

ABSTRACT MASTER THESIS: “Student Representative Organisations and Institutional Dependency in the Higher Education System. Assessing the Impact on Student Academic Freedom through a Qualitative Comparative Analysis between France, Italy, Norway and Slovakia”

Research on academic freedom in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has increasingly **considered the student perspective, particularly in relation to governance**. This can be defined as an ensemble of university institutional bodies, such as the Academic Senate and the University Council, as well as student-led institutional bodies, such as the Student National Government, where student representatives can participate in public decision-making processes (Klemenčič, 2024); and student voice (Matthews & Dollinger, 2020). While much of the literature focuses on the legal frameworks for student representation, **less attention has been paid to the structural constraints that student representative organisations (SROs) face when advocating for academic freedom**. At the same time, student representative bodies across Europe **report material and financial limitations that hinder students' ability to pursue tertiary studies**, such as a shortage of student housing, increasing tuition fees, limited financial support, and targeted attacks on SROs. The thesis examines **how institutional dependency, intended here as SROs' reliance on universities, governments, and regulatory frameworks for recognition, access, and resources¹, shapes their capacity to represent and protect student rights**. The research addresses three interrelated questions: (1) **What challenges do SROs face when defending academic freedom**; (2) **How do they develop strategies to navigate institutional constraints**; (3) **To what extent do these strategies converge or diverge within a national context**. A comparative qualitative approach is applied to four case studies: France, Italy, Norway and Slovakia, which represent contrasting HE governance models and systems of student representation at the national level. The adopted methods included **qualitative documentary analysis**, complemented by policy reports, legal texts, and social media content, **as well as semi-structured interviews with national and European student representatives**. Grounded by the **capability approach** (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999) and **Student Impact**

¹ This empirical definition of institutional dependency is provided by the ESU 2024 report “Bologna Process with Student Eye”

Theory (Klemenčič, 2024), the thesis links institutional dependency to SROs' repertoire of actions and SROs' agentic orientation. ***It contributes to understanding the conditions under which student representation functions as a formal right, but also a real capability for exercising and defending student academic freedom within the EHEA***