). Starting with the Sorbonne Declaration in 1998, whose goals in HE were re-asserted and expanded in the Bologna Declaration in 1999, the importance of an interconnected, stronger Europe in the field of HE was recognized throughout the continent. An unprecedented process of building a common EHEA was formally launched by the governments of 30 countries, increasing to 47 countries at present, covering the entire European continent. This project was further strengthened with the adoption of the Lisbon Strategy of the EU in 2000, which included in particular the project of a European Research Area, which would soon be linked with the project of the EHEA. Developing harmonized, compatible and comparable national HE systems as part of the EHEA was envisaged as an important tool to build and assert a competitive Europe in a globalized world.

It appears that in addition to recognizing the value of political and economic integration, political elites of European countries participating in EHEA projects have recognized the value of knowledge as one of the main factors supporting a country's overall economic and social development. Knowledge and knowledge economy are mentioned as core elements of both Lisbon and Bologna. By signing the Bologna Declaration in 2001, starting its serious implementation in 2005, adopting development strategy in education in 2001, in which Lisbon Strategy guidelines were incorporated, establishing the Croatian Qualification Framework (CROQF), Croatia recognized higher education as one of its priorities in development. What is evident is that Croatia has adopted legislation and policies in the field of education following the European pattern, encouraged and often initiated by the

EU. I will provide evidence for the statement that the adoption of EU principles started from the earliest stage of negotiations.

Nevertheless, I argue that reforms were not solely embraced because of their value in themselves, but also because, or chiefly because, they were seen as a way to step closer to EU membership and EU funds provided for higher education. This instrumental reason led to prompt but risky reforms, possibly harmful for their public, although they were certainly beneficial for the purpose of progressing in the negotiations with the EU. In the final part of this chapter I will give a general assessment of the nature of reforms conducted in Croatia during the pre-accession negotiation phase. Therefore, except for providing quality guidelines for further development, EU membership can be observed as a hazardous incentive which can lead towards rushed and underdeveloped strategies, as well as mechanisms necessary for any fruitful reform.

1.1. The Lisbon Strategy and the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP)

Through the adoption of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000 at the European Council in Lisbon, as a response to globalization challenges, the EU has recognized knowledge, education, innovation and training as essential elements of the knowledge based society and economy. Namely, the objective of the Strategy “is to make the European Union the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world.” (The Lisbon Strategy) Since it firstly did not achieve the expected results, the Strategy was relaunched in 2005, giving more specific guidelines for the member states on how to improve their overall growth, definitely based on the creation of knowledge-based society and economy. (The Lisbon Strategy) Five main reform areas were recognized: *investment in people*, particularly through the lifelong learning projects; *fostering innovation, research and development*; creation of more *dynamic business environment*; and support for a *greener economy*. (European Commission, 2010b) In order to foster the Lisbon objectives much easier, a National Lisbon

Co-ordinator position was created and adopted by each member state, as a way of translating Lisbon objectives to the level of national policy-making and discussion. Accordingly, it was more probable each country would adopt and implement the Lisbon guidelines.

Finally, “The Open Method of Coordination (OMC)” was created and implemented among EU member states. The method was created in order to improve exchange of information and best practice examples between the member states. Although each state had the authority to decide on the implementation of the Lisbon objectives, this method allowed greater influence on the less successful countries which experienced pressure and incentive to duplicate best practice examples. Therefore, this method “authorises the EU to take actions in areas in which it has no competencies.” (The Lisbon Strategy)

In the case of EU candidate states, although the OMC is not existent and officially used, I argue that strong impact on national policies exists, and can be better supported using the concepts of EU passive leverage and Europeanization, which I will discuss in the next chapter. Consequently, due to that impact certain policies are adopted and implemented, although the national system might not be well prepared to manage them successfully, such as in the case of Croatia and its implementation of the Erasmus programme. Circumstances of that kind may be harmful and have serious consequences on the national level.

The adoption of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000 gave an incentive for EU education and training policies to develop further and faster. Therefore, in 2001 the “Education and Training 2010 Work Programme” was initiated and in 2009 supplemented with “the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (‘ET 2020’).” One of their main goals was “making lifelong learning and mobility a reality.” (European Commission, 2010c) Already in 2000 the European Commission emphasized that lifelong learning “must become the guiding principle” in the field of education and training. It is also argued that EU member states should particularly promote and lead lifelong learning debate and

development, even though the project should encompass the entire Europe, strengthening the EHEA. The main ideas were to assure *new basic skills for all*; to invest in *human resources*; to promote *innovation in teaching and learning*; to promote *non-formal and informal learning*; to assure *access to good quality information* on education opportunities; and to *bring learning closer to home* using new Internet and Communication Technologies (ICT). (European Commission, 2000: 3-20)

Achievement of the Lifelong Learning Policy goals came into place with the Lifelong Learning Programme, which was established by the Decision of the European Commission in 2006. (The European Parliament and the Council, 2006). The programme includes a budget of almost €7 billion for the period from 2007 to 2013. Funds serve the implementation of four sub-programmes: Comenius for schools, Erasmus for higher education, Leonardo da Vinci for vocational education and training, and Grundtvig for adult education.

The Erasmus is “the European Union’s flagship mobility programme in education and training. It was established in 1987 and since then has enabled more than 2 million students from across Europe to enrich learning experiences in other countries.” In 2007, the Erasmus programme was officially incorporated into the Lifelong Learning Programme, where its implementation was significantly improved compared to its existence within the Socrates programme. (European Commission, 2011) It presents a European scheme for the mobility of higher education students and teaching staff. It is well accepted and praised by many European countries. It is not limited to the EU, however, the EU has recognized the Lifelong Learning Programme (including the Erasmus) as one of its primary mechanisms for the development of the knowledge-based society and economy.

According to Kerstin Janson, Harald Schomburg and Ulrich Teichler, its main advantages are: acquisition of diverse academic knowledge in different cultural surroundings; acquisition of practical knowledge related to the host country’s social, economic, political or

cultural issues; acquisition of knowledge in the fields which are inherently international; broadening life perspectives through life in different surroundings; acquisition of international life skills. Finally, the programme is appreciated for enriching students' personal development. (Janson, Schomburg and Teichler, 2009: 25)

Therefore, the programme is promoted both by its member states and some candidate states as extremely beneficial. However, I argue, in the case of Croatia the programme was partially adopted because it was considered a valuable higher education experience for students and professors, and partially as a fulfillment of EU standards and trends, which might enable the country to reach EU membership earlier, as well as the rich EU Erasmus fund. At the same time higher education institutions were not ready in the sense of their capacities to implement the Erasmus programme so early in a proper way, without harming the quality of studying, which is why this issue should be addressed, particularly the official explanations for its implementation as well as the nature and scope of its effect.

1.2. Higher Education Reforms in Croatia

In this subchapter, I intend to demonstrate changes in Croatian HE legal and policy framework, which obviously followed EU paths and objectives from the 1990s, very recently after they were identified and evaluated as beneficial and successful by the community. Therefore, from the earliest stages of the European HE reforms, supported by the EU, which emphasized mobility as one of the priorities, Croatia followed the same path in the HE policy-making and legislation, making a complete reversal in its HE tradition. As Vlasta Vizek Vidovic and Aleksa Bjelis indicate, from 2001, after making the first step towards HE reforms by signing the Bologna Declaration, the Croatian higher education system had to face complex and challenging demands on three major levels: “governance and internal organization, financial management, and approach to teaching, learning and research.” Five years after signing the Bologna Declaration, the authors argue “...the process of

transformation...certainly cannot be described as being smooth or painless.” (Vizek Vidovic and Bjelis, 2006: 163) The scope of reforms implies strong willingness to follow EU standards.

After the Sorbonne Declaration was signed in 1998 by the education ministers of France, Germany, UK and Italy which emphasized the mobility of students and teaching staff, as well as the establishment of the EHEA as a way to develop much stronger and culturally, politically, economically united Europe, the Bologna Declaration was signed in 1999, by 30 countries, confirming the objectives of the Sorbonne Declaration. (EHEA, 2010) The Bologna Declaration was identified as a mechanism for the realization of the European knowledge society, united in its values and competitive towards the rest of the world. Mobility, employability, social and cultural cohesion, economic prospects, political union were identified as inherent consequences of the EHEA. In order to achieve its objectives, the Bologna Declaration requires compatibility between universities and other higher education institutions across Europe. (EHEA, 1999)

In 2007, with the London Communiqué, then 46 participating countries identified lifelong learning as one of their strategic goals, including the Erasmus programme. (EHEA, 2010) Although Bologna Declaration provisions are not contractually binding, and are only set as “measures of a voluntary harmonization process”, Croatia continued with their implementation, even if lacking the necessary capacities. Today, 47 countries participate within the Bologna Process, working on the promotion of the following priorities for the next decade: “social dimension, lifelong learning, employability, student-centered learning, education, research and innovation, mobility, data collection, multidimensional transparency tools, funding.” (EHEA, 2010)

Croatia signed the Bologna Declaration in 2001, and according to the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports (MSES), by 2005 higher education programmes completely

fulfilled Bologna Process criteria. (MSES, 2011) However, as presented in the results, HE reforms in Croatia were not evaluated as very successful by academics, students, NGOs, and the OECD's review on tertiary education.

Furthermore, in 2001 Croatian government brought the “White Paper on Croatian Education”, as a part of the following project: “Strategy for Development of the Republic of Croatia – Croatia in 21st century.” This Strategy witnesses the willingness of the Croatian political elites to follow European trends, and to conduct HE reforms, tremendous in their scope. However, reforms in education are described as very risky and complex, whose success depends on the national infrastructure in education, assessed as underdeveloped and partially non-existent. Also, in the White paper some of the previous reforms in education are assessed as failed because of the lacking capacities. It is also emphasized how necessary and important changes should be made in the next 10 to 15 years in order to facilitate integration in the EU. The document recognizes education, particularly the concept of lifelong learning, as a fundamental part of successful national education policies, which can contribute to social, economic and cultural progress. Higher education is described as insufficiently compatible with the European standards, both in its quality and quantity (portion of highly educated was only 13% in 2001, compared to EU average of 20%). Investment in education is identified as crucial for society's further development (according to the document, 5 - 6% of GDP should be invested in formal education, supported by other sources, such as private companies).

Except for its own progress, according to this document, other incentives for Croatia's reforms in education emerge from potential EU membership. Moreover, in 2000, the OECD report recognized the necessity for a comprehensive reconstruction of the Croatian education system, in order to make it more compatible with the European. This document very explicitly recognizes joining the EU as one of the main goals of education reforms in Croatia, which indicates that some reforms might have been done even with lacking capacities required for

their success and contribution to society's progress. Furthermore, it is emphasized that reforms should follow the European Commission's recommendation about the necessary and urgent implementation of the Lifelong Learning Programme. (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2001: 5-20) "Since Croatia strives towards EU membership, it is important to follow education concepts and principles in Europe while developing its national education system." (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2001: 21)

In order to follow developed countries' standards in higher education, and to contribute to the creation of the EHEA, the following priorities have been identified by the Croatian government: growth in the number of highly educated people; efficient higher education system (i.e., higher education which significantly contributes to the country's development in various aspects, educational achievements on individual level); implementation of Bologna Declaration guidelines (e.g. structure of studies, ECTS system, non-formal education, ...); incorporation of modern information-communication technology into the system; international cooperation (including the Erasmus programme which was at that time part of the Socrates programme); further investment and education of professors, organization and autonomy of universities. (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2001: 65-89)

Besides participation in the Bologna Process and formation of the White Paper, adoption of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) guidelines within the Croatian Qualification Framework (CROQF), and National Reports on HE witness the two-fold importance recognized in the Lifelong Learning Programme (including the Erasmus programme). Except for society's internal development (cultural, intellectual, economic, political), implementation of the Erasmus programme was conducted in order to contribute to an accelerated EU pre-accession period, regardless of the actual readiness of higher education institutions in terms of their capacities.

