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PERCEIVING EU GOVERNANCE INPUTS AND POLICY-MAKING IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

In the field of education within the European governance framework the EU exercises its competences insofar as to "support, coordinate or supplement" the works of its Member States. This implies actions and programs designed to determine common ends and ensure the transfer of proper praxis such as the advancement of equal opportunities or life-long learning policies. This paper is determined to focus on the manner in which these actions are reflected in different selected mainstream online media and news sources. The research methodology is cast to roof through content analysis techniques the news coverage spanning a period of several years (2013-2017). The scope of such an endeavour is to determine the trends in media coverage of education-related articles. Thus, the analysis is projected to draw inferences by correlating the coverage of certain topics with events, phenomena, facts and figures, legislation and related documents pertaining to the period under study. This would facilitate both a discussion and deep understanding of the manner in which media coverage reflects EU education policies. Consequently, the paper would touch upon the manner in which selected national and international online news sources portray European Union institutions and bodies and national authorities in charge in their mission to design, adopt and implement education-related policies. This implies identifying the relevant articles and elaborating on the media-drawn profile of the institutions and agencies involved in policy-making and policy-implementation both at national and supranational level.

Keywords: Education policies**,** European governance, policy-making, programs, media monitoring.

1. Introduction

In the field of education within the European governance framework the EU exercises its competences insofar as to "support, coordinate or supplement" the works of its Member States. This implies actions and programs designed to determine common ends and ensure the transfer of proper praxis such as the advancement of equal opportunities or life-long learning policies. Studies on European citizenship placed education and mobility (through different EU life-long learning schemes such as Erasmus program) at the grassroots of forming an active citizenship. Centering the research on the conceptual framework of identity, rights and participation, it has been shown that European policies in the field of education and people (particularly youth/students) mobility across the EU as against passiveness contrive to the institutionalization of the European citizenship (Siklodi, 2015). Moreover, studies have argued for the advantages of European integration with a particular focus on freedom of movement to national higher education as regards EU funding, in-coming students, in-coming teaching staff work force, and out-going students resources (Mayhew, 2017). Further studies analyzed the linkages between migration policies, international/European (higher) education policies and student mobility frameworks methodologically correlating statistics with discourse analysis (Lomer, 2018). Earlier studies suggested that social and economic factors frame both the EU and Member State education policies. Thus, it has been highlighted that the EU has gradually changed its policies in the field of education and training to enhance social inclusion, equal chances of employment, economic development and competitiveness (Brine, 1997).

Studies have also revealed that under the globalization drive, what was styled as "regulatory regional governance" and (particularly higher) education policies act as impulses for change for non-EU Member States especially in the sense of economic growth and political stability, engaging and aggregating states through cooperation institutions even in far-reaching geographical regions (Jones, 2010). Actually, the EU's spurs in affiliating members through its core values, identities and democratic principles have been a monolithic force of dynamic change and transition towards free markets and democracy and a constant set-back to the infringement of the rule of law and of human rights and the revert to authoritarian regimes (Georgescu, 2018: 196-209). It has been further ascertained that human values and ethical behaviour are a constant priority of the citizens' participation enhancing EU governance matrix (Olimid, 2018). Education in itself has been proving its proficiency and reliability in forming and endorsing European identity.

Studies have shown that education policies support the integration process with their adaptability and potential to translate the EU supranational vision at national governmental level through different forms and recipes of standardization coming in diverse forms, formats and approaches, particularly in the current international context menacing to alter the European construction as a whole (Elken, 2017). Research has even provided evidence that standardisation of education testing and the metadata generated could support European education policy convergence and effectiveness at national and local level (Hartong, 2018). The same convergence oriented approach in the sense of European integration has been described in relation to vocational education and training (VET) policies framework mainly in economic terms (Zarifis, 2000).

2. Problem Statement

Having these results of previous researches in mind, it has come to our understanding that there is a tendency in media discourse on EU level education policies-related topics reflecting the processes and

outputs generated by EU institutions and bodies in accordance to the economic, political, social, cultural, security circumstances and to the dynamics of the European construction. Media reflection of policy-making has a massive role in agenda-setting. Moreover, as framing theory suggests, mass media is critical in shaping opinions and behaviours and in pushing an issue up (or down) the political agenda. Hence the need to learn the most discussed topics regarding a certain policy field for a specific period of time. It becomes crucial to the understanding the evolution of European integration to properly grasp the essence of media focus while correlating news coverage to events, phenomena, facts and figures, legislation and related documents elaborated at EU level through its institutions and bodies. It also becomes futile to weigh the interest shown by international and national media to the same topic pertaining to EU policy-making. This paper is determined to focus on the manner in which these actions are reflected in different selected mainstream online media and news sources.

