Shifting geopolitics of the European higher education space

Iryna Kushnir & Nuve Yazgan

View supplementary material

Published online: 13 Sep 2024.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 87

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Shifting geopolitics of the European higher education space

Iryna Kushnir [a] and Nuve Yazgan [b]

[a]Nottingham Institute of Education, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK; [b]Independent Researcher, UK

ABSTRACT

Given recent major geopolitical events in the European region, such as Brexit and the launch of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this article explores recent and under-researched shifts in the geopolitics of the European higher education space, focusing specifically on the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The analysis is informed by the critical geopolitics approach and relies on interviews with stakeholders in the four countries that established the EHEA (Germany, France, Italy and the UK), key recent EHEA official communications, and a thematic analysis of these datasets. The analysis has revealed three major recent overlapping shifts in EHEA geopolitics: regarding its borders, identity and values. These findings are significant, highlighting the existence and dynamics of the phenomenon of higher education geopolitics in Europe and addressing an under-researched area in the literature on European geopolitics and the role of higher education in it.

1. Introduction

There is a growing body of literature that recognises a relationship between politics and higher education (HE) (Gittell and Kleiman 2000; McLendon 2003; Morreira et al. 2020; Levin and Greenwood 2022). HE, in Kauko's (2013, 197) terms, is a 'political subsystem', which includes institutions and actors within them that develop HE policy and impact wider politics. Given a growing internationalisation in politics in general as well as in HE policy specifically, it is unavoidable to bring up the notion of geopolitics.

Geopolitics has traditionally been understood as the study of how geography influences political and economic choices (O'Sullivan 2014). However, a more recent conceptualisation of geopolitics – critical geopolitics – builds on this classical definition of geopolitics. Critical geopolitics focuses on the relationship between politics and borders, as well as values and identity (Kuus 2010).

The geopolitics of the European HE space is in the spotlight in this article. Although this article focuses on recent years, geopolitical dynamics have been part of the European project for decades and are not a recent phenomenon. Several authors have argued that different constellations of power maximise the advantages of geography and HE. Castells` (2009) work on the network society and the role of information and communication technologies could provide valuable perspectives on how geography influences the formation of knowledge networks and HE institutions. Specifically, Castells (2009) highlights how global communication networks reshape social and economic structures, impacting HE systems.

Marginson's (2022) research emphasises the increasing globalisation and internationalisation of HE, particularly the rise of transnational education networks and the competition for talent and resources. Marginson (2022) highlights the role of English as the dominant language of global HE and the centrality of research universities in the global knowledge economy. They mention 'a global hierarchy in higher education is reproduced in three mutually reinforcing ways: worldwide diffusion of neo-liberal norms and policies, social-cultural reproduction of White Supremacy, and linguistic-cultural monoculture in knowledge' (Marginson 2022, 508). Similarly, Hazelkorn (2007) provides a comparative analysis across different countries on how international rankings influence the decisions made by university leaders. The author discusses the potential pressures on students to choose institutions based on rankings and the impact on faculty in terms of performance expectations and career advancement. These delve deeper into the complexities of HE geopolitics in Europe.

The processes that make the European HE space are complex and have a long history. For example, the European Union (EU) has been supporting a number of education policy initiatives with a focus on HE. Examples include the famous Bologna Process which has established the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the associated Education and Training (ET) Work frameworks 2010/2020, which both later served as a foundation for the European Education Area (Robertson, Olds, and Dale 2022). The EC recently emphasised that HE 'has a unique position at the crossroads of education, research and innovation, serving society and economy' (EC 2024) but also HE being a pillar of a 'European way of life' (EC 2022, 2024), aiming to 'Consolidate universities as lighthouses of our European way of life with supporting actions focusing on academic and research careers, quality and relevance for future-proof skills, diversity, inclusion, democratic practices, fundamental rights and academic values' (EC 2022). Feeding on these growing HE initiatives, the EHEA has emerged as the largest all-encompassing HE harmonisation initiative not only in the European regions but in the world, having transformed into an 'international higher education regime' (Zahavi and Friedman 2019, 23). Although some scholars, evidently, anticipated or assumed the end of the work on the EHEA in 2020 with the arrival of the deadline for achieving a fully-functioning EHEA (e.g. Pereira Pires et al. 2021; Mendick and Peters 2022), the EHEA is still very much alive (EHEA 2020c).

Given recent major geopolitical processes, such as Brexit and the invasion of Ukraine, this article sets out to explore major shifts in the geopolitics of the EHEA that have taken place since the last milestone In the development of the EHEA – 2020. The analysis in this article relies on expert interviews with representatives from key policy-making institutions in the four countries that established the EHEA in 1998 (Germany, France, Italy and the UK) (Kushnir 2016) as well as key recent EHEA official communications, and a

thematic analysis of these datasets. The analysis has revealed three major recent overlapping shifts in the geopolitics of the EHEA: regarding its borders, identity and values.

The article proceeds with building a theoretical framework for this analysis around the idea of change in the context of path-dependency in geopolitics. This is followed by a literature review on European geopolitics and the role of HE in it, highlighting a growing knowledge around the existence of the phenomenon of HE geopolitics in Europe and how it has been shifting. The findings section presents and discusses key themes concerning shifting borders, values and the vision of European identity of the EHEA.

2. Theoretical considerations: geopolitics and its dynamic nature

The analysis in this article is informed by the idea of change in the context of path-dependency in geopolitics which rests on the theoretical foundations of historical institutionalism(Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2000).

Earlier definitions of geopolitics seem to be related predominantly to geography (Flint 2021), emphasising that geography is important in determining relationships between nations and their governments (O'Sullivan 2014). This is evident in the following example:

> Geopolitics is the science of the conditioning of political processes by the earth. It is based on the broad foundation of geography, especially political geography, as the science of political space organisms and their structure. The essence of regions as comprehended from the geographical point of view provides the framework for geopolitics within which the course of political processes must proceed if they are to succeed in the long term. (Haushofer et al. 1928; quoted in O'Loughlin 1994, 112–113).

The determinism of this classical definition of *geopolitics* assumes that political actions are predominantly dictated by the geographic location which can be used to legitimise any foreign policy ambition of a country (Flint 2021).

This early definition of geopolitics was disputed by the emergence of the critical geopolitics approach. Critical geopolitics emerged in the late 1980s-early 1990s as a result of the cultural and constructivist shift in the social sciences and human geography (Moisio 2015). First introduced by Simon Dalby (Dalby 1990; cited in Kuus 2010), critical geopolitics asserts that the notion of the sovereign state is not the foundation but rather a consequence of discourses related to sovereignty, security, and identity (Kuus 2010). In the critical approach, geopolitics is as a 'set of socially constructed, rather than naturally given, practices and ideas through which the international political economy is realised geographically' (Agnew and Corbridge 1995, 4–5). In other words, state identity and interests are not predetermined, but rather formed through states and other actors asserting their interests and identities. Therefore, state/region identity and interests are a crucial theme within the critical geopolitics (Kuus 2010). In sum, critical geopolitics focuses on sovereignty and security, or in other terms – borders, as well as two other aspects – values and identity (Kuus 2010). The study reported in this article is informed by the critical geopolitics approach which focuses primarily on states'/regions' identity and values in addition to the more traditional focus on borders. This will allow us to offer a more nuanced and complex understanding of the geopolitics of the EHEA.