In 2008, the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning was established, and member states were invited to harmonize their national qualification systems with it, particularly in order to make the mobility of workers and students easier. The aim was to make qualifications between countries comparable. (Europa: Summaries of EU legislation, 2008) In 2006, activities towards the formation of the CROQF started when the MSES formed a committee in charge of its implementation. In 2007, the Government adopted the Baseline of the CROQF and the Committee for the Development of the CROQF was established. The Committee continued conducting workshops across the country as a part of its five year long action plan, in order to achieve proper implementation of the CROQF. (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2009)

Finally, Croatia has shown its devotion to EU standards in education through national reports submitted in 2003-2009, which demonstrate the obstacles and difficulties in higher education, as well as invested effort in overcoming them. Before official negotiations on full membership with the EU started (2005), in its 2003 national report on higher education Croatia identified knowledge based society as its strategic goal, emphasizing fundamental problems of the system². Therefore, in 2003, the Act on Scientific Activity and Higher Education was adopted in order to promote the European standards for science and higher education (introducing the Bologna Process). The following objectives were identified: *adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees; adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles; establishment of a system of credits (ECTS); promotion of mobility; promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance; promotion of [the*

² „...the period spent studying is too long, and only a small percentage of those who have enrolled at a higher education institution actually finish it, faculties retain the right to make their own decisions on key issues regarding their activity and their finances, fragmented studying and research programmes, barely 4 percent of GDP is not sufficient either for the support of the existing system or for its expansion, due to years-long administrative freeze on hiring new staff the average age of teachers has risen significantly, etc.“ (Republic of Croatia: Ministry of Science and Technology, 2003)

necessary] European dimensions in higher education. (Republic of Croatia: Ministry of Science and Technology, 2003)

The National Report of 2005 emphasizes the Act on Scientific Activity and Higher Education as well, as an important legal framework which promotes European standards and is compatible with the Bologna Declaration. It is declared that Croatia had not joined European student mobility programmes at that time. Concerning the question on special measures taken in the country in order to develop the mobility of students, the national report provided a very humble and unspecific answer: “International cooperation offices at Croatian universities are preparing programmes for European student mobility. Mobility described in 7.1. functions according to established schemes and a very low percentage of students participate in exchange programmes. In order to enhance mobility in the near future, some undergraduate and postgraduate courses are already taught in English.” (MSES, 2005: 6) Furthermore, it is declared that no special and sufficient financing has been assured on the national level which could encourage developments in higher education domain of the Lifelong Learning Programme, despite the legal framework which introduces the programme. (MSES, 2005)

Despite various reforms³ already conducted, in 2006 some fundamental obstacles for student mobility were identified, such as the existence of only a few programmes offered in English, lack of grants provided in order to support student mobility, functional integration of universities, mobility of students even within national HE system, lack of quality assurance and control, necessity to finance HE from other sources other than the state budget, etc. (MSES, 2006)

Finally, according to the 2009 National Report numerous necessary measures have been introduced whose veracity I question in my research. Hence, this final report emphasizes

³ The introduction of ECTS system, conclusion of interuniversity agreements of cooperation, establishment of the Centre for Mobility and EU programmes, etc. (MSES, 2006)

the strategic plan of the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports as well developed, the foundation of the Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes, the existence of the government agency responsible for the Lifelong learning programme which have become completely operational, scholarship assurance from the MSES⁴, assurance of faster and simple procedure for issuing visas or residence permits⁵ if necessary, recognition of studies abroad assured by all universities, assurance of dormitory accommodation by all universities, plus the ongoing projects of expanding accommodation capacities in several cities. Finally, a very important drawback is identified: absence of the national loan system. (MSES, 2009)

In addition to national documents and official strategies which emphasize lifelong learning as one of their priorities, as well as difficulties they face, the European Commission published five reports on Croatian progress towards EU membership, also assessing the field of education. Despite the fact that negotiations about the chapter *Education and Culture* were concluded only one year after the official negotiations between Croatia and the EU started (2005), the European Commission continued with its evaluation, guidelines and recommendations in the same chapter. Therefore, in 2006 report it is emphasized that stronger efforts are necessary in the field of lifelong learning, in order to create national strategy for lifelong learning and to increase the number of participants in the programme. (European Commission, 2006: 63)

In the 2007 report, the European Commission indicates positive changes regarding the foundation of national agency for managing the Lifelong Learning Programme, however, lack of legal and administrative capacities is recognized, as well as of qualified staff for proper implementation of the programme. (European Commission, 2007a: 53)

In the 2008 report, general progress in the field of education is recognized with an emphasis on legal framework, however, need for further development of practical capacities

⁴ Bilateral Academic Mobility Programme initiated by the MESES and implemented by the Agency for Mobility and EU programmes offers additional financial support for student mobility. (MSES, 2009)

⁵ Assured by the Act on Foreigners, passed in 2007. (MSES, 2009)

necessary for lifelong learning implementation is indicated. (European Commission, 2008: 60)

According to 2009 report, the year when first HE institutions received Erasmus University Charter and started implementing the Erasmus programme, National agency only started with preparatory measures for implementation, such as staff education and training, and pilot-projects. (European Commission, 2009: 68)

Finally, in the 2010 report, participation in the strategic framework for European cooperation in education (ET 2020) is praised, however, the low level of highly educated people is emphasized and future challenges related to reforms of universities, their financing scheme, certification of CROQF, etc. (European Commission, 2010d: 58)

In this subchapter I intended to show the attention devoted by the Croatian government, in its official documents, strategies and declarations signed, to HE reforms and trends actual within the EU and on the European level in general, which were then transferred to its national level. Benefits of the reforms were obviously recognized, particularly achievement of a more favorable position regarding potential EU membership. Hence, emphasized and praised by the EU, the Lifelong Learning Programme has become an extremely important part of Croatian legislation and policy-making in the field of higher education, implying that various reforms might have been implemented too early, without the necessary capacities to become successful; helpful and profitable for its beneficiaries, namely students mostly. This conclusion can be drawn on the basis of the European Commission's reports as well, which praise cooperation in the field of lifelong learning, emphasizing various difficulties and challenges, making further requests and expectations towards the country.

1.3. Assessment of EU Pre-accession Reforms in Croatia

As Heather Grabbe emphasizes, candidate states try to comply with EU standards, imitating member states, even when there is no incentive other than EU membership for

adoption of certain EU policies immediately and successfully. Hence, she argues, effort and capital invested in alignment with EU policies supports any further reform which can increase chances for successful pre-accession negotiations, regardless of the country's readiness for conducting further reforms. (Grabbe, 2006: 3-4)

As emphasized by Katarina Ott, Croatian War of Independence, fought in the early 1990s, resulted in the country's lag behind other Central and Eastern European countries considering relations with the EU. Therefore, Croatia had to conduct various reforms very fast, in order to catch up with other neighboring countries and their negotiations with the EU. In 2003, after the Stabilization and Association Agreement was signed (2001), Croatia applied for EU membership, and negotiations have been in process since. Nevertheless, as the author indicates, Croatia strived to close negotiation chapters much faster than any of the previous candidates. (Ott, 2006: 5-6) Related to this, I argue that reforms in higher education, particularly the Erasmus programme as the focus of my research, have been implemented rapidly and early, taking into account capacities of universities necessary to implement quality mobility programme, satisfying Lisbon goals. Lack of specific and clearly defined criteria was used by universities which managed to receive the Erasmus University Charter⁶ only on the basis of declared readiness and nominally existing capacities, without proper evaluation made by the European Commission, prior to the implementation of the programme.

Therefore, it is interesting to observe reforms which candidate countries conduct within their higher education domain, even though it is free from active EU leverage and official directives. Hence, on the example of Croatia non-required enormous and prompt changes can be seen, including Erasmus mobility programme implementation. The nature of reforms is important primarily because of its possible consequences on the quality of

⁶ "The Erasmus University Charter (EUC) provides the general framework for all the European cooperation activities, which a higher education institution may carry out within the Erasmus programme. Awarded by the European Commission following a call for proposals, the Charter sets out the fundamental principles and the minimum requirements with which the higher education institution must comply when implementing its Erasmus activities." (European Commission, 2010e)

education, related both with outgoing and incoming Erasmus students. In the brief overview of European Union Monitoring Project, Katarina Ott stated that “...major problems found were related to education, public administration, normative vs. real conformity with the EU, building of efficient institutions and a society that respects laws and individual rights.” (Ott, 2006: 4) Therefore, the identified problems, general asymmetry of power between candidate countries and the EU, Croatia’s tendency to speed up the pre-accession process and general EU mood towards further enlargement resulted in fast reforms and adjustments with EU standards. Hence, Ott evaluated negotiations as having “focus on quick accession at any cost” because a slow process might jeopardize joining the EU. (Ott, 2006: 12)

Following the nature of Croatian overall pre-accession process, Tomislav Marsic suggested future change from a policy “as soon as possible” to a policy “as soon as ready”. What he argues is that EU membership and following EU goals cannot guarantee progress and solving problems. “Shortening this period [reform period] means less time available for designing reforms, for sequencing them and to implement them in a socially bearable way.” (Marsic, 2006: 49) Therefore, tight time limitations and encompassing reforms can hardly result in success, which I will demonstrate on the example of the Erasmus mobility programme in Croatia.

In order to understand motivation which Croatia had for intensive promotion of EU HE goals and implementation of advocated policies, I will introduce the concepts of EU passive leverage and Europeanization in the next chapter, explaining the nature of power balance between the EU and its candidate states in particular.

CHAPTER 2 – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

After brief introduction into a complex and far reaching theory of EU leverage, I will describe two concepts relevant for my research: *the EU passive leverage* and *Europeanization*. Furthermore, I will apply them on the field of HE, particularly the case of Erasmus programme implementation in Croatia.

According to Robert Adcock and David Collier, “the clarification and refinement of concepts is a fundamental task in political science, and carefully developed concepts are, in turn, a major prerequisite for meaningful discussions of measurement validity.” (Adcock and Collier, 2001: 529) The authors emphasize “the background concept” as the broadest one, encompassing various argumentations associated to it. “The systematized concept” should be extracted from the broad background, and clearly defined. Finally, measures and results are to support the chosen concepts’ validity.

