

The EU's Higher Education Policy

Integration against all odds

Nadia Manzoni & Daniela Crăciun

EQAF, Budapest, 13.11.2025

Setting the scene

- **Europe in polycrisis** “sleepwalking from one crisis to another without waking up” (Juncker 2018) - economic, political, social, environmental
- **Higher education not spared** → anti-intellectualism, anti-internationalization movements, nationalist agendas
- **Yet, a third wave of Europeanisation of higher education is in progress.**

How is it possible that the European Degree & QA were passed?

Who/what is behind this?

A refresher on what the Council passed in May 2025

Council Resolution on a joint European degree label and the next steps towards a possible joint European degree

- Differentiation between **label** vs. a **full European degree** → label as the 1st step
- Implementation **phases**:
 - ~**2026** prepare & finalise label
 - 2026-2028** rollout & evaluate feasibility
 - 2029** reflect & decide whether/how to introduce a full European degree
- to underpin **trust**, the label is closely tied to **agile, international QA** and **automatic mutual recognition** of qualifications → Resolution & recommendation point to the **ESG** and the **European Approach for Joint Programmes** as supporting instruments

Council Recommendation on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education

- **Cross-Institutional QA Framework** with “building blocks” for alliances: joint provision/programmes, micro-credentials, etc.
- **Once-only principle** for jointly managed educational provision
- **Strengthening & using DEQAR** to enhance trust
- Member states encouraged to work together, share good practice, identify and reduce administrative/legal barriers
- **Criteria for European degree label** (Annex II)

A refresher - European Degree label criteria

Joint Programme Organisation

1. HEIs involved
2. Transnational joint degree
3. Joint arrangements
4. Quality assurance
5. Graduate tracking
6. Student-centered learning
7. Transnational campus – access to services
8. Flexible and embedded student mobility
9. Co-evaluation and co-supervision for dissertations

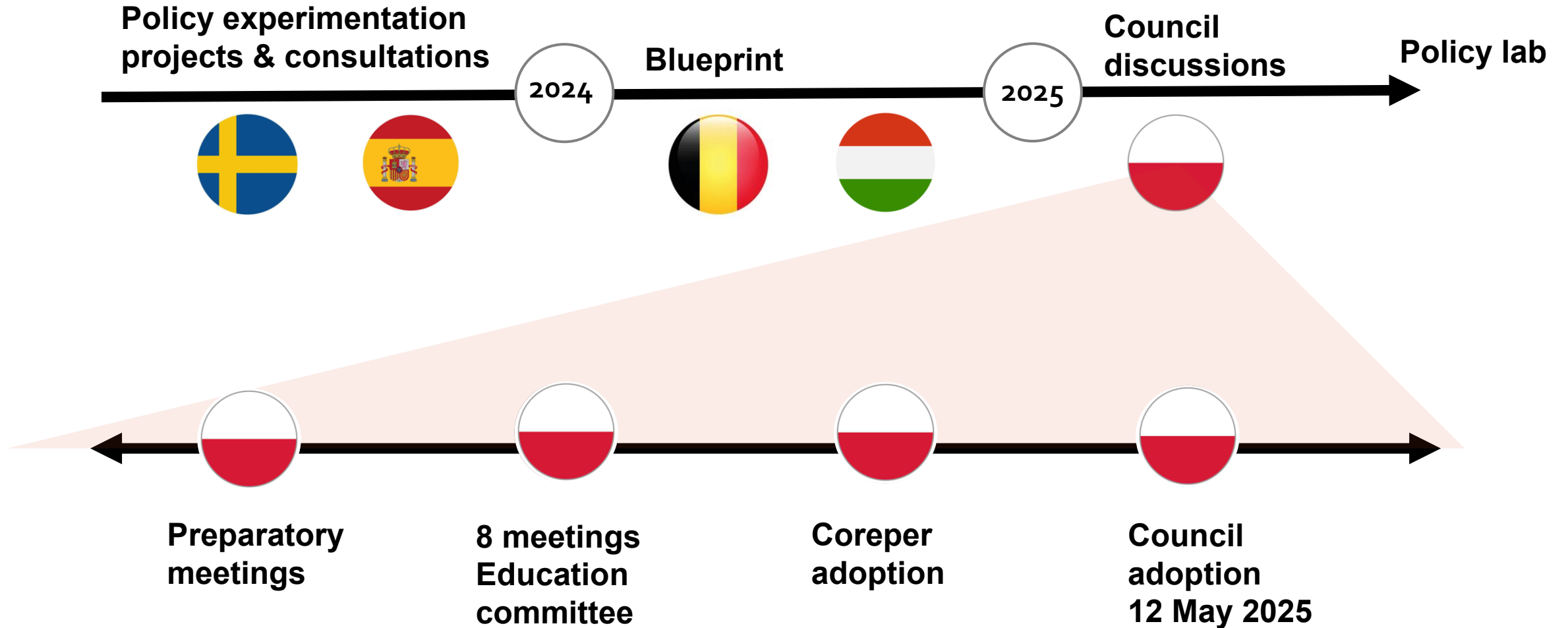
European Dimension

10. Interdisciplinarity
11. Learning beyond academia
12. Digital Skills
13. Democratic values
14. Multilingualism
15. Inclusiveness
16. Environmental sustainability

These developments did not come out of the blue

So how did it happen?

