



Sociology and Social Research Department

Master's Degree in Sociology and Social Research

“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”

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ABSTRACT

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 & Dollier, 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 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

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

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I. LIST OF ACRONYMS (SIGLA)

- Azione Universitaria – AU
- Communautés d'universités et établissements- COMUEs
- Conferenza dei Rettori Italiani Universitari – CRUI
- Conférence des Prèsidet Universitaire – CPU
- Conseil National de l'enseignement supérieur et de la Recerche - CNESER
- Consiglio Di Amministrazione – CDA
- Conseil National Ouevres Universitaires et Scolaires - CNOUS
- Consiglio Nazionale degli Studenti Universitari – CNSU
- Data Protection Office – DPO
- European Convention on Human Rights - ECHR
- European Higher Education Area – EHEA
- European Union – EU
- European Student Union - ESU
- Fédération des Associations Général Etudiants – FAGE
- Fondo di Finanziamento Ordinario - FFO
- Higher Education – HE
- Model of Different System Design - MDSD
- Norsk Studentorganisasjon – NSO
- Quality Assurance Agency - QAA
- Scholar at Risk – SAR
- Student Representative Organisations – SROs
- Študentská rada vysokých škôl – SRVS
- Union National des Etudiants de France – UNEF
- Union Nationale Inter-universitaire – UNI
- Unione degli Studenti Universitari – UDU

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION OF THE NOTION OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM, STUDENT REPRESENTATION AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

1.1 THE CRISIS OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN THE EHEA

Academic freedom has traditionally been defined as the right of academics to research, teach, and publish without undue interference, underpinned by a shared sense of social responsibility and accountability (Tight, 1988, as cited in Nordal, 2016). Historically, this definition applied primarily to professors and researchers, while students' academic freedom remained only partially acknowledged. Only in recent years has the position of students within the academic community, and their role in promoting and safeguarding academic freedom come under scrutiny (Mazzero, 2025). Some scholars interpret it as an extension of staff rights, while others regard it as a distinct set of student-specific entitlements (Mazzero, 2025; Nordal, 2016). Yet, there is still no shared supranational legal definition of student academic freedom across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), as national frameworks reflect diverse political and social traditions on student activism, which also included Student Representation (Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020; Matei & Iwinska, 2018). Although academic freedom is formally referenced in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights² (2000) and the Bologna Process³ (1998), which assess academic freedom as a protected right, both staff and students increasingly face constraints. Mounting political and economic pressures have eroded the autonomy of higher education institutions (Buoso, 2021; Láncos, 2021; Violini et al., 2021), while the 2007 London Communiqué and 2012 Bucharest

² The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000) consolidates in a single document the fundamental rights protected within the EU legal order, including civil, political, economic, and social rights. It serves as a reference framework for the protection and promotion of human rights in EU member states (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf)

³ The Bologna Process is a long-term intergovernmental initiative aimed at establishing the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) through policy coordination on issues such as academic freedom, student mobility, institutional autonomy, and the social dimension of education (Weitgruber, 2020). Since its inception in 1999, it has operated through non-binding ministerial communiqués, which are not legally binding, that articulate shared commitments and provide a framework for structural reforms, including the recognition of student activism and the promotion of inclusive access to higher education. (Crosier & Haj, 2020; Weitgruber, 2020).

Communiqué, which established student participation as a principle of EHEA governance⁴, have not prevented the growing dependency of student representative bodies on institutional and state actors (Weitbruger, 2020).

These pressures take two main forms. First, politicisation of HE, which is defined as the state's attempts to align higher education with dominant political and ideological agendas or to suppress dissent, is evident in countries such as Hungary and France (Joly, 2022; Láncos, 2021; Violini et al., 2021). Second, the neoliberalisation of HE, where universities are treated as competitive enterprises that require demonstrating performance outcomes to secure funding (Buoso, 2021). Furthermore, neoliberalisation has also implied an increasing reliance on performance-based funding schemes and budget cuts, which have concentrated financial resources in elite institutions and encouraged the introduction of tuition and service fees (Hauptman, 2013).

The uneven implementation of the Bologna Process exacerbates these trends. As the European Students' Union's 2024 report, *'Bologna Process with Student Eye'*, notes, differences in political priorities and administrative capacity in the implementation of the Bologna Process in national systems have led to significant disparities in the realisation of academic freedom and student participation across EHEA countries. Moreover, academic freedom cannot be separated from the material conditions that determine whether students can exercise it effectively. Socioeconomic factors, such as housing shortages and the erosion of welfare support, particularly affect low-income and international students, limiting their ability to engage fully in academic and representative life (Macfarlane, 2011; Sotomayor et al., 2022).

Although the 2015 Yerevan Communiqué reaffirmed the social dimension of Higher Education (HE) in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), emphasising gender balance and the inclusion of students from disadvantaged

⁴ Although in the EHEA website does not list “*student representation*” as a separate thematic area, the concept is nonetheless embedded within its “*Student-centred learning*” agenda which emphasises the collaboration between elected student representative and university administration (<https://ehea.info/page-student-centred-learning>)

backgrounds, specifically, those from working-class and migrant backgrounds in HE policymaking and governance processes, its commitments have largely remained unfulfilled (Crosier & Haj, 2020).

The persistence of such inequalities underscores the need to analyse how structural constraints and institutional dependencies affect students' real capacity to exercise academic freedom and participate in HE governance. This provides the conceptual foundation for the present study.

1.2 STUDENT REPRESENTATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: EXISTING RESEARCH

Student Representation is defined as: "*The totality of activities carried out by student representatives formally elected or appointed on behalf of the student union. This includes not only committee work, lobbying, and counselling but also campaigning, protest measures, and internal organisational work to the same extent*" (Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020, p. 303).

This definition frames student representation as a practical and institutionalised activity, in which elected representatives act on behalf of the student community within formal organisational systems. It encompasses both institutional and informal collective action, including committee work, lobbying, counselling, campaigning, and protests (Cinci, 2017; Cole & Heinecke, 2020; Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020; Klemenčič, 2024). Student Research Organisations (SROs) differ significantly from other student organisations, such as student journals, research consortia, and university chapters of international NGOs like Amnesty International, in that they do not primarily facilitate moments of self-formation among students. Most student organisations either aim to provide a working experience that will strengthen students' professional development by providing a series of soft skills, such as group work, or follow the objectives of the affiliated organisation (Klemenčič, 2024). Rather, student representation implies that members adopt defined political positions capable of influencing HE and political

agendas, while fulfilling specific institutional duties such as policy evaluation (Cole & Heinecke, 2020; Ince et al., 2018; Klemenčič, 2024).

Over than operating within legal and institutional frameworks, Student Representation also relies on multiple forms of collective action to ensure that student perspectives are incorporated into university governance and national HE policies (Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020; Klemenčič, 2024). Its position at the intersection of formal structures and activism has prompted debate over whether student representation should be considered a form of student activism. While activism traditionally challenges the status quo in HE systems (Cole & Heinecke, 2020; Linder et al., 2019), student representation is increasingly institutionalised within HE systems. Consequently, it often functions as a mechanism to address financial and material barriers to access to HE and the decision-making process, without necessarily questioning the broader institutional dynamics between HE authorities and SROs, particularly their relationship of dependency on university administrations and national government (Klemenčič, 2024).

Existing scholarship on student representation and SROs generally focuses on two main dimensions. The first strand investigates the legal and policy frameworks governing student participation in decision-making processes, particularly the authority granted to student representatives in relation to university administrations and national governments (Popović, 2023). Additionally, Klemenčič (2012, 2024) examines the organisational structures of student representative bodies, assessing how they function within HE systems and the scope of their strategic goals.

The second strand conceptualises student representation as a form of activism, focusing mainly on national case studies of student protests and collective action strategies within institutional arenas (Cinci, 2017; Piazza, 2018). This strand of literature and research focuses on manifestations in the street, sit-ins in academia and politically oriented artistic performances. It draws attention to the factors that lead to the convergence of student political agency in the national decision-making process (Klemenčič, 2024).

Despite these contributions, important dimensions remain underexplored. First, little attention has been paid to the material and financial constraints faced by SROs, or to how their organisational structures interact with the legal frameworks governing their recognition and protection (Klemenčič, 2024). This gap limits our understanding of the degree to which SROs depend on universities and national governments, and how vulnerable they are to social and financial pressures that constrain their autonomy and influence within higher education.

Second, few studies examine how broader structural factors, such as rising tuition fees, shortages of affordable student housing, cuts to welfare funding, and the growing presence of far-right student groups, shape the legitimacy of student representation, community participation, and student welfare (Hauptman, 2013; Klemenčič, 2024; Sotomayor et al., 2022; Vespa et al., 2024).

Third, there is limited research on SROs' strategic responses to violations of student academic freedom, including how they mobilise to defend students' rights.

This research therefore seeks to explore the structural conditions under which SROs' political agency either converges or diverges into national politics. The focus is on their selection of collective action repertoires and coalition-building alliances with academic trade unions, civic and political NGOs. The research also examines the strategies used to maintain distance from political actors, student movements and SROs that promote undemocratic ideologies or concentrate power within themselves (Klemenčič, 2024).

1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This Master's thesis critically examines the current state of student academic freedom in the EHEA. It focuses on the role of SROs in defending and sustaining student freedom, and on their varying degrees of independence and dependency on university and national governance structures. Particular attention is given to how the organisational structure of SROs shapes their agency and autonomy.

The sustainability of these organisations is essential for amplifying the student voice in HE governance and ensuring accountability to the student communities they represent (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022). SROs provide valuable insights into the student perspective in HE, the obstacles students face when navigating higher education systems, and the strategies adopted by SROs and other stakeholders to address these challenges. They also shed light on how broader social transformations affect students' capabilities, understood as the ensemble of opportunities and positive freedoms that students value and strive to pursue within HE system and beyond (Klemenčič, 2024). Furthermore, analysing the perspectives of SROs reveals the actual degree to which they are dependent or independent, how changes in the political orientation of political authorities and SROs can hinder or empower their activities, and the impact of persistent wider social issues on these activities, particularly when SROs address controversial or politically sensitive topics (Klemenčič, 2024).

This research builds upon a comparative project conducted during an internship at the ESU, which analysed student academic freedom and the institutional dependency of SROs across EHEA member states. For this project, the ESU Presidency and Secretariat, in collaboration with the University of Trento, selected four countries representing different regions of the EHEA. The selection was based on data collected by the ESU from national SROs documenting reported violations, as well as on the scarcity of literature and data concerning the current state of student academic freedom and the decision-making power of SROs. The four selected countries: France (Continental), Italy (Mediterranean), Norway (Nordic), and Slovakia (Eastern/Balkan), reflect the geographic and political diversity of the EHEA and illustrate the varied challenges to academic freedom and student representation.

The selected countries were chosen for their exposure to distinct yet intersecting pressures affecting higher education. In France and Italy, the increasing politicisation of HE manifests both as attempts to exercise control over academic institutions to silence criticism (DeGregorio, 2022) and as efforts to align universities with the political ideology and values of ruling parties (Joly, 2022; Láncos, 2021). The HE sector in Norway is undergoing a deepening process of

neoliberalisation (Bleiklie, 2023), and both France and Norway have been particularly affected by budget cuts to universities. Meanwhile, France, Italy and Slovakia have witnessed the growing influence of right-wing and far-right student movements and representative organisations. This goes beyond merely aligning the HE sector with the political ideology of the party in power; it also facilitates the dismantling and silencing of sensitive topics in HE.

Across all four countries, the housing crisis exacerbates existing inequalities and restricts students' access to tertiary education. Moreover, these countries differ significantly in their implementation of the principles of the Bologna Process, particularly concerning the incorporation of SROs in HE governance and the dynamics of power relationships between HE institutions and political authorities. This makes them particularly relevant for a comparative study of the conditions under which student academic freedom is protected or undermined.

This thesis seeks to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the most common and distinctive violations and limitations of student academic freedom in the selected countries?
- RQ2: What strategies have been adopted by student representative organisations to mitigate the impact of these violations and limitations?
- RQ3: To what extent have the actions of student representative organisations contributed to influencing national higher education policy? And if it is positive, how?

These research questions aim to expand the discussion on student academic freedom, addressing whether it constitutes a distinct and autonomous right or an extension of staff academic freedom (Mazzero, 2025; Nordal, 2016). They further seek to identify and critically evaluate the institutional, organisational, and power relations, both within and beyond the structures of SROs, that enable or constrain student representation. Finally, the research examines student representation as a form of student activism, analysing how SROs navigate higher education systems while negotiating their legal status, relationships with higher education and political authorities, and levels of financial independence.

To address these questions, the thesis draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks in first place, the capability approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999) is employed to understand how legal, institutional, and material dimensions of HE systems affect SROs' decision-making power and capacity to mobilise the student voice. This framework conceptualises student representation as an embedded and practice-oriented activity, shaped by the dynamic power relations between HE institutions and political authorities. In second place, student impact theory (Klemenčič, 2024) conceptualises SROs as political agents capable of enacting change within higher education systems. By recognising the interconnectedness of legal, institutional, material, and financial conditions, this theory provides a contextualised understanding of student representation as a political and relational activity.

Together, these two frameworks enable an in-depth analysis of the relationship between the institutional, legal, and material conditions that define the functioning of SROs, recognised as the main legitimate student organisations representing students in formal governance arenas (Klemenčič, 2024; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022), and their capacity to influence HE and political decision-making. Finally, the thesis critically examines the extent to which Student Representation can challenge and renegotiate existing power dynamics between SROs and university governance.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE

2.1 Conceptualisation of the Notion of Student Academic Freedom

2.1.1 Assessing Academic Freedom in the EHEA

Academic freedom within the European Union (EU) is recognised in Article 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which proclaims that:

“The arts and scientific research shall be free of constraint. Academic freedom shall be respected⁵”

Although this provision affirms academic freedom as a negative liberty protecting against external interference, it remains vague and indeterminate. It offers no guidance on who is entitled to academic freedom or how it should operate in practice. This reflects a broader concern in the EHEA: to what extent should the EU define and legislate academic freedom, and to what extent should this remain the responsibility of individual member states? (Demuro, 2021; Matei & d’Acquila, 2024). Furthermore, as the Charter only applies when EU law is at stake, it is less enforceable in national contexts than the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)⁶. As Demuro (2021) notes, the Charter neither specifies who qualifies as a subject of this right nor defines its operational content.

Moreover, since the Charter does not carry the same legal weight as the ECHR, its enforceability in national legal systems is limited. Indeed, as noted by Matei and d’Acquila (2024), despite the multiplicity of legal interpretations on the notion of academic freedom, they agree that the authority over defining and enforcing academic freedom largely remains with national governments. Related freedoms, such as freedom of expression, assembly, association, education, thought, conscience, and religion, are articulated more clearly in Articles 10 to 14 of the ECHR⁷. These provisions, which include artistic and scientific expression as integral to academic practice, emphasise communication and the public sharing of ideas as essential to sustaining democracy (Demuro, 2021). Most of these protections primarily address individual civil liberties and focus on academic staff and researchers, rather than students (Demuro, 2021).

⁵ Charter of Fundamental Human Rights of the European Union (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf)

⁶ The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) is a binding international treaty under the Council of Europe, to which most European states are parties, and it is enforceable through the European Court of Human Rights (https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_ENG)

⁷ https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_ENG

Popovic's (2023) comparative legal analysis of the recognition of academic freedom in the EU and EHEA reveals that it is widely recognised in constitutional provisions, national higher education laws and court rulings. However, Nordal (2016) notes that students remain peripheral to legal definitions, scientific debate and policy discussions. Recent studies on student academic freedom and representation have begun to explore the financial, material and political dimensions and barriers within specific HE institutional systems. These studies focus on how these dimensions can shape and hinder student academic freedom and agency. However, this research tends to overlook the role of student organisations and broader governance structures in either enabling or constraining these freedoms (Mazzero, 2025; Shahabul & al., 2021; Sotomayor & al., 2022).

Over the past two decades, however, and at the policy level, the Bologna Process has sought to broaden this framework. While the 1999 Bologna Declaration does not explicitly define academic freedom, it identifies it as a foundational principle of the EHEA, linking it to institutional autonomy, public accountability, and student participation. Importantly, it frames HE institutions as a public responsibility based on cooperation and trust, and positions students as beneficiaries of the EHEA framework, particularly through mobility and degree recognition (Weitbruger, 2020).

In this way, the Bologna Process Declaration marked a turning point by explicitly acknowledging students as actors entitled to protection within HE governance. This development provides the legal and political foundation for assessing the recognition and scope of student representation across EHEA member states. While student representation is not presented as a separate thematic area within the EHEA, it is embedded in the broader frameworks of student-centred learning, the social dimension, and quality assurance⁸.

Student Representation in the EHEA has been further and formally recognised in the London Communiqué of 2007 and the Bucharest Communiqué of 2012.

⁸ <https://ehea.info/page-student-centred-learning>; <https://ehea.info/page-social-dimension>; <https://ehea.info/page-quality-assurance>

Section 2.11, “*Lifelong Learning*” of The London Communiqué of 2007, “*Towards the European Higher Education Area: Responding to Challenges in a Globalised World*”, recognises the necessity to implement flexible study pathways that allow students to pursue their interests. Additionally, this section emphasises the importance of implementing practices that recognise student engagement in organisations by urging university administrations and national governments to implement policies that recognise and reward students' involvement in all types of organisations, including SROs, without hindering their academic progress. Furthermore, it states that SROs are the only student organisations that can represent and defend students' interests and rights at institutional and university levels. Their relationships and powers are defined by university regulations and national law. The London Communiqué (2007) states that:

“[...] *student body entering, participating in and completing Higher Education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our population*⁹” (London Communiqué 2007 cited by Crosier and Haj, 2020 p.146).

This quotation clearly states that SROs must be included in the decision-making processes of HE institutions at all levels, from the university level to the supranational level.

The 2012 Bucharest Communiqué, titled “*Making the Most of Our Potential: Consolidating the European Higher Education Area*”, reaffirmed the objective of the Bologna Process of creating and implementing a student-centred HE system. Section 6 positioned students as active participants in shaping their own educational journeys, placing them on an equal footing with academic staff and political figures. This partnership was intended to foster students' intellectual independence, self-assurance, and critical thinking skills in various contexts. The Bucharest Communiqué (2012) was one of the first EHEA policy texts to recognise students' capabilities and freedoms as positive rights. This assigned

⁹ This quotation is mentioned in section 2.18, 'Social Dimension', of the London Communiqué, which emphasises the importance of standardising and implementing mechanisms for student involvement and participation in HE policy-making at this stage (https://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/2007_London_Communique_English_588697.pdf)

universities and political institutions the responsibility of safeguarding student interests and treating students as full collaborators within and beyond academia.

Section 6 also emphasised the role of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), reiterating the importance of recognising student representatives and the obligation of the EHEA to remove obstacles to student engagement in representative organisations. Finally, it anticipated the integration of a stronger social dimension within EHEA institutions. However, it placed greater emphasis on the need to reform funding systems to ensure sustainability and mitigate the long-term consequences of the 2008 economic crisis.

The 2015 Yerevan Communiqué formally recognised the importance of addressing the social dimension within the institutional frameworks of HE in the EHEA (Crosier & Haj, 2020). According to the Communiqué, the Ministries of Higher Education of EHEA countries are expected to "*enhance the social dimension of higher education, improve gender balance, and widen opportunities for access and completion, including international mobility, for students from disadvantaged backgrounds*" (Yerevan Communiqué, 2015, cited in Crosier & Haj, 2020, p. 148).

This emphasis represents an evolution of the Bologna Process, highlighting the development and implementation of strategies aimed at increasing the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, not only in HE broadly but also within student governance structures. These groups include students from low socio-economic backgrounds, women, students with disabilities, and those with immigrant status (Crosier & Haj, 2020).

In the "*Fundamental values*" section of the Tirana Communiqué (2024), student involvement and participation in governance are reaffirmed as one of the core values of the EHEA. The text stipulates that students and staff have the right to organise autonomously, to elect and be elected, have their views represented, and, through their national SROs, participate in institutional and system-level governance. The document thereby recognises student representation not merely as a procedural formality, but as a value in its own right. At the same time, the Communiqué strengthens the social dimension by emphasising equity,

inclusion and the support of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, thereby linking student agency and participation to broader HE inclusion goals¹⁰.

Additionally, university and national governments must refrain from political or institutional interference in the SROs' advocacy work, political proposal drafting, and agenda setting due to differing political stances on particular issues. At the same time, universities and political institutions must provide the necessary financial resources to fund and sustain the SROs' activities within and outside academia, and incentivise the involvement of marginalised student groups, such as those from working-class and migrant backgrounds, in HE affairs. This involves assessing and addressing the structural and institutional barriers that prevent students from marginalised groups from accessing HE and participating fully in its academic and governance processes.

As Weitgruber (2020) observes, the Bologna Process is a voluntary multilateral framework rather than a binding supranational legal regime. Consequently, the principles of student-centred learning, quality assurance, and the social dimension, within which student representation is conceptually embedded¹¹, are implemented according to each country's political willingness, administrative capacity, and strategic priorities. Member states therefore, retain considerable discretion in determining how to institutionalise student representation, for example, whether to include student evaluations in policy processes, grant co-decision-making power in teaching and learning matters, or adapt representative mechanisms to align with domestic political agendas

Referring to Demuro (2021) and to Matei and d'Aquila's (2024) analysis of the EU's limited legal authority to legislate on academic freedom, national governments also have the discretion to select the sections and dimensions of the Bologna Process to incorporate in the HE system. This supports Macfarlane's (2011) critique on the harmonization of HE system in the EU within the Bologna

¹⁰ <https://ehea.info/Download/Tirana-Communique.pdf>

¹¹ <https://ehea.info/page-quality-assurance>; <https://ehea.info/page-recognition>; <https://ehea.info/page-student-centred-learning>

Process as it is a supra-national process that constrains, rather than enhances, students' academic capabilities.

The ESU 2024 Report, *'The Bologna Process from the Student's Eye'*, also documents criticism of the Bologna Process from National SROs across the EHEA. These organisations have argued that the Bologna Process risks becoming a bureaucratic mechanism focused on degree standardisation rather than student empowerment. The document also strengthens the social dimension by emphasising equity, inclusion, and support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. SROs report limited opportunities to participate meaningfully in implementation discussions and highlight that, in many EHEA states, student participation remains largely consultative or symbolic rather than granting equal stakeholder status in HE policymaking. Mechanisms for reporting breaches of policy or ensuring institutional accountability are often weak or absent.

The section "*Perception of the National Unions of Students*" in the ESU report (2024) reveals that this uneven implementation reflects not only varying levels of governmental engagement but also disparities among regional and local SROs. These inconsistencies raise important questions about the legitimacy of the presence of SROs within HE governance (Klemenčič, 2024). Some SROs contend that the Bologna Process has drifted away from its original spirit of student participation, while others face criticism for prioritising institutional influence over genuine student mobilisation (Klemenčič, 2024). Consequently, SROs emerge as dual actors, responsible for representing the student body and maintaining accountability to academic and political institutions.