Geopolitics is not a static phenomenon. It evolves. In order to consider this fully, it is essential to unpack the idea of change in the context of path-dependency in geopolitics.

The concept of *path dependency* is rooted in the historical institutional context in which politics and policies are made, as well as the potential limitations and opportunities that may arise from past choices and actions for further developments. The idea of path dependency originates from the scholarship on historical institutionalism, which advocates that political systems and subsystems, in Kauko's (2013, 197) terms, are typically resistant to change and tend to defend existing policies and organisations responsible for implementing them.

The main idea of historical institutionalism is that decisions, made when an institution is being created or a policy is being developed, will limit future choices. This happens because institutions and policies tend to stay the same; once a certain path is set, changing it requires a lot of effort (Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2000). Politics and its related policymaking can be seen as a phenomenon characterised by extended periods of stability, known as 'path-dependency' interrupted by turbulent formative moments (Peters, Pierre, and King 2005, 1276). This is because institutions often generate self-reinforcing positive feedback loops, leading to increasing returns that favour continuity (Pierson 2000). Feedback loops refer to the mechanisms through which initial decisions or events reinforce themselves over time, making it increasingly difficult to change course. While institutions are not completely resistant to change, the positive feedback loops create strong incentives for those benefiting from the current setup to resist change, making it costly to revert to previously available policy options (Peters 2019).

Significant changes can only occur during critical junctures – periods when decisions about the 'rules of the game' are made (Collier and Collier 1991) or policy windows (Kingdon 1995). Capoccia and Kelemen (2007) state that during critical junctures, change is less constrained as structural limits on actors are relaxed. In these moments, powerful socio-political actors make choices from a range of feasible alternatives, which then limit other options (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Peters 2019; Sorensen 2018). During these formative periods, new objectives are assigned to public policy, new priorities are established, and new political coalitions can emerge to sustain these new policies (Steinmo, Thelen, and Longstreth 1992; Mahoney 2000). Therefore, policy change occurs in a series of punctuated equilibria, where long periods of stability on a particular path of institutional change are interrupted by sporadic moments of possible change (Farrell 2018). Ultimately, the process leads to a lock-in situation, where the dominant decision pattern becomes fixed and deterministic. Over time, actions are entirely constrained by this path (Garud, Kumaraswamy, and Karnøe 2010). After these periods of change, institutions and policies settle into a new stable path, and inertia becomes the usual state once again.

The analysis in this article builds on these ideas, coupled with Kauko's (2013) theorisation specifically of HE politics. Two main points of Kauko's (2013) model are relevant to our discussion and worth unpacking. First, HE politics is dynamic – 'the political situation for change is embedded in the institutional structure of the higher-education system and how it is aligned with the external factors' (Kauko 2013, 197). This suggests that the equilibrium of HE politics is heavily punctuated due to the nature of HE as a political subsystem. Second, Kauko (2013) proposes four types of dynamics in HE politics, namely: reform, gridlock, consensual change and friction. Specifically, the reform dynamic presents a proactive attempt to change but the gridlock refers to a stalemate in policy environment in which no progress can be made. While the consensual

change dynamic involves compromise and agreement among policy stakeholders, the friction dynamic represents conflict and resistance to change within a political environment. Importantly, whereas the reform and consensual change dynamics assume that a political environment is prone to change, the gridlock and friction mean that it is resistant to change (Kauko 2013).

Kauko's model has been widely used in the analyses of the politics of education (e.g. Cruz 2018; Khelifi 2019). However, like any other theoretical approach, it has its limitations. While Kauko's (2013) framework focuses more on how the embedded institutional structures are aligned with the external environment, Jungblut (2017) examines how the impact of partisan preferences is moderated by coalition negotiations with other parties and subsequent policy making. They argue that change is not shaped only by embedded institutional structures but also by the relations of partisan coalitions. While Kauko's (2013) model is open to more development and further empirical research is invited to test the usefulness of this model (Kauko 2013), it adds a useful aspect to our theoretical framework in terms of highlighting that HE politics is dynamic by its nature. Thus, it is useful in expanding our understanding of how the European HE environment is shaped by geopolitical pressures.

3. Mapping literature on European geopolitics and higher education

3.1. Context

European geopolitics has been examined by various scholars (e.g. Diez 2004; Lewicki 2023). It is important to provide an overview of the main bodies of this literature before analysing the role of HE in the geopolitical context. First, the definition of Europe is debated with regard to its borders and the identity associated with them. The EU is often referred to as 'Europe', yet EU's membership is more limited than that of a geographical Europe. Switzerland, Norway and Ukraine are examples of countries outside the EU which belong to the geographical Europe (Diez 2004). More importantly, the definition of Europe is subject to debate, not only because of its location but also culture, as it is questionable whether to consider countries like Russia and Turkey as European (Diez 2004), particularly now, in the context of the Russian open rejection of European values of democracy and carrying on with its invasion of Ukraine. Given the focus of this article on the EHEA which is much wider than the EU, we view Europe as such – a space wider than the EU, in which the searching and making of the meaning of Europe takes place.

Another body of literature on European geopolitics is concerned with the influences of various crises on it. Europe has faced many of them in the last decades, from the Eurozone crisis to the rise of populism, migration crisis and Brexit, to the Covid-19 pandemic and – now – the invasion of Ukraine (Dupont, Oberthür, and Von Homeyer 2020; Albertazzi and Zulianello 2021; Léonard and Kaunert 2022; Costa and Barbé 2023). Specifically for the EU, as the core of Europe, a greatly troubled era has, arguably, escalated with its constitutional crisis. In 2005, French and Dutch voters said 'no' to the Treaty aiming to establish a Constitution for the EU. This negative result demonstrated the existence of a dissatisfaction with the EU on the part of some of its Member States, triggering a wave of change in European countries with the rise of Euroscepticism and anti-establishment

parties, having significant implications for the political landscape of the Europe (Kratochvíl and Sychra 2019).

Aside from the debates mentioned above, since the 1970s, scholars have also been examining what power the EU has had and how it helped shape the wider Europe (Duchêne 1972; Manners 2002; Damro 2012; Jenichen 2022). In the debates about its civilian, normative and market power, scholars have been examining whether the EU has been capable of addressing not just its own crises but wider challenges, including those on the global scale. The idea that EU's crisis-management capacities are questionable exists because of its structure. Having intergovernmentalism and supranationalism as part of its structure complicates policy-making. EU's policy areas, or in Kauko's (2013, 197) terms 'political subsystems', are characterised by more than one type of governance (Tömmel 2009). In its domestic policy-making, the EU involves multiple actors/institutions, possessing exclusive, shared, and supporting competences, which determine the areas in which it can make laws and adopt policies. For instance, the EU has the sole power to make laws on its customs. Externally, the EU has a special competence over its common foreign and security policy which limits the participation of the European Commission and the European Parliament in the decision-making procedure (Wallace et al. 2020). The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is an example of an EU foreign policy framework that aims to strengthen the EU's relationships with its neighbouring countries. Wessel (2021) argues that the EU has increasingly used soft international agreements such as the ENP as a tool for cooperation with non-EU countries. These agreements are often 'soft' with a focus on shared values, principles, rather than legal obligations and they provide a platform for dialogue and voluntary cooperation between the EU and its external region (Wessel 2021). The transcendence of the EU's borders in policy governance is particularly important for our further discussion of the role of HE in European geopolitics.