3. Research Questions

Having in view the pursuance of this matter, the research was steered methodologically through the apposition of the following research questions (RQ): RQ1. How do international/European/national news sources reflect education policies? RQ2. Which is the extent selected online news sources give to a particular education-related topic? RQ3. What were the major topics in European policy-making associated to education? RQ4. Are these topics also covered by national news sources? RQ5. Is there a specific manner in which EU institutions and bodies are portrayed in their mission to "support, coordinate or supplement" the works of its Member States in the field of education? RQ6. Is there a specific angle in which selected national news sources portray the institutions and agencies involved in policy-making and policy-implementation at national and at supranational level? And are there similarities or mainly differences in coverage?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study is aimed at thoroughly undergoing a content analysis on a sample of selected news articles representative for the period 2013-2017 in the field of EU education-related policies. The main research objective is to develop a discussion on the media narratives regarding the events, phenomena, facts and figures, adoption of legislation and related documents, the adoption and execution of the budget at EU level. Thus the study would identify the main topics associated to EU education-related policies and the manner in which these are reflected in national and international/European media. This would allow a portrayal of the EU actions designed to "support, coordinate or supplement" the works of its Member States in the field of education.

5. Research Methods

The research methodology is cast to roof through content analysis techniques the news coverage spanning a period of several years (2013-2017). The scope of such an endeavour is to determine the trends in media coverage of education-related articles. Thus, the paper is aimed at overlaying the following dimensions of study: (1) tracking the national and international online news sources relevant for the research ends, (2) media monitoring by identifying and selecting the connected articles in online news

sources archives, (3) observing the frequency of media coverage for education-related issues, (4) decomposing the selected items by manually categorising article topics in accordance to journalistic categories, (5) inquiring on the online news sources inclinations as regards the coverage of certain issues in certain periods of time. The content analysis of media discourse is drafted to identify, study and discuss the use and display of journalistic practices. Thus, the analysis is projected to draw inferences by correlating the coverage of certain topics with events, phenomena, facts and figures, legislation and related documents pertaining to the period under study. Moreover, the research is meant to complement media monitoring by bringing forward a comparative analysis of national and international media coverage of education-related topics. This would facilitate both a discussion and deep understanding of the manner in which media coverage reflects EU and national education policies. Consequently, the paper would touch upon the manner in which selected national and international online news sources portray European Union institutions and bodies and national authorities in charge in their mission to design, adopt and implement education-related policies. This implies identifying the relevant articles and elaborating on the media-drawn profile of the institutions and agencies involved in policy-making and policy-implementation both at national and supranational level.

For the purposes of this research we chose the online news archives of the following three online form international news sources for their coverage of EU affairs EurActive (https://www.euractiv.com), New Europe (https://www.neweurope.eu) and Euobserver (https://euobserver.com) and two Romanian national daily news sources Digi24 (https://www.digi24.ro) and Adevărul (https://adevarul.ro/). These five news sources were used for the content research covering the period 01 January 2013 – 31 December 2017.

The five online news archive were interrogated using the Boolean search operators for the keywords Education policy AND European Union OR EU, Education policy AND Erasmus Program NOT Erasmus of Rotterdam NOT Erasmus University. The initial number of 757 articles was significantly lowered after removing duplicates and irrelevant articles, resulting in a total of 476 articles. The articles were systematically read for meaning, analysed for frequency of appearance along the 01 January 2013 – 31 December 2017 period of study and as regards the five different news sources. Finally, the articles were categorised according to coverage of education policies-related issues at EU level, then embedded into the analysis of each of the five years under monitoring.

6. Findings

The articles under study offer a depiction of the EU policy-making in the field of education with a particular interest in the Erasmus+ Program, as one of the most covered and appreciated programs of the European Commission.