Even where student representation is formally recognised by law, their actual influence, decision-making power and autonomy can vary significantly (ESU, 2024). Furthermore, Gasteiger and Wulz (2020) note that student representation is still widely regarded as a voluntary activity rather than an essential component of the academic journey. This means that students engaged in this activity tend to be overworked and unpaid. Furthermore, their contribution to HE policy-making is not recognised as part of their academic development (Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020; Linder & al., 2019). Consequently, in the absence of institutional support and

flexibility to engage in representative work, students who participate in HE governance often risk being academically penalised for their involvement (Klemenčič, 2024)

Overall, these divergences demonstrate that the political and institutional role of SROs cannot be inferred from their formal recognition alone. Their effectiveness depends on historical traditions of student activism, national political culture, and the balance of power among universities, governments, and students (Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020; Klemenčič, 2024; Matei & Iwinska, 2018). This provides the conceptual foundation for the comparative analysis that follows, examining how SROs in France, Italy, Norway, and Slovakia negotiate their roles in protecting student academic freedom within distinct governance systems.

2.1.2 EXISTING PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Academic freedom has traditionally been defined as: *“the freedom of individual academics to study, teach, research and publish without being subjected to or causing undue interference. Academic freedom is granted in the belief that it enhances the pursuit and application of worthwhile knowledge and as such is supported by society through funding of academics and their institutions. Academic freedom embodies an acceptance by academics of the need to encourage openness and flexibility in academic work, and of their accountability to each other and to society”* (Tight, 1988, as cited in Nordal, 2016, p. 6)

Within this definition, scholars have conceptualised academic freedom as a right mainly enjoyed by professors and researchers. Academic freedom can be enjoyed as both an individual right and a collective right belonging to a specific professional group. Academic freedom can be understood in two contrasting ways. On the one hand, it can be considered a negative right, whereby academic staff can produce and disseminate scientific work without interference from political authorities due to differences in political and civic positions and not being subjected to political authority (Åkerlind & Kayrooz, 2003, as cited in Nordal, 2016

p.5). On the other hand, academic freedom is conceptualised as a positive right which requires national governments and universities to provide the necessary material and institutional conditions for meaningful academic work, and the academic community should pursue scientific objectives that the broader society should enjoy (ibid.). These two conceptualisations of academic rights often come into tension, depending on how HE is perceived: as a societal good or as an absolute right reserved for a specific working sector. However, as the provided definition states, these two conceptions are often interconnected as academic freedom necessitates institutional and external support to sustain and disseminate academic work under specific conditions that prohibit political and institutional interference. A further point of contention concerns the purpose of academic freedom: should it be valued as an intrinsic good, such as the pursuit of truth or as an instrumental good, serving broader social, political, or economic goals (Tight, 1988 as cited in Nordal, 2016, p.4-6).

Focusing on philosophical interpretations of academic freedom, there are three interpretations on defining academic freedom that currently exist: academic freedom as an institutional right (Sridhar, 2025); academic freedom as a professional right (Beaud, 2022) and academic freedom as a human right (Vrieling et al., 2023).

The first interpretation asserts that academic freedom, most frequently discussed in the US, should be understood as both an individual and collective right situated within the academic sphere, but constantly interacting with other arenas such as NGOs, political institutions and other educational systems (Sridhar, 2025). This legal interpretation is more inclined toward the negative conception of academic freedom, seeking to ensure that the rights of university members and the academic community are protected from interference by national governments and private actors. However, academic freedom is also subject to limitations, such as in the case of restrictions on freedom of speech imposed by institutional codes or legal judgments handed down by constitutional courts (Matei & Iwinska, 2018).

The second interpretation construes academic freedom as a limited professional privilege, a right enjoyed exclusively by university professors, academic administrators, and researchers, confined to HE settings. This legal framing adopts a negative conception, emphasising freedom from governmental or external interference, except under defined conditions. The protections accorded to members of the academic community arise from their professional status, while other groups or rights must rely on separate legal frameworks. As a consequence, has limited consideration of students and their rights (Beaud, 2022)

The third interpretation defines academic freedom as a fundamental human right with both negative and positive dimensions. This means it entails not only protection from external interference but also an active duty of the state to safeguard and promote it (Vrieling et al., 2023). Rooted in international human rights law, specifically Articles 19 and 27 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which emphasise freedom of speech and the possibility to participate and to contribute to the scientific advancement and its benefits¹². In addition, Articles 13 and 15 of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, state that academic freedom is inseparable from the broader right to science¹³. This link highlights that the production and dissemination of knowledge are social goods essential to both individual and collective well-being, not privileges of academia alone. Academic freedom, therefore, serves as both a right of the academic community and a cornerstone of democratic, knowledge-based societies.

These three philosophical interpretations of the notion of academic freedom provide a framework for understanding how student representation within a specific HE system is protected and recognised, how it has been operationalised, and the areas in which SROs have decision-making power over HE issues. This includes: exercising a monopoly, which signifies that SROs or student-owned bodies have sole control over housing, healthcare, welfare assessment, and the

¹² https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf

¹³ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>

design of HE policies; shared responsibility, whereby HE authorities and SROs ensure that students have access to welfare provision and co-design HE policies; limited responsibilities, whereby the involvement of SROs is limited to specific indicated HE topics and they have merely a consultative role (Bovill & al., 2016; Klemenčič, 2024).

Legal interpretations of academic freedom present several limitations. As Popovic (2023) argues, legal definitions of academic freedom often overlook its historical development across various national contexts. This omission limits our understanding of how rights such as freedom of speech, institutional autonomy, academic self-governance, this also included student representation have been recognised or contested over time. Furthermore, Matei and Iwinska (2018) emphasise that, in the absence of a clear legal framework at local, national or supranational levels, the cultural and social dimensions significantly influence what should be guaranteed and protected.

In the 2010s, Macfarlane (2011) proposes that academic freedom should be understood not only as a legal right but also as a material and practical condition, shaped by institutional structures, political economies, and financial dependencies. This theoretical framework approach highlights the relational dynamics between academic staff, university administrations, and state institutions, raising questions about how autonomy is exercised in practice. This concern is also extended to university students and SROs in the HE.

While the academic freedom of freedom of speech, research, teach and research have been extensively debated, the status of university students within this framework remains underdeveloped. As Nordal (2016) points out, students are rarely treated as full subjects of academic freedom in legal or policy documents. Although students' rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly are protected at the EHEA level and national level under general civil liberties, these might not be explicitly incorporated into academic freedom frameworks (Popovic, 2023). Aside from the legally enshrined right to be represented, it remains unclear whether students are entitled to distinct academic rights or

subject to academic obligations comparable to those of faculty (Mazzero, 2025; Nordal, 2016).

This ambiguity becomes especially problematic in contexts where students face repression or exclusion for their political engagement, both within and outside the university setting (Monypenny, 1963). It also raises concerns about students' material conditions, for instance, how cuts to HE and the erosion of student welfare systems constrain students' ability to meaningfully participate in academic life (Hauptman, 2013). These structural limitations are often overlooked in legal or normative accounts of academic freedom.

In line with Macfarlane's (2011) argument, it is crucial to consider how students' socioeconomic backgrounds affect their ability to access and exercise academic rights. This perspective reveals a persistent gap between the formal legal recognition of student rights and their practical implementation. Consequently, it remains uncertain whether students are seen as equal partners in academic governance, or as dependent subjects shaped by university hierarchies and national policy frameworks, and whether such dependency is justified or problematic.

2.1.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ON STUDENT ACADEMIC FREEDOM

The Humboldtian model of academic freedom was one of the first theoretical models to emphasise the role of university students and the rights that could be exercised within academia (Nordal, 2016). The role of university students was encapsulated by the principle of *Lehrfreiheit* (*freedom to learn*), which affirmed students' right to transfer between universities to broaden their knowledge and to choose their own course of study, free from interference or control by the university (Nordal, 2016). This concept aimed to foster intellectual independence by ensuring that students were neither obliged to attend specific courses nor subject to rigid evaluation or regulation in constructing their educational pathways. However, *Lehrfreiheit* also implied minimal interaction with professors in navigating this system and was designed for the aristocratic and noble classes,

as students were expected to cover all study-related costs themselves. This reveals that academic freedom for students, like academic freedom more broadly, was originally conceived as a privilege accessible only to an elite social group (Nordal, 2016).

By the early 1960s, debates emerged concerning the role and rights of university students, focusing on what academic rights students should enjoy, under what conditions these could be limited, and what institutional obligations universities held to safeguard and guide students (Monypenny, 1963). Monypenny (1963) argued that academic freedom for students should be constitutionally recognised alongside freedom of speech, assembly, petition, publication, and religion, as students remain dependent on professors for evaluation, mentorship, and degree completion. This dependency highlights the asymmetrical power dynamics between students and professors, shaping the criteria for granting and revoking academic rights.

Monypenny (1963) emphasised the university administration's responsibility to protect students' academic rights while preserving institutional integrity. He argued that administrations should respond to students' political expressions and actions by evaluating their legitimacy and responding proportionally, without undermining the autonomy of the academic community. This raises enduring questions about how to delineate legitimate institutional oversight from undue interference, particularly in relation to politically affiliated SROs and the extent to which their political orientations align with their institutional roles as representatives of the student body and intermediaries between students and higher education governance. The legitimacy and trustworthiness of SROs, therefore, depend on their ability to represent a plurality of student interests and perspectives, thereby upholding the democratic foundations of student academic freedom (Klemenčič, 2024).

Importantly, Monypenny (1963) emphasised that legal and institutional frameworks shape student governments as intermediaries between the student community and university governance. He questioned how these organisations define the relationship of dependence that university students maintain with

higher education authorities, whether they genuinely represent student interests, and to what extent they operate independently of university administrations. This critique also applies to the fact that student governments are dependent on institutional frameworks, which can limit their autonomy and prevent them from being able to advocate effectively.

During the democratisation of HE between 1967 and 1969, student movements across the EHEA began to demand formal recognition of their right to representation in all decision-making bodies, both within and beyond academic institutions (Nordal, 2016). These movements sought substantial influence over the design and implementation of HE policies. Consequently, between 1969 and 1990, many EHEA states introduced legal provisions recognising student representation within their national higher education frameworks. This included affirming student autonomy from teachers' authority and promoting the idea that students should take responsibility for their own learning (Nordal, 2016, p. 10).

Over subsequent decades, student representation and student voice were revisited and institutionalised through the Bologna Process, which reinforced the involvement of student representatives in decision-making processes at all levels, from institutional to national, particularly within Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) frameworks (Klemenčič, 2024; Weitbruger, 2020).

Despite the formal recognition of student representation within HE governance frameworks and the obligations imposed on institutions to integrate student voices in decision-making processes, student representation is still not recognised as an academic activity in most EHEA member states (Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020). According to Gasteiger and Wulz (2020), student representation HE governance remains largely a voluntary activity through which students contribute their time and expertise. This contribution extends beyond those formally elected to governance bodies and includes students who draft policy proposals, organise events, and assist peers in navigating bureaucratic procedures such as accommodation or administrative requests. These tasks are often performed extensively and without formal recognition within study programmes. Yet this voluntary nature stands in sharp contrast to the significant responsibilities and

skills required to effectively represent the student body and contribute meaningfully to institutional policymaking, revealing an underlying tension between commitment and institutional support. While a small number of EHEA countries have taken steps to partially acknowledge student representatives' contribution in the HE governance by awarding limited ECTS credits, stipends, or temporary leave for elected representatives, these measures remain exceptions rather than the norm (Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020). The overall landscape is therefore characterised by uneven and informal recognition, which reinforces disparities in students' capacity to participate meaningfully in governance (ESU, 2024).

The level of involvement in HE decision-making remains uneven because each EHEA member state has adopted divergent legal frameworks for student representation, differing in both scope and timing (ESU, 2024). The institutional fragmentation in the implementation of Bologna policies and the uneven distribution of decision-making power among SROs raise critical questions about the very purpose of a homogenised supranational higher education system that purports to benefit students (Macfarlane, 2011). They also highlight ongoing tensions over where authority should lie between supranational and national governments in defining academic freedom and the rights attached to student representation (Demuro, 2021; Matei & d'Aquila, 2024).

Consequently, SROs operating within the EHEA find themselves in a variety of national and institutional contexts, which differ in terms of the degree to which they are recognised, their decision-making power, their institutional dependency and their organisational autonomy. These differences are shaped not only by national political and legal structures but also by the internal dynamics of the student representative bodies themselves (Klemenčič, 2024). For example, in some EHEA countries, SROs are formally consulted for feedback on draft HE policies before parliamentary debates. In other EHEA countries, SROs are granted voting rights in these proceedings, but never decisional power over HE policies.

Even when SROs are legally recognised, their actual capabilities remain heavily dependent on power dynamics, engagement in informal practices, such as

protest or advocacy, and access to material and financial resources (Klemenčič, 2024; Popovic, 2023). These factors shape the extent to which SROs can influence HE policy and act independently of university administrations and government institutions. Analysing these variables is therefore essential to understanding the real scope of student agency in higher education systems and assessing how materially and politically feasible student academic freedom truly is. According to Popovic (2023), legal comparative studies of the EHEA and EU on the conceptualisation of academic freedom show that students' capacity to claim representational rights often correlates with the robustness of institutional safeguards and the openness of governance structures. Drawing on the capability approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999), Mazzero (2025) further demonstrates that effective student academic freedom depends not merely on formal rights but on access to resources that enable students to act as autonomous agents in academic and political life. Taken together, these literature gaps and the uneven implementation of Bologna Process policies concerning student representation underscore that the scope of student agency and representation in HE, as mobilised through SROs, cannot be fully understood through legal recognition alone. It must also be examined through the practical capabilities that enable students to engage meaningfully and autonomously in academic and political life.

2.1.4 CAPABILITY APPROACH. ACADEMIC FREEDOM AS AN EMBEDDED AND PRACTICAL ACTIVITY

By the 2010s, scholars began calling for a refinement of the notion of academic freedom that went beyond its purely legal dimension (Macfarlane, 2011). The legal understanding remains central to defining how academic freedom is codified, interpreted, and regulated at different institutional levels (Karran, 2007; Matei & d'Acquila, 2024; Monypenny, 1963; Popovic, 2023). However, this perspective alone cannot capture the material, institutional, and political conditions under which academic freedom is actually exercised.

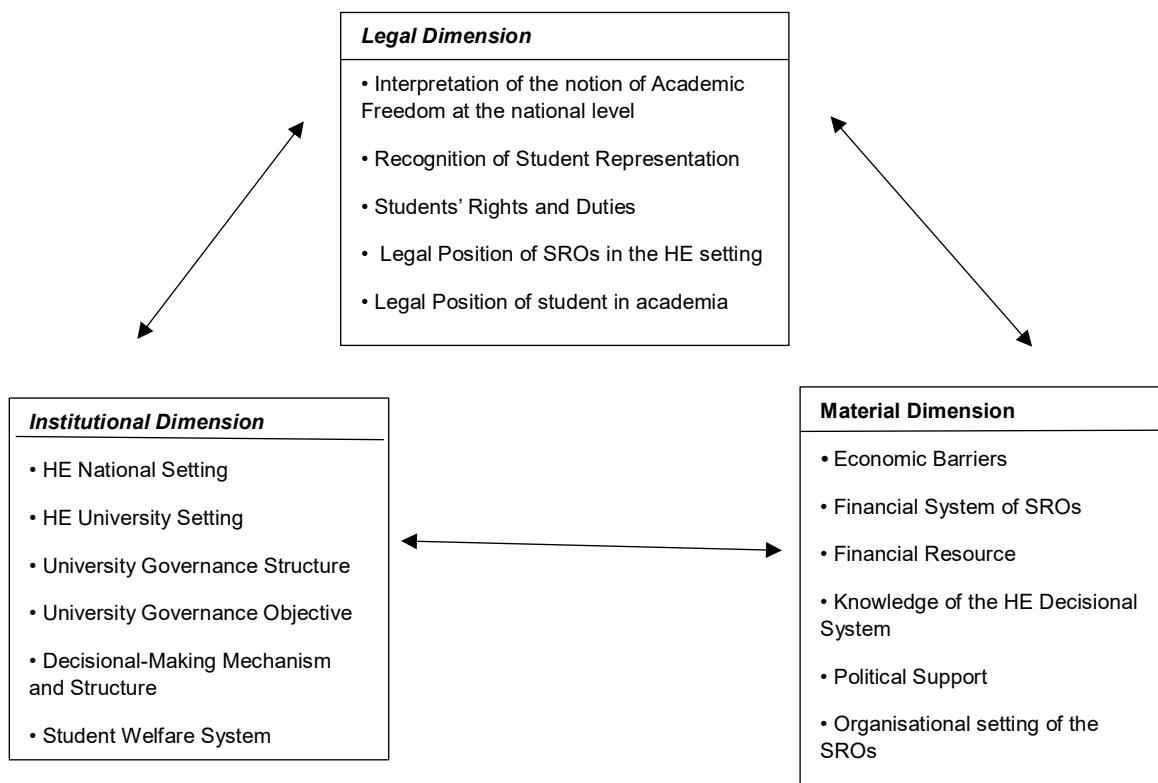
Sen (1999), one of the main forerunners of the capability approach, conceptualises freedom not merely as the absence of constraints but as the real opportunity to act and achieve valued outcomes. Applied to HE, this means that academic freedom must be understood as a societal good that enables both individual and collective intellectual development. Sen (1999) argues that several types of barriers: economic, institutional and structural, greatly limit individuals' and groups' ability to fully exercise a right, even when it is formally granted. Enjoyment of academic rights, therefore, depends not only on formal legal guarantees but also on the access, concentration, and distribution of material and financial conditions that make their exercise feasible.

Buoso (2021), Hauptman (2013), Macfarlane (2011), Sen (1999) and Violini and her colleagues (2021) have shown that the decline in public funding for higher education has forced university administrations to cut policies, exemptions and welfare provisions for students, and to implement new forms of payment in addition to tuition fees. Furthermore, the growing emphasis on performance-based assessment threatens the autonomy and sustainability of academic work, leading to a concentration of power in universities that can produce significant research results. (SMIVEZ, 2023). Macfarlane (2011) further highlights the political and ideological dimensions of HE, showing how competing interests shape public discourse and influence how academic freedom is implemented and restricted through policy and law (Vrielink et al., 2023).

Within this framework, academic freedom can be understood as both a negative and a positive right. As a negative right, it entails protection from external interference: academics and students should be free from undue control by HE institutions or political authorities, provided they respect academic and legal standards (Beaud, 2022; Kronfeldner, 2024). As a positive right, it requires proactive support from the state and institutions to ensure that such freedom can be effectively exercised. This includes adequate funding, fair employment conditions, and access to the material and institutional resources necessary for teaching, research, and participation in governance (Buoso, 2021; Sen, 1999).

From a capability perspective (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999), therefore, academic freedom is not only a legal entitlement, but an embedded and practical capability, whose realisation depends on the concrete opportunities individuals have to pursue academic goals meaningfully and autonomously within a supportive institutional environment.

Figure 1: Macfarlane and Sen's Capability Approach



As illustrated in Figure 1, the capability approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999) can be broken down into three interconnected dimensions that shape the real agentic capabilities of SROs to act as autonomous agents within HE systems: (1) The legal dimension provides insight on how student representation has been recognised and what are the conditions of students to be elected or nominated as student representative, how the elected or nominated student representative can participate in public decision-making processes and which areas have decisional power. The legal dimension determines whether student representation is formally capable of entering the public decision-making arena and influencing the political decision-making process; (2) The institutional dimension concerns the HE institutional system and national system of student

representation, the formal and organisational scope of action of SROs pursued within governance systems. It provides insight into the power relationship dynamics between SROs, HE and political authorities and the role that cover SROs in the policy-making process (Bovill & al., 2016). In capability terms, the institutional dimension affects the conversion factors that transform legal entitlements into effective participation; (3) The material dimension refers to the resources, knowledge, financial mechanisms, and civic or political support available to SROs. These resources determine the extent to which SROs can sustain independent activities and advocate for students' rights without relying on funding resources, knowledge and material support from universities, governments, or external organisations. In capability terms, the material dimension represents the enabling conditions that make academic and political participation feasible in practice.

Taken together, these three dimensions show that academic freedoms and rights, included student representation, is not just abstract or legal rights. Instead, they are embedded capabilities that depend on the interplay between formal recognition, institutional agency and material support. These factors can either foster or constrain students' real freedom to act as co-authors of HE governance. Figure 1 illustrates a model that makes it possible to assess how SROs' efforts to mobilise the student voice can be hindered by financial dependency on universities or governments, limited knowledge of institutional processes, or weak political support for student initiatives. This analytical framework provides the basis for the subsequent comparative investigation.

As Komotar (2022) emphasises, supranational political entities and institutions such as the EHEA and the EU increasingly influence and shape national HE policies of the member countries. This highlights the need to situate the legal, institutional, and material dimensions within multi-level governance, where EU law and national legal frameworks interact.

2.2 STUDENT AGENCY. SETTING THE REAL INFLUENCE OF STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE ORGANISATION

2.2.1 ASSESSING STUDENT AGENCY IN THE HE

Student agency is defined as “*the ability that students can develop from their agentic orientation in interaction with the structure of the HE, which can be constrained or extended*” (Klemenčič, 2024, p.13). It reflects students’ capability to navigate and shape their learning environments, educational trajectories, and institutional settings (Klemenčič, 2024, p.11). As illustrated in Figure 1, the effectiveness of student agency depends not only on legal recognition and protection, but also on the financial and material resources available to student organisations, including SROs, the extent of institutional control over these resources, and the decisional power that SROs hold in public decision-making processes, in line with the capability approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Klemenčič, 2024, Sen, 1999). Moreover, the capability approach sheds light on the agentic orientation of SROs, understood as the “*positive freedom and opportunities within higher education and the broader societal ecosystem for students to do and be what they have reason to value*” (Klemenčič, 2024, p.12). Therefore, the interplay between the legal and institutional positioning of SROs and their access to resources determines how effectively they can exercise agency, navigate barriers, and pursue their objectives within HE system.

Adopting this theoretical perspective positions SROs not merely as formal intermediaries between students, universities, and public authorities, but as platforms for voicing concerns, reporting violations of academic freedom, mobilising student interests, and shaping institutional decisions (Bovill et al., 2016; Klemenčič, 2024; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022). As noted in Sections 2.1.1 and 2.1.4, the capability of SROs in the EHEA to be intermediaries and platforms for students based on also the degree of their involvement in decision-making at university and national levels vary across institutional and national contexts, reflecting differing degrees of autonomy, legal recognition, and access to governance structures (Klemenčič, 2012, 2024; Popovic, 2023).

The development of students' agentic capabilities is also influenced by the internal agentic orientation of SROs (Klemenčič, 2024). This encompasses the strategies employed by SROs to encourage students to voice their opinions and the formal or informal interactions they engage in with academia and political institutions. Such interactions may entail formal partnerships with academic staff, alliances with external stakeholders, or mobilisation campaigns aimed at systemic reforms (Klemenčič, 2024; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022).