Having sketched some key bodies of literature on European geopolitics, it is now timely to turn to the role of HE in geopolitics. Following an active development and enactment of joint academic mobility programmes in the post WWII period (Scott 2012), the European Commission started to see HE in Europe as a potential tool to help create a European single market and cultivate the idea of a European citizen (Corbett 2005). The aim of creating a common European identity had gained momentum because of the challenges in the continent following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Grek 2008). The necessity to reinforce the common identity of Europe led to signing the Treaty on EU or the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and enforcing it in 1993. Ironically, despite the fact that Maastricht had been eagerly anticipated, enthusiasm decreased after it was signed. According to Grek (2008), the lack of support could only have been overcome once a unifying idea was found. The idea of common economic policies seemed not to have been sufficient enough to justify the European project. Instead, education in general, including HE, started emerging as a more influential factor of Europeanisation in the region.

The European Commission devised new tactics to develop the 'European dimension' in education by further consolidating a European HE space and looking for cooperation opportunities with other regions (Robertson, de Azevedo, and Dale 2016). A range of collaborative programmes were established with non-EU states, for example: the América Latina – Formación Académica (ALFA) programme in Latin America; the Tempus

programme with the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, Central Asia and some Mediterranean countries; and Asia-Link with Asia (Robertson 2008). While these were big developments, they tended to be based on cultural cooperation and idea exchange, and 'were not well coordinated with the emerging policy programme for education within Europe' (Robertson, de Azevedo, and Dale 2016, 29). Mounting global pressures prompted the EU to seek a more coordinated strategy of building its economic competitiveness in different ways, including through HE by setting out to develop the EHEA.

The EHEA was formally established by Germany, France, Italy and the UK in 1998; it has grown into the largest international cooperation platform in the area of HE (Zahavi and Friedman 2019). Its territorial growth to include many non-EU countries (up to 49 prior to 2022, before Russia and Belarus were suspended) is important to consider when trying to understand what and where Europe is as the EHEA has been 'changing its geopolitics through expanding its borders and promoting the idea of a common European identity within these borders' (Kushnir 2016, 665).

3.2. New trends in the geopolitics of European higher education

Arguably, there has been a significant shift in the EHEA post-2020, driven by the unprecedented challenges that Europe has encountered, marking a departure from previous norms. The geopolitical challenges have indeed intensified in recent years, even though such pressures have been inherent within the European project since its beginning.

The expansion of European borders through the EHEA also coincided, more recently, with the formation in 2017 of a separate education space just for the EU – the European Education Area (EEA) (EC 2023). The EEA targets all levels of education, unlike the EHEA, but this means that it does include HE initiatives as well, such as the European universities initiative and European student card initiative (Kushnir 2021). The reasons for the establishment of the EEA are multiple, however the preservation of specifically EU identity has been one of them (Kushnir 2021), which Robertson, Olds, and Dale (2022, 65) terms this as EU's 'renewed state-making ambitions'.

The interconnections between the EHEA and the EEA are undeniable (Kushnir 2021). The EC (2024) has recently explicitly acknowledged that European HE has been targeting 'achieving the European Education Area (EEA) and the European Research Area (ERA), in synergy with the European Higher Education Area'. In fact, in the area of quality assurance, a move from the EHEA being 'the near singular focus for European level coordination and harmonisation' to a 'much more diverse and complex quality assurance and evaluation infrastructure' has been taking place (Grek and Russell 2023, 1). Nevertheless, EHEA's significance in the European HE space and European geopolitics more widely must not be underestimated. EHEA's impact on geopolitics has been felt not only on the European level particularly through the promotion of peace in the recent attack on Ukraine (Kushnir 2023), but EHEA's impact on geopolitics has also been felt on the domestic level of some of the EHEA countries. For example, studies about Central-Eastern Europe highlight that their memberships in the EHEA were a means to address the countries' socio-economic interests and, more importantly, contribute to their journey in joining the EU by demonstrating their willingness to participate in European projects (Huisman and Van Der Wende 2004). In another example – the post-Soviet countries – 'it was not the EU accession that encouraged them; it was

rather a strong "getting together" with (West) European HE and an awareness that keeping outside this movement can't contribute to the progress of a national system' (Zgaga 2009, 90). However, some authors contend that the inability to implement reforms consistent with the Bologna Declaration in post-Soviet countries is primarily due to national policymakers underestimating the extent of the necessary cultural and institutional changes (Huisman 2019; Soltys 2015).

Several authors mentioned the commercialisation of HE (Marginson and Considine 2000) that has converted many universities into influential, consumer-driven corporate entities, significantly undermining public-interest values (Ball 2012; Hazelkorn 2007). In this manner, Healey (2023) advocates for a fundamental change in the approach to international HE. Healey (2023) envisions a future where HE acts as a driving force for social and environmental transformation, equipping students to become global citizens dedicated to justice and sustainability. Given that HE is political (Marshall and Scribner 1991), not only can we discuss the role of HE in European geopolitics but also the geopolitics of the European HE itself. The dynamic nature of geopolitics, explained above, makes it only expected that the geopolitics of HE in Europe has been changing as well. We operate on the assumption that most of these changes have happened post-2020, given that a few major events have taken places: the end of the Brexit transitional period at the end of 2020, the pandemic, the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Bamberger and Huang (2024) analyse the change in the EU's strategy toward international research collaboration. The authors explore how geopolitical tensions, particularly resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, along with concerns about security and competitiveness, have prompted a shift from the previously widespread openness to more protectionist policies. While Moscovitz and Sabzalieva (2023, 150) make the case for the 'new geopolitics of higher education' focusing on distinctive shifts in global, rather than European, geopolitical directions, we can apply the term of the 'new geopolitics' to the post-2020 EHEA, the geopolitics of which has not been researched.

4. Methodology

This article contributes to the growing literature around the post-2020 geopolitics of the EHEA, exploring: *What major shifts in the geopolitics of the EHEA have taken place since 2020?*

The overarching research design of this project was informed by the most recent at the time BERA (2018) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, and data collection followed a favourable ethics decision from the Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BLSS REC) at Nottingham Trent University. This article presents an extract of a collective case study of four EHEA's founders' perspectives on the major shifts in the geopolitics of the EHEA that have taken place since 2020. As per Stake's (1994) definition, a collective case study involves some level of comparison, but it is not a comparative study per se. Instead, it aims to provide a comprehensive discussion of the issue under investigation across several cases.

The data for the overarching project were collected through in-depth semi-structured elite interviews with EHEA stakeholders in the four countries (see Data Access Statement and Table 1).

Table 1. List of interviewees.