6.1. Article frequency analysis

The analysis of article frequency according to news source during the monitoring period has revealed the situation presented in Figure 1. We can notice a strong media interest in covering EU education-related policies, and a comparable concern shown by national news sources in reporting.
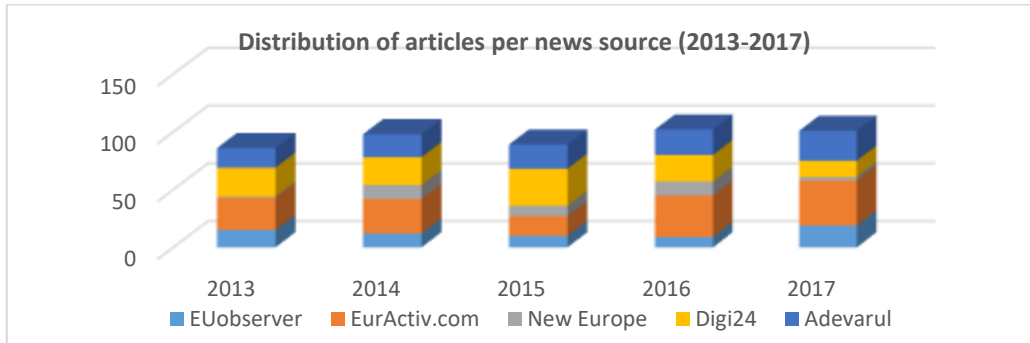
Figure 01. Distribution of articles per news source during the selected period 2013-2017

The annual frequency of articles on European education policies-related topics is presented in Figure 2. We have to observe the quasi-equal annual distribution of articles during 2013-2017, the significant increase in article frequency in 2014 (21%) being generated by the release of the Erasmus+ mobility framework, while the percentage calculated for 2016 (21%) could be a cue to the Brexit vote anxiety fuel as regards the consequences for European (higher) education access and mobility. In the same note, the figures for 2017 (21%) are a sign of media interest towards the anniversary of the three decades of Erasmus program, one of the most widely covered topic, presenting in-depth the advantages and benefits of such a policy endeavour for the future of EU.
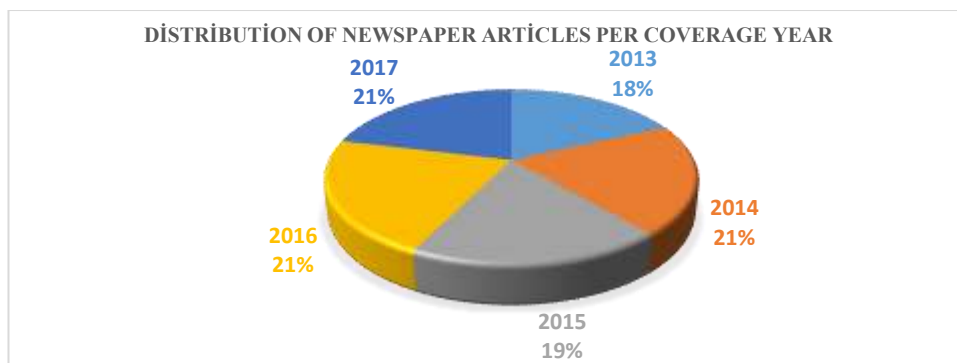

Figure 02. Distribution of newspaper articles per coverage year.

The distribution of articles per news source during the monitoring period is shown in Figure 3, presenting significant differences among news sources reporting. The percentage of national media reporting shows considerable attendance to education policies, especially to the manner in which European framework has been translated and the effects it generated (particularly in terms of benefits) at national and local level, thus providing evidence as regards the national versus international news sources comparative analysis dimension of the research.
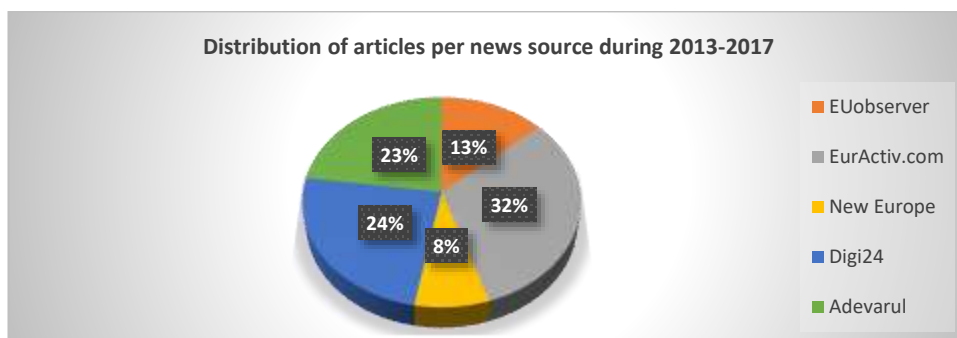
Figure 03. Distribution of articles among news sources during 2013-2017.