Starting from Milada Anna Vachudova, Heather Grabbe, Joan DeBardeleben, Robert Harmsen, Thomas M. Wilson et al., the concepts of EU leverage and Europeanization can be applied both to EU member states and candidate states, encompassing different levels and mechanisms. Namely, EU leverage can be understood both as active (required adoption of EU legal, political, economic and administrative framework) and passive (support for harmonization in the realms free from EU direct conditionality). It is applied both to EU member states and its candidate states, as well as in different time frameworks, starting from the post-communist period from 1989. Furthermore, Europeanization effects are used in different levels: *the polity, policy* and *politics* level, including the issue of *identities* and *citizenship*.

Considering Croatia’s candidate state status which excludes the majority aspects of the EU active leverage, and the nature of education within EU legislation (EU member states can make independent decisions), I will use the concept of EU passive leverage and

Europeanization phenomenon in the field of policy-making. In order to provide additional explanation for the choice of concepts, I will first briefly introduce power relations in the field of education between the EU and its member states.

2.1. Authority Demarcation in the field of education between the EU and its Member States

The EU does not have a common education policy, therefore, the Lisbon Strategy and the Bologna Declaration, including implementation of the EQF on national levels, are mechanisms of coordination and harmonization in the education domain across countries. Despite various EU objectives, strategies and measures, EU member states, as well as the candidate states, can make independent decisions in the field of education. As Tamara Perisin argues, the EU has “...authority to support, coordinate and fulfill state activities (complementary authority)...” in the sector of education. Hence, according to the Lisbon Treaty no state depends directly on any European measure connected to education. (Perisin, 2009: 229) However, even though Croatia as a candidate country does not have an obligation to conduct reforms, various reform programmes have been prepared and implemented in the last few years. As Ana-Maria Boromisa and Visnja Samardzija emphasize, negotiations on full membership with the EU provided an incentive for the country to self-willingly initiate harmonization of its policies with EU programmes and documents.

Nevertheless, five years after the Lisbon Strategy was agreed the results achieved were not satisfactory. Boromisa and Samardzija emphasize the following problems: *disappointing delivery; widely defined goals; an overloaded agenda; poor coordination; conflicting priorities*. Therefore, further challenges and efforts were requested from the member states in order to make up for lost time and benefits. Knowledge society was highlighted as one of the

five necessary goals⁷ which would support employment and production growth. (Boromisa and Samardzija, 2006: 211, 227-228) In the light of all this, Croatia obviously had a strong incentive to conduct reforms, including the Erasmus programme implementation, despite its unadjusted higher education system and costs potentially surpassing the reform's benefits, except the benefit of approaching EU membership.

2.2. EU Passive Leverage

The European Union, as initially a strong economic and later political legal entity, has been very attractive for the majority of European countries since its formation. Cultivation of market economy and customs union, democracy and human rights has represented a strong incentive for all potential member states to apply for EU membership. Emphasizing how governments of post-communist countries by the end of 1990 defined joining the EU as one of their foreign policy priorities, Milada Anna Vachudova analyses the attractive sources and background of EU membership. As she argues, "...EU membership emerged as a matter of national interest because it offered tremendous geopolitical, sociocultural and economic benefits." (Vachudova, 2005: 63)

In this thesis, I will use Vachudova's theoretical explanation of the influence the EU can exercise over its future member states. On the basis of EU economic and political power, Vachudova identifies asymmetry of power between the EU and its credible future member states. Therefore, she argues, the EU can have and usually has a significant impact on politics, institutions and policies both within its member states and candidate states. I will primarily focus on the case of Croatia, as a candidate state, and on Vachudova's passive leverage concept, whereby the author distinguishes "active" and "passive leverage" which the EU can exercise over its member states and candidate states. As she explains, "...by passive leverage I mean the attraction of EU membership...". (Vachudova, 2005: 63)

⁷ Four set goals were: *the internal market, the business climate, the labour market and environmental sustainability*. (Boromisa and Samardzija, 2006: 211)

Although Vachudova applies her theoretical concept of passive leverage on the European democratizing states after 1989, I will use the concept in the case of Croatia's higher education system reforms in order to explain the actual changes which countries make in their pre-accession period, with the purpose of becoming more eligible for attractive EU membership.

Passive leverage is the traction that the EU has on the domestic politics of credible candidate states merely by virtue of its existence and its usual conduct. This includes political and economic benefits of membership, the costs of exclusion, and the way the EU treats nonmember states...But it does not include any deliberate politics to influence the states in question or to pave the way for their eventual membership – this is active leverage. For the EU to have leverage or 'traction' on domestic politics, a state must be a credible future member of the EU. (Vachudova, 2005: 65)

Vachudova emphasizes various benefits which make the EU attractive among nonmember states, mainly referring to political and economic benefits, such as *protection of EU rules; voice in EU decision making; access to EU market; transfers from EU budget; increased investments and growth; increased entrepreneurship and skills*. In addition to this, the author emphasizes *costs of exclusion when neighboring states are joining and EU treatment of nonmembers*. (Vachudova, 2005: 65)

Considering the benefits the EU can assure for its member state, it is reasonable to expect that the candidate states will try to fulfill EU requirements as soon as possible, in order to step closer to their joining the EU. Therefore, the EU has power strong enough to impose acceptance of its values, norms and rules outside its borders. As Vachudova argues, since the candidate states benefit more than the EU, they are more dependent on the EU than vice versa.

Although the EU guarantees various benefits for its member states, the author assumes that the attractiveness of those benefits differs between democratic and less democratic or non-democratic countries. Hence, she argues that less democratic leaders can perceive EU membership as a threat to their political power. Therefore, they mostly resist approaching the

EU, as opposed to democratic political elites, who believe EU membership can strengthen their credibility and political positions. (Vachudova, 2005: 72-73)

In Croatia, a liberal democracy, governing elites perceive meeting EU standards and joining the EU as a way to increase their chances for reelection and further accumulation of power. Political and economic benefits of EU membership, coupled by the costs of being excluded, present a strong incentive for political elites to be pro-EU. The actual Croatian government, led by the conservative party, identified full membership in the EU as its first foreign policy goal. Furthermore, as declared by the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "...there is a general agreement among the political parties and Croatian citizens about this foreign policy goal". In addition, in 2002, all parliamentary political parties voted in favor of Croatia's joining the EU. As emphasized by the Ministry, Croatia is a small country whose further overall progress can be realized easily through EU membership. "The analysis of costs and benefits of entering the EU has shown that Croatia will profit from it in the long term, in other words, it is estimated that the possibilities of Croatia's economic, political, scientific and cultural development are greater within the EU than outside it." (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integrations, 2006)

Since Croatia shares democratic and market economy features with the EU, its passive leverage can be tested on much lower levels of policy making, such as the one this thesis discusses: higher education reforms, particularly the adoption and implementation of the Erasmus mobility programme for students. Vachudova provides the theoretical background for this perspective by arguing that the candidate countries weaken their policy-making process via simple adoption and implementation of already active policies within the EU, which is particularly interesting in the case of areas of domestic policy-making completely independent and free from the EU, such as education.

Furthermore, the author argues how candidate countries adopt policies as a product of passive leverage without clear guidelines, which can jeopardize their implementation success. (Vachudova, 2005: 228) Thus, countries adopt policies as soon as possible in order to follow EU standards and trends, using random mechanisms with no clear guidance and evaluation criteria, risking the quality of the change simply because of EU attractiveness.

2.3. Europeanization

As a consequence of the EU leverage, both passive and active, scholars across disciplines discuss the concept of *Europeanization*. Even though Europeanization does not refer solely to the EU, the power of Europe can be hardly separated from the influence of the EU, therefore it mostly refers to it. Robert Harmsen and Thomas M. Wilson argue there is no universal definition of the concept, however, eight basic understandings are highlighted:

- *Europeanization as the emergence of new forms of European governance*
- *Europeanization as national adaptation*
- *Europeanization as policy isomorphism*
- *Europeanization as problem and opportunity for domestic political management*
- *Europeanization as modernization*
- *Europeanization as 'joining Europe'*
- *Europeanization as the reconstruction of identities*
- *Europeanization as transnational and cultural integration.* (Harmsen and Wilson, 2000: 13-18)

The second, third and sixth interpretations of the process of Europeanization can be used in order to explain the cause of Croatia's adoption of the Erasmus mobility programme.

I argue the process of Europeanization, together with the concept of passive leverage, can be used in order to explain why Croatian government and universities supported the implementation of the Erasmus programme earlier than their capacities allowed so. Hence,

becoming more Europeanized, Croatia increased its chances to gain EU membership as early as possible, harming the quality of the reform process in education, particularly the quality of the Erasmus mobility programme and education related to it.

As Harmsen and Wilson present, *Europeanization as national adaptation* refers to the adaptation of national institutions and policy-making process in order to make a country more compatible with EU standards and trends. *Europeanization as policy isomorphism* refers to policy choices made according to the pattern of the EU member states. Policies can be understood as qualitative and attractive, however, the fact that they are favored by the EU supports their implementation in the candidate states as well. Finally, *Europeanization as 'joining Europe'* specifically refers to the Central and East European candidate states which adopt an overall West European state model, starting from a democratic political system, market economy complex administration capable of handling European policy-making sphere.

In order to provide a more clarifying explanation of the process of Europeanization, I will briefly present how it differs from similar and the most important schools of European integration theory: *neo-functionalism* and *intergovernmentalism*. As the authors demonstrate, the core feature of neo-functionalism is its concept of “spill-over”, according to which transnational cooperation in certain areas leads to cooperation in other fields. On the other hand, intergovernmentalism is characterized by its logic of national interest pursuit. Hence, according to this school, countries will cooperate only if they can increase national interest. What makes the process of Europeanization specific is that it “...evokes parallel and interconnected processes of change at *both* the national and supranational levels. The idea of European integration, as suggested by its etymology, is primarily concerned with the construction of a European ‘centre’, or perhaps a European ‘whole’.” (Harmsen and Wilson, 2000: 19)

Since there is obviously no unifying understanding of the process of Europeanization, I believe Robert Ladrech rightfully indicates how broad and encompassing this concept is. Hence, as he argues, in the mid-1990s various perspectives of one tendency appeared: "...invoking the EU as an independent variable to explain changes in national arenas." (Ladrech, 2010: 12) Except in the sphere of politics and polity, the EU has a great impact on the candidate states' policies. Therefore, my thesis will mainly focus on the policy domain characterized by the process of Europeanization. As I argue, policy-making in the sphere of higher education can be primarily used as a mechanism of stepping closer to EU membership, even when the changes are understood both by the government and universities as valuable in themselves. Higher education, although an autonomous domain of states' policy-making, as argued by Ladrech, is under the influence of *indirect* or *soft EU policy*, meaning that the European Commission has a much greater role in making domestic policy decisions than key actors within countries. "...the Commission's role is closer to a facilitator and promoter of ideas, networks, etc." (Ladrech, 2010: 30) As argued by Ladrech, soft directions are not binding, thus they include *recommendations, declarations and resolutions*. There are no clear consequences if the change does not happen, however, burdens can be put on a country through *peer reviews, benchmarking, best practice comparisons, studies,....* Finally, the author provides an example of the soft impact on domestic policies: meeting Lisbon objectives. (Ladrech, 2010: 182)

Ladrech utilizes the scheme of five possible outcomes of domestic policy change, developed by Börzel (2005) and Börzel and Risse (2007). In order to demonstrate how strong EU influence on the implementation of Erasmus mobility programme in Croatia was, I will use the concept related to the strongest change: *transformation*. (Ladrech, 2010: 36) Fundamental changes were made in a short period of time, declaring the readiness for the implementation of the Erasmus programme. However, various indicators show a lack of

capacities necessary for the quality assurance and satisfaction of objectives required by the European Commission, included in the Erasmus University Charter.