Klemenčič (2024) identifies two major student agentic objectives that SROs pursue: Student self-formation agency and Student Political Agency

Student self-formation agency is defined as: *“students acting as members of SROs to pursue individual self-formation, such as obtaining a degree. At this level, students exercise political agency to assess changes in higher education and society, which serve collective/public goods”* (Klemenčič, 2024, p.11)

Student political agency refers to: *“students’ capabilities for influencing policies and decisions in the governance of higher education institutions or national and supranational policies through direct interactions with authorities such as institutional leaders, the government, and international organisations and collective political action”* (Klemenčič, 2024, p. 10).

The objective of students' self-formation agency is to provide tools and institutional pathways that improve the quality of tertiary education and training. This form of student agency aims to enhance students' ability to obtain a degree or secure employment upon graduation (Klemenčič, 2024). By contrast, student political agency challenges power dynamics between the student community and academic and political authorities. It does this by taking a civic and political stance on broader societal issues and demanding greater student involvement in material, social and political matters (ibid.). This master's research thesis will focus on student political agency (Klemenčič, 2024), as this concept aligns with the core of RQ3: identifying the factors that could lead to the convergence or divergence of SROs' agency in national politics.

Student political agency aims to improve the economic and material conditions for students, as well as giving them a voice in public decision-making discussions (Klemenčič, 2024). Regardless of the agentic orientation adopted by SROs, they are positioned as political agents demanding change in HE and wider society (ibid.) Depending on the political and ideological position adopted by HE and political authorities and SROs, SROs mobilise their agency to transform situational obstacles into opportunities that benefit themselves and the student community. SROs achieve this by engaging with university governance, the national government, other youth organisations and HE stakeholders. The agentic orientation of SROs shapes their objectives, the strategies they adopt to achieve them, and their strategic engagements with HE authorities (Klemenčič, 2024). Understanding the conditions under which such engagement translates into tangible outcomes requires a further framework. The Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024), discussed in the next section, provides the tools to evaluate when and how student agency translates into institutional and policy influence.

2.2 STUDENT IMPACT THEORY

Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024) provides an analytical framework for understanding how student agency, particularly political agency, is translated into tangible influence over HE governance and policymaking. According to Klemenčič (2024), students act as political agents by initiating, negotiating, and shaping institutional change through their involvement and participation in student representation. Through SROs, students can hold HE institutions and political authorities accountable for failing to protect students' rights or to address structural barriers to welfare, academic progression, and equitable access to tertiary education.

This theory challenges the traditional, one-directional view of HE governance and policy-making process, which portrays institutions as the sole shapers of student outcomes and limits analysis to individual self-formation (Klemenčič, 2024). Instead, it emphasises that students can actively shape HE policy and decision-making processes to reflect their interests. At the same time, SROs must remain

accountable both to the student body and to institutional structures, while critically engaging with the power dynamics that link universities and political authorities.

Klemenčič (2024) grounds this theoretical framework in four key propositions:

1) HE institutions do not only have effects on students but students directly and purposefully co-shape social structure, social life and institutional decisions of the HE institutions. The “high student impact roles”, roles with high potential for students to have direct effects on the HE institutions, exist student representation, voluntary service and leadership roles in student groups, on-campus jobs and through student activism

2) Students influence social structures and institutional change also indirectly: through the expression of individual and collective (consumer) preferences and through patterns of individual and collective (consumer) behaviour

3) Student impact occurs along a continuum: different roles afford different (potential) degrees of impact, and the same student role affords different (potential) degrees of impact at different times

4) Degree of student impact depends on student agency- agentic opportunities and agentic orientation

(Klemenčič, 2024, p.14)

While SROs are among the highest-impact roles available in the HE, their effectiveness depends on internal governance, national legal frameworks, access to financial resources, and the formal or informal nature of their interactions with academic and political actors (ESU, 2024).

The first proposition of the Student Impact Theory emphasises the significance of the organisational model of the SROs. This will be discussed in depth in Section 2.3.3. The impact of the SROs' agentic orientation and political agency depends on the interconnection of these aforementioned dimensions. This determines whether the SROs can operate autonomously, represent students legitimately, and effectively mobilise collective claims.

The second proposition elaborates on the idea that students can influence politics beyond formal governance roles. Students can exert influence by organising and participating in cultural and civic activities, such as organising debates and joining youth networks. These activities create a sense of community among enrolled students and encourage engagement not only with HE affairs, but also with broader social and political issues that affect the academic community directly or indirectly. This dimension acknowledges the consumerist turn that higher education has taken, which may also extend to SROs.

The third proposition introduces a temporal dimension. Depending on external pressures from social and political change or internal strategic choices, SROs may have greater or lesser agency, leading to the divergence of their members into several opposing groups. In this context, the integration of the capability approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999) is particularly relevant, as it captures the impact of contextual and structural changes on students' agentic orientation in HE. This encompasses the values associated with academic freedom and the objectives to be pursued, as well as the internal fragmentation within SROs that leads to the emergence of other SROs, and the level of material independence of SROs (Klemenčič, 2024)

The final proposition underscores a key tension: do the orientations of SROs align with the priorities of students, HE institutions, and political authorities? This raises questions about both the coherence of SROs' agency and their legitimacy as representatives of the wider student community. This last proposition challenges the assumption of Student Representation as a student activity that automatically reinforces student academic freedom and student voice in the HE, and challenges the power relationship with HE and political authorities. Connecting with the second proposition, it questions when and how SROs' political and ideological positions hinder student voice in the HE, and how the increasingly institutional incorporation of SROs in HE governance leads to institutional inertia on behalf of SROs.

Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024) also sheds light on the internal dynamics of SROs. Not all roles carry the same weight; senior officers and those

with specific mandates may directly influence national debates, whereas others are confined to internal governance. Understanding these variations is essential to grasping how student politics extend beyond campus to influence national educational policy, welfare advocacy and democratic participation.

Despite its significant analytical value, Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024) remains limited in one respect: it is relatively static. It does not fully account for how student agency may be eroded over time through institutional inertia, political co-optation, or financial restrictions, even without explicit legal change. For this reason, it must be complemented by the capability approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen 1999). As discussed in Section 2.1.4, this framework highlights the gap between formal rights and real opportunities and reveals how structural and material conditions either foster or hinder student empowerment.

In summary, combining Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024) with the capability approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999) enables a more detailed analysis of SROs. Together, these theories enable us to examine the structures within which SROs operate, as well as how these organisations evolve, particularly in response to political shocks or institutional change. This integrated framework provides the foundation for the comparative analysis presented in subsequent chapters, offering a longitudinal perspective through which to evaluate the adaptation, resistance or transformation of SROs in France, Italy, Norway and Slovakia in response to changes that undermine students' rights and freedoms. It is also significant to assess how the notion of student representation has been analysed, questioned and studied, as it is a popular topic in academic and policy literature for developing strategies to strengthen student representation in higher education, especially given the growing tension between supranational and national authorities (Komotar, 2022; Matei & d'Aquila, 2024)

2.3 ASSESSING THE NOTION OF STUDENT REPRESENTATION

2.3.1 STUDENT REPRESENTATION EQUAL TO STUDENT ACTIVISM?

Student Representation is defined as *“the totality of activities carried out by student representatives formally elected or appointed on behalf of the student union. This includes not only committee work, lobbying, and counselling but also campaigning, protest measures, and internal organisational work to the same extent”* (Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020, p. 303). Within HE governance, Student Representation refers to the structured and institutionalised participation of students in decision-making processes at university, national, and supranational levels. It operates through elected bodies that represent the collective interests of students within formal arenas such as university senates, quality assurance boards, and national student councils.

Student Representative Organisations (SROs) are *“autonomous student-run associations with democratic governing structures and procedures to elect their representatives. These organisations exist to represent the collective interests of all students within higher education and typically combine service provision, advocacy for student rights, and the appointment of representatives to governing boards”* (Klemenčič, 2024, p. 4). By applying this definition, SROs include national student unions, local student governments, and other bodies legally recognised by universities or national legal frameworks. This definition excludes informal collectives or activist groups that engage in advocacy, lobbying, or protest around politically sensitive issues but lack formal mandates or accountability mechanisms to represent students' interests in the HE governance

These definitions are discussed both in academic literature, which analyses how Student Representation has been regulated and assessed within HE systems (Klemenčič, 2012, 2024; Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020), and in policy EHEA frameworks, specifically the London Communiqué (2007), the Bucharest Communiqué (2012), and the Tirana Communiqué (2024), which frame student representation as a fundamental right of the EHEA and as a principle of participatory governance and quality assurance (see Section 2.1.1). At the student-body level, SROs themselves frequently emphasise the tension between

institutional collaboration with HE and political authorities and grassroots mobilisation, which pursues challenges to the status quo dynamic, tensions caused also by the divergence of political and ideological position (Bovill et al., 2016; Ince & al., 2018; Linder et al., 2019).

From this perspective, student representation can be conceptualised as a specific, institutionalised form of activism: operating within formal frameworks, it remains politically motivated to advance student interests. Its relationships with university administrations and state authorities shape it, combining formal activities such as committee participation and lobbying with informal practices such as protesting and campaigning (Cinci, 2017; Cole & Heinecke, 2020; Linder et al., 2019). In addition, Klemenčič's (2024) definition of a Student Representative Organisation (SRO) implies that SROs operate within a HE system that recognises and enhances their presence. However, it also implies that SROs must adopt democratic procedures and values within their own organisation. This creates the first barrier to the exclusion of SROs.

This dual nature makes student representation a multidimensional concept. On one hand, it functions as a democratic mechanism enabling students to influence HE governance and assert themselves as legitimate interlocutors (Bovill et al., 2016; Klemenčič, 2024; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022). On the other hand, as Klemenčič (2024) notes, its increasing formalisation risks transforming SROs into administrative extensions of university governance, tasked with implementing institutional priorities rather than critically challenging them. Thus, representation and activism should not be viewed as contradictory but as interdependent processes: activism revitalises representation through critical engagement, while representation institutionalises activism, ensuring its continuity within decision-making structures.

Figure 2: Lizzio and Wilson's Lens of Interpretation of Student Representation in the HE

Functional Perspective	Developmental Perspective	Societal Perspective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do university governance will benefit by involving SROs in the HE governance • How SROs' involvement will improve the efficiency of HE governance • What could be SROs benefits from being involved in the HE affairs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do SRO's involvement in the HE governance will be improved student policies • What are the main institutional and material barriers • Will SROs' involvement actually improve students academic, institutional and material situation in the HE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How Student Representation will enhance active citizenship? • How Student Representation involvement in the public decision making process enhance student academic freedom • How do SROs can enhance student agentic possibilities within and outside academia

Figure 2 outlines the three theoretical perspectives through which Lizzio and Wilson (2009) interpret student representation: functional, developmental and social. The functional perspective asks how the presence of SROs in HE institutions can improve them as providers of tertiary education. The developmental perspective poses questions on how the presence of SROs could be better incorporated into HE policies to enhance students' capabilities and encourage them to pursue tertiary education. The societal perspective raises questions about how SROs can provide a platform to encourage students to engage with the policymaking process, both within and outside academia.

Each lens frames SR respectively as a tool for institutional policy implementation, a means for student development, or a platform for exerting influence within the HE system. These lenses align with the capability approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999) and the Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024) (see Sections 2.1.4 and 2.2). Together, they raise crucial questions: to what extent is Student Representation could be evaluate as a student-led activity that enhances student academic freedom and agentic orientation and under what conditions can it still be considered a form of student activism (Cole & Heinecke, 2020; Ince et al., 2018; Linder et al., 2019)?

Within this framework, the concept of student voice becomes central. It implies “counting students among those who have the knowledge and position to shape what counts as education, to reconfigure power dynamics and discourse practices within existing realms of conversation about education, and to create new forums” (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 3, cited in Matthews & Dollinger, 2022, p. 556). Student representatives act as intermediaries between the student community and governance institutions, communicating student experiences and highlighting barriers to academic participation. Yet, as Gasteiger and Wulz (2020) and Klemenčič (2024) observe, student representation, though formally recognised, remains largely a voluntary activity, rarely embedded in academic curricula or rewarded institutionally.

In recent years, the notion of Student Representation has come under renewed scrutiny. Echoing Macfarlane’s (2011) critique of the Bologna Process, the progressive formalisation of student participation at the national and supranational level reflect an effort to institutionalise SROs’ political agency in the EHEA decision-making process¹⁴. However, this trend also risks rendering SROs politically and institutionally compliant with national or supranational authorities. This outcome contrasts with the emancipatory intent of the student voice concept (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022), which seeks to challenge power asymmetries between students, universities, and political institutions.

Table 1: Strengths and positive outcomes of SR in HE according to Klemenčič

Enhancement of Student Democratic Rights	<i>Student Representation can ensure the safeguards of students’ rights in HE and the incorporation of students’ perspectives and experiences in HE policies</i>
Effectiveness of Decision Making and Service Delivery	<i>Student representation is a useful instrument for properly addressing and tailoring students’ perspectives on accessing and delivering welfare services.</i>

¹⁴ This is mentioned in the third point of the 'Fundamental values' section, which explicitly states the core civic and political values on which the EHEA is based (<https://ehea.info/Download/Tirana-Communique.pdf>)

Form of Citizenship and Civic Education	<i>Student Representation contributes of the development of skills related to the active citizenship and civic involvement. Their presence reinforces the concept of HE institutions as site of citizenship</i>
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Table 2: Weaknesses and shortcomings of SR in HE according to Klemenčič

Deterrent of Student Oppositional Forces and Unrest	<i>This is mainly present in authoritarian regimes that implement democratic structures of student governance to maintain a façade of democratic pluralism. In these regimes, the authorised student body represents an instrument of state control and an extension of its political ideology.</i>
Lack of Expertise, Self- Interest and Short-Time	<i>Student representation implies knowledge of institutional and governance structures within the higher education (HE) setting, as well as a long-term perspective. However, there may be student representatives or student representative organisations (SROs) that aim to exert influence in HE with little or no expertise and pursue short-term goals.</i>
Threat to Consensual Decision-Making	<i>Students often hold adversarial positions that disrupt or stall the consensual mode of institutional decision-making. The more formal powers student representatives have, the more disruptive to decision processes they can be</i>
Lack of Legitimacy	<i>Student governments often lack significant external support from students, which undermines their legitimacy within the student body. Poor governance practices, financial mismanagement and a lack of autonomy can therefore hinder both the student body and the government. The latter may be 'domesticated' by institutional leaders, political parties or the state.</i>

Tables 1 and 2, summarising Klemenčič's (2024) arguments in favour and in opposition of the presence of Student Representation in HE. Tables 1 and 2 highlight that Student Representation is not inherently a democratic practice, but rather a relational and context-dependent practice shaped by structural

conditions and power dynamics. The transformative potential of student agentic orientation (Klemenčič, 2024) depends on how effectively SROs convert their formal mandates into genuine influence over decision-making and policy outcomes, a process mediated by legal frameworks, institutional cultures, and access to resources.

In this respect, Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024; see Section 2.2) offers an analytical bridge for evaluating how internal governance structures and external constraints affect SROs' capacity to act as meaningful political agents on behalf of the student community to incorporate student voice (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022) in the public decision-making process. While student representation can function as a legitimate form of activism that enhances democratic rights and civic participation, it can also foster institutional dependency and diminish oppositional power when excessively formalised or co-opted by political and academic authorities.

Ultimately, Student Representation and Student Activism should be seen as mutually constitutive processes: Student Representation institutionalises Student Activism within governance, while Student Activism revitalises Student Representation through critique and political mobilisation. However, the extent to which these processes converge greatly depends on whether SROs emerge as defenders of student academic freedom or as instruments of institutional compliance. This depends on their level of institutional and financial independence, as well as their ability to resist political or administrative capture. (Nordal, 2016).

2.3.2 STUDENT REPRESENTATION CORRESPOND TO STUDENT PARTNERSHIP?

The concepts of Student Representation and Student Partnership are often conflated in academic and policy literature, but they are not synonymous (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022). Nonetheless, the two may overlap or converge, as suggested by Gasteiger and Wulz's (2020) definitions of student activism, which

includes all the activities carried out by elected student representatives within institutional and informal academic settings. These activities may also involve creating formal and informal networks of collaboration with political actors, NGOs, and other SROs to strengthen their political agency and influence both within and beyond academia (Cinci, 2017; Matthews & Dollier, 2020; Vespa et al., 2024).

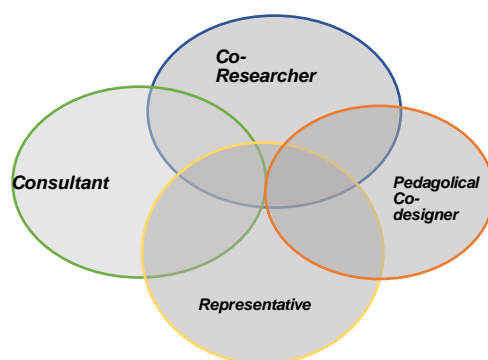
Student Partnership has been defined as “*a process of engagement, where students, academics, academic staff, senior managers, and student representatives work together on educational efforts that unfold both in and out of the classroom*” (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014, cited by Matthews & Dollinger, 2020, p. 557). This definition positions Student Partnership as an activity potentially embedded in the collective action strategies of Student Representation, particularly when SROs pursue collaborative relationships with academic staff and representatives of university governance institutions (Cinci, 2017). An example of a student partnership is provided by Cinci's (2017) research on student activism in Italian university settings. His research noted that the coalition-building between some student representatives of the Student Council and some professors who are members of the Academic Senate, to influence the HE governance policy agenda, represents a significant strategy that SROs recur to incorporate students' community perspective in HE policies.

Student Partnership is not limited to cooperation with academic staff. As Cinci (2017) and Vespa and his colleagues (2024) point out, SROs increasingly pursue alliances with external actors, youth organisations, trade unions, and civil society movements, to enhance their advocacy and civic influence both within and beyond academia. Forming such partnerships is therefore a key strategy for SROs at local, national, and supranational levels, particularly for reinforcing their influence in shaping HE policies that are more student-oriented or responsive to student concerns (Cinci, 2017; Ince et al., 2018; Piazza, 2018; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). Establishing partnerships also enables SROs to overcome organisational and legal constraints, pursue long-term objectives, and extend their influence in decision-making processes. In addition, partnerships facilitate formal activities such as lobbying and advocacy beyond academia, while also helping SROs disseminate their work among students and political actors (Klemenčič 2024). As

Cinci (2017) and Matthews and Dollinger (2022) mentioned, student partnerships require students to represent also professors' and academic staff's requests regarding the renunciation of student concerns that do not align with the agentic orientation objectives of professors, and to mobilise politically sensitive and controversial issues in HE governance to gain support from them. This is connected to Table 2 on the weaknesses of student representation in HE. When SROs are politically domesticated or affiliated with political parties, the risk is that partnerships will consolidate the influence of those parties over SROs. The goals may then reflect the interests of the party and its affiliated youth movements rather than those of the broader student community. Furthermore, the short mandates and limited training of certain student representatives may hinder their ability to navigate intricate university, student dynamics, potentially prioritising institutional or political interests over student needs (Klemenčič, 2024).

There are two main reasons why student representation and student partnership often overlap. First, partnerships can be seen as outcomes that SROs pursue in order to achieve long-term objectives. Second, partnerships function as strategies for incorporating students' perspectives into HE policies (Bovill et al., 2016; Cinci, 2017; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). This dual role highlights their significance within SROs' political and organisational agendas.

Figure 3: Bovill and colleagues' scheme in Student roles in co-creation of learning and teaching



As illustrated by Figure 3, Bovill et al. (2016) identify multiple roles through which students can engage in HE. Although student representation has its own distinct

dimensions, elected representatives often fulfil overlapping roles depending on institutional settings, traditions of student activism, and the broader role of students in HE. This overlap demonstrates that student representatives can fulfil multiple roles, providing insight into students' perspectives on the academic experience. They can also tailor policies and welfare systems to students' needs and participate in co-creating educational objectives for HE institutions. Within this framework, student partnerships emerge as meaningful strategies through which SRO members recur to navigate HE structures, norms, and practices. By incorporating multiple roles, they can implement inclusive approaches in governance settings and contribute to the co-creation of learning and teaching policies (Bovill et al., 2016, pp. 197–198).

Despite some strategic overlap, Matthews and Dollinger (2022) demonstrate that Student Representation and Student Partnership remain distinct. These two concepts differ in terms of their core objectives and the primary responsibilities they uphold towards students and the academic community. Student Representation is primarily responsible for safeguarding and articulating students' rights and interests, both as entitlements and as lived experiences. Student Representatives act as quality assurance agents, collecting and analysing data to ensure adequate and supportive educational pathways (Matthews & Dollinger, 2020, p. 560). By contrast, the Student Partnership involves contributing to knowledge creation, teaching, learning and the enhancement of student life alongside academic staff and the wider student community (ibid., p. 559).

Although conceptually distinct, these roles often overlap in practice. Institutional and structural constraints limit the formal responsibilities of student representatives, who typically occupy consultative positions in governance. Consequently, partnership has emerged as a transformative practice, repositioning students as active co-creators of their educational experiences. This shift challenges hierarchical structures, enabling students to contribute to curricula development, pedagogical innovation, and policy design (Bovill & al., 2016).

Analytically, distinguishing between Student Representation and Student Partnership is crucial for understanding the extent and limits of student agency within HE governance. Through the lens of the capability approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999), these concepts reveal how SROs strategically engage in coalition-building, advocacy, and partnership to expand their real freedoms, their ability to act, influence, and co-create institutional and educational environments (Klemenčič, 2024). Evaluating both student representation and student partnership, therefore, allows us to assess the capacity of SROs to exercise and mobilise students' academic freedom and democratic student participation in HE affairs (Klemenčič, 2024; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022; Nordal, 2016).

2.3.3 ORGANISATIONAL SETTING MODELS OF STUDENT REPRESENTATION

Empirical and theoretical research on student representation has primarily focused on identifying factors that enhance or hinder student representatives' participation in the co-creation of HE policies, as well as on student involvement in this specific form of activism. This literature examines institutional enablers of student participation in decision-making, relational and psychological factors that foster or constrain student agency, strategies students use to navigate institutional norms and barriers, and the overall effectiveness of student participation in policymaking (Bovill et al., 2016; Klemenčič, 2024; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022; Meeuwissen et al., 2018; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Piazza, 2018; Shahabul et al., 2022).

By contrast, less attention has been devoted to the organisational structure and internal dynamics of SROs, and how these interact with HE governance and administrations. Klemenčič (2024) defines HE governance as the ensemble of institutions and mechanisms through which higher education functions and is governed, encompassing both formal structures and informal practices that shape decision-making processes. This perspective highlights the complexity of Student Representation within HE systems.

Existing research on the organisational models of student representative bodies primarily focuses on single-case studies within specific national or institutional contexts (Cinci, 2017; Genelot, 2024; Mazzero, 2025; Meeuwissen et al., 2019; Nordal, 2016; Vespa et al., 2024; Shahabul et al., 2021). As a result, there is a notable absence of the adoption of comparative research design that examines how different organisational configurations shape the dual role of SROs: internally, as political agents that safeguard student interests and fostering student participation in the HE, and externally, as institutional intermediaries actors that navigate institutional, material, and political constraints to influence HE governance and policy (Klemenčič, 2024; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022; Mazzero, 2025; Shahabul & al., 2021).