Country case study	Interviewee's codes and affiliations (unless anonymised to 'HE actor')
UK	A1 – Guild HE (England, Wales, N. Ireland and Scotland)
	A2 – A key HE actor in the UK (Scotland)
	A3 – National Union of Students (NUS-UK) (England, Wales, N. Ireland)
	A4 – Scottish Government (Scotland)
	A5 – Universities UK International (England, Wales, N. Ireland)
	A6 – National Union of Students (NUS-Scotland) (Scotland)
Germany	B1. Federal Ministry of Education and Research
	B2. A key HE actor
	B3. A key HE actor
	B4. Rectors' Conference
	B5. Free association of students' unions (FZS)
	B6. Erasmus + National Agency, DAAD
	B7. A key HE actor
	B8. Education and Science Workers' Union (GEW)
France	C1. Representative from ENIC-NARIC France
	C2. French expert in the Bologna Process
	C3. Representative of the Assembly of Directors of University Institutes of Technology (ADIUT)
	C4. Representative of a national student organisation (FAGE)
Italy	D1. A key HE actor
	D2. A key HE actor
	D3. A representative of the Italian quality assurance agency (ANVUR)
	D4. A key HE actor
	D5. A representative of the national Union of University Students (UDU)
	D6. Former vice-chair of the Bologna Follow-up Group in Italy
	D7. Representative of the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI)

All the interviews were conducted in 2022, except for the UK case study which took place in 2021. In order to bolster the claims made by the interviewees, supplementary data were sought from the official communications that are available on the EHEA website, issued after 2020 (Table 2). The inclusion of these documents adds depth and context to the interviewees' perspectives and allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

Whereas semi-structured interviewing is a useful method to examine policy actors' experiences and viewpoints (Mason 2002), some limitations due to bias should be acknowledged. Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility for interviewees to share their thoughts and provide the flexibility to address limitations during interviews by adjusting questions based on the communication style and institutional setting (Leonard 2003). We acknowledge that the responses in our interviews could have been influenced by the interviewer's unconscious bias or the respondents' perceptions and experiences, potentially leading to partly subjective interpretations, although this is the case with any research that relies on interviews. We also acknowledge a relatively

Table 2. List of EHEA international official communications.

EHEA (2020a)
EHEA (2022a)
EHEA (2022c)
EHEA (2022e)

small size of the interviewees sample which leads us to being cautions with the intended generalisations from our findings.

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and then subjected to a thematic analysis, along with the official communications. The analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for analysis. During the first two stages – familiarisation and coding – the focus was on grouping data segments based on similarity. This resulted in identifying patterns related to the politics of the EHEA. For instance, such codes as 'forum for exchange' and 'peace' were identified in the interviews. These preliminary codes became the foundation for the two phases that followed, namely searching for and reviewing themes. The focus of the last two phases was on defining and naming the themes. The themes were restructured to establish relationships amongst them and finalise the super-ordinate themes. Three key themes related specifically to the shifts in EHEA geopolitics with regard to its borders, identity and values were identified. Illustrative interview quotations for these themes were finally supported by relevant quotations from the supplementary official communications. The interview data were selectively utilised to present the most accurate findings, ensuring that the insights presented were comprehensive and representative of the study's scope.

5. Findings and discussion

What follows below is a presentation, theorisation and discussion in light of the literature reviewed earlier of the key themes from the analysis, indicative of the three major recent overlapping shifts in the path dependent geopolitics of the EHEA: regarding its borders, identity and values. These three aspects of geopolitics are concordant with Kuus's (2010) summary of the meaning of critical geopolitics which recognises that geopolitics is more than just the influence of geography (e.g. borders) on politics.

5.1. Borders

The EHEA has had a substantial impact on reshaping and redefining not only the European HE space but also Europe as a whole by actively influencing its geopolitical landscape, gradually expanding its borders to incorporate 49 signatories (Kushnir 2016) prior to 2022. However, the borders of the EHEA have recently undergone important changes in terms of two seemingly paradoxical developments: their blurring and, at the same time, attempting to delineate these changing borders. On the one hand, there has been a drive to unite different regions within the EHEA by blurring the boundaries amongst them. On the other hand, such significant events as Brexit and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have played a role in inspiring the delineation of the borders within the EHEA. The Russian invasion of Ukraine can be seen as a major critical juncture leading to a policy change from the status quo in the EHEA. It has prompted European policymakers to re-evaluate their relationships with institutions in conflict-affected regions and reconsider their strategies for academic cooperation and mobility.

5.1.1. Blurring
The first point about the blurring of the boundaries strategy that has been acknowledged by key HE stakeholders in the EHEA founding countries refers to facilitating friendships

between different countries that make up the landscape of the EHEA for the stability in the region. Interviewees have reflected particular cases of non-EU countries in the EHEA: the UK and Eastern European countries influenced by Russia.

The change of EU's borders following Brexit has shaken UK's position in the EHEA. This was, of course, aggravated by UK's follow-up departure from a key EHEA initiative – the Erasmus + Programme (Mayhew 2022). These wider developments have, evidently, inspired a rhetoric in the UK of declaring continuing unity with the EHEA:

> … in particular, with Brexit, it's important for the UK to be seen to want to participate in an international organisation … it's essential that we play an active part in the EHEA because it makes sure, particularly for students wanting to move, Brexit aside, from one institution to another across boundaries. (A2, representative from Guild HE in UK)

This demonstrates UK's commitment to the European HE space, reflecting UK's highlighting its dedication to unity and cooperation in education (Kushnir and Brooks 2022) and adherence to established institutional structures – a form of path-dependency in HE policy, in Mahoney's (2000) terms.

While the justification to reassure UK's place in the European HE space emerged with Brexit, Eastern European countries, particularly those influenced by Russia, have been key in establishing friendships through expanding EHEA's borders with the aim of facilitating stability in the region following the calamities of the past:

> In the beginning, there was really much hope to diminish the split between east and west. But now, it's obviously growing again [in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine] … it [the strategic significance of the EHEA for Europe post-2020] is still the dialogue with Eastern Europe, especially the Russia-influenced countries that were part of the Soviet Union before. (B1, representative from Federal Ministry of Education and Research in Germany)

The succession of, for instance, Belarus into the EHEA has been a controversial case since the start:

> a difficult thing to swallow was the succession of Belarus [to the EHEA in 2015]. That was highly disputed back then. Everyone in the end agreed because they said it would have a civilising effect on the Belarusian higher education and beyond, the entire society … (B4, representative from Rectors' Conference in Germany)

The issue with Belarus was that it was considered:

> … by some in the EHEA as – how to say – a not legitimate member. And I can see from working with them that unfortunately they had non-legitimate things going on before the invasion of Ukraine … But I see that they were not any worse than Azerbaijan or some other countries … So before the invasion I did my best to support Belarus to help them. (D6, Former vice-chair of the Bologna Follow-up Group in Italy)

5.1.2. Delineating

Clearly, the above evidence of the openness of the EHEA to the inclusion of signatories signifies the focus on building cooperation in the region which, in turn, presupposed a step away from focusing EHEA governance on country and regional borders within the EHEA. However, these developments were somewhat restrained because, at the same time, there has been another contradictory process at work – ensuring some

borders within the EHEA are indeed delineated, which carries a lot of political meaning. Such recent border delineation within the EHEA is the most pronounced due to Brexit and particularly the suspension of EHEA memberships of Belarus and Russia following the launch of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The interview data nuances Robertson et al.'s (2022) argument that the creation of the EEA by EU policy makers was EU's state-making project. A representative from Federal Ministry of Education and Research in Germany explains how the EU wanted to contribute to preventing Brexit through creating an exclusive HE space for the EU members which would offer somewhat more attractive cooperation initiatives not functioning in the EHEA at the time:

> I pleaded for the possibility to have also, within this programme [European universities], cooperation with Eastern European universities. Or non-EU universities … Of course, also in my concept, they would have to pay their own costs … That was a very political discussion, but more on the side of the EU. Because, at that time, we had the Brexit discussions and there was a fear of many politicians, if we do that now in the Bologna process, then Britain could say, well, I have it in the Bologna process. I don't need it in the EU. So, they didn't want to give anything to Britain at that time. (B1)

This is a clear example of rationalising the creation of the European Universities initiative adjacent to but separate from the EHEA at the time of Brexit agreement negotiations. This has contributed to the diversification of HE cooperation initiatives in Europe and taking them outside the realm of the EHEA (Grek and Russell 2023). However, given that EU's hopes to prevent Brexit or at least UK's departure from Erasmus + did not materialise (Mayhew 2022) may have enabled an eventual establishment of the links between the EEA's European Universities initiative and non-EU countries in the EHEA (Kushnir 2021).