Very often the Europeanization concept is used to explain the influence the EU has on domestic policies in its member states, however, as Claudio M. Radaelli indicates, in its comprehensiveness, the concept can be applied both to EU member states and candidate countries. In order to conclude this chapter on theoretical background, I will use one of the most encompassing and well accepted explanations of Europeanization, provided by Radaelli.

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 public policy and politics and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures, and public policies. (Radaelli, 2003: 30)

Therefore, concerning the candidate states, Europeanization refers to soft policies, supported by the EU, with no use of coercion. On the contrary, decisions are brought by the national decision-making bodies solely, very often led by the logic of appropriateness of the reforms, and by the attractiveness of EU membership. However, as I argue, reforms are often conducted in a prompt and risky way, as in the case of Erasmus mobility programme implementation. In any case, Croatia has shown a tendency to overcome the misfit between EU standards and trends in any field, including education, as soon as possible, in order to accelerate joining the EU.

2.3.1. Europeanization in Higher Education

In her work on the mechanisms of European enlargement in Ukraine, Tetyana Koshmanova deepens the entire theoretical concept focusing on the area of higher education, as well as on the reforms that the country has implemented in order to step closer to European integration structures. Koshmanova discusses the implementation of the Bologna Process as “...an effective political and economic mechanism supported by the European Union (EU) for European integration in the educational sphere”. (Koshmanova, 2008: 166) Analysis of the

Ukraine example, and its adoption of the Bologna Process provides evidence for the process of Europeanization and the EU's passive leverage in the field of higher education. As Koshmanova describes, adoption of the Bologna Process has provoked strong criticism, especially in Eastern Europe. Thus, she argues, it was an adequate mechanism for fulfilling the European standards in higher education, however, at the same time countries had to face various challenges in adjusting their university faculty, programmes and student's perception of higher education to match new expectations. Furthermore, the author emphasizes pressure coming from the European Commission calling for reforms in higher education as a means of making the European Higher Education Area stronger and united, particularly competitive in comparison to the United States. (Koshmanova, 2008: 167-168) Opposition and obvious underdevelopment of the Ukraine's system to adopt Bologna Declaration requirements did not prevent following the European trend in HE. As in the case of the Erasmus programme in Croatia, this indicates the scope of EU power, imbalance of power between the EU and its candidate states, as well as the candidate countries' readiness to comply unconditionally with EU pressure, regardless of the consequences.

As Ukraine, Croatia implemented the Bologna process very promptly, lacking the capacities for fulfilling all the necessary criteria successfully, which resulted in alarming student protests and Bologna criticisms in Croatia. Furthermore, instant changes and the sudden break with the old system of education were not assessed as successful, both by the students, teachers and higher education policy experts.

However, as Lenard J. Cohen emphasizes, with regards to the general skeptical mood⁸ in the EU concerning further expansion and admission of western Balkan states, it is no surprise that candidate states, including Croatia, are ready to conduct various reforms in order to become more eligible for EU membership. (Cohen, 2008: 207)

⁸ "...public in France (54 per cent), Germany (52 per cent), Luxembourg (50 per cent), Finland (47 per cent), Austria (45 per cent), the Netherlands (44 per cent) and Belgium (41 per cent) indicates that they feel frustration, annoyance or fear when they hear discussions about EU enlargement." (Cohen, 2008: 216)

Focusing on the process of Europeanization in the field of higher education, encompassing the case of Croatia, Tihomir Ziljak argues that one of the fundamental reasons why higher education provides a good example of the EU's passive leverage is the autonomy of national policies on education. (Ziljak, 2007) Hence, although there are no official requirements in the field of education, potential member states are trying to conduct reforms, even if they are prompt and risky, in order to become more compatible with the European framework and vision of the knowledge based society, assuring the access to EU structure, funds, policies and information. As Ziljak argues, implementation of the EQF can be understood as an element of the Europeanization process, which is compatible with the process of modernization within the systems of education. According to Ziljak, the EQF provides criteria for the comparison of different national systems of education, and their achievements across the borders. Interaction of the national qualification frameworks with the EQF supports their development through the exchange of educational modules or policy tools. However, as Ziljak emphasizes, the relationship is not perfectly balanced: the European expertise has a much greater influence, which is why the national framework tends to copy examples of the European good practice. Again, EU membership is a strong tool in the hands of the EU, allowing it to foster reforms among candidate states. Ziljak provides two explanations on why countries follow EU guidelines in HE: their potential efficiency and pressure coming from the top. The author identifies lack of mobility among students and teachers, together with improper institutional and financial arrangement as the main obstacles in the field of education towards European integrations, which is another indicator of the rushed and risky Erasmus implementation. (Ziljak, 2007)

The EU passive leverage and the process of Europeanization are clearly applicable and visible in the case of Croatia's mobility reforms in the field of HE. Moreover, the influence was strong enough to push the government and higher education institutions to get involved in

the Erasmus programme without possessing sufficient capacities, necessary to fulfill the Erasmus University Charter's criteria, related to the quality standards in higher education. Solely through their application, higher education institutions expressed their alleged readiness for implementation of the Erasmus, without any official requirement posed by the EU. Following EU guidelines in the field of HE, particularly in its mobility aspect, Croatia demonstrates the effect of Europeanization on its higher education institutions. The effect is a consequence of EU passive leverage, based on evaluations, recommendations, funding and public advocacy of EU higher education objectives.

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

Using Robert K. Yin's typology, Winston Tellis described three approaches in designing case study: "...*exploratory*, *explanatory*, and *descriptive* case studies..." (Tellis, 1997: 5) According to the author, *exploratory* case studies imply that research and data collection are done prior to defining a clear research question and hypotheses. Thus, fieldwork helps the researcher to come up with an interesting question which can be answered using the data already gathered. *Explanatory* case studies are used for identifying causal relations and making causal inference. Finally, *descriptive* case studies imply hypotheses based on cause-effect relationships. Also, research has to be supported with a descriptive theory. (Tellis, 1997: 5-6) Considering the EU passive leverage and Europeanization theories I use in order to examine EU influence, its scope and consequences on its candidate states, particularly in the field of education in Croatia, my research falls under the type of descriptive case study.

Since my aim was to confirm the theories I use, contributing to them in a way to emphasize the strong and harmful consequences which the asymmetry of power between the EU and its future member states can produce, an in-depth analysis of particular case study was appropriate choice. As Tellis indicates, "single case studies are used to confirm or challenge a theory..." (Tellis, 2007: 8)

Due to the complexity of the higher education field (the Erasmus programme in particular), and the need for a holistic research, in order to gather viewpoints from different participants regarding my research hypotheses, I found single case study as the most appropriate methodological choice. Furthermore, in the time frame available, I was unable to expand and support my research findings with other case studies.

Nevertheless, I find Croatia an appropriate choice for this topic, considering its current EU candidate country status, whose pre-accession period was prolonged more than its government expected, incentivizing as soon as possible each negotiation chapter closure, as

well as favorable diplomatic relations with the EU. Therefore, Croatia is a good example of accelerated negotiations, where EU passive leverage is strong enough even to push the country towards reforms advocated by the EU, but not completely elaborated in order to be solely beneficial for reform's target group.

Led by Tellis' theory – "Case study is done in a way that incorporates the views of 'actors' in the case under study..." (Tellis, 1997: 3), "...statistical robustness is not an absolute necessity in all case studies." (Tellis, 1997: 14) – I conducted surveys with universities, their Erasmus coordinators and vice-rectors for international relations, as well as with seven students with previous Erasmus experience, using them as an informal source of information, in order to research HE institutions' capacities and readiness for Erasmus implementation.

Finally, I used descriptive content analysis, including official documents and archival records. According to Tellis, documents can be "...letters, memoranda, agendas, administrative documents, newspaper articles, or any document that is germane to the investigation. Archival records can be service records, organizational records, lists of names, survey data, and other such records." (Tallis, 1997: 10) As documents I used mostly the European Commission's strategies and declarations, as well as development strategies from the Croatian government. As archival records I used mostly research and report done by the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, coordinated by the Institute for the Development of Education (IDE) in Zagreb, related to Croatian universities' capacities necessary for Erasmus implementation, prior to their participation in the programme.

In order to properly examine whether Croatian HE institutions (at the same time EUC holders) were ready for the implementation of the programme, or their application for the EUC was more a result of EU passive leverage and Europeanization, as well as of the national willingness to join the EU as soon as possible, I researched HE institutions' capacities in a

year prior to their application for the EUC (2008) and in their first year of Erasmus implementation (2009 or 2010). Expectations in 2008 and results in 2009 were compared and also, results of student mobility were taken into consideration.

3.1. Survey methodology

In April 2009 ten higher education institutions in Croatia received the Erasmus University Charter, enabling them to start participating in the Erasmus programme in the same year. In December 2009 another seven higher education institutions applied and managed to receive the Charter, enabling them to start participating in the programme from 2010. Finally, in December 2010, five more higher education institutions became holders of the Charter. In total, 22 higher education institutions in Croatia now hold the Erasmus University Charter, thus are official participants of the programme. (European Commission, 2010e)

Considering the time available for conducting the research, I decided to examine the capacities and results of Erasmus mobility only for seven Croatian universities. Those seven universities⁹, among ten in total, are the only ones which implement the Erasmus. Furthermore, they encompass the largest percentage of students and they receive the largest amount of financial resources intended for Erasmus mobility in Croatia. In 2009, these seven universities received 87% of available resources for Erasmus mobility. (Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes, 2009) In 2010, the proportion was 83%, slightly lower due to the fact that other HE institutions started to participate in the programme. (Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes, 2010) In the academic year 2009/2010, public universities (included in this research) encompassed 80% of total number of students in Croatia. (Agency for Science and Higher Education, 2010) Having the largest capacities and number of students, evaluations

⁹ University of Zagreb, University of Rijeka, University of Split, University of Osijek, Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, University of Zadar, University of Dubrovnik.

drawn on the level of universities can be used for further conclusions on the entire Croatian HE system.

In order to collect the necessary information, during the first week of March 2011 I distributed questionnaires to Erasmus coordinators at the university level. In one month's time the questionnaires were sent back to me, answered through cooperation between Erasmus coordinators and vice-rectors for international cooperation. The questionnaire was also sent to central Croatian agency in charge of the Erasmus programme, the Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes. Finally, seven Croatian students with Erasmus experience, coming from the largest, oldest and most developed university in Croatia – University of Zagreb - were asked to share their experience related to the programme, as well as to assess the readiness of Croatian HE institutions for participation in the programme, according to their student experience and information available. The number of student respondents is low due to time limitations. Nevertheless, I found their feedback very useful, as an informal check of the data reliability provided by universities. Furthermore, being the students of the largest and the most developed university, I assumed they had the best chances to experience the highest quality mobility among others. Also, among them there are students who experienced Erasmus mobility in different stages of its development, including the first year of implementation – 2009.