Addressing these gaps requires a comparative research design capable of assessing how the interaction between the institutional system of Student Representation and the organisational structures of SROs, framed by the Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024), affects their capacity to exercise agency. Such an approach can shed light on how SROs develop strategies to overcome barriers, respond to targeted attacks, uphold institutional agreements and engage effectively in policy processes. This enhances their internal effectiveness and external impact on HE.

Reprising the definition of SROs introduced in section 2.3.1, Klemenčič (2012; 2024) distinguishes four ideal-typical models of student representation, each characterised by different levels of autonomy, legitimacy, and political agency. These models will serve as the basis for the comparative analysis in this thesis.

Table 3: Klemecic's table on the Student Organisational Model

National System of Student Representation				
	Corporativist	Neo-corporativist	Pluralist	Static/Clandestine
Number of Student Representative at the national level	One compulsory, non-competitive national student organisation with deliberative representational monopoly	One of few privileged intermediary student representative organisations involved in the public decision-making process which are autonomous from the State	The State does not guarantee official recognition to one specific student representative organisation. But there might several (national-based, institutionalised based and politically affiliated) that reclaim such representation	The State either does not recognise or prohibit student representation. If they are student representative organisation they operate in hiding

State formally or informally grants or monopoly of student interest	The Student Representative Organisation received state-controlled funding.	The Student Representative Organisation receives state funding under secure	The Student Representative Organisation do not receive fundings from the State but from administrative and funding agreements at the university level where they tend to compete for access of fundings	The Student Representation Organisation do not receive any funding as Student representation is not recognised or banned
Membership is a national level organisation	It is automatically or compulsory for all the students	It is automatically or compulsory for all the students	Voluntary	Voluntary and Clandestine

Table 3 illustrates Klemenčič's (2024) model of the organisational setting of SROs, which can be categorised across the globe based on three macro factors: The number of SROs that are eligible and entitled to represent student interests and concerns at the national level; The existence and type of formal and informal administrative and funding arrangements that determine the conditions under which SROs can be funded and have access to policymaking; The conditions of membership of Student Representation Organisations. Table 3 shows that Klemenčič (2024) identified four general models of national Student Representation systems: Corporatist, neo-corporatist, pluralist and statist/ clandestine. As the latter tends to recur in authoritarian and totalitarian political regimes, the thesis will focus on the other three types of national student representation systems.

The corporatist model implies state recognition of only one SRO, implemented by the national government or the national legal framework, which has notified its mandatory presence in policy-making discussions. It has limited decision-making powers over HE policies. The SRO holds an exclusive monopoly over the design and management of student welfare systems and educational policies within HE settings. In this model, membership is either automatic or compulsory. Well-established and agreed funding agreements and mechanisms have been put in place. It is important to note that there may be other student-led or student-owned

organisations with which they share decision-making power, but which are not student representative organisations.

The neo-corporatist model involves one or a few privileged student intermediary associations that play a role in public decision-making concerning students. These associations are often recognised by law as representatives of the student community. The exclusivity of specific student bodies to engage in institutional relationships and participate in public policies can only be determined by law, informal agreement, or long-standing tradition. Membership is mainly automatic or compulsory. They have the exclusivity of nominating their representative to the permanent consultative structure and are invited to participate in ad hoc working practices.

The pluralist model, rather than granting recognition to one specific student representative organisation, the state recognises the presence and influence of multiple such organisations within the HE system. Existing SROs tend to compete for access to policymaking and financial resources provided by the state or university administration. In this model, the number of student representation units that can have a seat in the national student government or national academic council is quite specific because it depends greatly on their size. They perform different tasks, which are decided independently of the presence of others. They compete with other associations for seats, and no student representative association exercises hierarchical power over the others. According to Klemenčič (2012), this model establishes the student representative organisation as a voluntary NGO. Membership is therefore both voluntary and affordable. The organisation's work is often oriented based on the claims advanced by its student members and their adopted political position (Klemenčič, 2012).

The clandestine/statistic model involves either SROs that are recognised and controlled by the national government to promote the appearance of the democratisation of HE governance by recognising politically affiliated SROs or by controlling student body governance. Alternatively, it refers to a series of clandestine student associations that have SRO organisational structures and

aim to implement democratic mechanisms in HE governance. These associations denounce the national government and student conditions in clandestinity within their country or abroad (Mazzero, 2025). In the Statistical/Clandestine Model, SROs are formally established as voluntary NGOs that require student support to continue their activities (Klemenčič, 2024).

Table 3 illustrates how the organisational structure of student representation at a national level affects SROs' access to and navigation of HE and public decision-making systems. It shows the formal and informal access that SROs have to university and quality assurance governance institutions, and how they can influence public decision-making.

Incorporating the organisational dimension of the SROs into the analysis of student academic freedom (Nordal, 2016) is significant, as it provides insight into how SROs are formally allowed and substantially able to exercise their influence within HE, and to implement the students' perspective in HE policies through legally defined and relational channels. Furthermore, it allows us to conduct a critical analysis of SROs, given that they are responsible for carrying out the specific duties assigned to their institutional role and representing the wider student community.

It is therefore necessary to situate SROs within the broader national HE system as well as the university setting (Cinci, 2017; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022; Meeuwissen et al., 2019). Their capability to act and mobilise in the HE system is shaped not only by legal and organisational arrangements, but also by the performance of national HE systems, particularly in terms of access to student welfare, financial support, and services guaranteed by law, state provision, or student contributions. These institutional and material conditions directly affect students' ability to participate in higher education and to exercise their rights effectively.

2.3.4. ASSESSING THE INSTITUTIONAL HE AND STUDENT REPRESENTATION SYSTEM OF THE CASE STUDIES SELECTED

As outlined in Section 1.1, this Master's thesis conducts a qualitative comparative analysis of SROs in four selected countries: France, Italy, Norway, and Slovakia. Incorporating the theoretical reflections from Sections 2.1.4, 2.2.2, and 2.3.3 is essential to assess student representation as an embedded and practical activity situated within both a specific HE system and a national system of student representation. The latter defines how student representation is legally recognised and delineates the institutional and relational channels through which student voices are articulated within HE governance. Therefore, the analysis considers not only the national systems of student representation but also the broader national HE frameworks in which they operate (Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2014; Klemenčič, 2024; Lumino et al., 2017). Examining the intersection between these two systems enables exploration of how HE and political authorities define responsibilities related to academic freedom, how SROs gain access to policymaking processes, and how decision-making power is distributed between institutional actors and SROs. Finally, the analysis will evaluate whether the power relationships between SROs and authorities are symmetrical, asymmetrical, limited, or obstructed by structural factors.

Figure 4: Intersection of Higher Education Governance (Centralised–Decentralised) and National Student Representation Models (Corporatist–Pluralist)

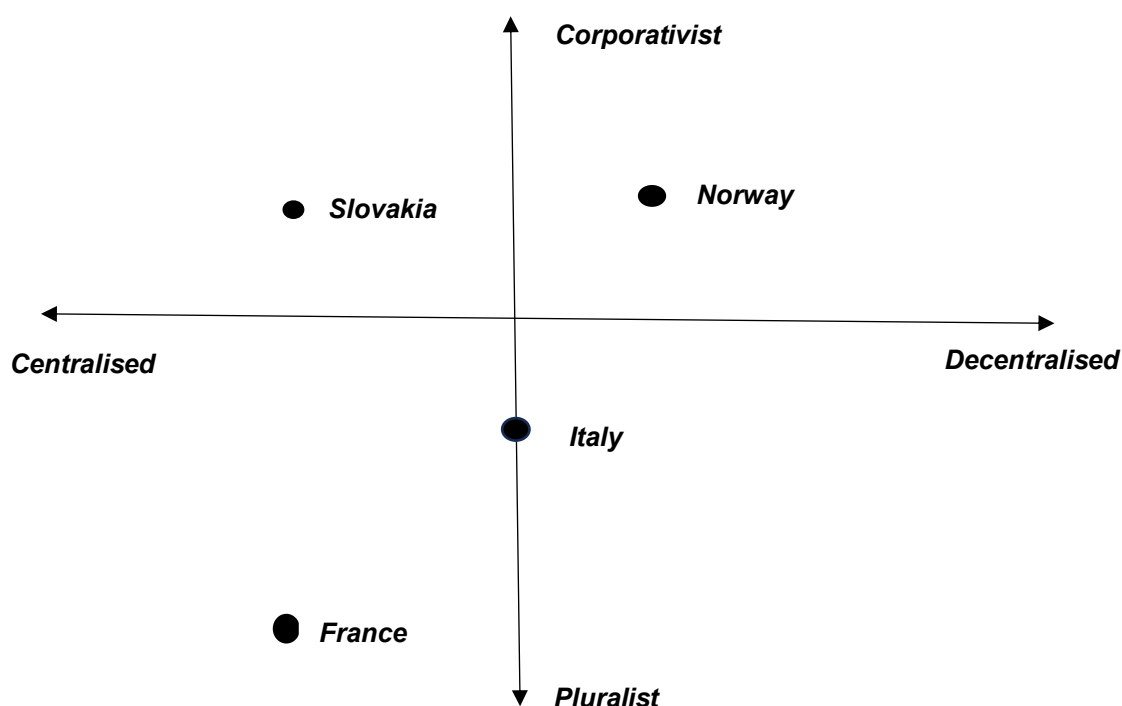


Figure 4 illustrates the intersection between the national HE system, which has been divided into centralised and decentralised systems (Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2014), and the national student representation system, which has been divided into pluralist and corporatist systems (Klemenčič, 2012; 2024). This intersection of axes illustrates how the SROs of the four countries selected for this comparative research navigate specific institutional and legal settings of HE, which also define the rights and duties of students. It also provides insight into how national systems of student organisation influence access to public debate and how they can mobilise the interests and concerns of university students in HE policies.

In France and Italy, a pluralistic system of student representation has been adopted, where multiple SROs exist at different levels within HE. Each SRO has adopted a specific political position or is politically affiliated, and they compete to gain the necessary funding and resources to sustain their activities within HE. They also compete for access to university governance and the national public decision-making system through direct elections within the student population. In this system, there are student governments at national level or a specific number of seats in consultative academic governance bodies to represent students' perspectives in HE policies (Klemenčič; 2012; 2024). However, France has a centralised HE system, in which the national government is responsible for defining curricula and annual budgets, as well as providing all forms of student services, from housing to scholarships, via the national student welfare system (Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2013). Italy has adopted a hybrid system combining centralised and decentralised elements. Some duties, such as planning curricula, budgeting, and scholarship criteria, are managed by the national government, while others, such as the provision of health assistance, housing, and financial reductions, are managed by regional and university authorities (CNSU, 2018, 2022; Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2023; Lumillo et al., 2017).

Norway has adopted a corporative national student representative system in which only one nominated national SRO is legally entitled to represent the student community and participate in decision-making processes at the national level. This system is funded by the state and student participation in student

representation at the university and national level is implied once students are enrolled. Lastly, the nominated SRO and recognised student government bodies hold a monopoly on student welfare, covering everything from social life to housing (Klemenčič, 2012; 2024). This State has adopted a decentralised system where the university has a significant autonomy in defining academic curricula, assessing the budget, defining the relationship with the elected student representative and student body (Bleiklie, 2023; Fetvei, 1992)

Slovakia has adopted a neo-corporatist national student representative system in which one or a few SROs have been formally or informally recognised to represent the student community. These SROs have regular contact with the national government and secure regular funding provided by the state, which does not interfere in their budgeting or activities. Like Norway. Student participation in student representation is implied once students are enrolled at the university (Klemenčič, 2024). This state has adopted a centralised system, but, unlike France, some duties such as academic curricula and budgeting are under the responsibility of the university management.

Figure 4 illustrates how the intersection between national HE system setting and nation system of student representation provides some insights into what could be the legal and institutional obstacles that SROs face and where they lie. This intersection also illustrates what are the major actors that either empower or hinder student representation and student activism.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

As discussed in Section 1.3, this Master's thesis aims to address three main interrelated research questions, which aim to identify recurrent cross-national and context-based limitations and violations of student academic freedom in the four countries selected (RQ1); what is the repertoire of collective actions that SROs employ to address financial and material barriers and constrains that student community face and exercise influence and pressure to political authorities to

strengthen student academic freedom (RQ2); lastly, how does SROs' political agency (Klemenčič, 2024) converge or diverge across the four national countries selected and which factors explain such patterns (RQ3).

Building on these three interrelated research questions, this thesis seeks to advance existing scholarship on Student Representation and Student Academic Freedom (Nordal, 2016) through the analytical lens of the capability approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999). This framework conceptualises Student Representation as a situated practice embedded within specific HE systems and national structures that determine access to governance and the distribution of resources. It highlights how institutional, legal, and material arrangements shape the capacity of students and SROs to act as autonomous agents within HE governance. In addition, applying Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024) enables the analysis to identify the agentic orientations of SROs in the selected countries, examine how these orientations are expressed and constrained, and assess whether they converge or diverge within national political contexts.

Accordingly, this Master research investigates how the interplay of legal, institutional, and material dimensions enables or constrains SROs' political agency in reinforcing student academic freedom. It examines whether students are entitled to specific academic freedoms distinct from faculty members (Klemenčič, 2024; Mazzero, 2025; Nordal, 2016), and how SROs, which are the sole student organisation that requires the presence of a democratic process of selection of their representation and implementation of democratic values within and outside of organizational setting of SRO to promote for student academic freedom (Klemenčič, 2024), advocate and enhance student academic freedom in practice

This Master's Thesis also contributes to the ongoing debate on the multi-level governance of HE, focusing on the tension between supranational, national, and local authorities in defining HE policy priorities (Komotar, 2022; Matei & D'Aquila, 2024). In this regard, it draws on the findings collected in ESU 2024 report "*Bologna Process with Student Eyes*" to explore further and in-depth the uneven implementation of Bologna commitments, especially those concerning Student

Representation and Student Involvement in HE governance and policy-making processes.

Finally, this research builds upon Klemenčič's (2024) discussion on how to critically assess Student Representation, SROs, and their presence in the HE system. It does so by including the arguments in favour and in opposition, identified by the author (see Tables 1 and 2 in Section 2.3.3), and by identifying the factors that can hinder SROs' political agency (Klemenčič, 2024) in the existing institutional, HE and national student representation systems. It also considers the institutional power relationship dynamics and organisational setting of SROs.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

3.2.1 COMPARATIVE APPROACH IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION FIELD

In Higher Education research, the qualitative comparative approach aims to identify similarities and differences in values, processes, and practices across institutional and organisational contexts (Antonucci, 2013; Brian & Yang, 2014; Fairbrother, 2014; Klemenčič, 2012, 2024). This approach places particular emphasis on the influence of institutional and organisational settings in HE, which is relevant to the research objectives outlined in Section 3.1. These objectives focus on examining how national legal frameworks affect HE systems, national models of student representation, and the organisational settings of SROs, as well as how SROs can effectively mobilise student academic freedom (Klemenčič, 2012, 2024; Macfarlane, 2011; Mazzero, 2025; Sen, 1999). This perspective assumes that HE cannot be separated from the cultural and political systems in which it is embedded.

A comparative approach requires the identification of both units of observation and units of explanation (Bray & Jiang, 2014). Units of observation are those that make it possible to examine how actors operate and navigate within a specific HE setting, focusing on particular dimensions or variables that characterise this system or contribute to a specific outcome. Units of explanation, by contrast, are

contextual variables that account for similarities or divergences in trajectories and outcomes, depending on the structure of the system (Bray & Jiang, 2014). In this thesis, these concepts guide the analysis of how SROs navigate their institutional environments and how national systems influence their capacity to promote student academic freedom and participate in decision-making processes.

Over the past two decades, the qualitative comparative approach has been widely employed to analyse the implementation and standardisation of the EHEA and its effects (Antonucci, 2013; Komotar, 2022; Kosmützky et al., 2020). In the sociology of higher education, it has become a key methodology for comparing institutional settings and the policy effects of initiatives such as the Bologna Process, thereby identifying broader patterns in the evolution of higher education systems (Antonucci, 2019; Komotar, 2022; Kosmützky et al., 2020). With the growing internationalisation of HE, comparative research has increasingly turned to analysing the interplay between supranational and national forces, particularly how the European Union and domestic political actors shape governance models, institutional autonomy, and educational objectives (Komotar, 2022). This shift has highlighted the role of supranational influence in processes of homogenisation and neoliberalisation in HE systems worldwide (Hauptman, 2013; Komotar, 2022; Violini et al., 2021).

Following this evolution, the comparative approach is especially suitable for setting out a cross-national comparison of the legal, institutional, organisational, and material dimensions in which SROs are embedded. Klemenčič (2024) underscores that student representation also encompasses a relational dimension involving interactions with stakeholders beyond formal governance structures. Accordingly, this approach allows for the extraction and identification of power dynamics between SROs, national governments, university administrations, and civil society.

Building on these methodological premises, this thesis adopts a Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) (Anckar, 2008), which compares cases that differ substantially in political context, HE governance models, and SRO structures, yet are situated within the shared framework of the EHEA. The logic of MDSD is that

if systems with markedly different characteristics produce similar outcomes, such as comparable limitations of student academic freedom, these outcomes are likely linked to common structural factors. Conversely, divergent outcomes can be attributed to context-specific variables, such as legal frameworks, institutional arrangements, or political cultures (Anckar, 2008). This design thus enables the study to identify both the supranational constraints shaping SRO capacities across the EHEA and the national-level factors that produce variation in their political agency and influence over higher education policy.

In this thesis, the units of observation are the SROs operating in the four selected countries. This choice aligns with RQ2 and RQ3, which explore the strategies SROs adopt to mobilise, exert influence, and respond to the structural conditions that generate either convergence or divergence in their political agency (Klemenčič, 2024). Defining SROs as the observational units allows an assessment of how their political agency is shaped, strengthened, or constrained, and how their legitimacy within HE systems is affected by legal and institutional frameworks.

The units of explanation are the four EHEA member states examined: France, Italy, Norway, and Slovakia, selected in continuity with the ESU internship project. These countries were chosen to represent distinct geographical and political traditions: Continental Europe (France), Mediterranean Europe (Italy), Nordic Europe (Norway), and the Balkans (Slovakia). This diversity provides a broad comparative basis for analysing academic freedom across heterogeneous contexts, while the national state remains a fundamental unit of analysis in comparative education (Bray & Jiang, 2014). Consistent with the logic of MDSD (Anckar, 2008), similarities across diverse cases reveal common structural patterns, whereas divergences point to context-dependent variables such as legal norms, institutional governance, or political culture (Klemenčič, 2024; Matei & d'Aquila, 2024).

Overall, this design captures both the shared supranational architecture of the EHEA and the context-specific dynamics that shape SRO capabilities. By comparing how limitations and violations of student academic freedom vary in

intensity, form, and impact, this study analyses how SRO political agency operates under diverse national systems, even when similar repertoires of collective action are deployed. The next section presents the case study design used to examine these dynamics within each national context.

3.2.2 CASE ORIENTED COMPARISON IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION FIELD

Case study research is a widely adopted approach in the sociology of higher education, frequently combined with comparative designs to capture the complexity of institutional and policy variation (Fairbrother, 2014; Kosmützky et al., 2020). In qualitative comparative research, studies can be either variable-oriented or case-oriented (Bray & Jiang, 2014). This Master thesis follows a case-oriented design, as it seeks to: (1) identify recurrent and context-specific violations of student academic freedom (RQ1); (2) analyse how SROs in the four countries selected deploy collective action strategies to mobilise students and safeguard their rights within and beyond academia (RQ2); and (3) explore the conditions under which SROs' political agency can influence national HE policy (RQ3). Case-oriented studies privilege depth over breadth, emphasising how context-based variables explain the direction and outcomes of observed phenomena (Antonucci, 2013; Kosmützky et al., 2019).

This logic reinforces the application of the MDSD design presented in Section 3.2.1 (Anckar, 2008), as it emphasises that recurrent violations can have different implications depending on the legal framework, institutional configuration and system of student representation of each country. It also aligns with Klemenčič's (2012; 2024) argument that comparative studies in Student Representation in HE must account for the relational dimension of student representation, that is, how SROs interact with external stakeholders, including ministries, universities, and civil society, beyond formal governance procedures.

In line with the ESU's 2024 report, *'The Bologna Process with Student Eyes'*, which highlights the uneven implementation of student participation across the EHEA, the Tirana Communiqué (2024) assesses student representation and

involvement in the EHEA as a fundamental pillar of its setting and academic freedom, this study situates such variation within national political, institutional, and organisational contexts. These differences are often shaped by power relations with HE and political authorities, resource asymmetries, and the embeddedness of SROs within national systems of HE (Klemenčič, 2024; Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999).

Within this framework, France, Italy, Norway and Slovakia are treated as four distinct yet comparable cases. They were selected due to their legal and institutional heterogeneity with regard to academic freedom, student welfare systems and the organisational models of SROs, as well as their contrasting political dynamics affecting civic space and academic participation.

In France, recent research DeGregorio (2022), Joly (2022), Wierwoka (2022) highlights an increasing politicisation of higher education. Since 2015, episodes of terrorism and the murder of Professor Samuel Paty have been followed by tighter state control over NGOs, including student organisations.

In Italy, the political environment of the last three years has been shaped by a right-wing government, repeatedly criticised by ESU and civic NGOs for curtailing the role of civil society organisations, including SROs¹⁵. The debate and approval of the *DDL Sicurezza* have heightened these concerns¹⁶. Reports of police interventions at university sites, especially in the last five years, point to a narrowing space for student activism and a more conflictual relationship between SROs, universities, and state authorities¹⁷.

¹⁵ This thesis refers to the joint communication issued by ESU and UDU in response to Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's criticism of UDU's request to verify government use of PRNN funds (<https://esu-online.org/statement-on-the-vicious-attacks-of-prime-minister-meloni-against-the-national-union-of-students-in-italy-you-cannot-silence-the-student-voice/>)

¹⁶ DDL Sicurezza is a policy that seeks to strengthen public order provisions by expanding police powers and increasing penalties for acts of civil disobedience such as roadblocks, sit-ins, and occupations of public buildings. Among its initial provisions, Article 31, which was later removed, authorises enhanced intelligence activity in academic environments, potentially allowing state security services to investigate politically active students and professors <https://unipd-centrodirittiumani.it/it/notizie/nazioni-unite-gli-esperti-onu-criticano-il-decreto-sicurezza-del-governo-italiano>

¹⁷ <https://esu-online.org/policies/bm85-democracy-is-at-risk-in-italy-even-within-heis/>

In Norway, little academic or advocacy research has examined the current state of academic freedom. The 2024 report by the Nordic Academic Union Trade, *Academic Freedom in the Nordics: Legislation, Practices and Challenges*, indicates that systematic research is lacking, despite Norway's strong tradition of academic freedom and civic participation¹⁸. The report focuses primarily on faculty, excluding students. As a result, little is known about whether and how student representation may be weakened, not necessarily through direct political suppression, but through broader social and economic changes that could indirectly affect SROs' political agency (Klemenčič, 2024).