The other prominent case in recent attempts of border demarcation in the EHEA pertains to the suspension of Belarus and Russia from the EHEA in April 2022. EHEA leaders state:

> We … condemn in the strongest terms the armed attack on Ukraine by the Russian Federation in violation of international law … The Russian Federation invasion of Ukraine … disregards the values and goals of the EHEA … We therefore ask the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) to suspend the Russian Federation's rights of participation in all structures and activities of the EHEA, including the BFUG, working groups, task forces, peer learning groups and similar structures. We ask the BFUG to extend the same measures to Belarus. (EHEA 2022a)

Building on Kuus's (2010) explanation that borders are only one of the aspects of geopolitics, the following two subsections focus on shifting identity and values in the EHEA, respectively. This aligns with the critical geopolitics approach which opposes a more classical definition of geopolitics focused predominantly on the idea that politics is dictated by geography (O'Sullivan 2014; Flint 2021).

5.2. Identity

The shift in the idea of what citizen's identity the EHEA is meant to facilitate has developed around a gradual replacement of the aim to build a European identity with an

emphasis on the internationalisation of the EHEA, as well as a more recent inclusion of the focus on cultivating a generation that cares about sustainability.

5.2.1. From the European identity to internationalisation

The data shows that the initial emphasis on cultivating a European identity in the European HE space (Grek 2008) has subsided over the years in the EHEA. A representative from Guild HE in the UK explains this by the dominance of the aim of the structural harmonisation of HE systems across the EHEA:

> Clearly the Bologna Process … came at a particular moment in time, on the back of a decade of conflict on European soil … that is why I think that sense of the importance of democracy, citizenship, Europeanisation trends were so embedded within the initial document [Sorbonne Declaration of 1998] … There's been huge developments around qualification systems, credit, quality assurance, all of the structural bits, that it feels a lot less attention that's been focused on creating a European identity … I think the UK sees the European bit of the European higher education area as essentially a geographical zone with which it is able to see a common set of infrastructure. (A1)

In addition to the idea that the structural harmonisation has pushed the European myth into the background, this interviewee also suggests that the European identity idea was not appealing to all the EHEA members. Clearly, the UK, despite being a founding country of the EHEA, has progressed its anti-European sentiment. Its culmination in the 2016 Brexit vote is an illustration of the 'aggravating tensions in the development of a territory – identity integrity in Europe' constructed by the EHEA that Kushnir (2016, 665) discussed, although Kushnir's (2016) argument was focused on the countries that were part of the EHEA but fell beyond the geographical Europe, such as Kazakhstan.

The subsiding of the aim of the EHEA to cultivate the European identity may have been reinforced by the processes of internationalisation:

> … education doesn't end at the European door, basically. You have to engage the global world as well. (B3, a representative of a student organisation in Germany)

The focus on the international in the work of the EHEA is also present in the EHEA official communications, such as EHEA (2020i, 8), 'We recommit to international dialogue on higher education values'. This signifies an important development whereby not only the EHEA has been impacting HE developments beyond its borders (Zahavi and Friedman 2019) but the processes of internationalisation have been integrating into the essence of EHEA's work.

The eventual move towards a more international vision of citizen's identity for the EHEA to promote is not surprising, given the inherent tensions between EHEA's vast borders and how European people within them feel (Kushnir 2016). This move may have also been facilitated by the recent populist gains across Europe which have provoked the growth of anti-European sentiments (Kratochvíl and Sychra 2019).

5.2.2. A generation of global citizens that cares about sustainable development

Rooted in the move towards a more international identity that the EHEA has recently been promoting, one of the key objectives of the EHEA has recently been to promote the integration of sustainable development principles into HE curricula and research to raise a generation of global citizens. There is only a handful of studies that explicitly

analyse how the EHEA mission and policy promotes the idea of sustainable development, such as Puente et al. (2020) and Janssens et al. (2022). Focusing on uncovering the lack of support in transforming HE practices in particular institutions within the EHEA to make them cater to sustainable development, these studies do not acknowledge recent EHEA's policy initiatives aimed at overriding such problems. An extract from a recent EHEA communication illustrates how crucial the EHEA is in cultivating a generation of global citizens for the promotion of sustainable development within and beyond the EHEA:

> We commit to continue and step up our investment in education, to ensure that higher education institutions have appropriate funding to develop solutions for the current crisis, post crisis recovery, and generally, the transition into green, sustainable and resilient economies and societies'. (EHEA 2020i, 3)

The analysis of EHEA's official communications revealed that the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals are often seen as overarching issues that the EHEA should address (EHEA 2020i). This is inevitable given that sustainable development addresses all core challenges globally – environmental, social and economic (Shields 2019). This is further explained by a representative of a national student organisation in France:

> The Europeanisation of higher education has no meaning if it is not made to work on sustainable development. Climate change, global warming, I think, are top priorities when implementing the Bologna Process. It has no meaning to exist otherwise, if it is not to answer the main issues our generation will meet. (C4)

5.3. Values

The discussion of shifting EHEA's values is another key aspect of EHEA's geopolitics. Along with the re-bordering processes and shifts in identity cultivation, presented above, it uncovers EHEA's 'new geopolitics' in Moscovitz and Sabzalieva's (2023, 150) terms. The following quote from a representative of the Rectors' Conference in Germany presents an illustrative summary of the two main points to be unpacked in this sub-section: (1) the move of the EHEA from focusing on structural issues in HE systems to the emphasis on cultivating certain values, and (2) re-establishing the mission of HE in the EHEA as a tool for political cooperation:

> … what used to be the core of Bologna: increasing mobility, introducing study cycles … in that sense Bologna has become less important. It is becoming more important in other regards and we're coming to that: fundamental values, academic freedom, and now, of course, the war on Ukraine - we would rather see the importance of the Bologna Process in this area now as a forum for exchange. (B4)

Prior literature on the EHEA confirms the vision of the EHEA as a platform for the standardisation of HE structures and HE cooperation (e.g. Zahavi and Friedman 2019). It would be too deterministic to claim that the idea of any values was absent from the vision for this cooperation, at least given the focus on the promotion of European identity in the past (Kushnir 2016), as that did, arguably, link with the ideas of democracy. However, it is 2020 which marked a milestone for an explicit move in EHEA's international policy rhetoric from focusing on structural elements of HE systems to being concerned with what values HE in the region promotes.