3.2. Questionnaire design

While creating questionnaires intended for universities, the Agency and students, I decided to use open-ended questions, in order to obtain broad answers and detailed information, trying to substitute the advantage of interviews. Precise information and data which are available on the universities' and the Agency's websites were excluded from the questionnaire. Personal evaluation of certain capacities was mostly required from examinees.

Following the research pattern used by the IDE in the research of university capacities in 2008, I formulated questions under five general topics: *institutional capacities*, *administrative capacities*, *academic capacities*, *financial capacities* and *general questions*.

Under institutional capacities I included questions concerning bilateral agreements, existing strategic documents, cooperation between vice-rector for international cooperation, office for international cooperation and Erasmus coordinators.

Questions related to administrative capacities dealt mostly with the existing job positions related to the programme, accommodation capacities for incoming students, informative materials provided for outgoing and incoming students, university aggregated database on mobility of students, cooperation between university administration and student organizations, student services assured for the incoming students, and knowledge of foreign languages among administrative staff.

Academic capacities questions encompassed education about the programme for executive and legislative bodies on university level, adoption of the ECTS system required for any sort of international student exchange, study programmes offered in foreign languages, existence of quality assurance center, foreign language courses for teachers, intensive Croatian language course for incoming students, system for recognition of grades and ECTS earned while studying abroad.

Financial capacities questions were related to the available budget and its adequacy for fostering Erasmus mobility, including alternative financial sources for outgoing students.

Finally, the questionnaire was comprised of some general questions: universities' reasons for adoption of the programme, results in the number of incoming and outgoing students, challenges universities had to face while implementing the programme.

Questionnaire sent to the Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes was comprised of slightly different questions, mostly related to reasons for application for the programme,

assessment of universities' capacities and mobility results, while former Erasmus students were asked to evaluate the offer of study programmes abroad, availability of information about the programme, application procedure, process of recognition at the home faculty, and the general readiness of Croatian higher education for quality, meaningful and educationally beneficial Erasmus.

3.3. Measurement

Each HE institutions accepted for participation in the Erasmus programme holds the Erasmus University Charter. It is the only document which determines the required criteria for successful Erasmus implementation. However, these criteria are fairly general, inappropriate to evaluate and compare existing HE institutions' capacities with them. Three fundamental principles are clearly defined within the Erasmus Extended University Charter which allows mobility of students both for studying and practice.

Mobility should be carried out only within prior inter-institutional agreements; no university fees for tuition, registration, examinations, access to laboratory, and library facilities are to be charged to in-coming Erasmus students; full recognition shall be given to students for satisfactorily completed activities specified in the compulsory *Learning Agreements and Placement Agreements*. (European Commission, 2007b)

However, other criteria and guidelines are very superficial and not clearly defined, such as: "the highest quality in the organization of student and staff mobility; to support the integration of visiting Erasmus students in the Institution's activities; to facilitate and acknowledge Erasmus teaching activities..." (European Commission, 2007b) Considering this broad and very short description of requirements, which may be differently interpreted in different countries (and by different HE institutions), in order to evaluate universities' capacities and readiness for the quality Erasmus, in addition to this Charter, I will use comparison between universities' expectations prior to joining the Erasmus and their

accomplishments in the first year, results from other countries comparable¹⁰ with Croatia (such as Lithuania, Slovakia, Latvia and Slovenia), and best practice examples awarded in 2007 and 2009: Akdeniz University, Antalya, Turkey; University of Granada, Spain; Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany.

¹⁰ Comparable according to their population size; GDP per capita; annual expenditure on public and private educational institutions per student in Euros PPS (purchasing power standards), at tertiary level of education; total public expenditure as % of GDP, at tertiary level of education; number of students (taking into consideration student population as percentage of total population). (Eurostat, 2011)

CHAPTER 4 – THE ERASMUS PROGRAMME IN CROATIA: DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter I will firstly introduce the Croatian HE system, particularly referring to its institutional arrangement. This will help me to demonstrate the share of responsibilities and power between HE institutions, government and its agencies. Hence, the autonomous position which HE institutions enjoy did not allow the government to force the application for the Erasmus. Nevertheless, the promotion of the programme through national strategic documents related to education and the Bologna Declaration objectives pushed universities towards the programme (particularly EU funds and international reputation as their main incentives) that the government supported, regardless of the lack of capacities necessary for quality and proper Erasmus performance.

Secondly, I will analyze the institutional, administrative, academic and financial capacities of seven universities, researched in 2008 (one year prior to the implementation of the Erasmus programme in the majority of universities) by the Croatian Institute for the Development of Education, one extremely successful, influential and reliable non-governmental organization in the country, involved particularly in higher education development.

Finally, analysis of information provided through questionnaires by Erasmus coordinators and vice-rectors for international cooperation from seven universities will follow, together with previous Erasmus students' personal evaluation and experience related to the programme.

The entire evaluation and analysis will encompass comparisons with best practice examples listed above, including general guidelines and objectives present in the Erasmus University Charter and EU strategic documents on lifelong learning.

4.1. Higher Education System in Croatia

According to the Scientific Activity and Higher Education Act, HE in Croatia is performed by higher education institutions divided into universities (comprised of faculties and art academies), polytechnics and schools of professional higher education (or colleges). Universities organize undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate studies. HE institutions belong under the authority of the MSES, which closely cooperates with the Parliament's national councils and agencies in charge of science, higher education and their financing. (Official announcement publications, 2009)

According to the Agency for Science and Higher Education in Croatia, by the end of 2009 there were 56 accredited HE institutions in the Republic of Croatia: 10 universities, 16 polytechnics and 30 colleges. For this research seven public universities are relevant and provide a representative sample of the higher education situation in Croatia, considering the number of students and financial resources they encompass. (Agency for Science and Higher Education in Croatia, 2010) According to the IDE, these seven public universities can be divided into three categories, considering their size and age: three small and new universities – Pula (founded in 2006), Dubrovnik (founded in 2003), Zadar (founded in 2002) – encompassing a total of 10 101 students all together; three larger universities – Split, Rijeka, Osijek, founded in the 1970s – encompassing 63 045 students; finally, University of Zagreb as the largest (75 635 students) and the oldest one going back to 1669, encompassing more students than the other six universities together. (ASHE, 2010) Having these facts in mind, there are higher expectations concerning the University of Zagreb.

Higher education institutions in Croatia enjoy academic self-governance. According to the Act on Scientific Activity and Higher Education, academic self-governance includes “setting rules for studying and student enrolment; appointment of heads and teachers; managing resources available to higher education institutions”. University autonomy specifically includes “stipulating internal organization; establishing educational, scientific,

artistic and professional programs; financial autonomy; decision on approving projects and international co-operation, etc.” (Official announcement publications, 2009: 2) However, certain government initiatives were necessary to allow HE institutions to apply for the EUC, and they were at the same time incentives for application. According to the IDE, in 2007 the Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes (one of the prerequisites for Croatia’s full participation in the LLP was accreditation of the Agency by the European Commission) was established by the government, or more specifically under the supervision of the MSES and the Ministry of Family, Veterans and Inter-Generational Solidarity. The other two prerequisites for Croatia’s full participation in the LLP were satisfied in 2008 (the conclusion of the Financing Agreement for the Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance) and in 2009 (preparatory measures for the Youth in Action Programme). (IDE, 2008: 19)

Measures taken by the government (particularly availability of IPA¹¹) have probably been a strong incentive and supported HE institutions to apply for the EUC, even with lacking capacities.

4.2. The Erasmus implementation

In January 2009, the Croatian Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes signed a contract with the European Commission, allowing Croatian higher institutions to apply for the EUC, starting with programme implementation in academic year 2009/2010 earliest. 22 HE institutions now hold the EUC, seven of them the Standard Erasmus University Charter¹², 15 of them the Extended Erasmus University Charter¹³. Out of seven universities included in this

¹¹ 11 468 billion of Euros intended for seven countries (including Croatia) within seven years long period of time. (Central Office for Development Strategy and Coordination of EU Funds in Croatia, 2009)

¹² The **Standard ERASMUS University Charter** is for institutions which wish to apply for ERASMUS funding for transnational student mobility for studies, for transnational mobility activities for teachers and other staff and/or to apply for ERASMUS intensive language courses, ERASMUS intensive programmes, multilateral projects, networks, accompanying measures or preparatory visits. (European Commission, 2010e)

¹³ The **Extended ERASMUS University Charter (Standard Charter and Student Placements)** is for institutions which wish to apply for activities covered by both the Standard and the Extended University Charter (Student Placements only). (European Commission, 2010e)

research, only two (Juraj Dobrila University of Pula and University of Dubrovnik) still hold the Standard EUC. The University of Zagreb, University of Rijeka, University of Split, University of Osijek and Juraj Dobrila University of Pula received the EUC in April, 2009, while the University of Zadar and University of Dubrovnik received the EUC in December 2009. (European Commission, 2010e)

In the questionnaire filled in for the purpose of this research the Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes declared that Croatia decided to join the Erasmus since it is one of the priorities of the Bologna Declaration, which Croatia signed in 2001. Therefore, its duty was to follow the given objectives. Furthermore, the Agency recognizes the value of the programme in itself, however, it does believe that Croatia's participation within the Lifelong Learning programme certainly had an effect on Croatia's rapprochement to EU membership. In the first two academic years (2009/2010, 2010/2011 until January, 2011) of the Erasmus in Croatia, EUC holders were not allowed to receive incoming students, since Croatia was at that time within the preparatory period for full membership in the Lifelong Learning Programme. The decision was made by the European Commission, but the reasons are not publicly available nor stated by the Agency.

4.3. Evaluation of capacities prior to joining the Erasmus

Starting with OECD's overall assessment of HE system in Croatia, the lack of capacities for the successful fulfillment of the Bologna Declaration goals (including the mobility programmes) becomes obvious. Hence, according to the OECD Review of Tertiary Education¹⁴ in general, conducted in June, 2006, Croatia's tertiary education was not satisfactory. Furthermore, this assessment emphasizes EU membership as the main incentive

¹⁴ "This Country Note on Croatia forms part of the OECD Thematic Review of Tertiary Education. This is a collaborative project to assist the design and implementation of tertiary education policies which contribute to the realisation of social and economic objectives of countries." (OECD, 2008)

for education reforms, which if improperly implemented, damage the quality of HE, opposing Lifelong Learning Programme objectives.