Since late 2023, the government led by Robert Fico has replaced the directors of several cultural institutions with loyalists, favouring state-aligned projects and raising fears of censorship and the exclusion of critical voices.¹⁹ While these measures have targeted solely the cultural sector, they raise concerns about potential spillover into HE. This highlights the precarious environment in which SROs operate, where political interference may undermine institutional autonomy and limit student participation.

This enriches the MDSD analysis, as the comparison is anchored not only in theoretical literature but also in ongoing political developments. Each case is distinguished by its specific context, offering insights into how the relationship between SROs, the state, and universities evolves under different pressures.

As this research aims to make comparisons, it is necessary to establish common ground (Bryan, 2014). The comparison of each of these four cases focuses on:

- National legal frameworks on academic freedom and student representation;
- Institutional configurations of the HE and student welfare systems;
- Organisational settings and internal structures of SROs;

¹⁸ https://sulf.se/app/uploads/2024/10/Report_Academic_freedom_in_the_Nordics_2024.pdf

¹⁹ <https://artisticfreedominitiative.org/our-programs/advocacy-for-artistic-freedom/research-2/slovakia-2/>

- Formal powers and relationships between SROs and external stakeholders.

This framework allows identification of both structural constraints and context-specific dynamics shaping SRO legitimacy, presence, and influence. As Fairbrother (2014) and Kosmützky and his colleagues (2020) suggest, case-based comparative inquiry provides a bridge between macro-level structures and micro-level practices, revealing how supranational norms are filtered through diverse national contexts.

The combination of case study and comparative approaches also highlights the persistent gap between the formal commitments and the practical implementation of the Bologna Process. According to the ESU (2024), France is the only one of the four analysed countries that has established a dedicated Bologna coordination office. In Norway and Slovakia, responsibility for Bologna implementation and monitoring lies primarily with the national QAAs and with national SROs through evaluation and consultation mechanisms. In contrast, Italy lacks an equivalent institutional body or systematic evaluation process conducted by student representative organisations or student government structures. This variation illustrates the discretionary nature of Bologna Process implementation, which depends largely on national administrative capacity, political commitment, and the strength of student representation within governance structures (See section 2.1.1).

In addition, the political position of SROs emerges as a relevant comparative dimension, particularly in pluralist systems such as France and Italy. In these contexts, multiple SROs compete for representation in HE governance, and their organisational identity is often shaped by affiliation or proximity to national political parties or ideological currents. Such alignments can enhance access to decision-makers but can also constrain autonomy, affect legitimacy among the broader student body, and influence the repertoire of collective action available to the organisation.

The four cases thus offer the opportunity to examine how political positioning interacts with institutional structures:

- In France and Italy, pluralist models produce politically aligned SRO landscapes, where partisan affiliation affects both internal governance and the capacity to form coalitions on academic freedom issues.
- In Norway and Slovakia, representative structures are more unitary, with SROs less formally tied to political parties and they tend to be more politically neutral. However, ideological orientations, even if they are not well defined in the political spectrum, still shape advocacy strategies.

In sum, the four cases illustrate how different configurations of legal frameworks, institutional settings, welfare regimes, and organisational models condition the scope of SRO action. France and Italy exemplify pluralist systems, where partisan alignments both empower and constrain SROs, while Norway and Slovakia illustrate more unitary but politically neutral structures. This organisational-political dimension, when combined with institutional and legal variables, provides a robust comparative lens for examining how shared supranational commitments are filtered through heterogeneous national contexts to shape the legitimacy, position, and effectiveness of SROs in defending student academic freedom.

3.2.3 ASSESSING COUNTRY CASE OF HE AND STUDENT REPRESENTATIONS

Refer to Table 3 (Section 2.3.3) and Figure 4 (Section 2.3.4) for an overview of how HE systems intersect with national student representation frameworks. These analytical tools illustrate the institutional configurations and governance arrangements that shape student representation within the four case studies: France, Italy, Norway, and Slovakia.

This section provides the empirical foundation for understanding how SROs in these countries navigate their institutional environments, mobilise resources, and orient their agency within national power dynamics (Klemenčič, 2024). The following sub-sections briefly outline the legal frameworks governing student academic freedom, the structure of the HE and student welfare systems, and the configuration of national student representation. Together, these elements define

the broader institutional and political coordinates in which SROs operate and exercise their representative and advocacy functions.

3.2.3.1 FRANCE

3.2.3.1.1 LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON STUDENT ACADEMIC FREEDOM

The French legal framework for HE and student rights is grounded in the constitutional recognition of education as a fundamental right. The Preamble of the 1946 and 1958 Constitutions affirms access to education at all levels as an essential component of equality and citizenship.

A major shift occurred with the *Faure Law* (1968–1969), which established university autonomy and participatory governance. It introduced university councils composed of academic staff, students, and administrative personnel, and formally recognised student representation at institutional and national levels, though implementation remained uneven across universities (Genelot, 2024).

Following the 1984 French Constitutional Court ruling on the *Savary Law*, student representation became mandatory in university decision-making processes. This ruling obliged university administrations to include a student representative in the university council²⁰ (Genelot, 2024).

The *Jospin Law* (1989) refined electoral procedures and representation modalities for national student assemblies, institutionalising consultative participation in HE policymaking. Later, the Law on the *Liberties and Responsibilities of Universities* (2007) expanded institutional autonomy and reinforced the financial independence of universities, indirectly reshaping the framework through which student representatives engage with decision-making processes (Genelot, 2024).

²⁰ [Décision n° 83-165 DC du 20 janvier 1984 | Conseil constitutionnel](#)

At the statutory level, the *Code de l'éducation*²¹ contains provisions that set out principles applicable to HE, from Livre VI to Livre VII. The notion of academic freedom has been reprised in the *Code de l'èducation* Livre VI article Article L611-1 "*Principles of Academic Freedom*" which explicitly states academic freedom and institutional autonomy; prohibits political interference in teaching and research. Thereby, the notion of academic freedom is assessed as a negative right (Nordal, 2016). Furthermore, the articles mentioned in those sections articulate institutional autonomy and general protections for academic activity, while student-specific rights (including access to student aid and participation mechanisms) are distributed across several articles and decrees.

3.2.3.1.2 INSTITUTIONAL HE SETTING AND STUDENT WELFARE SETTING

The French HE system is characterised by the coexistence of two distinct traditions: the university system and the *grandes écoles* system (Musselin, 2024). Historically, universities were established to provide broad and relatively egalitarian access to tertiary education, primarily for the middle classes (Paradeise, 2017; Musselin, 2024). By contrast, the *grandes écoles* have traditionally trained elite engineers, administrators, and teachers for public service and industry, through highly selective admission procedures (Musselin, 2019, 2024; Paradeise, 2017).

Over the past two decades, successive reforms have sought to reduce the divide between these sectors by promoting collaboration in research, curricula, and governance structures (Musselin, 2019; Sursock, 2024a). The 2013 loi ESR introduced *Communautés d'universités et établissements* (COMUEs), designed

²¹ The Code d'éducation is the legal provision defining the organisational framework of the French education system, including the institutional autonomy of the university, the rights and obligations of students, the social rights of professors, the welfare system in the education system and the labour rights of academic staff. It has been updated multiple, lastly in 2013. I am reporting the final version, that of 2013 (https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/texte_lc/LEGITEXT000006071191/)

to strengthen institutional cooperation and research coordination across universities and grandes écoles.

Two central figures coordinate the implementation of higher education policy in France: the *Recteur* and the *Président de l'Université*. The *Recteur*, appointed by the state, ensures that national HE policies and regulations are applied locally, oversees administrative and financial compliance, and acts as the government's representative in the academic region²². The *Président de l'Université*, elected by the university's administrative council, comprising faculty, staff, student representative, and external members, is responsible for managing the institution's budget, representing it publicly, and directing research and teaching activities²³. Importantly, under French law, the police may not intervene on university premises unless a crime has been committed or at the explicit request of the *Président de l'Université* (Beaud, 2022).

Despite these decentralising reforms, the French HE system remains highly centralised under the authority of the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, which continues to exercise significant control over funding and policy direction (Sursock, 2024a, 2024b).

Student welfare provision operates within an equally centralised framework, managed by the CROUS (*Centres régionaux des œuvres universitaires et scolaires*). The CROUS network administers accommodation, scholarships, food services, and student life programmes. Students in France have to pay limited tuition fees, which are around 175 euros; they also contribute an annual CVEC (*Contribution de Vie Étudiante et de Campus*) fee, which finances student welfare services, cultural and sports activities, and social support initiatives. While modest, this contribution represents one of the key sources of institutional funding for student organisations, including SROs, and their activities.

The French scholarship system is based on social criteria, with grants allocated according to family income. Awards are distributed across seven levels

²² [Sous-section 1 : Le recteur. \(Articles R*222-13 à D222-23-2\) - Légifrance](#)

²³ https://ics.utc.fr/parfaire/structure/co/04_orgStruc_04_universite_03_gouvernance.html

(*échelons*), with monthly payments determined annually by household revenue²⁴. This mechanism aims to promote social equity in access to HE.

3.2.3.1.3 STUDENT REPRESENTATION POSITIONALITY AND DYNAMICS

France adopts a pluralist model of student representation (Klemenčič, 2012, 2024), reflected in the diversity of its SROs and their ideological orientations. The *Union nationale des étudiants de France* (UNEF) is among the oldest national unions and has historically been associated with the centre-left political tradition. The *Union des étudiants communistes* (UEC) is linked to the French Communist Party, while the *Union nationale inter-universitaire* (UNI) is aligned with the conservative spectrum. Alongside these partisan unions, the *Fédération des associations générales étudiantes* (FAGE) brings together over 2,000 student associations across France, presenting itself as independent and non-partisan, with a focus on democratic participation, welfare, and student rights (Genelot, 2024).

At the institutional level, SROs hold seats in university governance bodies such as the *Conseil de la formation et de la vie universitaire* (CFVU) and the *Conseil d'administration* (CDA). These bodies deliberate on academic and social issues, including programme structures, budget allocation, and the allocation of the CVEC funds. Student representatives also participate in welfare governance through the CROUS councils, where they contribute to decisions on housing, cultural activities, and social support measures (Genelot, 2024)

At the national level, student representation is formalised through two consultative national academic assemblies established under the Faure and Savary laws: the *Conseil national de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche* (CNESER) and the *Centre national des œuvres universitaires et scolaires* (CNOUS). The CNESER, composed of around 100 members, includes 11 student representatives elected on national lists presented by SROs or alliances.

²⁴ <https://www.service-public.gouv.fr/particuliers/vosdroits/F12214?lang=en>

It meets several times a year with the Ministry of Higher Education and Research to discuss university budgets, strategic objectives, quality assurance procedures, and accreditation of qualifications²⁵. Students are elected to fill the CNESER seats every two years (Genelot, 2024).

The CNOUS oversees the national student welfare system, with 8 of its approximately 28 members being student representatives elected indirectly through the regional CROUS councils. These representatives vote on welfare allocations, housing budgets, and the national distribution of the CVEC (Genelot, 2024).

3.2.3.2 ITALY

3.2.3.2.1 LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON STUDENT ACADEMIC FREEDOM

The Italian Constitution of 1946 provides the foundational framework for HE and academic freedom. Under the section “*Fundamental Principles*,” it limits academic freedom primarily to the dissemination and creation of artistic, scientific, and technological research (Popovic, 2023). In the section “*Ethics and Social Relations*,” Article 33 explicitly protects the freedom of teaching and research and affirms the institutional autonomy of universities, though within certain legal parameters. These include organisational structures, criteria for academic progression, and national regulations concerning access to university courses, the number of credits required to obtain a degree, and the professional qualifications derived from specific disciplines (Esposti & Geraci, 2010). Article 34 further defines the role of the State in ensuring the right to education, providing scholarships and social support to enable access to education, including HE, for capable and deserving students, irrespective of their financial circumstances.

Since the 1990s, a series of reforms has redefined the balance between state regulation, university autonomy, and student participation. Law 537/1993 (Art. 5)

²⁵ <https://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/fr/le-conseil-national-de-l-enseignement-superieur-et-de-la-recherche-cneser-87955>

reinforced universities' financial autonomy by granting control over their *Fondo di Finanziamento Ordinario* (FFO) and tuition fees. It also imposed a cap stipulating that revenues from student contributions cannot exceed 20% of total FFO allocations, thereby safeguarding affordability and limiting over-reliance on tuition fees.

Article 1 of the Law 230/2005 reaffirmed that teaching and research are organically connected and must be conducted with full freedom. It clarified that professors have the right to choose their research subjects and methods, within the broader framework of institutional planning and ministerial oversight.

A major governance reform came with Law 240/2010 (the "*Gelmini Reform*"), which sought to modernise the university system and improve efficiency and transparency. Article 2 established new principles for university governance and accountability. In particular, subsection (l) required universities to adopt an ethical code to regulate the conduct of academic and administrative staff, while subsection (m) introduced disciplinary measures and sanctions in cases of violations. The same article mandated that student representation be ensured in all governance bodies, thereby strengthening student involvement in decision-making processes. Article 3 focused instead on promoting meritocracy, removing obstacles to higher education, and guaranteeing access for capable students regardless of economic condition, with respect to regional competencies. Article 21 established binding national criteria for student representation: students must be present in all governance bodies dealing with student issues and constitute at least 15% of total seats²⁶.

Finally, the *Statuto degli Studenti Universitari* (2011) codified student rights and duties at the national level. Its first section, "*Tutele e Diritti*", Article 1, recognises students as integral members of the academic community and obliges universities to provide appropriate means for their participation in academic life. In the seventh section "*Rappresentanza Studentesca*" Article 7 explicitly affirms

²⁶ <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2011/01/14/011G0009/sg>

that student representatives must be involved in all matters concerning university governance and higher education policy²⁷.

3.2.3.2 INSTITUTIONAL HE AND STUDENT WELFARE SETTING

Over the past forty years, a series of legislative interventions has gradually transformed the Italian HE system from a highly centralised model into a hybrid structure that combines national steering with institutional autonomy (Esposti & Geraci, 2010; Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2014; Lumino et al., 2017).

In the early 1990s, reforms promoted decentralisation by granting universities greater autonomy over budgets, educational objectives, curricula, and credit allocation for tertiary qualifications.

Law 370/1999 requires universities to implement an internal system of evaluation of the University administration, research and academic activities, the level of support to students by evaluating the allocation of funds, the level of productivity of research and academic activity of the University. This internal evaluation must be carried out by an internal evaluation body of the university.

Law 509/1999 introduced a new institutional framework for delivering and obtaining a tertiary education degree. This framework introduced a three-year Bachelor's degree and a two-year Master's degree. Each faculty can set its own access criteria, except for Law, Medicine, Health and Architecture (Esposti & Geraci, 2010; Lumino et al., 2017). The four-year pathway for obtaining a tertiary degree has been removed (Esposti & Geraci, 2010; Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2014).

Law 286/2006 established the National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes: ANVUR, under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education and Research. ANVUR coordinates and monitors internal university evaluations, assesses the effectiveness of national research and innovation programs, and manages the allocation of performance-based funding (*quota*

²⁷ http://www.cnsu.miur.it/argomenti/documentazione/mozioni/2011/mo_2011_09_08_002.aspx

premia) from the FFO. The *quota premiale* rewards universities according to student enrolment, research productivity, innovation, and collaboration indicators based on the number of students enrolled, number of scientific publications and research collaborations (Agasisti, 2008).

The *Gelmini Reform* (Law 240/2010) introduced new governance structures, strengthened performance criteria for FFO distribution, and formally linked evaluation mechanisms to national objectives. It also reaffirmed the role of regional governments in managing student welfare services and scholarships, in accordance with their constitutional competences (CNSU, 2018; 2022; Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2014).

In 2017, a major reform of student welfare was introduced in the form of the '*no-tax area*' (L. 232/2016), which provides tuition fee exemptions, either full or partial, based on students' family income (ISEE). Universities must respect national minimum and maximum thresholds when applying these criteria. According to the UDU's 2024 report, '*Università Quanto mi Costi*', the current minimum ISEE threshold for a full exemption is €22,000, with partial reductions extending up to €30,000²⁸. Under Law 537/1999, university administrations can decide the ISEE amount to allocate for full or partial tuition fee exemptions, provided these values are met.

According to the CNSU's 2018 and 2022 reports on the *Rapporto sulla Condizione Studentesca*, student welfare provision remains regionally managed. Each region operates its own welfare agency denominated *ente per il diritto allo studio*, which defines and establishes criteria for housing, scholarships, and healthcare, while universities directly administer canteens and certain forms of financial aid.

²⁸ <https://unioneuniversitari.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Sintesi-ricerca-Udu-sulle-tasse-universitarie-2024.pdf>

3.2.3.2.3 STUDENT REPRESENTATION POSITIONALITY AND DYNAMICS

As discussed in Section 2.3, Italy follows a pluralist model of student representation (Klemenčič, 2012; 2024), in which multiple SROs coexist, often reflecting broader ideological cleavages. The *Unione degli Universitari* (UDU), the largest national union, is traditionally aligned with progressive and left-wing positions and maintains close ties with the CGIL trade union. On the opposite end, *Azione Universitaria* (AU) represents the student branch of the right-wing party *Fratelli d'Italia*, through its youth wing *Gioventù Nazionale*. The *Blocco Studentesco*, affiliated with the neo-fascist movement *CasaPound*, embodies far-right positions. Alongside these national unions, Italy hosts a variety of smaller or local associations with centrist, liberal, or religious orientations. For example, *Obiettivo Studenti* draws from Catholic student traditions, while groups such as *ASTRA*, *Confederazione degli Studenti*, *La Svolta*, *Rete Mediterranea*, *Studenti in Movimento*, and *UNILAB* have emerged intermittently with variable national influence (Vespa et al., 2024).

Italian SROs are constituted as voluntary associations under civil law, rather than statutory corporations. As Vespa and his colleagues (2024) observe, this organisational model contributes to structural instability and internal conflict, limiting continuity in HE governance at the national level. Political identification remains a defining feature of SROs political agency, agentic orientation and organizational model (Klemenčič, 2024), reinforcing long-standing fragmentation within Italian student representation.

The *Consiglio Nazionale degli Studenti Universitari* (CNSU), established in 1997, serves as the national intermediary body for student representation. The CNSU consists of 30 student representatives elected every three years on national lists presented by SROs across multi-regional constituencies, along with members appointed by the Ministry, the *Conferenza dei Rettori delle Università Italiane* (CRUI), and the *Consiglio Universitario Nazionale* (CUN). It provides opinions on draft legislation, funding allocation, and national HE objectives.

Students elect their representatives to the CNSU through regional constituencies grouped by student enrolment size. Within each constituency, candidates are

presented by one or more SROs, and results are aggregated nationally. Thus, representation operates through a multi-level system, linking regional participation to national consultation.

As defined by Law 18/2006, the CUN is made up of professors, researchers, rectors and student representatives who are appointed by the CNSU. The CUN is responsible for academic policy and governance, including defining scientific disciplines, evaluating research and publication criteria, and advising on tenure procedures and institutional funding. Despite its broad expertise, the role of student involvement is consultative rather than co-designing higher education (HE) policies to incorporate the student perspective.

In sum, Italian student representation reflects the coexistence of stable national unions such as UDU, AU, and LINK, alongside a wide array of smaller, transient associations with limited institutional continuity. While national bodies such as the CNSU and CUN formalise student participation, their consultative nature highlights the limited decisional power of students within Italian HE governance.

3.2.3.3 NORWAY

3.2.3.3.1 LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON STUDENT ACADEMIC FREEDOM

In the Norwegian legal framework, academic freedom is not mentioned in the Norwegian constitution. Despite the attempts by the Norwegian academic community to advance a proposal to the Norwegian Parliament to include the concept of academic rights and their protection in the Constitution²⁹, the concept of academic freedom is legally recognised and protected by “*University and University College Act*”³⁰ of 2005, renewed in 2024.

²⁹ <https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-news-europe-nordics-2024-2-constitutionalise-academic-freedom-urge-norwegian-groups/>

³⁰ For this thesis, all references to the University and University Act are based on the revised and consolidated version of 2024 (<https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2024-03-08-9>)

Section 2.5, '*Academic Freedom and Responsibility*', which states that Norwegian universities, both public and private, are obliged to guarantee academic freedom and research in accordance with scientific, artistic, and ethical standards. The university administration must not interfere with the academic content of a course or academic project, and must be transparent about the results of research, academic appointments, and the publication of academic material.

Section 1.1, '*Purpose of the Act*', explicitly states that Norwegian public and private universities must encourage and promote an understanding of academic freedom to contribute to environmentally, socially and economically sustainable development. Furthermore, they must promote the dissemination of scientific and artistic knowledge.

Section 2.1 "*The activities of the institutions*" illustrates that the provision of HE, the right to pursue and conduct academic and artistic research, the right to disseminate, and the guarantee of participation of professors and students in the higher education system must be guaranteed both within public and private universities.

Other dimensions relevant to academic freedom are addressed through complementary legislation. The *Working Environment Act* (2006) regulates employment conditions, including workplace safety, working hours, union representation, and rights to parental and other forms of leave. Although primarily designed for employees, it also applies to student workers and doctoral candidates, ensuring that their working environment supports research and study³¹. The *Copyright Act* (2018) defines which types of work are protected by copyright, explicitly including academic works. It affirms the ownership rights of authors over their scientific output and regulates how such works may be disseminated to the public³². Together, these provisions extend the protection of academic freedom beyond the classroom and laboratory, covering both the

³¹ <https://www.arbeidstilsynet.no/en/laws-and-regulations/laws/working-environment-act>

³² <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2018-06-15-40>

conditions of academic labour and the intellectual property of academic production.

Sections 10.11 “*Student Bodies*” and 10.12 “*Student Representation in Institutional Bodies*” state that public and private university administrations must incorporate student bodies into the academic council and include them among the university staff. This is to safeguard students' rights and interests, and to promote tertiary education. Consequently, the university administration must ensure the active involvement of student representatives at every stage of the decision-making process. Furthermore, the university administration must listen to and address students' doubts and concerns and incorporate their views into HE policy proposals. Students can establish their own student body within a university department and stand for election. According to Section 10.12, student representatives must occupy 20% of the total seats on the Academic Council and at least one student representative must be present at every stage of the decision-making process. This ensures that student voices are formally integrated into governance on issues ranging from curricula to welfare services.

3.2.3.3.2 INSTITUTIONAL HE AND STUDENT WELFARE SETTING

In the Norwegian HE system, institutions are classified as universities and university colleges³³. These differ in their accreditation processes and educational objectives. Universities are more research-oriented and offer bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees, whereas university colleges have traditionally focused on professional programmes linked to specific occupations (Fetvei, 1992). Professional degrees in fields such as medicine, dentistry, and veterinary studies are structured as integrated programmes lasting five to six years, while the general structure of bachelor's (3 years) and master's (2 years) applies across institutions³⁴.