Rome Communique (EHEA 2020i) is full of rhetoric on values. It outlines that plan to develop the EHEA based on three key principles: inclusive EHEA, innovative EHEA, and interconnected EHEA to 'underpin a sustainable, cohesive and peaceful Europe' (EHEA 2020i, 4). A representative of the Conference of Italian University Rectors expands on this, highlighting HE's political power, and thus, capacity to deal with values:

> We developed a vision of an open and inclusive European Higher Education Area. It is a political issue to make the EHEA as more open and inclusive as possible. We believe that having contacts with other geographical systems, education systems … is very important to connect, to have exchanges, to exchange good practices and so on. And this is from a political point of view. (D7)

Such ideas are concordant with the scholarly perspective on the link between HE and politics (Marshall and Scribner 1991; Gittell and Kleiman 2000; McLendon 2003). This brings us to the second major point regarding the rhetoric on values in Rome Communique (EHEA 2020i, 5) which is a separate section on 'fundamental values'. This section along with the subsequent rich interview data on the reaction of the EHEA to the invasion of Ukraine suggests the re-establishing of the mission of the EHEA as a forum for political cooperation, rather than only as a platform for cooperation specifically in HE. First, EHEA's reaction to the wider political developments such as the invasion was necessary because:

> The Russian Federation invasion of Ukraine … disregards the values and goals of the EHEA. (EHEA 2022a)

While we have discussed the suspension of Russia's and Belarus' memberships in the EHEA elsewhere, what is crucial to mention here is the emerging value of education, including HE, in the EHEA as the first bridge to establish and the last bridge to burn in international cooperation on a wider political arena. The current geopolitical crisis including the Brexit and the Russian invasion of Ukraine has catalysed a re-evaluation of the role of HE in the EHEA. These have acted as a critical juncture, temporarily relaxing the structural constraints and enabling substantial policy shifts.

> … if you look at the Cold War we had, education, culture, sport, science were things where we started to work together before it was possible to work together politically or empirically. (B6, representative from Erasmus + National Agency, DAAD in Germany)

This is a justification this interviewee provides for the suspension of Russian and Belarus as opposed to expelling them form the EHEA completely. Another representative from Germany explains further:

> And suspension I think was a wise and right decision. Because if you have demolished one's bridge [education] between these two countries and the rest of the EHEA, it would be almost impossible to build it again … And we have now the opportunity in the next months, or rather years, to re-establish trust between the countries … after having made peace in Europe. I think this is quite important. (B8, representative from Education and Science Workers' Union in Germany)

By leveraging HE as a soft power tool, the EHEA contributes to political dialogue and engagement in the face of the current evolving geopolitical challenges. This confirms EHEA's role in European geopolitics which has been a matter of prior scholarly

discussions, albeit not many. To remind, EHEA's membership served as a tool for Central-Eastern European countries to demonstrate to the EU their readiness to join the Union (Huisman and Van Der Wende 2004) or for some post-Soviet countries to modernise their HE systems and inspire wider national progress by developing close ties with the western Europe through the EHEA (Zgaga 2009). What is more original and significant stemming from the above data analysis is the growing value of HE in the EHEA as a prime key to international cooperation in crises. As said earlier, education is recognised by EHEA stakeholders as the first bridge to establish and the last bridge to burn in international cooperation on a wider political arena.

6. Conclusion

This article has explored major shifts in the geopolitics of the European HE space that have taken place since 2020, focusing on the EHEA. This work is important, given that it contributes to the growing knowledge around the existence of the phenomenon of HE geopolitics in Europe and how it has been shifting in the recent context.

The analysis in this article relied on expert interviews with representatives from key policy-making institutions in the four countries that established the EHEA (Germany, France, Italy and the UK) as well as key recent EHEA official communications, and a thematic analysis of these datasets. This analysis has revealed three major recent overlapping shifts in the geopolitics of the EHEA: regarding its borders, identity and values. EHEA's borders have been shifting, following two seemingly opposing directions. On the one hand, there has been a drive to unite different regions within the EHEA by blurring the boundaries amongst them with the aim to facilitate friendship and stability in the region, particularly with regard to UK's plan – at the time – to exit the EU, and Eastern European countries' post-Soviet anti-democratic legacies. On the other hand, such significant events as Brexit and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have also prompted a reverse process – the delineation of the borders within the EHEA, such as in the case of the suspension of EHEA memberships of Belarus and Russia following the launch of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. What concerns the idea of what citizen's identity the EHEA is supposed to facilitate has also been shifting. There has been a gradual replacement of the aim to build a European identity with an emphasis on the internationalisation of the EHEA, as well as a more recent inclusion of the focus on cultivating a generation that cares about sustainability. The discussion of shifting EHEA's values is predominantly related to the move of the EHEA from focusing on structural issues in HE systems to the emphasis on cultivating certain values, and re-establishing the mission of HE in the EHEA as a tool for political cooperation, not just as a HE cooperation platform.

By examining the three major overlapping shifts in EHEA's geopolitics regarding its borders, identity and values, we can witness a complex relationship between geopolitics of HE and wider political developments. These findings are timely and significant, highlighting the existence and dynamics of the phenomenon of HE geopolitics in Europe and contributing to growing knowledge in the literature on European geopolitics and the role of HE in it.

Disclosure statement

This article has been published under the Journal's transparent peer review policy. Anonymised peer review reports of the submitted manuscript can be accessed under supplemental material online at https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2024.2398742.

Hyperlink the transparent peer review policy highlighted in yellow in the Supplementary footnote and Disclosure statement and that link will need to be taken to https://www.tandfonline.com/action/authorSubmission?show=instructions&journalCode=rehe20#Transparent%20Peer%20Review.

Funding

Data availability statement

The dataset with interview transcripts, generated and analysed during the current study, is available in the Research Data Archive of Nottingham Trent University, at https://doi.org/10.17631/RD-2022-0001-DDOC.

Ethical approval

The overarching research design of the project that served as a foundation for this article was informed by the most recent at the time BERA (2018) Research Ethics Guidelines, and data collection followed a favourable ethics decision (Ref: KUSHNIR 2021/414) from the Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BLSS REC) at Nottingham Trent University.

Informed consent

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews.

Notes on contributors

Dr Iryna Kushnir is an Associate Professor of Education Policy at Nottingham Trent University. Prior to this, she held academic posts at the University of Edinburgh and the University of Sheffield. Dr Kushnir's interdisciplinary research combines the following main areas: higher education policy and sociology, European integration and social justice.

Dr Nuve Yazgan has worked as a Research Consultant at Full Fact, as well as a researcher at the Nottingham Institute of Education at Nottingham Trent University and at the Department of Government at the University of Essex. Her research interests include European Public Policy, Greek Politics and Greek-Turkish Relations.

ORCID

Iryna Kushnir 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0727-7208
Nuve Yazgan 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8436-1767

References

Agnew, J. A., and S. Corbridge. 1995. *Mastering Space*. London: Routledge.

Albertazzi, D., and M. Zulianello. 2021. "Populist Electoral Competition in Italy: The Impact of Sub-national Contextual Factors." *Contemporary Italian Politics* 13 (1): 4–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2020.1871186.

Ball, S. J. 2012. "Performativity, Commodification and Commitment: An I-spy Guide to the Neoliberal University." *British Journal of Educational Studies* 60 (1): 17–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2011.650940.

Bamberger, A., and T. Y. Huang. 2024. "From Irreversible Openness to Protectionism: Geopolitics and International Research Cooperation in the European Union." *Journal of Education Policy* 34: 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2024.2351516.

BERA. 2018. *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. 4th ed. London: British Educational Research Association. https://www.bera.ac.uk/resources/all-publications/resources-for-researchers.

Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101.

Capoccia, G., and R. D. Kelemen. 2007. "The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism." *World Politics* 59 (3): 341–369. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100020852.

Castells, M. 2009. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Chichester: Wiley.

Collier, R., and D. Collier. 1991. *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Corbett, A. 2005. *Universities and the Europe of Knowledge: Ideas, Institutions, and Policy Entrepreneurship in European Union Higher Education Policy, 1955–2005*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Costa, O., and E. Barbé. 2023. "A Moving Target. EU Actorness and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine." *Journal of European Integration* 45 (3): 431–446. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2183394.

Cruz, L. 2018. "The Idea of Educational Development: An Historical Perspective." *To Improve the Academy: A Journal of Educational Development* 37 (1): 159–171. https://doi.org/10.3998/tia.17063888.0037.106.

Damro, C. 2012. "Market Power Europe." *Journal of European Public Policy* 19 (5): 682–699.

Diez, T. 2004. "Europe's Others and the Return of Geopolitics." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17 (2): 319–335. https://doi.org/10.1080/0955757042000245924.

Duchêne, F. 1972. "Europe's Role in World Peace." In *Europe Tomorrow*, edited by R. Mayne, 32–47. London: Fontana.

Dupont, C., S. Oberthür, and I. Von Homeyer. 2020. "The Covid-19 Crisis: A Critical Juncture for EU Climate Policy Development?" *Journal of European Integration* 42 (8): 1095–1110. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2020.1853117.

EHEA. 2020a. "Rome Ministerial Communique." Accessed May 19, 2023. http://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf.

EHEA. 2020b. "Rome Ministerial Communique." Accessed April 19, 2023. http://www.ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf.

EHEA. 2020c. "European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process." Accessed July 2, 2020. http://www.ehea.info/.

EHEA. 2022a. "Extraordinary BFUG Board Meeting LXXIX/I." Accessed May 19, 2023. http://ehea.info/Upload/Extraordinary%20Board_FR_AZ_79_1%20minutes%20.pdf.

EHEA. 2022b. "Extraordinary BFUG Board Meeting LXXIX/I." Accessed April 19, 2023. http://ehea.info/Upload/Extraordinary%20Board_FR_AZ_79_1%20minutes%20.pdf.

EHEA. 2022c. "Adoption of the Statement by the Bologna Follow-Up Group and the Suspension of the Rights of Participation of the Russian Federation and Belarus." Accessed May 19, 2023. http://ehea.info/page-ADOPTION-OF-THE-STATEMENT.

EHEA. 2022d. "Adoption of the Statement by the Bologna Follow-Up Group and the Suspension of the Rights of Participation of the Russian Federation and Belarus." Accessed April 19, 2023. http://ehea.info/page-ADOPTION-OF-THE-STATEMENT.

EHEA. 2022e. "Statement by Members and Consultative Members of the Bologna Follow-up Group on Consequences of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine." Accessed May 19, 2023. http://ehea.info/Upload/STATEMENT%20BY%20MEMBERS%20AND%20CONSULTATIVE%20MEMBERS%20OF%20THE%20BOLOGNA%20FOLLOW%20UP%20GROUP%20ON%20CONSEQUENCES%20OF%20THE%20RUSSIAN%20INVASION%20OF%20UKRAINE.pdf.

EHEA. 2022f. "Statement by Members and Consultative Members of the Bologna Follow-up Group on Consequences of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine." Accessed April 19, 2023. http://ehea.info/Upload/STATEMENT%20BY%20MEMBERS%20AND%20CONSULTATIVE%20MEMBERS%20OF%20THE%20BOLOGNA%20FOLLOW%20UP%20GROUP%20ON%20CONSEQUENCES%20OF%20THE%20RUSSIAN%20INVASION%20OF%20UKRAINE.pdf.

European Commission. 2022. "Higher Education: Making EU's Universities Ready for the Future through Deeper Transnational Cooperation." Accessed August 19, 2024. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_365.

European Commission. 2023. "European Economic Area (EEA) in the World." Accessed April 19, 2024. https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/eea-in-the-world.

European Commission. 2024. "Higher Education Initiatives." Accessed August 19, 2024. https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/about-higher-education.

Farrell, H. 2018. "The Shared Challenges of Institutional Theories: Rational Choice, Historical Institutionalism, and Sociological Institutionalism." In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*, edited by R. A. W. Rhodes and P. 't Hart, 23–44. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Flint, C. 2021. *Introduction to Geopolitics*. New York: Routledge.

Garud, R., A. Kumaraswamy, and P. Karnøe. 2010. "Path Dependence or Path Creation?" *Journal of Management Studies* 47 (4): 760–774. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2009.00914.x.

Gittell, M., and N. S. Kleiman. 2000. "The Political Context of Higher Education." *American Behavioral Scientist* 43 (7): 1058–1091. https://doi.org/10.1177/00027640021955766.

Grek, S. 2008. "From Symbols to Numbers: The Shifting Technologies of Education Governance in Europe." *European Educational Research Journal* 7 (2): 208–218. https://doi.org/10.2304/eerj.2008.7.2.208.

Grek, S., and I. Russell. 2023. "Beyond Bologna? Infrastructuring Quality in European Higher Education." *European Educational Research Journal* 23 (2): 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041231170518.

Hazelkorn, E. 2007. "The Impact of League Tables and Ranking Systems on Higher Education Decision Making." *Higher Education Management and Policy* 19 (2): 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1787/hemp-v19-art12-en.

Healey, N. M. 2023. "Reinventing International Higher Education for a Socially Just, Sustainable World." *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education* 27 (4): 169–178. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2023.2217780.

Huisman, J. 2019. "The Bologna Process in European and Post-Soviet Higher Education: Institutional Legacies and Policy Adoption." *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 32 (4): 465–480. https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2019.1597686.

Huisman, J., and M. Van Der Wende. 2004. "The EU and Bologna: Are Supra- and International Initiatives Threatening Domestic Agendas?" *European Journal of Education* 39 (3): 349–357. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3435.2004.00188.x.

Janssens, L., T. Kuppens, I. Mulà, E. Staniskiene, and A. B. Zimmermann. 2022. "Do European Quality Assurance Frameworks Support Integration of Transformative Learning for Sustainable Development in Higher Education?" *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* 23 (8): 148–173. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSHE-07-2021-0273.

Jenichen, A. 2022. "The Politics of Normative Power Europe: Norm Entrepreneurs and Contestation in the Making of EU External Human Rights Policy." *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 60 (5): 1299–1315. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13157.

Jungblut, J. 2017. "From Preferences to Policies in Coalition Governments—Unpacking Policy Making in European Higher Education." *Public Policy and Administration* 32 (4): 323–348. https://doi.org/10.1177/0952076716679223.

Kauko, J. 2013. "Dynamics in Higher Education Politics: A Theoretical Model." *Higher Education* 65 (2): 193–206. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9538-z.

Khelifi, S. 2019. "Interplay Between Politics and Institution in Higher Education Reform." *European Journal of Educational Research* 8 (volume8-issue3.html): 671–681. https://doi.org/10.12973/eu-jer.8.3.671.

Kingdon, J. 1995. *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*. New York: Harper Collins.

Kratochvíl, P., and Z. Sychra. 2019. "The end of Democracy in the EU? The Eurozone Crisis and the EU's Democratic Deficit." *Journal of European Integration* 41 (2): 169–185. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2019.1569001.