...Croatia is extremely, if not unanimously eager to become part of enlarged Europe, with aspirations to join the Union...In terms of tertiary education, this commitment and purpose takes the form of unqualified adoption of Bologna changes and accord, to allow the nation to align with the common qualification system and labor market to which the Bologna accord is moving EU members. The Croatian Government, through the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports (MSES), is not alone among European authorities in using Bologna to attempt reforms that are thought anyway to be necessary. However, the scale and rate of change implied and now being attempted by Croatia are very ambitious, and raise concerns even among keen supporters, as to how well they can be managed so quickly, and what unintended consequences and collateral damage may follow. On the other hand, some of these changes appear essential if the country is to achieve its aspiration to have a dynamic fit-for-purpose system integral to a modern knowledge society. (OECD, 2008: 11)

Despite its extremely ambitious intention to follow the reforms of developed and influential EU member states, Croatia did not achieve noticeable success in the implementation of the Bologna Process. Again, I would argue the challenge was undertaken not because of capacities which were adequate, but because of the aspiration to become more likely to join the EU and more comparable with its member states. The implementation of the Bologna Process did set the grounds for the Higher Education frame alignment with the EU member states, however, the rapid changes failed to achieve the main objectives of the Bologna system, which imposed certain costs on all the beneficiaries of the HE field. Accordingly, the response to the EU's conditions challenged responsiveness towards the beneficiaries of the higher education system. The following problems have been identified: total public expenditure on tertiary education below EU average¹⁵; decreasing quality of education considering the number of students enrolled above the quotas established by the MSES; crowded classes and lack of contact between teachers and students; low graduation

¹⁵ In 2007, EU average public expenditure on tertiary education was 1,12% of GDP, while in Croatia it was 0,81%. (Eurostat, 2011)

rates and too long periods of studying¹⁶; ineffective governance and management in providing policy cooperation between tertiary education and labor market; underdeveloped system of quality assurance¹⁷; the dominance of the teacher-centered perspective within the system, neglected learners' needs and remarks; funding systems mostly insensitive towards the need of the students, and based solely on merit¹⁸; obvious gender division within the field of study; more commercialized HE, considering the growth of the private sector in HE; underdeveloped lifelong learning project; lack of necessary data about the student population; centralization of HE system¹⁹; insufficient human and material resources for enhancing student mobility. (OECD, 2008: 17-55; 79-85)

The following assessment is more specific and divided into four parts: institutional, financial, administrative and academic capacities.

(a) INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITIES

According to the report written by Danijela Dolenec and Karin Doolan, in 2008 six universities' (University of Zagreb excluded as an exception) commitment to foster mobility was underdeveloped at the level of university management. Nominally, the university managements recognized mobility as one of their strategic goals, however, no concrete plans or actions were taken. The fact that action plans regarding mobility were not initiated at the

¹⁶ OECD statistical data indicates 10-15% of students who graduate on time. (OECD, 2008: 30-39) According to the European Commission Eurostat database, in 2007 completion rate in the field of tertiary education was 18.3%, while it was 29.9 for the EU-27. (Eurostat, 2011)

¹⁷ "Quality assessment included the necessary elements of self-assessment, peer review, site visits, external evaluation, and participation by experts from abroad. However, this OECD review found little evidence in the practice of these procedures." (OECD, 2008: 36) According to the data provided by the European Commission, still in 2010 Croatia does not have a Quality Assurance Agency as a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Hence, the only quality assurance agency is the national one: Agency for Science and Higher Education.

¹⁸ Thomas Farnell stresses the lack of stipends and student loans, various obstacles for physically disabled, no incentives for Roma people to become more involved in higher education process. (Farnell, 2008) Farnell argues, since 1990s tuition fees increased drastically while financial state support for students is very poor: in 2009, on 130 000 Croatian students, only 10 000 received state scholarship, which was mostly based on the merit (70% of the state scholarship fund), not the need. Finally, the author emphasizes, on average, 70 Euros per month is an extremely low amount of financial help. (Farnell, 2010)

¹⁹ "...over 50% of all tertiary students in Croatia are enrolled in Zagreb institutions; 2/3 of Croatian higher education academic staff are employed in Zagreb; over 70% of early stage researchers are employed in Zagreb, only 28.5% at tertiary institutions outside." (OECD, 2008: 45-55)

university level (except at the University of Zagreb), what the authors interpreted in the following way: “There is a sense that the universities seem to be largely waiting for the MSES to initiate the Erasmus programme, after which they will start adjusting to the new situation.” (Dolenec and Doolan, 2008: 54) It is emphasized that no concrete steps have been taken to set aside financial resources for the development of mobility. The exception is the University of Zagreb, as a leader in many aspects of university reforms conducted at the national level. In 2007, mobility was declared as one of its key programmatic issues. Concrete measures on institutional level have been taken for enhancing mobility: adoption of “Declaration on Mobility” and an “Action Plan”, with the list of necessary actions and measures for the successful introduction of Erasmus, eight people were hired in the International Relations Office (IRO), and the Vice-Rector for International Affairs was appointed. (Dolenec and Doolan, 2008: 53-54)

According to this report, in their self-assessment encompassing their own institutional capacities, universities declared the following: the universities of Dubrovnik, Osijek, Pula, Zadar and Split did not even begin drafting the Erasmus Policy Statement (necessary for receiving the Erasmus University Charter), and the first three did not include mobility as one of their priorities in their strategic documents. The university of Osijek even declared the need for restructuring their IRO and for nominating contact persons at faculties in order to better accommodate Erasmus actions. (IDE Report, 2008) Although the majority of universities has formulated strategic documents on mobility by now, the University of Split is still formulating the rulebook on international mobility – besides, the EUC is emphasized as the most important document related to the mobility of students. Furthermore, the Juraj Dobrila University of Pula also indicated that the Rulebook on International Mobility and the EUC are the only documents referring to student mobility. Finally, Dolenec and Doolan emphasize how the Bologna reform in 2005 and 2006 overloaded universities’ capacities, making them

resistant to accept new obligations that might increase their workload, especially without monetary compensation. “In an interview, one of the university representatives said there is a risk that the teaching staff will likewise not welcome the Erasmus programme, as it will mean extra work for them.” (Dolenec and Doolan, 2008: 54) Obviously, institutional capacities (in terms of clear strategic documents, action plans necessary for successful implementation of any programme and attitude of personnel) are still in the process of formulation and development, probably decreasing attention and effort devoted to mobility, thus its quality inevitably.

Among the students examined, the majority expressed dissatisfaction with the number of programs offered (implying inactive, although existing bilateral agreements with foreign universities²⁰), particularly the students who experienced Erasmus mobility during the first year of implementation in Croatia (only 3-4 programmes offered).

(b) FINANCIAL CAPACITIES

As indicated by Dolenec and Doolan, only a year prior to joining the Erasmus, almost none of the universities took concrete actions to financially prepare for the increased mobility of students. As the authors emphasize, a precondition for increasing mobility is to allocate more funding for mobility, in order to retrieve membership fees for the LLP which Croatia had to pay for entering the Erasmus. The authors indicate two possible constraints, or reasons: decentralization within universities disables university management to coordinate finances of different faculties²¹, and exhaustion of financial resources by the Bologna reform. As indicated in the report, the MSES has not accompanied new demands for administrative staff and teaching positions with adequate funding. Furthermore, universities reported that “...there is insufficient funding for Croatian students and staff to study abroad and also to fund foreign

²⁰ According to Dolenec and Doolan, bilateral agreements favor reciprocity between two institutions, therefore, lacking capacities at one university/faculty, at the same time provided by the partner institutions, can sabotage activation of agreements. (Doolan and Dolenec, 2008: 58)

²¹ The largest income for faculties is comprised of tuition fees they receive, plus funds intended by the MSES. Thus, university management only serves as a distributor of resources provided by the MSES.

lecturers' visits to Croatia. Academic exchange for Croatian students within Europe is further hampered by the fact that there is a significant difference in the standard of living between Croatia and the larger part of EU members..." (Dolenec and Doolan, 2008: 56)

It is important to emphasize that socio-economically less advantaged students were not motivated through any sort of additional scholarships or loans for participating within Erasmus. (Dolenec and Doolan, 2008: 55-56) Until today, other than the resources provided by the Agency²², there are no alternative financial resources assured for students in order to enhance their mobility. Students are forced to rely on their private incomes or on their personal search for stipends from local/regional government and private companies. This is to assume that students might be discouraged to participate in Erasmus considering the noticeable difference in living standards between Croatia and the majority of EU member states. To make matters worse, lack of financial resources encourages discrimination among students, providing opportunities only for the well-off. The only exception is the University of Zagreb, where, according to the head of the IRO, additional resources (in small degree) are provided by the university.

(c) ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITIES

As indicated in the IDE's report, administrative capacities mostly refer to the work carried out within IROs of each university, such as informing staff and students about outgoing mobility opportunities, preparing and distributing information materials for incoming students. As shown in this report, in 2008 some universities did not have their web pages translated into English, or they were providing only some basic information in foreign languages. Furthermore, lack of other administrative services Dolenec and Doolan emphasized next to IROs, such as career services or psychological help centers for incoming students, with staff successfully managing their work in English, or student organizations

²² Monthly stipend awarded by the Agency for 1 student was 300€ in academic year 2009/2010, and 400€ in academic year 2010/2011.

involved in the Erasmus programme. Other administrative obstacles identified in 2008 were: complex administrative procedure of acquiring residency permits for foreigners (process for registering foreign student can take over a month); small number of employees within IROs (mostly one or two²³); health care assured by private providers is not acceptable (according to Croatian law, health insurance has to be issued by the government office); outgoing students losing their rights to state stipends²⁴; lack of dormitory space²⁵ indicated by all universities; lack of knowledge of foreign languages among administrative staff. (Dolenec and Doolan, 2008: 57-58)

Although universities partly improved²⁶ their administrative capacities by today, there are many administrative obstacles still present. The University of Zadar does not have Erasmus coordinators on a faculty level (their workload is distributed among ECTS coordinators); as declared by the University of Split, the share of Erasmus workload is still in process (no clear systematization yet); the Juraj Dobrila University of Pula currently has only one Erasmus coordinator, there are no new job positions created for managing mobility and Erasmus in particular, which is the same case with the University of Dubrovnik. Furthermore, accommodation capacities are problematic for the majority of HE institutions: only 3% of accommodation capacities in dormitories is assured for incoming students at the University of Zadar, and there is no cooperation with private accommodation providers; student dormitory does not exist and there is no cooperation with private accommodation providers in the case of the universities in Split, Dubrovnik and Pula, which also do not possess any system for managing data about mobility. At the University of Zadar, only Excel tables are used for data

²³ According to the IDE's report, the number is not sufficient since IROs have to manage most of administrative issues for incoming students, because of the language barriers.

²⁴ "State scholarship must be exclusively held and is revoked once any other funding is obtained (even if the second source is also the state)." (IDE, 2008: 57) This regulation again discourages disadvantaged students to participate in Erasmus, particularly if they receive permanent state scholarship which they are not willing to risk only for a few months of Erasmus experience, for which they are maybe not even able to cover costs without both sources of funding (Erasmus stipend and local/state/private stipend).

²⁵ Particularly in the case of disabled students.

²⁶ Most of the web pages are available in English, new job positions related to Erasmus mobility are created (mostly in IROs).

management on mobility as a minimum standard. In general, there are no programmes for incorporating incoming students into the academic community, starting from no cooperation between university administration and student organizations. Informative materials about the Erasmus are scarce: as declared by the University of Split, information are provided only through websites, without additional materials, while the Juraj Dobrila University of Pula provides informative materials only in Croatian (including the webpage), emphasizing that there are no measures taken for the purpose of promoting university abroad as an attractive destination. Finally, knowledge of foreign languages among administrative staff is assessed as *not adequate* or *satisfactory*.