³³ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/norway/types-higher-education-institutions>

³⁴ Ibidem

The Norwegian HE system is shaped by a complex interplay of governmental, institutional and individual actors. According to the Universities and University Colleges Act, formal authority lies with the 'King in Council', a constitutional term referring to the government. In practice, strategic decisions regarding the structure and duration of programmes, as well as appointments to governing boards, are taken by the Ministry of Education and Research, supported by agencies such as NOKUT, which is the independent national quality assurance authority. The King's role is thus primarily formal, while operational authority is delegated to the ministry, institutions, and external agencies

With the first version of the University and University College Act of 1990, the government established that one of the criteria for distinguishing between a university and a university college is that the former must have a research centre within it (Fetvei, 1992). With the implementation of the University College Reform in 1994, later consolidated by the University and University Colleges Act of 1995, the governance of Norway's university colleges shifted from direct central state control to a model granting greater institutional autonomy, particularly in academic and administrative matters (Bleiklie, 2023). In 2003, in the context of the Bologna Process, Norway adopted a unified three-cycle degree structure (Bachelor's, Master's, PhD) and introduced the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). These reforms standardised degree frameworks across all higher education institutions and aimed to enhance international comparability and student mobility (Bleiklie, 2023).

A distinctive feature of Norwegian HE is the *Studentsamskipnad*³⁵, regulated by the "*Studentsamskipnad Act*" of 2007. Each *student samskipnad* is an independent, student-led and student-owned body with a monopoly on providing student welfare services, including housing, canteens, bookshops, health services, kindergartens, and cultural activities. By law, they have the right to free

³⁵ In the English Samskipnad are being traduced in Student Welfare Organisation, which is the term I will continue to use throughout this thesis.

office space at educational institutions, and their boards must include at least 20% student representatives³⁶.

Students do not pay tuition fees at public universities, but they must pay a semester fee, around €60–100, to the *samskipnad* affiliated to the university site to access services.

National student financial aid is managed by *Lånekassen*,³⁷ which provides loans and grants to about 80% of Norwegian students (Fetvei, 1992). Unlike other EHEA systems, Norway allocates financial and social support largely independent of social class or parental income, ensuring near-universal access (Crosier & Haj, 2020).

3.2.3.3.3 STUDENT REPRESENTATION POSITIONALITY AND DYNAMICS

As discussed in Section 3.2.2.2.3.2, reprising Table 3 of Klemenčič's (2024) theoretical model of national system of Student Representation, the *samskipnad* are student-led and student-owned organisations that operate at the national level and hold a legal monopoly over the management of student welfare services. They are responsible for allocating and distributing all welfare provisions, including housing, healthcare, and educational resources, independently from university administrations and the national government. As noted in chapter 6 of the *Studentsamskipnad Act (2007)*, the objective of the *samskipnad* is to take care of the needs of the welfare needs of students at the individual institution³⁸. There are currently 14 Student Welfare Associations active in the Norwegian Higher Education landscape³⁹.

³⁶ <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2007-12-14-116>

³⁷ Lånekassen is a national administrative body under the management of the Ministry of Higher Education and Research. It is responsible for ensuring access to loans and student stipends <https://lanekassen.no/en-US>

³⁸ <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2007-12-14-116>

³⁹ <https://studyinnorway.no/student-welfare-organisations>

While *samskipnad* are independent and autonomous, they receive partial public funding through state allocations and student semester fees, which they independently allocate the fundings collected according to organisational and student needs (Klemenčič, 2024). Each *samskipnad* is governed by a board composed of student representatives, university employees, and staff from welfare organisations.

At the national level, *Samskipnad* have regular contact with the *Norsk Studentorganisasjon*⁴⁰ (NSO), the primary national student representative organisation in Norway, which informs of the student material and financial barriers that face and to reach institutional support. According to the ESU (2024) report, Norwegian student representative bodies, both the NSO and the university *samskipnad*, are politically, financially, and institutionally independent from universities and the state.

3.2.3.4 SLOVAKIA

3.2.3.4.1 LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON STUDENT ACADEMIC FREEDOM

The Slovak Constitution of 1992, as amended in 2017, explicitly recognises the principles of academic freedom and education as fundamental rights. These are addressed in multiple sections. In the 2 section “*Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms*” Article 24 guarantees freedom of expression, including the right to disseminate artistic and scientific works, subject only to limitations necessary to protect public order, health, and the rights of others. In the 3 section “*Political Rights*” Article 26 further protects freedom of information and prohibits censorship, while Articles 28 and 29 safeguard the rights to peaceful assembly and association, both relevant to student organisations and activism. In the section on “*Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*”, Article 42 establishes the right to education and the possibility of financial support for its pursuit, while Article 43 protects scientific research, artistic creation, and access to cultural heritage.

⁴⁰ The English denomination of the Norsk Studentorganisasjon is the National Norwegian Student Union.

The Higher Education Act No. 131/2002, as amended recently in 2025, provides the main legal framework governing Slovak higher education. It defines universities as public institutions dedicated to education, research, and cultural development. Article 2 situates Slovak universities within the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area, underlining their obligation to contribute to knowledge, science, and culture in line with the Bologna Process. Article 3 specifies that the primary mission of higher education institutions is to provide education, conduct scientific and artistic research, and address the needs of society.

Most importantly, Article 4 of the Act explicitly enshrines academic freedom. It guarantees freedom of research, teaching, learning, publication, and expression within universities, together with the autonomy of institutions to elect their own representatives and adopt internal governance statutes. This autonomy is safeguarded against political interference, although it might be restricted under exceptional conditions such as national security, public health, or environmental protection.

Article 26 of the Act stipulates that students must be represented within university governance structures. Specifically, they must constitute at least one-third of all members of academic councils, committees, and other governance structures. This ensures that student representatives play a meaningful role in shaping university decisions on budgets, statutes, and academic policies.

3.2.3.4.2 INSTITUTIONAL HE AND STUDENT WELFARE SETTING

The Slovak HE system, among the youngest in the EHEA, has been shaped by its post-communist legacy. Under the Czechoslovak socialist regime (1948–1989), HE was centrally managed and ideologically aligned with party doctrine, a structure that has left enduring traces in the decision-making hierarchies of universities (Filčáková, 2023). Following democratisation in 1989, the establishment of a national HE framework was delayed until 2002, amid debates

about institutional autonomy, state oversight, and the country's alignment between the European and Eastern blocs (Kosová & Porubský, 2007).

The Millennium Project (2000), supported by the United Nations, became a pivotal step in the modernisation and Europeanisation of Slovak HE. Although externally driven, it fostered the decentralisation of educational governance, encouraged institutional flexibility, and introduced a more participatory approach to curriculum and research management (Balážová, 2010). The reform signalled a transition from a politically controlled to a semi-autonomous university system, setting the groundwork for Slovakia's later integration into the Bologna Process.

The contemporary Slovak HE system comprises three types of institutions: public, private, and state higher education institutions. Public universities are self-governing and operate according to defined organisational structures that include the Rector, Academic Senate, Scientific Council, and Disciplinary Commission. Public Universities can determine the number of students who can be admitted to a course; the admission procedure for accessing a university course; the definition and planning of university programmes; the rights and obligations of students; the objectives of research projects and programmes; the number of students eligible for reimbursement of the cost of the study programme and associated fees; and the scope of collaboration with other universities. Lastly, they must plan budgets for income and expenditure to cover management costs. The plan must be prepared within a certain timeframe and sent to the Ministry of Education. In addition, Section 5 of the Higher Education Act elucidates that the national government can dissolve, abolish or incorporate a public higher education institution by determining its legal person, assets, debts and liabilities, and to which other public HE institutions and its students will be transferred.

According to Section 3 of the Higher Education Act, Private universities operate independently of state funding, while state institutions are administered by specific ministries and are dedicated to professional education in specialised sectors such as defence (Ministry of Defence), law enforcement (Ministry of the

Interior), and healthcare (Ministry of Health)⁴¹. Importantly, students attending both public and state universities are exempt from paying tuition fees⁴².

Articles 96 and 97 of the Slovak Higher Education Act regulate the student welfare system, which comprises three main categories of scholarships: social scholarships, awarded on the basis of family income; motivational scholarships, linked to academic merit; and special-purpose scholarships, designated for mobility or targeted forms of support. Social scholarships for full-time bachelor's and master's students are modest, generally ranging from €50 to €300 per month, with legal income thresholds determining eligibility. Need-based grants can oscillate between €10 and €375 per month, depending on family income and other criteria such as health disability⁴³.

Slovakia, like Norway, has a national student loan system administered by the Education Support Fund, which offers four types of loans to accommodate different student needs (OECD, 2021). Loans with a guarantor require a third party, typically a parent or guardian, to guarantee repayment if the student is unable to do so, while loans without a guarantor are fully repaid by the student alone. Additional loans are available for students who demonstrate academic excellence and for those granted asylum, additional protection, or temporary protection, ensuring that financial support is accessible to both high-achieving students and those in vulnerable circumstances⁴⁴.

In sum, the Slovak HE system remains largely centralised, with the state retaining substantial control over governance and funding. Yet, its student welfare model combines merit-based incentives with social support schemes, reflecting a mixed logic of competitiveness and equity.

⁴¹ <https://www.slovakiaeducation.info/higher-education>

⁴² *ibidem*

⁴³ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/slovakia/higher-education-funding>

⁴⁴ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/financing-adult-learning-db/search/student-loan-fund-0>; <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/slovakia/higher-education-funding>

3.2.3.4.3 STUDENT REPRESENTATION POSITIONALITY AND DYNAMICS

Under Article 26(2) of the Higher Education Act (No. 131/2002 Coll., as amended 2022), Slovak higher education institutions are required to ensure that at least one-third of the members of all academic senates are students, elected by their peers. This mandatory participation embeds student representation within the core of institutional governance.

In addition, Articles 40(1) and 42(2) extend this participation to faculty academic senates and disciplinary commissions, guaranteeing that students are represented in decision-making processes across multiple levels of higher education governance. Student representatives must be involved in discussions concerning all public matters related to higher education, including academic, organisational, and welfare issues.

At the national level, the Higher Education Act stipulates that before the adoption or amendment of policies related to accreditation, curricula, student welfare, or the recognition of degrees, the Ministry of Education, Research and Sport must consult with key stakeholders, including the Slovak Rectors' Conference, academic trade unions, and the *Študentská Rada Vysokých škôl*⁴⁵ (ŠRVŠ), which serves as the sole legally recognised national student body to meet the Ministry of HE, Research and Sport, to advance evaluation on HE policies draft, to presence motions and communication on incidents and attacks toward students occurs within and outside university, demand accountability to HE and political authorities

3.3.3 DATA COLLECTION

As noted in the Introduction Section (See Section 1.1 & 1.3), this Master's thesis builds on a research internship conducted in collaboration with the ESU and the University of Trento, under the supervision of Professor Ester Gallo. The research design and data collection strategies were co-developed with the ESU

⁴⁵ In English it has been nominated the Student Council of Higher Education

representative and with the main supervisor to address the thesis research questions.

The original plan for the research internship combined two qualitative methods: a documentary analysis of relevant legal, institutional, and organisational texts, and four focus groups, one in each selected country, composed by the student representative of the national, regional or local SROs selected. These two qualitative methods will be integrated with the semi-structured qualitative, which has the research objective to reach an in-depth description of the identified violations and limitations of student academic freedom (RQ1), SRO's repertoire of collective action (RQ2) and the convergence and divergence between SROs' political agency and national politics (RQ3).

Despite repeated outreach, the number of confirmed participants in each country remained insufficient to conduct focus groups that met the minimum standards of representativeness and data richness. Given these constraints, we agreed to proceed exclusively with qualitative documentary analysis for the internship research and to integrate with the semi-qualitative interview for the Thesis.

Semi-structured interviews compensate for the lack of focus groups, as even with a small number of interviews, I can control the length and in-depthness of the interview to collect as much data as possible. Furthermore, I can include additional documents in the analysis to strengthen the triangulation and reliability of the data.

Documentary analysis allows on the one hand, a systematic comparison of legal frameworks, institutional arrangements and reported incidents of academic freedom limitations and violations over the last two decades, creating a shared background on the selected dimension mentioned in sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2, and maintaining contextual peculiarities, cultural and social traditions and issues.

Documentary analysis is particularly well suited to answering RQ1 and RQ2 in identifying commonalities and differences of the types and forms of violations and limitations of student academic freedom that occur across in the EHEA, the SROs' agentic orientation and agency (Klemenčič, 2024) in front of the identified

issues and what strategies resorted to by SROs to diminish the effects of the identified violations and limitations and what are the initiatives carried out by SROs to help students to overcome financial and material struggles that face.

At the same time, documentary analysis has its limitations. It may not fully capture how identified violations and limitations of student academic freedom have persisted or evolved, either improving or further hindering students' capabilities within HE. This includes understanding the motivations behind specific collective actions, why these actions have been repeated over time, whether they have been successful, and whether SROs have altered their objectives or sought external support to enhance their influence. It is also important to examine whether the political agency of SROs aligns with, or diverges from, national policy, and if so, to what extent. Semi-structured interviews can provide an in-depth analysis of the informal aspects of stakeholder relationships, changes, and the persistence of recurring issues throughout the EHEA. They can also reveal the dynamics of relationships at formal and informal levels, from the university to the national level.

In addition, the semi-structured interview is one of the most appropriate qualitative methods for this research, as it will provide further theoretical and conceptual clarity on how the HE systems of the countries in question work. This will focus specifically on the SROs of the four countries selected, for which the legal framework and institutional HE and student representation systems have been briefly described.

Furthermore, this qualitative method allows us to get in-depth and comprehend the experience of student representatives in navigating a specific HE system and how they balance institutional obligations as intermediaries and stakeholders in HE, while also being able to critically assess the fallacies of the HE system and institutional decisions taken by authorities that can hinder the agency of students and SROs (Klemenčič, 2024).

Data collection has mainly been online, from researching documents to conducting interviews. Semi-structured interviews have their limitations: I have to consider the number of questions to ask the participants within a limited

timeframe, deal with unexpected changes to the date or participants dropping out, and adapt the questions in response to recent news or policy communications published during the interview phase.

Data collection will begin at the start of the internship, which was in mid-October 2024, and continue until May 2025. As it will be further explained in the paragraph dedicated to the discussion of the Documentary Analysis and the Semi-structured Interview, the timeline of data collection of each of these selected qualitative methods has been significantly different, as there was an original project that was changed while I was working on it, and the time necessary to mitigate the aforementioned issue at the beginning of this paragraph.

3.4 QUALITATIVE DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS

The qualitative documentary analysis aimed to identify similarities and differences in the violations and limitations of student academic freedom across macro and meso levels (Bohnsack, 2008; Bryan & Jiang, 2014; Coffey, 2014). At the same time, it sought to examine the collective action strategies adopted by SROs, to understand how and where student capabilities are constrained, and which institutional or political actors contribute to these processes. This methodological approach is consistent with the MDS design (Anckar, 2008) and the case study orientation of this research (Bryan, 2014).

Data collection was conducted between mid-October 2024 and the end of May 2025. The first phase, between mid-October and early December, focused on document collection, followed by an initial round of analysis between mid-December and early February. A second round, conducted between March and May, incorporated additional materials in response to feedback provided by Professor Gallo and to account for the evolving developments discussed in the internship report. This iterative process enabled the identification of key themes that informed the design of the semi-structured interviews, thereby ensuring a coherent integration of the two qualitative methods.

The selection of documents aimed to capture the institutional, material, and political dimensions of student representation in the four countries examined.

Sources included:

- Academic Papers on the HE institutional setting, political polarisation of student activism, politicisation of HE, case study of student activism and context-issue
- EU website such as *Eurydice*
- National legal website such as *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, *Legi-France*, *Constitutional French Court*, *Government.No*
- Online media news outlet such as *the Guardian*, *The Times of Higher Education*
- Instagram post related to the national, regional or local SROs
- SAR Media Monitoring Report on Academic Freedom incidents
- Report redacted by ESU and national SROs ESU member of the selected country
- Online PDF of the official or draft legal documents
- Online PDF of joint communication between ESU and SROs on ESU official site
- Online webpages of joint communication between ESU and SROs on ESU official site
- Reports redacted by professional organisations such as SMIVEZ, CGIL

This combination ensured a balance between official, academic, and media-based materials, reducing potential biases while offering a comprehensive understanding of higher education contexts and student experiences. In particular, the inclusion of social media sources was essential, as such platforms increasingly serve as key data sources in the social sciences (Olteanu et al., 2019). Posts from SROs' official social media accounts were treated as primary data, since they represent one of the main channels through which these SROs communicate both bureaucratic information, such as scholarship deadlines, dormitory procedures, and welfare provisions, and political positions adopted by SROs regarding student rights and representation. Social media content thus

provided valuable insights into both the operational and political dimensions of SRO activity. To strike a balance between avoiding bias and gaining a general overview, I have decided to collect information from the organisational Instagram pages of national or regional SROs, which provide information on the broader situation regarding student academic freedom (Olteanu et al., 2019). In parallel, the inclusion of Scholars at Risk's Media Monitoring Archive and reported redacted by professional organisations such as CGIL and Artistic Freedom Initiative complemented this by documenting incidents of academic freedom violations perpetrated across the political spectrum, ensuring a plural and balanced dataset.

Following the theoretical framework of guidance for this thesis, the capability approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999), the Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024), and the conditions of the case studies and of the theoretical assumption of the comparative design of the MDSM (Anckar, 2008), which implies that the analysis must be guided around specific dimensions that allow comparison around identified recurrent cross national issues by keeping the institutional and legal setting differences. The documents selected must not only reflect the institutional and material situation of the student community within academia, but also outside of it to have a broader general view on how student access and navigate in the HE

The selection of the format and types of documents illustrated previously were selected as they provide one or more of the following information:

- Legal framework for recognition and interpretation academic freedom.
- Legal framework for the recognition and interpretation of the inclusion of student representatives in the HE at different level.
- Legal framework on how SROs are recognised in the national HE setting, and how they can navigate and operate within it.
- Material conditions under which the student community is subjected
- Mechanisms and sustainability of existing student welfare mechanisms
- Recurrent material and economic obstacles to students' capability
- Incidents recurred within and outside academia

The analysis devoted particular attention to the recognition of SROs as legitimate stakeholders in HE governance, consistent with the London Communiqué (2007), Bucharest Communiqués (2012) and the Tirana Comm. These documents establish SROs as equal partners within the EHEA, while simultaneously acknowledging national variations in implementation (Weitbruger, 2020; Komotar, 2022).

Through the iterative analysis, nine main thematic codes were identified. These relate both to cross-national limitations and violations of student academic freedom (RQ1) and to the factors influencing the convergence or divergence of SROs' political agency within national political contexts (RQ3). The identified codes include: lack of affordable housing, budgetary cuts, concentration of economic power, implementation of financial service policies, interference in higher education governance, fragile or consultative student representation, targeted attacks on student activism, socioeconomic barriers, and recurring material and economic obstacles. As further explained in Section 3.6, some of these codes were later refined into subcodes or grouped under broader parent codes, maintaining their alignment with RQ1 or RQ3.

Because this research relied heavily on online materials (Mannheimer, 2021), particular attention was paid to assessing the credibility and potential bias of sources, especially those produced by politically oriented SROs. This was especially relevant in pluralist contexts such as France and Italy, where multiple SROs represent divergent ideological positions (Klemenčič, 2012; 2024). To ensure analytical balance, data were triangulated from professional reports, media archives, and social media materials, allowing the study to capture both the formal and informal dimensions of student representation and academic freedom (Nordal, 2016) across national contexts.

3.5 SEMI-STRUCTURED QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW

Another method adopted for this Master's research project is the semi-structured interview, conducted both in-person and online (James & Busher, 2011; Svend,

2013). As briefly outlined in Section 3.3 on data collection, the purpose of these interviews is to provide an in-depth description of the positionality of SROs in HE (Bovill et al., 2016), the power dynamics shaping their relationships and the directionality of their political agency (Klemenčič, 2024). Lastly, we must consider the contextual and relational factors and mechanisms that lead to the convergence or divergence of SROs' political agency in national HE policies, and how these policies are implemented according to SROs' agency.

Semi-structured interviews capture the perspectives of SROs on working within national legal and institutional systems that formally recognise their presence, but which may not fully acknowledge their contributions (Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020). As mentioned in sections 2.1.1 and 2.3.1, student representation is still a voluntary activity (ibid.). Consequently, student representatives hold an incredible responsibility towards the student community, ensuring that student claims and rights are mobilised within HE governance and incorporated into HE policies. In the absence of timely and appropriate intervention from the government or university administration, SROs dedicate additional resources and time to implementing initiatives that mitigate the negative effects of the barriers students face. Consequently, student representatives, who are overworked, ensure that the student voice is heard (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022; Linder & al., 2019). They fulfil their objectives and provide support and assistance to the student community in the absence of a response from HE and political authorities (Klemenčič, 2024).

When seeking information about their relationship dynamics as student representatives in HE settings, the perspective of SROs is relevant. Are they student representatives, consultants, co-designers or collaborators? (Bovill et al., 2016). Lastly, to understand how SROs operate within different organisational settings with varying degrees of autonomy and dependency, it is important to consider their perspective.

The perspective of SROs provides an in-depth insight into the informal aspects of student representation, which involves not only engaging in protests and advocacy, as mentioned in Section 2.3.1 (Cinci, 2017; Cole & Heinecke, 2020;

Gaisteiger & Wulz, 2020), but also how HE institutions and political authorities engage with student representatives in legal and political matters. The informal dimension reflects the normative and social perception of both student representation and students as a distinct group. This enables us to gain a better understanding of the challenges that SROs may encounter when involved in HE governance and policies, even when HE and political authorities have not actually violated a law. Lastly, this could also be due to differences in political stance between the SROs, the HE and the political authorities, whether these differences are implicit or explicit.

3.5.1 INTERVIEW SAMPLE

The sample population for the semi-structured interviews consists of SROs from the four selected countries. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted, as student representatives act as intermediaries between the student community and the institutional decision-making structures of HE (Klemenčič, 2024). Their positionality makes them particularly suited to address the research questions, since they are directly engaged in governance processes and aware of the mechanisms of SRO involvement at different levels. Building on Klemenčič's (2024) arguments regarding the incentives and disincentives for student representation, the semi-structured interviews seek to clarify the stages at which SROs are involved in decision-making processes, the areas in which they exert influence alongside other stakeholders, and the areas in which they possess exclusive decision-making authority.

In addition to their institutional role, student representatives are well placed to provide insights into the material obstacles students face when pursuing higher education and participating in academic, civic, and political communities. They are also familiar with the availability and effectiveness of student welfare systems and social support structures. This makes them sensitive observers of how broader social and political changes affect students' capabilities and participation.

The selection of participants followed Manzon's (2014) guidance on accounting for the contextual sensitivities of institutional, legal, and organisational settings in comparative research (Anckar, 2008; Antonucci, 2013; Bryan & Jiang, 2014). Case selection and sample size were therefore defined to ensure both the validity of cross-country comparison and feasibility, considering access constraints. These parameters were guided by the theoretical frameworks underpinning the thesis: the capability approach (MacFarlane, 2011) and student impact theory (Klemenčič, 2024).