Kushnir, I. 2016. "The Role of the Bologna Process in Defining Europe." *European Educational Research Journal* 15 (6): 664–675. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904116657549.

Kushnir, I. 2021. "The Role of the European Education Area in European Union Integration in Times of Crises." *European Review* 30 (3): 301–321. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798721000016.

Kushnir, I. 2023. "It Is More Than Just Education. It's Also a Peace Policy': (Re) Imagining the Mission of the European Higher Education Area in the Context of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine." *European Educational Research Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041231200927.

Kushnir, I., and R. Brooks. 2022. "UK Membership(s) in the European Higher Education Area Post-2020: A 'Europeanisation' Agenda." *European Educational Research Journal* 22 (5): 718–740. https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041221083073.

Kuus, M. 2010. "Critical Geopolitics." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2): 683–701. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.20.

Leonard, M. 2003. "Interviews." In *The A-Z of Social Research*, edited by R. L. Miller and J. D. Brewer, 166–171. London: Sage.

Léonard, S., and C. Kaunert. 2022. "De-centring the Securitisation of Asylum and Migration in the European Union: Securitisation, Vulnerability and the Role of Turkey." *Geopolitics* 27 (3): 729–751. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1929183.

Levin, M., and D. J. Greenwood. 2022. *Creating a New Public University and Reviving Democracy: Action Research in Higher Education*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Lewicki, A. 2023. "East–West Inequalities and the Ambiguous Racialisation of 'Eastern Europeans'." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 49 (6): 1481–1499. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2154910.

Mahoney, J. 2000. "Path Dependence in Historical Sociology." *Theory and Society* 29 (4): 507–548. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007113830879.

Manners, I. 2002. "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?" *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 40 (2): 235–258. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353.

Marginson, S. 2022. "What is Global Higher Education?" *Oxford Review of Education* 48 (4): 492–517. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2022.2061438.

Marginson, S., and M. Considine. 2000. *The Enterprise University: Power, Governance and Reinvention in Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Marshall, C., and J. D. Scribner. 1991. "It's all Political" Inquiry Into the Micropolitics of Education." *Education and Urban Society* 23 (4): 347–355. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124591023004001.

Mason, J. 2002. *Qualitative Researching*. London: Sage Publications.

Mayhew, K. 2022. "Brexit and UK Higher Education." *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 38 (1): 179–187. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/grab043.

McLendon, Michael K. 2003. "The Politics of Higher Education: Toward an Expanded Research Agenda." *Educational Policy* 17 (1): 165–191. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904802239291.

Mendick, H., and A. K. Peters. 2022. "How Post-Bologna Policies Construct the Purposes of Higher Education and Students' Transitions Into Masters Programmes." *European Educational Research Journal* 22 (2): 236–253. https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041221076633.

Moisio, S. 2015. "Geopolitics/Critical Geopolitics." In *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Geography*, edited by J. Agnew, V. Mamadouh, A. Secor, and J. W. Sharp, 220–234. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Morreira, S., K. Luckett, S. H. Kumalo, and M. Ramgotra. 2020. "Confronting the Complexities of Decolonising Curricula and Pedagogy in Higher Education." *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 5 (1-2): 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/23802014.2020.1798278.

Moscovitz, H., and E. Sabzalieva. 2023. "Conceptualizing the new Geopolitics of Higher Education." *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 21 (2): 149–165. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2023.2166465.

O'Loughlin, J. V., ed. 1994. *Dictionary of Geopolitics*. Westport: Greenwood Press.

O'Sullivan, P. 2014. *Geopolitics*. London: Routledge.

Pereira Pires, ÍS, E. L. Fernandes, A. C. Braga, and M. A. Flores. 2021. "Initial Teacher Education after the Bologna Process: Possibilities and Challenges for a Renewed Scholarship of Teaching and Learning." *European Journal of Teacher Education* 46 (1): 6–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1867977.

Peters, B. G. 2019. *Institutional Theory in Political Science: The New Institutionalism*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Peters, B. G., J. Pierre, and D. S. King. 2005. "The Politics of Path Dependency: Political Conflict in Historical Institutionalism." *The Journal of Politics* 67 (4): 1275–1300. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2005.

Pierson, P. 2000. "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics." *American Political Science Review* 94 (2): 251–267. https://doi.org/10.2307/2586011.

Puente, J., I. Fernandez, A. Gomez, and P. Priore. 2020. "Integrating Sustainability in the Quality Assessment of EHEA Institutions: A Hybrid FDEMATEL-ANP-FIS Model." *Sustainability* 12 (5): 1707–1722. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12051707.

Robertson, S. 2008. "'Europe/Asia' Regionalism, Higher Education and the Production of World Order." *Policy Futures in Education* 6 (6): 718–729. https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2008.6.6.718.

Robertson, S., M. de Azevedo, and R. Dale. 2016. "Higher Education, the EU, and the Cultural Political Economy of Regionalism." In *Global Regionalisms and Higher Education*, edited by S. L. Robertson, K. Olds, R. Dale, and Q. A. Dang, 24–48. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Robertson, S. L., K. Olds, and R. Dale. 2022. "From the EHEA to the EEA: Renewed State-Making Ambitions in the Regional Governance of Education in Europe." In *From Actors to Reforms in European Higher Education: A Festschrift for Pavel Zgaga*, edited by M. Klemenčič, 65–76. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Scott, P. 2012. "Going Beyond Bologna: Issues and Themes." In *European Higher Education at the Crossroads: Between the Bologna Process and National Reforms*, edited by A. Curaj, P. Scott, L. Vlasceanu, and L. Wilson, 1–14. New York: Springer.

Shields, R. 2019. "The Sustainability of International Higher Education: Student Mobility and Global Climate Change." *Journal of Cleaner Production* 217:594–602. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2019.01.291.

Soltys, D. 2015. "Similarities, Divergence, and Incapacity in the Bologna Process Reform Implementation by the Former-Socialist Countries: The Self-Defeat of State Regulations." *Comparative Education* 51 (2): 179–195. https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2014.957908.

Sorensen, A. 2018. "Multiscalar Governance and Institutional Change: Critical Junctures in European Spatial Planning." *Planning Perspectives* 33 (4): 615–632. https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2018.1512894.

Stake, R. E. 1994. "Case Studies." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln. London: Sage Publication.

Steinmo, S., K. Thelen, and F. Longstreth, eds. 1992. *Structuring Politics: Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tömmel, I. 2009. "Modes of Governance and the Institutional Structure of the European Union." In *Innovative Governance in the European Union*, edited by I. Tömmel and A. Verdun, 9–23. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Wallace, H., M. A. Pollack, C. Roederer-Rynning, and A. R. Young, eds. 2020. *Policy-making in the European Union*. London: Oxford University Press.

Wessel, R. A. 2021. "Normative Transformations in EU External Relations: The Phenomenon of 'Soft' International Agreements." *West European Politics* 44 (1): 72–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2020.1738094.

Zahavi, H., and Y. Friedman. 2019. "The Bologna Process: An International Higher Education Regime." *European Journal of Higher Education* 9 (1): 23–39. https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2018.1561314.

Zgaga, P. 2009. "The Bologna Process and its Role for Transition Countries." *Revista de La Educacion Superior* 38:83–96. ISSN 0185-2760.