With one exception in most of the areas – the University of Zagreb – other universities still struggle with administrative obstacles mostly related to accommodation for incoming students, services provided for incoming students (such as career opportunity office), services for incorporating students into academic community, no students included in the Erasmus student network, difficulties with foreign language skills among the administrative staff, complex state procedure where universities should focus pressure, and until recently (2010) taxed scholarship scheme, which was converting scholarships into insufficient for covering the living expenses.

Previously represented data can be supported by students' very critical feedback concerning the universities' administrative capacities. One student stated that she managed to apply for Erasmus thanks to her own "intelligence, creativity and ingenuity", considering a very complex procedure and lack of information among the staff. Another student marked the application procedure as "chaotic; the faculty coordinator did not possess sufficient information and competence related to application procedures, so she instructed students to collect and send even unnecessary documents, just in case." Communication between hosting and sending university was assessed as very "weak" and "nonchalant", and among the

majority of students lack of coordination between university and faculties was emphasized. One of the students stated that by the mistake of the IRO, she did not receive the first stipend while studying abroad, which caused serious financial issues, and another stated that her last stipend was three months late (received after finishing the Erasmus programme). In addition to this, this year's application procedure is late with publishing official results for stipends, leaving no choice for students but to apply for the programmes abroad before they know whether they will receive the stipend, in order not to skip the deadline. Moreover, faculties encourage applications because they expect official results to be published after the application deadlines for the programmes abroad. That might cause problems in the future if students apply for the programme without receiving the stipend afterwards.

Lack of knowledge, coordination, communication and clear share of responsibilities between faculty's, university's, agency's and even ministry's administration can discourage students to apply for the Erasmus, or it can create aggravating circumstances before or during the period of study abroad.

(d) ACADEMIC CAPACITIES

The IDE's report from 2008 emphasizes absence of courses and academic programmes in English and other foreign languages as a crucial obstacle for student mobility, including Erasmus. Dolenec and Doolan state that some universities expressed concern related to teachers' willingness to improve their foreign language skills, despite offered language courses. All universities adopted ECTS, however the question is whether students face any difficulties concerning the recognition of their credits gained while studying abroad. Again, with the exception of the University of Zagreb, other universities did not offer complete study programmes in English or other foreign languages in 2008 – few courses or modules started with preparation in a foreign language. (Dolenec and Doolan, 2008: 58-60) For example, in 2008 the University of Osijek had only an intention to offer one or two

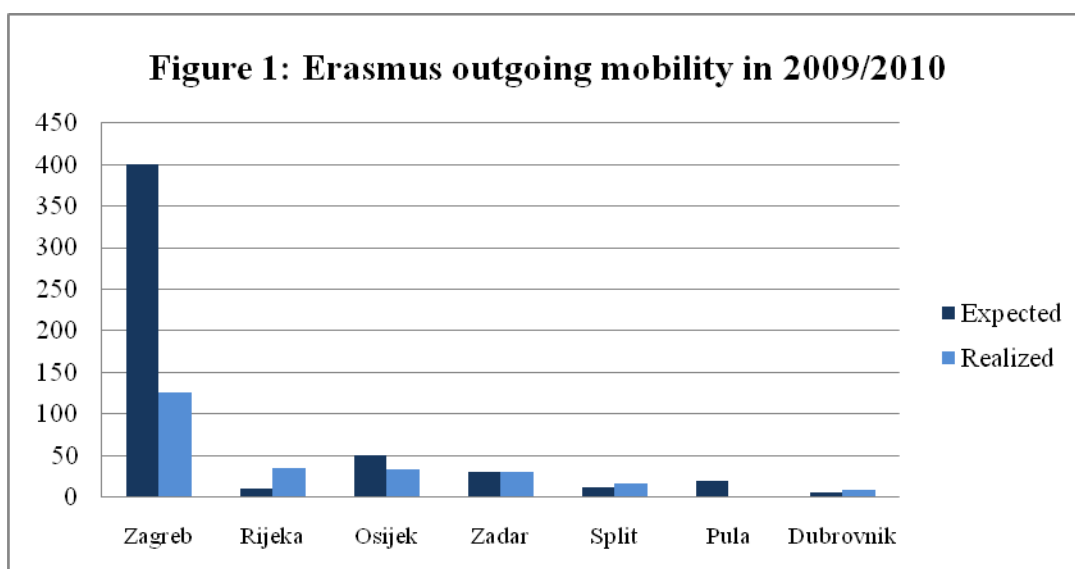
courses per faculty held in English. Also, their staff was not familiar with recognition procedures, and was not offered foreign language courses – other universities also faced those problems. The University of Dubrovnik today offers only 30 ECTS in English and there is no intensive Croatian course organized for incoming students. The Juraj Dobrila University of Pula is still organizing courses which will be held in foreign languages, there is also no intensive course of Croatian assured for incoming students. Furthermore, the University of Rijeka does not provide any course of foreign languages for their teaching staff, or for incoming students, and a rulebook on recognition of credits gained abroad still does not exist. The University of Split states that their foreign language courses and programmes are still under construction.

Responding to the questions related to academic capacities, students experienced some difficulties and complicated procedures, such as one year long recognition procedure of credits gained abroad; “fight for recognition of academic obligations fulfilled abroad”; “Croatian education system is unorganized and incompatible with the programmes offered abroad”; “I almost did not finish my BA on time because the administration was breaking our learning agreement according to which all courses taken abroad should have been recognized when I was back.” Furthermore, all examinees among students stated lack of courses and programmes in English or other foreign languages, as well as the number of teaching staff necessary for quality classes.

Students have emphasized the positive experience gained abroad mostly related to life separated from parents, new friendships, improvement of foreign language skills, however, the majority faced administrative, academic or financial difficulties during their application for the programme or when back. All examinees were students from the University of Zagreb, the most developed and best prepared for the programme requirements. Nevertheless, various

difficulties have been identified, implying a general lack of capacities necessary for successful Erasmus programme and obviously externally encouraged, rushed implementation.

Concerning the number of outgoing students in the first year of Erasmus implementation (for five²⁷ universities it was the academic year 2009/2010, for two²⁸ universities it was the academic year 2010/2011), universities overall did not achieve the expected number of outgoing students in their first year of Erasmus (expected 525, realized 249). Individually, results concerning the numbers of outgoing students in the first year of implementation are not so striking. Nevertheless, they show discrepancy between the expected results and universities' preparedness to reach them. At the same time, numbers do not indicate much about capacities' status.



Source: Acquired from the Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes in Croatia

As presented in the Figure 1, in their first year of Erasmus implementation three universities did not achieve the expected numbers (Zagreb, Split, Pula), while others managed to reach their lower set goals. However, it is important to emphasize that the Juraj Dobrila University of Pula did not have any outgoing students in the first year of implementation,

²⁷ University of Zagreb, University of Rijeka, University of Split, Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, University of Osijek

²⁸ University of Zadar, University of Dubrovnik

although the EUC was acquired, and in the year afterwards only 3 students went for Erasmus exchange. Furthermore, seven public universities altogether did not achieve any results related to incoming students, since they were not allowed to receive them, according to the decision of the European Commission. Out of 284 expected incoming students in the first year of implementation, there were no students coming to Croatia through the Erasmus programme. (IDE's report, 2008 and ASHE database) Finally, according to the Agency, one non-named HE institutions (after receiving the EUC and financial resources from the Agency) decided to withdraw from the programme during that specific year, and return the fund to the Agency.

If compared with other countries' results in Erasmus exchange during their first year, Croatia achieved similar results within its outgoing mobility. However, since Erasmus became part of the Lifelong Learning Programme, other countries have been much more successful, compared to Croatia. After joining the Erasmus in 1999, Lithuania, Latvia and Slovenia had approximately the same number of outgoing students as Croatia did in 2009, compared to their student population. In Croatia, 249 students went abroad (taking into consideration seven public universities within the first year), in Lithuania 361, in Latvia 166 and in Slovenia 170. Slovakia was far from Croatia's results in its first year of Erasmus – only 59 students went abroad in 1998, however, in 1999 the number increased to 380. In 2008, when Croatia was about to join the Erasmus, other countries managed to use their capacities much better, as well as the circumstances (number of participating countries, therefore potential bilateral partners increased), absorbing at the same time a greater part of Erasmus funds than Croatia did in 2009. In the academic year 2008/2009, Lithuania recorded 2 425 students going abroad, Latvia 1104, Slovenia 1703 and Slovakia 1132. (Eurostat, 2011)

As announced at the beginning of the chapter, I have assessed universities' performance using comparisons not only between countries, but also between comparable universities. Therefore, on a micro-level I chose three universities, marked as the best practice

examples in the Erasmus programme, by the European Commission. “Best practice examples”, or “success stories” are identified on the basis of “...the figures for the incoming and outgoing students and teachers, the level of innovation with curriculum development and thematic network projects.” (European Commission: Education and Training, 2007: 5)

Particular attention is given to incoming students, since more demanding preparation and effort has to be invested in order to welcome and integrate foreign students. In 2007, the University of Granada (UGR), one of the oldest universities in Spain, received *Lifelong Learning Erasmus Award in Gold*. According to its age (founded in 1531) and its size (approximately 60 000 students), it can be compared to the University of Zagreb. The UGR concluded 800 bilateral agreements by 2007, compared to 130 of the University of Zagreb. In general, 13% of total student population are international students (already in its first year of Erasmus – 2004/2005 – it had around 1600 incoming students and around 950 students who went to study abroad). There is a variety of classes and programmes offered in English; courses of Spain and other foreign languages are provided for foreign students (10 000 students enroll each year in one of the courses). (European Commission: Education and Training, 2007) They run a Knowledge Transfer Office, for communication with the business world, Accommodation Service; Cultural Service; Student Welfare Service; various International Student Associations; Guidance and Counseling Service, etc. Various types of in-depth information are provided for foreign students already via online brochures and guides. (University of Granada, 2010)

Furthermore, the Akdeniz University in Antalya, Turkey, received *Lifelong Learning Erasmus Award in Bronze* in 2009, and it can be according to its year of establishment (1982) and according to its number of students (around 30 000) compared with two Croatian average public universities: the University of Rijeka and the University of Split. Firstly, the Akdeniz University has more than 250 bilateral agreements (the University of Rijeka 77, the

University of Split 80), approximately 600 students have had Erasmus experience abroad since the programme started in 2003/2004 until 2007 (the University of Rijeka 35, the University of Split 33), which implies that Rijeka and Split can hardly reach the same number in the same period of time, even if they double the figures they currently have. Approximately 300 foreign students studied there (in Croatia none during the first year), the University organizes Intensive Turkish Language Course for foreign students (277 foreign students attended language courses by this time), already in 2005 the University started the project “At the Campus”, followed by the “Building Bridges” project, which “...involves language support, intercultural learning, EU vision and gathering all Erasmus students through cultural events.” (European Commission: Education and Training, 2007) The university is well connected with the European Volunteer Service within the Youth in Action programme – coordination between EVS and Erasmus serves to improve the visibility of both programmes. Various social, cultural, health services, students’ clubs and societies are provided and adjusted for international students. According to their website information, a variety of programmes and courses is offered in English language, there is also information on dormitory accommodation available. (Akdeniz University, 2009)

Finally, the Humboldt University of Berlin²⁹, again comparable with an average Croatian public university, with around 700 outgoing students and 900 incoming students each year (14% of student body are international students), received *Lifelong Learning Erasmus Award in Silver* in 2007, and significantly exceeded current Croatian standards. Except for the Guide for International Students, various other sources of help are assured, such as *Visa service, Language Exchange Service, Cultural Programme, Intercultural Training for International Students, Career Center*, etc. Many programmes (including undergraduate and graduate level) are offered in English. (Humboldt University, 2011)

²⁹ Founded in 1810, with nearly 40 000 students.