Initial contacts were made with national SROs that are members of the ESU, facilitated by the networks established during my research internship. In Norway and Slovakia, I contacted the NSO and the ŠRVŠ. These are the sole nationally recognised SROs in their respective countries, legally mandated to represent students in dialogue with the Ministry of Higher Education and other political authorities. For each country, between two and three representatives were identified as potential interviewees.

In France and Italy, which have adopted pluralist models of student representation (Klemenčič, 2024), the sample also includes multiple SROs to capture the diversity of political orientations and advocacy strategies. Several of these organisations maintain explicit political affiliations, which shape their objectives, influence inter-organisational relations, and sometimes generate competition or conflict even when addressing similar issues. Including SROs with distinct political orientations thus provides valuable insights into how political alignment affects the legitimacy, strategies, and collective action of student organisations.

The overall sample was constructed using a snowball sampling approach. National referents provided by ESU served as the entry point for establishing initial contacts, while additional participants, particularly in France and Italy, were identified through these networks. After completing the first round of qualitative documentary analysis, invitations were extended to representatives from FAGE (France), UDU (Italy), NSO (Norway) and ŠRVŠ (Slovakia). The Norwegian referent provided two names of people in their group who were available to

participate in the interview. Later, contact was made with them to arrange interviews. The Slovakian referent provided a list of five people available to participate at the beginning of May via email. Only two out of five responded and declared their interest in participating in the interview.

The FAGE representative provided me with the contact details of the only person available for an interview. Unfortunately, despite the International Office of the ESU providing me with the contact details of *UNEF* and *Union Etudiant*, I found the contact details for UNI, a right-wing SRO, on their official website. Neither UNI nor Union Etudiant responded to my enquiries. Initially, UNEF found someone available to participate in the interview. However, they did not respond later on after sending the document of informed consent and privacy. Consequently, I only have one participant to represent France. This limitation is closely tied to the characteristics of the French Student Representation landscape, which is highly competitive: long-standing and well-resourced SROs tend to dominate the seats of the national council and exercise significant influence (Genelot, 2024).

Regarding Italy, I contacted the President of the National Council of Italian University Students (2022-2025), asking them to reach out to UDU members and other SROS representatives on the council. I have searched for the contact details of other SROS members active in Italy and contacted some friends from my hometown on Instagram who, like me, study at a different university. I have also contacted people I previously worked with on an advocacy project via LinkedIn. I have also contacted some of the students at the University of Trento who have experience with local SROS, such as *UNITin*, and national SROS, such as *UDU*, *LA PRIMAVERA DEGLI STUDENTI*, *LINK* and *AU*. I contact via email, LinkedIn or Instagram some of the representatives of *SVOLTA*, *UNILAB*, *CONFEDAZIONE DEGLI STUDENTI*, *ASTRA* and *RETE MEDITERRANEA*, which are SROs present in specific Regions in Italy (Vespa & al., 2024). I have no answer from those SROs. I have received only the availability from UNILAB, specifically from a chapter affiliated to a private university, which I desire to keep, especially on opening a brief comparison between the implementation on SROS in public and private universities, specifically on homogenization of the SROs' institutional setting at the university level.

Regarding Italy, I was unable to carry out a political division of the sample due to the low number of responses received. Furthermore, the participants who agreed to take part come from a left-wing SRO. Instead, I opted for a geographical division of Italian SRO monopolies. This builds on the empirical research on political agency and directionality conducted by Vespa and his colleagues (2024). This mitigation strategy is highly relevant as it sheds light on the fragmented nature of the Italian Student Representation landscape, caused not only by ongoing political tensions. Taking into account the obstacles faced, I recruited four participants: one local SRO representative, one regional SRO representative and two UDU members, one of whom works within ESU.

In total, I conducted nine interviews, with five female and four male participants. Table 4 provides further information about the participants. Specifically, it provides information on how many years they have worked in student representation, whether they currently work in the SROS and if they have experience working in the local SROS. To guarantee anonymity, I will not specify which participants are female and which are male, nor will I mention any other sensitive information. Participants will be referred to by the initials of their names and the initials of the SROs to which they belong.

Table 4 – Characteristics of the participants of the semi-structured interview

Participant Code	Country	Name of The SROs	Years of experience	Representation level (National/Regional/Local)	Experirnece in local SROs	Role Covered in Local SROs	Active in SRO
FAGE_M	France	FAGE	2 years	National	No	Has covered no role	Yes
BLAB_L	Italy	BLAB	2 years	Local (in a private university); it belongs to a section of UNILAB	Yes	Has covered no role	Yes
UNITin_E	Italy	UNITin	7 years	Local	Yes	President of the Student Council and member of the CDA	No
UDU_L	Italy	UDU	4 years	National	Yes	Student Representative in the HE department	Yes

UDU_L2	Italy	UDU	7 years	National	Yes	Student Representative in the HE department and member of the Academic Senate	Yes
NSO_N	Norway	NSO	7 years	National	Yes	President of the Student Council	Yes
NSO_O	Norway	NSO	5 years	National	Yes	President of the Student Council	Yes
SRVS_E	Slovakia	SRVS	5 years	National	Yes	Member of the academic senate	Yes
SVRS_M	Slovakia	SVRS	4 years	National	Yes	Member of the academic Senate	Yes

As shown in Table 4, almost all participants are currently employed in SROs and familiar with their own university's SRO, with one exception. All participants have between two and seven years' experience of being involved in student representation.

3.5.3 INTERVIEW STRUCTURE

Adopting the semi-structured interview model was the most appropriate choice for this research, as it complements the qualitative documentary analysis described in Section 3.3. While the documentary analysis addresses RQ1 and RQ2 at the macro and meso levels, the interviews enable a deeper exploration of processes and relationships at the meso and micro levels, as addressed in RQ3.

This approach is particularly suitable because the study investigates processes embedded in institutional, cultural, and social traditions (Klemenčič, 2024; Svend, 2013). Semi-structured interviews are topic-oriented (Ruslin et al., 2022) and guided by themes emerging from the documentary analysis. In line with the work of Bryan and Jiang (2014) and Manzon (2014), the design of the interviews ensures that the distinctive social and cultural characteristics of each national context are captured. The identified topics reflect transnational issues and the

specific contextual issues of the four selected countries. Semi-structured interviews have begun, starting with the cross-national issues identified by the qualitative documentary analysis (see Section 3.4). The Student Housing Crisis and Student Participation. Some topics recurred in at least two or three of the countries selected:

- Budget cut in the HE (France, Norway)
- Brain drain (Italy, Slovakia)
- Politicisation of HE (France, Italy, Slovakia)
- Educational inequalities (France, Italy)

Other topics included specific contextual issues: Student poverty (France); lack of recognition of social and political student rights (Italy); neoliberalisation of HE (Norway); and corruption in academia (Slovakia).

Although the semi-structured interview format implies a guided conversation on specific, previously identified topics, this qualitative interview also allows for a certain degree of flexibility during the interview (Ruslin et al., 2022). Specifically, follow-up questions are posed to demand clarification on terms in the native language that have been used to indicate and explore new sub-themes that have emerged during the interview (Ruslin et al., 2022). Identifying these new sub-themes is important for analysing some under-explored topics or issues in depth.

This proved particularly valuable in investigating the financial sustainability of SROs, a theme that emerged during the interviews but was not fully addressed in the documentary analysis. As highlighted by ESU's 2024 "*Bologna Process with Student Eye*", financial independence is critical not only for autonomy but also for enabling SROs to fulfil their objectives and maintain operations. Furthermore, the interviews provide insight into SROs' strategies for signalling issues to academia and national stakeholders, their power relationships with government and political actors, and whether their political agency (Klemenčič, 2024) aligns or diverges from national higher education policies.

Following the first round of topic extraction from the documentary analysis (mid-December 2024 to early February 2025), I began contacting SROs in the four

selected countries via email, Instagram, and LinkedIn to invite participation. Due to low response rates, the contact phase was extended until the end of May 2025, implementing mitigation strategies to safeguard validity and reliability.

I conducted a trial focus group with classmates to check time management and question clarity. In May 2025, I revised the semi-structured interview format and conducted a second pilot interview to ensure adherence to time constraints and coherence with the selected topics.

Except for one interview conducted in person on 29 May at the University of Trento's Linguistic Centre for practical reasons on the participant's side, all interviews were held online via Zoom between June and July 2025. The detailed execution, including synchronisation, consent procedures, and recording, is described in Section 3.4.4 on the Interview Protocol.

3.5.4 INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

As noted in the previous sub-section, one interview was conducted in person and eight were held online via Zoom. The online meetings were hosted using the Zoom room and profile provided by the University of Trento's IT office and associated to the University of Trento. The University of Trento IT office also offered technical guidance on setting up the sessions, registering participants, and storing recordings securely on the University's Zoom Cloud on the personal Zoom room provided.

Participants were first contacted by email, where they received an introduction to the project, an outline of the interview aims, and practical information regarding the procedures. These included the expected duration of each session (between 75 and 120 minutes), the modality of the interview (Zoom), and clarification that the study builds on the work conducted during the research internship.

In line with the University of Trento's Privacy Notice and Informed Consent regulations, all participants received a consent form before the interview. The form was signed and returned in advance, either in the March–April version or the updated version circulated in May. Participation was strictly voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences.

Interview scheduling was facilitated through four Doodle polls (two in June and two in July), based on the availability of both the interviewer and participants. Additional follow-up coordination was handled via email and text messages.

According to the consent documentation:

- The Data Controller is the University of Trento. The Data Protection Officer (DPO) can be contacted at dpo@unitn.it
- Interviews were recorded only with explicit prior consent.
- Data collected included: (a) anonymised demographic and contact information, (b) audio-visual recordings, and (c) participants' opinions, experiences, and perspectives.
- Data processing complied with GDPR principles of lawfulness, fairness, confidentiality, pseudonymisation, and secure storage.

I will arrive a few minutes before the participants, open the Zoom and suspend registration for the call. I will then welcome them and explain how the interview will be structured, the topics they will discuss and the anonymisation and pseudonymisation measures adopted according to the Informed Consent and Privacy Document. I will also ask them to confirm that they consent to being registered. Once they have confirmed whether or not they authorise registration, I will activate registration and start the interview.

Recordings were made in a personal Zoom room affiliated with UniTN's IT services and accessible exclusively by the interviewer.

In accordance with the University's privacy policy, recordings are stored on secure platforms affiliated with UNITN (Google Drive linked to the university account) and on the personal mobile hard disk affiliated to the researcher. They will be retained by the Department of Sociology and Social Research until December 2026. After that, raw data will be permanently deleted, while anonymised transcripts will be stored for an additional year.

The video was transcribed by hand using Microsoft Word. During this phase, and especially after revising the transcription, some elements of the script were removed to protect the anonymity and privacy of the participants, and to remove any information that I was not authorised to share. Furthermore, I insisted to the participants during our

conversation that they should not make any specific references, for example, where they study, to prefer to remain anonymous.

The interviews were conducted in English, Italian and French. The French and Italian interviews have not been translated, as the participants used specific terms in their own language to illustrate legal principles, HE figures and institutions, and student welfare mechanisms. To provide clarity, the thesis will offer brief explanations of the meanings of the words and the functions of the roles they cover. Furthermore, I am fluent in French, both spoken and written. The thesis will provide an English translation of quotations from the interviews selected to describe the results of the comparative analysis.

All transcripts were pseudonymised and anonymised, ensuring that personal identifiers, political affiliations, religious views, and other sensitive information were removed. No personal data will be shared with third parties, universities, or governmental authorities. Finally, research results will only be disseminated in aggregated and anonymised form.

3.5.5 RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY AND REFLEXIVITY

My prior role as a student researcher intern conducting an internship within the ESU shaped my access to national SROs and facilitated the interview stage. I also met three of the participants or national referents during the 88th ESU Board Meeting, and some Italian contacts were acquaintances from previous collaborations in student representation. This familiarity reduced the need for extensive trust-building and encouraged open, authentic exchanges (James & Busher, 2011).

Participants were informed via email or direct messages (Instagram, LinkedIn, Telegram) about the aims of my Master's research, the scope of the thesis, the adopted methodologies, and the data protection measures. Conversations unfolded as interactive exchanges in which both differences and similarities were addressed, reflecting my dual position as peer and researcher (James & Busher, 2011). Despite occasional technical disruptions, such as temporary internet connection failures, the overall flow of interaction was maintained.

Throughout the interviews, participants primarily positioned themselves as university students embedded within specific legal and institutional systems. Norwegian interviewees, for example, described the difficulty of reconciling academic responsibilities with representative duties that required constant negotiation with higher education authorities and political actors. They emphasised that student representation remains a voluntary activity, with no institutional policy providing academic flexibility or workload adjustment (Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020). The lack of formal recognition often forces student representatives to choose between academic performance and advocacy work (Klemenčič, 2024; Linder et al., 2019). As Matei and Iwinska (2018) note, historical power relationship dynamics surrounding student activism continue to shape how universities perceive politically active students. Norwegian participants' reflections revealed a broader tension between seeing themselves as active agents capable of influencing policy and as dependent subjects constrained by institutional hierarchies that do not structurally support their role (Monypenny, 1963).

Participants also framed students either as members of the academic community with decision-making power or as subordinated actors positioned as consumers, with representatives holding limited influence. In both cases, they showed awareness of the material and relational barriers students face, as well as of power dynamics among stakeholders in formal and informal arenas (Hauptman, 2013; Klemenčič, 2024; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022).

This duality resonates with my own positionality: I entered the field as a graduate student within the Italian HE system and as a former ESU intern. These roles shaped how I was perceived and how I interpreted participants' narratives. Acknowledging both proximity and distance was essential to avoid over-identification and maintain analytical balance.

I adopted a reflexive stance to examine how students are positioned within HE systems and how SROs exert influence across institutional and national governance levels (Klemenčič, 2024; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022). This involved reflecting on intersections and distinctions

between student representation and partnership (Bovill et al., 2016; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022), emphasising their dependence on organisational, legal, and political conditions. Situating these reflections within broader traditions of student activism (Beaud, 2022; De Gregorio, 2020; Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2014; Joly, 2022; Wieviorka, 2023; Vespa et al., 2024) highlighted the embeddedness of SROs in national cultures and power structures.

Ultimately, reflexivity served not only as an ethical commitment, ensuring trust and transparency, but also as a methodological tool to analyse how Student Representation operates within specific HE systems, the power dynamics it entails, and the material conditions that constrain or enable student agency. Adopting this stance allowed me to situate student representation within the broader challenges to academic freedom in the EHEA and to trace how social and political transformations shape students' capacity to act.

3.4.6 CODING STRATEGY, CLUSTERING AND EMERGING THEMES

This research employed thematic analysis to identify similarities and differences between documentary sources and semi-structured interviews. Following Antonucci (2013) and Bray & Jiang (2014), thematic analysis is particularly suitable for comparative qualitative research grounded in existing research in the HE studies. Furthermore, thematic analysis can also be used to extract underexplored sub-dimensions related to existing topics on academic freedom and student representation that have never been identified or connected to existing sub-topics.

A mixed coding approach was implemented (Fereday & Eimear, 2006). A mixed coding approach was the most sustainable approach to implement for the thematic analysis, as it is guided by two clear theoretical frameworks: the capability approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999) (see Section 2.1.4) and the student impact theory (Klemenčič, 2024) (see Section 2.2). These frameworks allow us to firstly grasp the gaps between the legal recognition of student representation, which is present in nearly all EHEA countries (ESU, 2024), and

the institutional, financial, and political barriers that SROs face in pursuing and fulfilling their agentic orientation (Klemenčič, 2024). They also allow us to understand how SROs adapt to overcome these barriers. In addition, the mixed coding approach is adaptable (Fereday & Eimear, 2006) and enables the identification of topics connected with the notion of academic freedom, such as the politicisation and neoliberalisation of higher education (Joly, 2022; Láncos, 2021; Buoso, 2021; Hauptman, 2013; Violini et al., 2021). This allows us to contextualise these phenomena within the specific systems of higher education and student representation, gain insight, and understand how these problems are being addressed and how SROs react to them. Lastly, mixed coding (Fereday & Eimear, 2006) is also appropriate for identifying topics from the student perspective, which is one of the research objectives (see sections 1.3 and 3.1), and for extracting underexplored topics connected with the issue of student academic freedom (Nordal, 2016).

Deductive coding has primarily been used in documentary analysis to identify cross-national and context-based limitations and violations (RQ1), as well as the range of collective actions that SROs rely on and the reasons for choosing particular types of collective action (RQ2). Lastly, it sheds light on the political agency of SROs in relation to the identified limitations and violations, and on how these are addressed in the national public decision-making process (RQ3). The deductive coding strategy involves identifying existing topics related to academic freedom issues that can be connected to either the capability approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999) or the student impact theory (Klemecic, 2024). Deductive coding grasps the nine aforementioned codes in section 3.3 of the qualitative documentary analysis.

Generally, the deductive code has been identified the following topics:

- Politicisation of Higher Education (Joly, 2022; Láncos, 2021)
- Neoliberalisation of Higher Education (Hauptman, 2013)
- Socio-Economic Inequities of Access to Higher Education (MacFarlane, 2011)
- Levels of Student Involvement in Governance (Klemenčič, 2024)

- Legal Definitions and Dimension of Student of Academic Freedom (Karran, 2007; Nordal, 2016; Popovic, 2023)
- Organisational Dimension of the SRO (Klemenčič 2012; 2024)
- Student Governance Dynamics (Klemenčič, 2024; Meeuwissen & al., 2019)

These identified codes will serve as guidelines for inductive coding, which, like deductive coding, must be theory-driven. Therefore, the identified topics must be connected to one of these dimensions.

Later in the interview phase, inductive coding was applied for two main reasons: first, to categorise existing topics on academic freedom from the perspective of university students and SROs, and to understand the impact of existing issues on student agency (Klemenčič, 2024) and academic freedom (Nordal, 2016); and second, to identify topics affecting academic freedom that have not previously been associated with these issues, either because they focus on the institutional dimension (Nordal, 2016), or because they address how students can express their political position in an authoritarian regime (Mazzero, 2025).

Inductive coding was suitable for provide and in-detail and further analysis of RQ1 on how student academic freedom can be limited or hinder largely academic students within and outside academia and RQ3 to stress what are the factors that explain the divergence and convergence on SROs's influence in national HE policies and what other role can cover in the political arena over than representative (Bovill & al., 2016; Cinci, 2017; Klemenčič, 2024; Meeuwissen & al., 2019) Furthermore, inductive coding is suitable to grasp also the informal and relational dimension between SROs and political authorities in formal and informal arena, the factors that explain the complexity of the power relationship dynamics between SROs, university administration and national government (Klemenčič, 2024) and the socio-economic dimension that hinder student capability to access and navigate in the HE over the legal dimension (Abbiati & al., 2018; Musselin, 2019, 2024; Sursock, 2024b; Romito, 2025) and how the political dimension significantly affects SROs political agency (DeGregorio, 2020; Joly, 2022).

Table 5: List of the inductive codes identified

NAME OF THE INDUCTIVE CODES	BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE CODES
<i>Expressive and Embodied Student Agency</i>	This code emphasises the importance of collective action based on performance, such as protesting, as well as creative and community-building student events at the university.
<i>Level of Involvement</i>	In line with Klemenčič's (2024) Student Impact Theory, the level of involvement indicates the extent to which SROs are involved in HE governance and public decision-making processes. It also focuses on how much SROs are involved outside of HE governance.
<i>Student Authoritative Power</i>	This refers to the decisional power that SROs have in specific issues of higher education politics. This highlights the impact of their decisional power in relation to the level of involvement.
<i>Broad Social and Political Context</i>	How existing and recurrent context-based social and political issues influence SROs' political agency
<i>Effectiveness of SROs</i>	In line with the Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024), this draws attention to how SROs, with the support of the institutional Higher Education and Student Welfare systems, can respond to and address identified limitations and violations.
<i>Political and Ideological Position</i>	This highlights the implicit and explicit political and ideological positions of HE, political authorities and SROs, particularly in France and Italy. This code focuses on the impact that either divergence or convergence of political position have in SROs' political agency and orienting agentic orientation (Klemenčič, 2024)
<i>Advocacy Repertoire</i>	This refers to advocacy strategies that SROs use, such as reporting and media campaigns on social and traditional media (media press, radio and television)
<i>Implementation of Payments Service in the HE</i>	This follows Hauptman's (2013) list of strategies that university administrations implement in response to reductions in public funding. This code reflects how university students have to pay for access to student welfare and how higher education (HE) and political authorities have

	successfully or unsuccessfully implemented new fees to access new financial resources.
<i>Student Representative Political Agency</i>	Following Klemenčič's (2024) definition of political agency, this code focuses on the agentic orientation of SROs in the four countries under consideration. The code serves to capture both cross-national trends and the contextual basis of SROs' agentic orientation.
<i>Commodification and Disincentivation of Internationalisation</i>	This code illustrates how internationalisation of HE, despite being one of the core pillars of the EHEA, has been commodified or discouraged due to bureaucratic barriers and unbalanced costs compared to national students, as well as recent HE policies.
<i>University Student Legal Position</i>	This builds on the questions posed by Mazzero (2025) and Nordal (2016) regarding the conceptualisation of student rights as either distinct or embedded. This code focuses on whether university students are part of the academic community, and on their decisional power and involvement in HE governance.
<i>Socio-Economic Student Capability</i>	This code emphasises that a student's social and economic family background significantly affects their trajectory when entering and navigating higher education (Abbiati et al., 2018; Musselin, 2024; Sursock, 2024b).
<i>Budgetary and Financial Constraints</i>	This code focuses on how budgetary cuts to HE and increasing lifestyle costs impact students' capabilities in HE. Additionally, it illustrates the mitigation strategies adopted by students in the absence of institutional support.
<i>Social and Political Rights</i>	This code encompasses the recognised and non-recognised social and political rights that university students can or cannot enjoy.
<i>Mismatch Between Institutional Capability and Student Need</i>	This code emphasises either the inefficiencies in the governance of the student welfare system or the convergence of its provision of welfare to students, and reflects the real financial costs that students need to cover.
<i>Institutional and Organisational Barriers</i>	This code emphasises the impact of organisational structures within a national higher education (HE) and student representation system, as well as the

	political and ideological position of HE and political authorities, on the agency, capability and independence of SROs.
<i>Social and Normative Discourse on HE and Student Representation</i>	This code highlights how social and normative HE and Student Representation can hinder SROs' ability to influence HE governance and discourse.
<i>Student Socio-Economic Capability</i>	This code emphasises that the social and economic background of students has a significant impact on their educational trajectory, and that students can struggle to progress in the HE system (Abbiati et al., 2018; Romito, 2025; Sursock, 2024b).
<i>Strategic Partnership</i>	This code focuses on forming coalitions with academic trade unions and the Rectors' Conference, as well as with external civic and political actors, such as NGOs (Cinci, 2017; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022).

Table 5 provides a list of the titles of the inductive codes identified, along with the dimensions covered by each code. Although most of them are theoretically based and guided, they aim to provide insight into how students and SROs navigate HE.