Timeline



Questions

- What are the main areas of **consensus** among EU Member States in the negotiations on the European Degree package?
- What are the main areas of **dissent** among EU Member States in the negotiations on the European Degree package?
- How did these points of consensus/dissent **impact the final policy** adopted by the Council?
 - **Method:** Process tracing of policy development process to sequence events, incl. document analysis of Council texts (6 iterative drafts) and Commission minutes analyse themes and track changes.

Main areas of consensus

- Value of the *concept* of European Degree (label) → for cooperation, mobility, and recognition in the EU, but should be implemented gradually
- Institutional autonomy → participation is voluntary and institutions are autonomous in designing and implementing joint programmes
- Continuity with Bologna Process → use of ESGs, European Approach and other instruments
- Feasibility → Criteria should remain manageable, measurable, feasible and consistently interpreted
- ED and QA alignment → QA of criteria should be flexible, proportionate and trust-based to minimise administrative burden

MS positioning in negotiations

Supportive Group

- Advocate mentioning (a future) ED in texts.
- Support a comprehensive or moderately broad set of criteria.
- Open to aligning ED to QA
- Accept some administrative effort to strengthen mutual trust.
- Emphasize the European value-added and visibility of the label.

Reserved/Skeptical Group

- Prefer a “label-first” approach, oppose premature references to ED.
- Support simplified or QA-linked criteria only (based on ESG/European Approach).
- Stress voluntary, non-binding participation.
- Concerned about administrative burden and overlapping frameworks.
- Seek cautious, legally precise language in Council texts.

Continuous tensions

- Ambition vs. pragmatism
- Comprehensive vs. minimal vs. value-based criteria.
- Trust vs. accountability (administrative burden)
- Efficiency vs. national control in cross-institutional QA
- Quality enhancement vs. measurable & feasible criteria

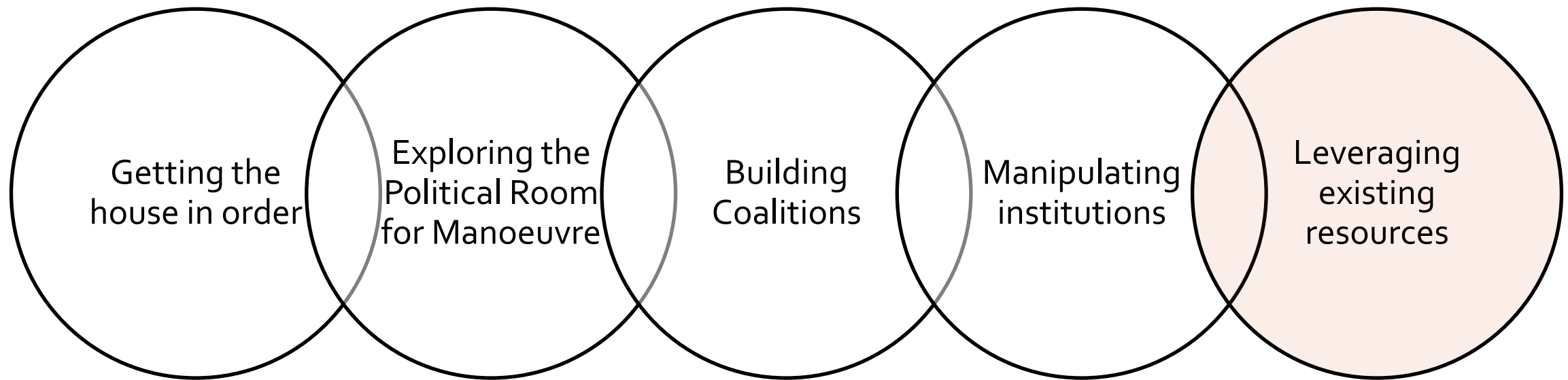
The evolution towards a compromise

- **Holistic framing** → Focus evolved from economic competitiveness to a balanced educational, social and competitiveness framing.
- **Gradual softening of language** → 'should' → 'are invited to', showing respect for national and institutional autonomy.
- **Accountability to the policy makers** → Evaluation mechanisms and feedback loops increasingly structured and detailed.
- **Balance of power** → The resolution text reflects a balance between EU-level ambition and national sensitivities.
- **Consensus-building** → Incremental progressive refinement of the text shows consensus-building and institutional learning.

**How is it possible that the European
Degree & QA were passed?**

Policy Entrepreneurship of the European Commission?

Blom-Hansen & Senninger, 2021



Theory-informed look into the future

- Europeanisation as a *top-down process* involves a) construction, b) diffusion and c) **institutionalisation** of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things' and shared beliefs and norms (Radaelli)
- Europeanisation as a *bottom-up process* is defined as an encounter with the EU to pursue (sub)national policy goals (Quaglia and Radaelli, 2007)
- Europeanisation as an *outcome* is the 'domestic impact of European institutions' (Olsen 2002)
- European degree and Cross-institutional QA are still only (successfully) constructed and diffused ideas, Member States and universities/alliances need to **institutionalise** them and implement them into rules, procedures and norms.

Never waste a good crisis

"A crisis provides a formidable threat to integration. But it also creates a decision-making window of opportunity wider than normal-times windows"

(Radaelli, 2022)

Thank you!

Questions, comments, suggestions