External evaluation of the Croatian higher education system done by the OECD in 2006 indicated general disadvantages and flaws which legislative and executive forces on the ministry, university and faculty level should have improved. Many of them remained until today, despite various changes implemented. From the perspective of institutional, financial, administrative and academic capacities presented in this chapter, Croatian universities still lag far behind from the examples discussed, and whose standards and practice concerning the Erasmus programme are required for the programme to be assessed as successful and advantageous for the entire academic community, particularly students.

DISCUSSION

As indicated by all Bologna major documents and as emphasized in the questionnaire by the Croatian Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes, mobility is one of the Bologna priorities, and therefore Croatia committed itself to achieve the goals to which it subscribed by becoming a signatory of Bologna, as well as by promoting Erasmus mobility. Despite the value recognized in the programme itself, associated with additional possibility to improve the level of student skills, on the basis of the research summarized in this thesis, in particular on the basis of the assessment of universities' capacity prior to the decision to join Erasmus it could be argued that Croatia's inclusion in the Erasmus programme was a result of EU pre-accession period and of an attempt to qualify for EU membership on each level, and to reach available EU funds, rather than a result of the country's pure willingness and readiness to become a part of one of the biggest and the most famous European programmes of student exchange.

Already in IDE's report, one year prior to Erasmus implementation in the majority of public universities, potential disadvantages/handicaps were recognized in the field of institutional, financial, administrative and academic capacities. Dolenec and Doolan provided an overall assessment emphasizing lack of coordination between universities' IROs and other (then mostly non-existing) student services, which should disburden the central office for international relations and focus attention solely on Erasmus activities. Even today the majority of universities do not advertise any new job positions created for managing Erasmus activities, thus, extra burden has been put on existing staff, definitely decreasing, rather than increasing the capacity and human resources that could be invested in the programme implementation.

Furthermore, Dolenec and Doolan indicated a lack of financial schemes for the purposes of expanding mobility from their own sources, leaving students to rely solely on

modest stipends provided by the MSES and on their personal income. (Dolenec and Doolan, 2008: 60) Students face financial problems anyway, particularly those who do not study in their hometowns, thus, they have high living expenses and can even less afford studying abroad, based on their own financial resources, particularly in a country with higher living standard than Croatia, which is the case in the majority of EU member states. Financial issues recognized by the students, universities and the Agency, support discrimination towards successful students from disadvantaged socio-economic background, discouraging them to engage in the studying abroad, due to the lack of financial resources.

Related to administrative capacities, the majority of public universities was not properly equipped (and still is not) with systems for managing data and distributing information about mobility, both for outgoing and incoming students. Lack of information, in the sense of aggregated data, can disable tracking advantages and disadvantages of the programme implementation, slowing down progress in the field. It is hard to believe that there are still universities which do not have even their webpage translated into English, not to mention printed brochures and packages intended for foreign students. Accommodation capacities present another important obstacle, considering lack of dormitory space for incoming students, and high prices of private accommodation. This can lead to a lack of interest among foreign students in studying in Croatia. Also, this can be an aggravating circumstance when concluding bilateral agreements based on reciprocity with countries which possess adequate accommodation capacities. It is worth mentioning that universities did not assure any type of student services for incoming students, including activities for incorporating them into the academic community, which can harm exchange experience when combined with language barriers.

Finally, in 2008 as well as today the very small selection of programmes and courses available in foreign languages is probably the largest capacity constraint of Croatia's

universities. The quality of education of incoming students can be seriously harmed in this way, disabling them to be focused on the programmes of their own interest, and forcing them to take courses just because they are available in a language they understand. Lack of teaching staff (implied by the OECD review and by students' evaluations) necessary for interactive classes and seminars can undermine the quality of education. Furthermore, obstacles which outgoing students identified concerning the process of recognition can be very tedious and problematic particularly for students who wish to spend their last semester of the BA abroad, and continue with education elsewhere afterwards. The complex procedure of recognition and the requirement for retaking exams after the programme (as it was the case with two students interviewed) signal lack of preparation for participation in the programme as well.

Compared with countries such as Slovenia, Slovakia, Lithuania and Latvia, Croatia had similar achievements considering the number of outgoing students taking into account the first year of the Erasmus programme within each country. However, when the programme became a part of the Lifelong Learning Programme, encompassing much larger financial resources, each of these countries achieved better success than Croatia. I am aware they have become experienced in the programme by that time, however, Croatia had the same period for preparation, and in addition had examples to learn from. However, this data does not indicate existing capacities in other countries, but it does imply that Croatia should have been able to achieve better results in terms of statistics.

Statistics and analyses done at university level demonstrate a noticeable gap between the role-model universities and Croatian opportunities. Croatian universities and other even less developed HE institutions will have to invest constant effort, in terms of finances, staff and its further education, student services, programmes offered in foreign languages, promotion abroad, clear missions related to mobility, and dedication to that priority above all.

Until then, amateurism or unpreparedness can negatively affect the quality of education of outgoing and incoming students, as well as universities' domestic and international reputation.

According to one newspaper article published in 2010, in addition to universities, the state is also not very prone to foreign students, particularly when it comes to complex visa procedures and health care administration. It is stated that the presence of foreign students at Croatian universities, compared to prestigious world universities, can be expressed in promilles. (Slobodna Dalmacija)

CONCLUSION

The first major conclusion of the MA thesis, at the same time an answer to its research question, is the following: implementation of the Erasmus programme in Croatia is an example of EU passive leverage on higher education reforms, expressed in the fact that Croatia rushed to match its formal policies with EU expectations and standards, to become a part of that community quickly as possible, in every formal possible policy aspect, rather than trying to improve content and quality of higher education. There is no question that the government and universities nominally recognized significant HE reforms (including the Erasmus programme) as part of their strategy to move towards a knowledge based economy and society, however, universities' capacities at institutional, administrative, financial and academic level do not indicate higher education system's preparedness for proper implementation of the Erasmus, which can lead towards only nominally salient goals. Some genuine appreciation of the programme as being worth in itself, combined with EU passive leverage and the process of Europeanization was insufficient in order not to result in the programme's premature and risky implementation.

Some of the basic requirements were fulfilled already with the implementation of the Bologna process, such as government's strategic and sectoral action plans, or the ECTS system necessary for any type of recognized international student exchange. However, various other imperative elements were not assured, starting from universities' concrete plans and actions taken prior to acquiring the EUC, a "permit" for Erasmus activities; lack of financial resources for the development of mobility set aside by universities; small number of programmes offered, as emphasized by students; lack of financial resources coming from the governmental agency; lack of materials written in English (starting from websites to printed informative brochures); non-existence of information and data management systems for student data, lack of student services important for the life quality of incoming students

particularly; complex administrative procedures; insufficient number of employees working in offices for international relations; lack of dormitory space or other type of assured accommodation; insufficient foreign language knowledge among the administrative and teaching staff; small number of courses, comprehensive programmes in particular, offered in foreign language; unmotivated teachers for improvement of their own skills for teaching in foreign language; problems in recognition of ECTS and grades obtained abroad.

In general, Croatia's higher education institutions which hold the EUC were not allowed to receive foreign students during the first year of the programme, according to a European Commission's decision. Obviously, lack of necessary capacities and the need for preparation was recognized, however, there was no official assessment on readiness for the Erasmus eventually being carried out. Nevertheless, previous evaluations, such as the one conducted by the OECD, have shown the need for the future improvement. Exactly because of the unspecified requirements and non-existing official assessment, 22 HE institutions are today allowed to send their students abroad and to receive foreigners, without proper social, financial, and academic support systems. Nominal confirmation of the existing capacities is provided from each institution, however, as this research indicated, practice rebounds from the official data.

The matters of capacities and possible consequences presented in the Discussion part (*above*) required further research about the causes. I have used the context of EU passive leverage and Europeanization, combined with the long pre-accession negotiations for the full EU membership, in order to demonstrate convergence in various policy domains, including higher education, between EU candidate and member states. My intention was to explore the scope of influence and potentially harmful consequences that EU membership can encourage. Beginning with the Bologna process, negatively evaluated in Croatia by students, civil society organizations, teachers and external evaluators (e.g. OECD), and the Erasmus programme, the

actual EU pressure and leverage becomes obvious in my study, particularly in the field of higher education, an autonomous policy-making sphere within national borders. This research, therefore, underscores the strength of EU leverage (which was not questioned in the first place), and the level of risk the candidate country can be ready to take in order to approach EU membership.

The Erasmus programme as such, started in 1987, incorporated in the Lifelong Learning Programme in 2007, promoted through the Lisbon Strategy and the Bologna declaration, adopted by 33 European countries, funded by approximately 450 million euro per year was an adequate case, incorporated into EU passive leverage and Europeanization theoretical framework to demonstrate the EU's impact in general on its member or candidate countries, particularly in the field such as education, autonomous and subject to the principle of subsidiarity, emphasizing challenging consequences which can be taken for granted when compared with the benefits of EU membership.

As indicated already in 2008 by Dolenec and Doolan in the IDE's report, further improvements should be made in the following fields even today: clear strategic documents and action plans related to mobility activities; active and revived bilateral and multilateral agreements already existent; strong awareness on the importance of mobility among staff and students; higher financial support for teachers and students engaged in the programme; redistribution of workload among international relations staff through opening new job positions or separate offices only for Erasmus activities; establishment of the efficient communication channels between higher education institutions involved in the programme; well organized management system on mobility data; cooperation between universities and student organizations; student accommodation capacities; assurance of various student services for incorporating incoming students into the social and academic community; available information on mobility through different means of communication; language

training for teachers and staff at each HE institution involved in the programme; development of courses and programmes offered in English; Croatian foreign language course assured for incoming students; and well regulated system of recognition of achievements obtained abroad by outgoing students. (Dolenec and Doolan, 2008: 53-60)

Although universities have made many improvements related to mobility since 2008, other changes are still required in order to reach the level of expected results by universities themselves, as well as the level of Erasmus best practice examples, which will allow taking a bigger part in the Erasmus fund, increasing the quality of HE. Otherwise, following the European trends in HE without the necessary quality can bring into question the ideal of lifelong learning.

Finally, recommendations for the further research refer to broadening the scope of the research to other HE institutions involved in the Erasmus programme, as well as to government bodies dealing with education. Other qualitative methods could be considered for such research, particularly semi-structured interviews.

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