6.2. Content analysis

The following section of the paper is dedicated to discussing the content (main thematic areas, topics, issues) of the articles associated to EU education policies. The approach is based on a year-by-year account of the articles published by the selected news sources. Thus, the scope was to provide a display of the dynamics in media coverage of the exercise by the EU of its "support, coordinate or supplement" competences in the field of education and the advancement and feedback of these actions at the level of Member States and local communities.

6.2.1. 2013 – Prospecting the European budgetary and financial issues

EUobserver articles covering education-related topics at European level in 2013 dealt with financial prospects as consequences to the adoption by the EU legislative (both European Parliament and Council) of the seven-year budget (Mahony, 2013), while *EurActiv* journalists covered the increase in funding for education and research for the period 2014-2020 and the changes amending the Erasmus program beginning with 2014. According to *New Europe*, education was envisaged as harvesting "smart growth" (Xiaojuan & Cong, 2013) as well as fighting youth unemployment.

At the same time, the national point of view expressed by central newspapers covered in-depth the European Parliament's recommendations on correlating national education system offers to the labor market demands (Rusu, 2013). Moreover, national coverage news sources such as *Digi24* reported both the advantages of pursuing an university education within a Community institution and the necessary procedural stages in acquiring the European scholarship.

6.2.2. 2014 – Addressing immigration and discrimination through education

In 2014 one of the main issues correlated to education was the fight against discrimination and inequality. Thus, education found itself in the midst of the discussion surrounding the debut of the migration crisis in Europe. Education was moreover correlated to the exercise of citizenship in terms of voting behaviour and other political rights. The discussions reported in 2014 were especially linked to the changes in the program of the new European Commission's mandate (Nielsen, 2014) and also touched upon the financial issues brought about by the adoption of the budget for 2015. Budgetary expenditures negotiations were the top topics of media coverage (Gotev, 2014). Technological enhancement of the education process correlated to a more integrative approach as well as the record figures of Erasmus scholarship scheme beneficiaries were key aspects covered by the media (Casinge, 2014).

The selected national media related the successes attained by young professionals and entrepreneurs or institutions through European funding projects. Thus, national media concentrated around the use of keywords: opportunity, growth, multiculturalism, integration, inclusion, learning, chance, baby boom.

6.2.3. 2015 – Empowerment through education

Fighting illiteracy has been translated as a tool of empowerment against poverty, discrimination and the breach of human rights, and also against extremism and terrorism. Thus, throughout 2015 *EUobserver* snapshotted instances of national representations of European policies. The accent was cast on the increase in the financing of education as a means to cut poverty and enhance the quality of life. An important emphasis was laid on the education of migrants to lift the integration barriers in the EU. In 2015 the journalists from *EurActiv* covered under the umbrella of social Europe and employment articles dealing with the efforts of increasing apprenticeships within Erasmus+ program, the stimulus for integration through free youth railroad transportation, fighting unemployment through economic investments, and boosting economy through university research. At the same time, *New Europe* covered the new regulations for non-EU citizens, students and researchers, and the funding from the 2016 budget for refugees, migration and jobs. Meeting European standards, opening minds, increasing youth mobility, innovation and use of foreign language through volunteering, heightening professional training, boosting the opportunity of studying/training/internship in a European university and reducing school dropout were the key aspects highlighted by national media throughout 2015 (Nicolescu, 2015). Thus, national media concentrated in 2015 on the positive issues of the implementation of Erasmus program activities, highlighting specific instances – institutions, communities, high-school or university students – actively benefitting from this program. International/European media was keen on portraying the policy outlook, picturing the European budget negotiation, adoption and execution, the discussions in the European Parliament and with the Commission and the slices derived from it addressing European policies for education, youth and sports.

6.2.4. 2016 – Beyond Brexit: focus on mobility and free movement

In 2016 the media focused on key aspects triggering the anxiety of public discourse: Brexit vote, migration and unemployment. Thus, it pictured the main concern of European policy-makers that European unity was achievable through people (youth specifically) cross-border, continent-wide mobility. Thus, European identity was portrayed as a desideratum and process obtained through EU's key value and principle of free movement (Zalan, 2016). Thus, the issue of Brexit was depicted as it raised serious concerns as regards the restrictions for students' and workers' further mobility. In the light of Brexit vote and increasing nationalist and radical discourses, the online journal *EurActiv* covered the disquiet regarding the future of the European construction, approaching solutions on the following directions: investing in youth, connecting through new technologies, intermingling sports and studies, investing in security, reforming the EU multiannual financial framework and educating people (youth in particular) in the spirit of EU's democratic values. At the same time, *New Europe* covered in-depth the release of the EU Solidarity Corps, an initiative aimed at addressing investments in European youth. While the European media covered European executive's involvement in addressing migration and integration, Romanian *Digi24* news source under monitoring focused on the programs and investments of European funds within local education

institutions and on the specific issues or right set of circumstances affecting students communities, emphasizing the successes and particular opportunities these groups of people were offered (Ion, 2016).

6.2.5. 2017 – EU & Erasmus #30: innovating for a "brighter future"

In 2017 the European journalists' attention spanned among the accomplishments of the EU policies in the field of education and youth. The journals covered the innovative projects undergone by university programmes and other education institutions under Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+ to increase program and students' competitiveness, the financial distribution of parts from the EU budget among different branches, the Erasmus Program receiving an increased budget as against other EU policies (Pind & Vidal, 2017). The media further covered other successful innovative policies benefitting from Erasmus support which addressed the issues of refugees, media challenges, reducing inequalities and youth responsibility regarding alcohol consumption, and presented the claims of both political and academic elites for an increase in Erasmus funding. In the spirit of European integration, the media covered the celebration of three decades of Erasmus scheme, further innovative policies in the sphere of SMEs and mobility, extending the Erasmus framework to new non-EU territories and promoting the program to both study and work activities (Friis, 2017). This funding was directed to secure employment, innovation, entrepreneurship, mobility and development especially targeting European youth (Radosavljevic, 2017). National selected media covered throughout 2017 the successes reported in implementing Erasmus+-financed programs by local community education institutions, at both high-school or university level, as well as the innovations introduced in the EU budget for 2018 as regards financing SMEs, mobility, youth employment and Erasmus (Cristescu, 2017). Throughout 2017 *Digi24* national media moreover presented the adoption of 2018 budget and EU's interest in increasing youth mobility through student railroad transportation grants.

7. Conclusion

The paper concludes on the amplitude, availability and frequency in media coverage of education related issues within the European governance framework, inferring on the outline drawn through media reflections upon EU and Member States programs and actions. The paper has weighted on the manner in which international/European and national news sources reflect education policies and discussed the extent selected online news sources give to a particular education-related topic. In the light of the above findings two key issues have been drawn:

Firstly, the research has highlighted the major topics in European policy-making associated to education. European journals covered the process, discussions, negotiations, and arguments, statements accompanying every adoption of new policy, program, and changes in EU budget for the next year or in the multiannual financial framework (MFF). At EU level, education was correlated to the issues of migration, Brexit-triggered challenges, discrimination and human rights, social inclusion and the fight against poverty and unemployment. Secondly, at national level, the Romanian national media presented a positive outlook over EU education and youth designed policies, over their purpose, implementation, but especially in covering the particular results, beneficiaries, and advantages of these policies. National media was prone on presenting the opportunities in accessing EU financing, in innovating, in implementing youth-development designed programs. The Erasmus+ Program in particular received a special attention, being

highly regarded as one of EU's leading and most recognisable schemes, in light of EU's interest towards European integration and unity, towards educating European youth in the spirit of EU fundamental democratic values and principles. Consequently, the paper has also identified the topics also covered by national news sources. The research has further discussed the manner in which EU institutions and bodies (especially the European Parliament and the European Commission, both the institutions per se and MEPs, Commissioners) are portrayed in their mission to "support, coordinate or supplement" the works of EU's Member States in the field of education by highlighting the trends in media coverage, the portrayal of the EU policies in the field of education, youth and sports, the adoption and execution of the EU annual budget, but also of the multiannual financial framework (MFF) and of the successes and challenges of the European leading programs and financial schemes in the field. The research has touched upon the manner in which the selected news sources portrayed the Erasmus+ Mobility Framework and other policies associated to it concluding on the massive interest it enjoyed among beneficiaries and as regards news coverage.

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