In the final phase, the deductive and inductive codes extracted from the documentary analysis and the semi-structured interviews were combined to form broader analytical themes, ensuring density and cross-case comparability. Examples of these themes include *'Effectiveness of SROs'*, *'Socio-economic barriers'*, *'The legal and institutional setting of student rights'*, *'The neoliberalisation of Higher Education'*, *'The politicisation of Higher education'* and *'Levels of involvement'*. A series of subcodes illustrates how each of these macrothemes is categorised and connected to other phenomena and issues, taking into account the contextual specificity of the legal systems, higher education systems and student representation systems of the four selected countries.

Finally, the merging themes were consolidated into overarching themes which represent the three research questions: *"Student Representative Agency tools and Strategies"* (RQ2), *"Violations and Limitations of Academic Freedom"* (RQ1),

“Convergence and Divergence of Student Political Agency” (RQ3), which correspond to the three research questions, thereby become the main parent code that will lead the comparative Analysis. In total, 7 codes were extracted from document analysis (two of which were later integrated into the interview codebook), and 23 from interviews, for a total of 30 codes.

CHAPTER 4: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND COMPARATIVE INSIGHT

This chapter presents the empirical findings derived from documentary qualitative analysis (see Section 3.4) and semi-structured interviews (see Section 3.5). These findings address three interrelated research questions: (RQ1) What are the recurrent violations and limitations of student academic freedom across the four case-study countries?; (RQ2) Which repertoires of collective action and strategies do Student Representative Organisations (SROs) adopt to navigate and overcome institutional and political constraints?; (RQ3) Which factors explain the convergence or divergence of SROs’ political agency within national politics?

Together, the answers to these questions illuminate cross-national trends in the EHEA, revealing both shared patterns and country-specific divergences shaped by institutional and organisational contexts (Anckar, 2008). As outlined in Section 1.3, this chapter contributes to understanding the uneven implementation of student representation within the EHEA by analysing the gap between formal and informal participation mechanisms, the degree to which SROs’ agency is embedded in HE governance, and the extent to which this agency translates into tangible political influence (Klemenčič, 2024). The analysis also explores the financial, material and political barriers that constrain both SROs’ political capacity and students’ academic freedom (Klemenčič, 2024; Macfarlane, 2011; Nordal, 2016; Sen, 1999).

The chapter concludes by outlining the thirty codes and corresponding macro-themes that emerged from the empirical analysis, clarifying the dimensions they encompass, and highlighting key similarities and differences among the four national contexts and their implications for students and SROs.

4.1 LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING OF STUDENT RIGHTS

This macro-code examines how student academic freedom (Nordal, 2016) is articulated within the legal frameworks of the four selected countries, either explicitly or implicitly. It investigates whether students are recognised as integral members of the academic community or as subordinate to professors' authority (Monypenny, 1963). This distinction provides the foundation for assessing whether students' academic rights constitute distinct rights or are merely extensions of staff rights (Mazzero, 2025; Nordal, 2016).

The code is divided into two sub-codes. The first, University Student Legal Position, analyses how students are positioned within HE systems, assessing whether they are entitled to specific academic rights or share those granted to professors and researchers (Mazzero, 2025; Nordal, 2016). The second, Social and Political Rights, explores the protection of students' social and political entitlements, including access to welfare, financial support, and scholarships (Nordal, 2016). Together, these sub-codes provide insight into how legal and institutional frameworks shape the scope and exercise of student academic freedom.

4.1.1 UNIVERSITY STUDENT LEGAL POSITION

Based on ESU 2024 report and the brief description of the legal framework on the notion of academic freedom described in section 3.2.2.2, this code illustrates in the first place in the how do university students can enjoy the same academic rights reserved for the academic community or a separate sets that recognizes decisional power over a limited issues connected to student welfare, learning or teaching and have social and political rights (Mazzero, 2025; Nordal, 2016; Popovic, 2023)

In France, academic freedom is framed as a professional right, meaning that only university professors and researchers, as a professional group within HE governance, are eligible for restricted rights and privileges (Beaud, 2022).

Consequently, students are not considered part of the academic community. Rather, they are subject to the scrutiny of academic authority. However, the 1987 constitutional ruling on the *Savary Law* explicitly states that students have the right to be represented in academia and that their elected representative must be involved in both university governance and the national HE councils⁴⁶. Although university students are assessed and are stakeholders in academia, in particular on the distribution and effectiveness of student welfare services, academic curricula, the budgeting of HE and HE educational objectives at university and national levels. However, they do not have the same protections and decisional power as university professors.

In Italy, the notion of student academic freedom is explicitly mentioned in Article 1 of the *Statuto dei Diritti e Doveri degli Studenti* (2011). The article does not consider university students to be part of the academic community, but rather as holders of civic and political rights who should have the same decision-making power as other members of the academic community⁴⁷. In terms of assessing student academic freedom in Italian HE, it has not yet been implemented at a national level, despite the attempts of the CNSU between 2010 and 2011 to implement a national code of conduct, as described by UDU_L2:

“[...] *There had been a push from the National Council of University Students to have a student rights charter, because many things were not guaranteed and the situation was quite different from university to university.*” [UDU_L2’s interview]

During the interview, UDU_L2 continued to explain that it has not been implemented due to obstructions from national governments and CRUIs in supporting this initiative. Later, UDU_L2 added that the *Statuto dei Diritti e dei Doveri degli Studenti* (2011) was implemented ten years later, but not nationwide. Instead, each university has implemented the *Statuto* either as part of its university regulations, by recognising students as part of the academic community with decision-making powers, or as a guideline. The latter is more

⁴⁶ <https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/decision/1984/83165DC.htm>

⁴⁷ http://www.cnsu.miur.it/argomenti/documentazione/mozioni/2011/mo_2011_09_08_002.aspx

symbolic and does not oblige the university administration to establish effective student representation and involvement in HE government, as set out in article 21 of the Gelmini reforms, which is the only legally binding reference to student representation.

According to sections 1 and 2 of the *University and University College Act 2024*, Norway is the only one of the four countries to explicitly recognise students as part of the academic community in legislation. Additionally, sections 2.2, 10.1 and 10.2 state that the Norwegian Union of University Students has the same rights as a university professor, a fact confirmed by the NSO:

“In Norway, again by law, students have the same right to academic freedom as professors. So a student can research whatever they want, as long as it's within the law.” [NSO_N's interview]

Consequently, university students have the right to participate in discussions and express their opinions, including those concerning the dismissal of a university professor, provided the session is public and relates to education. *The University and University College Act (2024)* implies that students can participate in every stage of the decision-making process within each HE governance structure in the Norwegian HE system, as NSO_N has explained:

“[...] So there are always students somewhere in every part of higher education (laughing). The students in the student parliament, in the executive committee of the local democracies, the presidents most likely have meetings with the principal often or director, whatever you want to call the person” [NSO_N's interview]

This quotation illustrates that Norwegian students are an integral part of the Norwegian academic community, always involved in HE affairs and contributing their opinions to the HE policy-making process, even when, as specified by NSO_N and NSO_O, they are not officially elected as student representatives. As shown in Table 3 of Klemenčič's (2024) corporativist model, students are automatically nominated as members of the local SROs active on university campuses.

Even though the *Higher Education Act* (2002) in Slovakia does not explicitly mention the inclusion of university students in the academic act, this law states that a student-led body must be included in and involved in public national discussions on HE. This law does not explicitly appoint SRVS as the sole representative body, according to the neo-corporativist system (Klemenčič, 2024) SRVS has been selected as a privileged body to interfere national government. Despite the lack of explicit formal mention, university students are strongly involved in the university and public decision-making process, as SRVS_M illustrates:

“This is a very strong character of the heritage of active students that since the 2nd World War and other things the students were always the voice of the active change and more liberal things and universities knew these. And they are protecting these because many of the professors who were students, who were there.” [SRVS_M's interview]

This quotation illustrates the strong historical and social tradition of student activism in Slovakia during the 1980s and 1990s, which included involvement in public decision-making and at the university (Klemenčič, 2024). As SRVS_M points out, students were among the main figures pushing for democratisation in Slovakia, as well as for greater involvement in the public decision-making process and to demand student rights at university. This aligns with the theoretical statement by Matei and Iwinska (2018) on observing the historical and cultural development of student activism, and the structure and relationships between student representatives and institutional governments.

Another sub-dimension of this theme concerns the degree of homogenisation in the applicability of student academic freedom across public and private HE institutions (Nordal, 2016). This dimension directly relates to RQ1, as it highlights the extent to which student academic freedom is recognised and implemented within different institutional frameworks, and to RQ3, as it reveals how national regulatory systems condition the agency and legitimacy of SROs.

In Norway, student academic freedom is fully standardised across both public and private institutions. Section 2.1 of the *Universities and University Colleges Act*

(2024) guarantees uniform rights, participation in governance, and involvement in quality assurance processes for all students, ensuring equal protection and representation regardless of institutional type.

In Slovakia, recent reforms to the *Higher Education Act* in 2022 and the implementation of QAA in the country in 2010 have similarly harmonised student rights across public and private universities. These standards require that all HE institutions establish internal quality systems that include student involvement and participation in programme evaluation and accreditation, thus embedding student representation into the formal governance structure of all types of HE institutions.

In France, despite the standardisation introduced through the *Code de l'Éducation* (Livre VII), significant differences persist between public universities and *the grandes écoles* (Musselin, 2019; Paradaise, 2017). While public universities are subject to national regulations mandating student participation in governance, the *grandes écoles* operate with greater autonomy. This results in variable degrees of representation, ranging from consultative involvement to minimal participation, reflecting institutional hierarchies and professional objectives that often supersede student input. Despite these divergences, FAGE's agency aims to enable students at *grandes écoles* to engage in student activism and access the instruments and initiatives developed by FAGE to address broad societal challenges, such as student housing crisis⁴⁸.

In Italy, the uneven and fragmented implementation of student rights defined in the *Statuto dei Diritti e dei Doveri* (2011), combined with a fragmented landscape of student representation (Vespa et al., 2024), has led to weak and inconsistent enforcement mechanisms. As a result, universities differ significantly in how they integrate students into decision-making processes. While some institutions actively promote participation, others, particularly private universities, limit or restrict it. Nonetheless, certain SROs based in private universities, such as

⁴⁸https://www.instagram.com/reel/DKXVESiifsl/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

UNILAB, hold seats in the CNSU, allowing them to exercise limited influence alongside public universities (Vespa & al., 2024). This unevenness highlights broader structural challenges in translating constitutional guarantees into coherent and equitable institutional practices

Although academic freedom for students is formally guaranteed within supranational and national frameworks (see sections 2.1.1 and 3.2.2), its implementation varies significantly depending on the institution. In Norway and Slovakia, for example, students are recognised as integral members of the academic community and must be represented at every stage of public decision-making. Both public and private universities are legally required to ensure student participation in governance and uphold academic freedom. By contrast, in France, students are considered stakeholders rather than full members of the academic community. While they are formally represented HE governance, their involvement often remains consultative, reflecting institutional hierarchies (Genelot, 2024). In Italy, implementation of the *Statuto dei Diritti e dei Doveri degli Studenti* (2011) is fragmented, largely dependent on individual HE institutions' initiative, and produces significant disparities in how student rights and representation are realised.

These cross-national variations suggest that formal legal guarantees alone do not ensure equal access to academic freedom. Instead, institutional design and national governance structures play a decisive role in shaping how student academic freedom is enacted in practice and how far SROs can exercise effective political agency within HE systems (Nordal, 2016)

4.1.2 SOCIAL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

The purpose of this sub-code is to identify which social and political rights are guaranteed, and at what university or national level. Furthermore, in line with the theoretical position of Matei and Iwinska (2018) on the use of a social and cultural framework to guide the interpretation of academic freedom, this sub-code will

shed light on how these rights are regulated in the absence of a clear legal framework.

Livre VIII of the *Code de l'Education* provides a general statement on the social and political rights to which university students are entitled. These rights, which cover both negative and positive aspects, are separate from those set out in other legislation. Students are entitled to protection from institutional and political interference, as well as state financial and social aid. Article L811-1 of *Livre VIII* implies freedom of expression. Article L811-3 recognises student representation at the university level in all university governance bodies. Articles L821-1, L821-2, L831-1 and L832-1 state that students are entitled to financial support from the state, specifically from the CROUS, which the state student welfare institution responsible for delivering services and providing financial aid and health coverage in the country.

According to the CNSU's 2018 and 2022 *'Rapporto sulla condizione degli studenti universitari'*, the uneven implementation of the *Statuto dei Diritti e dei Doveri* (2011) at the university level in Italy has led an uneven implementation of social and political rights. On the one hand, to the legislation of social rights such as housing, healthcare and financial assistance at the regional level through a regional student welfare institution known as an *'ente per il diritto allo studio'*. This institution can assess its own criteria and modalities for accessing and disseminating welfare provisions, and can implement local policies to reduce costs for students, such as offering grocery discounts or subsidising apartment rentals. Consequently, Italy does not have a unified student welfare system, but rather a fragmented one, whereby each regional government and university can set their own eligibility criteria for financial aid, tuition fee exemptions, scholarships and student housing, as explained by UDU_L2.:

*"Each university can establish its own specific criteria, which also depend on availability. Because, in cities like *****, for example, there's a system of colleges that's quite unique in Italy because there are several of them. On the other hand, cities like ***** still have relatively few student residences, so it's difficult, perhaps even more difficult, to find a place there. *****, for example, has the particularity*

of having many houses, even for housing in a public space, because it rents apartments that aren't inside large student residences, and therefore offers this option as well. Other cities, on the other hand, only have large public residences, and so students are housed there. There's no uniformity.[...]" [UDU_L2' interview]

This quotation further emphasises the fragmented landscape of the Italian HE system (Vespa et al., 2024). Italian university students must navigate a series of localised welfare systems to access scholarships, tuition fee exemptions, and financial and social aid. Students studying at different university sites therefore face different institutional barriers when trying to access welfare, scholarships and tuition fee exemptions, as each university has its own criteria. According to the CNSU reports from 2018 and 2022, the CNSU council has long advocated for the harmonisation of the student welfare system to a certain degree. This would allow students to access provisions released by the welfare system under the same criteria, while taking into account university autonomy and the specific circumstances of each university. This request is still unanswered.

On the other hand, the existing national law remains a point of reference of legislating political rights or national legal specific tailored measures. Italian university students are not eligible to vote from a distance and face barriers when accessing the healthcare system due to residency criteria, which force students to vote and receive medical treatment at their registered residence. Consequently, students spend a lot of money planning to return home to vote and receive medical attention. Regarding the latter, the CNSU (2018; 2022) state the existence of local voluntary agreements between the university administration and the local municipality can implement financial reductions reserved exclusively for university students, as well as policies that can facilitate access to healthcare through specific measures such as the *medico convenzionato*, which refers to a series of local doctors conventioned by the local professional unions who are available to medically visit students at an affordable price.

In Norway, the *StudentSampshipnad Act* (2007) formally recognised the Sampshipnad, a student-led body that governs student welfare organisations and

has a monopoly on guaranteeing access to, and the delivery of, the welfare system. This includes student housing, healthcare, and academic materials. This monopoly enables university students to adjust the allocation and dissemination of the welfare system based on students' needs and requests. As mentioned in Section 3.2.2.2.3.2, in order to access the student welfare system, Norwegian students must pay a semesterly student fee, which provides them with full Sampshipnad coverage. Furthermore, Norwegian students have financial rights, as illustrated by the NSO_N's description of the depositum: an amount of money students pay towards repairs to university accommodation:

“But when I move out, if I have painted the walls, and I have ruined the refrigerator, and they have to, you know, paint the wall and buy a new refrigerator, they take that money out of that account. And whatever is left, I get back. But if I have been a perfect student, and I have not ruined anything, I will have to get, I get like all the money back, plus interest.” [NSO_N's interview]

This quotation illustrates that, once they have finished their studies, university students receive the amount of money poured into the reparations, and sometimes even economic interests. As mentioned in sub-paragraph 3.2.2.3.2, Norwegian students also have a financial obligation to repay loans requested from *the Lånekassen*. The *Lånekassen* is the national banking system that provides student stipends and loans. Students must renew these loans every year. NSO_N describes how the *Lånekassen* works:

“That’s that, also what stay as a stipend goes to a loan depends on a couple of things..... 40% gets turned into a stipend once the school has sent information that you pass your exam and get, again, study points. So, if you have passed the year, at you have gotten 60 study points, 40% of what you got this year will be automatically transformed into a stipend and you only to 60% of what you have been asked” [NSO_N's interview]

Student loans can be partially transformed into a stipend once they finish the academic year, the accomplishment of the exams required for that academic freedom, and the attainment of a tertiary degree. Once the tertiary education is concluded, students still have to pay the remaining debt. As NSO_N later added,

few criteria define the amount of loan to provide, based on disability, living situation, and the possibility to work to contribute

Under the *Higher Education Act* (2002), the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Sport is responsible for guaranteeing access to and the effectiveness of student welfare services. Slovakian universities can have their own welfare organisation, which must ensure the delivery of services provided by the national state. Furthermore, these organisations can be led by local SROs⁴⁹. In practice, these organisations are often led or strongly influenced by local SROs, with the SRVS holding a privileged position at the national level. Although the law does not explicitly recognise SRVS as the sole representative body, its neo-corporatist status has made it the main interlocutor with government authorities. SRVS representatives are therefore regularly consulted in policy discussions concerning housing, scholarships, and student services, and they can lobby for improvements in welfare provision.

In summary, Italy is the only country without a unified legal framework for students' social and political rights or the organisation of national-level welfare provision. Furthermore, Italian university students are denied social and political rights, such as voting and healthcare. Welfare services are delegated to regions, municipalities and universities, and SROs have little influence over their delivery. By contrast, France, Norway and Slovakia all have clear national frameworks in place. France and Slovakia guarantee general social and political rights through central state regulation, while Norway defines these rights in detail and entrusts their implementation to student-led organisations.

4.2 RECURRENT VIOLATIONS AND LIMITATIONS ON STUDENT ACADEMIC FREEDOM

This section examines the recurrent cross-national and contextual based violations and limitations of student academic freedom emerging from the four

⁴⁹ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/slovakia/administration-and-governance-central-and-regional-level>

country cases. Adopting the capability approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999), it assesses the gap between the formal recognition of rights and their effective capability of pursuing tertiary studies, being able to reach state welfare provision within HE systems. The findings reveal that while student academic freedom in the EHEA is legally protected and recognised (See Section 2.1.1), structural inequalities and institutional hierarchies continue to constrain students' agentic capabilities to participate, express dissent, and influence decision-making (Klemenčič, 2024).

This section explores how institutional, material and political constraints manifest themselves through legal ambiguities, financial and material barriers, and socio-political pressures. It illustrates how these factors restrict the exercise of student academic freedom across different countries.

4.2.1 NEOLIBERALISATION OF THE HE SYSTEM

According to Buoso (2021), Hauptman (2013) and Violini and his colleagues (2021), the neoliberalisation of HE aims to reduce public funding to sustain HE finances and systems. This can hurt student representation, either directly or indirectly. According to Hauptman (2013), reductions in public funding and state resources have forced universities to increase tuition fees and expand the private sector's presence in HE. Lastly, there is an increasing reliance on performance-based criteria to assess national funding more effectively. The main code comprises the following sub-codes: budget cuts; concentration of economic power; implementation of payment services; and expansion of the private sector in HE. Each sub-code examines the impact of the neoliberalisation of HE on student academic freedom and representation.

4.2.2.1 BUDGETARY CUTS

All four of the selected countries have documented a series of budget cuts over the last twenty years. This has impacted students' capability to pursue tertiary studies, as well as reducing institutional autonomy and the capability to provide

welfare services, including material and academic courses throughout the academic year (Hauptman, 2013)

France's draft 2025 budget includes plans to cut approximately €630 million from higher education and research funding⁵⁰. These budget cuts will have a terrible effect on the majority of French universities, exacerbating the impact of current inflation. FAGE_M illustrates how these budgetary cuts have significantly negatively affected 2/3 of the public universities in France:

"[.....] that at the end of 2024, there were 60 universities out of 74 that had voted a negative budget, a deficit, with more expenses than revenues. And in fact, this is explained because universities, for several years, with inflation and salary increases, they have had to pay more money to revalue salaries on pensions, etc." [FAGE_M's interview]

This quotation shows that the university administration has been trying to resolve mainly faculty issues, such as professor salaries, pensions, and the division of administrative tasks. Consequently, university administrations have made cuts to teaching courses, training opportunities and academic materials. This has greatly impacted students' academic freedom, due not only to an increase in tuition fees, but also to the removal or lack of provision of professional training in HE, a reduction in the number of teaching courses and programmes available, and fewer places on specific courses.⁵¹ Recently, FAGE published a post on its social media page regarding the draft of the national budget plan for 2026. FAGE denounced the significant budget cuts to the funds allocated for student associations and activism, including the national budget for SROs⁵². This highlights the significant challenges faced by French students when it comes to pursuing tertiary studies, student representation and activism, and accessing scholarships and financial and social aid, all without having to worry about

⁵⁰ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/french-academics-fear-grim-funding-situation-under-barnier>

⁵¹ https://www.instagram.com/reel/DDH7I3oonYx/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

⁵² https://www.instagram.com/reel/DPmJiUtij7P/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

finances. This also has a significant negative impact on SROs, which are unable to finance and invest in initiatives such as *Agorae, Dispostives de Longements Solidaires* and tutoring programmes on university exam, which help students avoid entering a situation of precarity or poverty by ensuring they have secure accommodation, affordable access to groceries and academic support.

The 2023 joint report by CGIL and FLC, *“La Nuova Emergenza Universitaria: Correggere gli Equilibri”, Correggere gli squilibri. Rilanciare il Sistema*” specifically illustrates the continuous reduction in public funding from the national state to the FFO over the last twenty years. Consequently, Italian universities have increased tuition fees, which are now among the highest in Europe, alongside those in the UK, Spain, and the Netherlands. This is despite the introduction of a national no-tax area in 2017, which allows for a partial or total exemption from tuition fee payments. Consequently, Italian university students pay an average annual tuition fee of between 900 and 1,000 euros at public universities and 3,408 euros for a bachelor's degree or 3,543 euros for a master's degree at private universities⁵³. As a consequence, Italian university students must constantly rely on their family's financial situation and ability to navigate in the HE to pay the tuition fee.

Recently, Norway, like every country in the EHEA has also effected budgetary cuts on HE, which has never occurred before as NSO_N mentioned:

“We have a lot of all of money, which is weird because we do not touch it (personal sarcastic comment) Anyways sorry, One way they have been cut (thinking) the finances to Higher Education” [NSO_N's interview]

This quotation illustrates how sudden this change of direction is, as Norway has never before questioned the national budget for higher education in favour of other areas. This sudden change of direction has impacted not only the faculty,

⁵³ “Università Quanto mi costi. Almeno 11 Università Fuori Legge. Una sintesi della Ricerca UDU”, UDU 2024 (<https://unioneuniversitari.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Sintesi-ricerca-Udu-sulle-tasse-universitarie-2024.pdf>)

which has imposed a hiring ban, but also research activities conducted by students, as mentioned by NSO_N:

“We have a newspaper (NSO_N correct themselves) a web page newspaper..... that is like for Higher Education students. And that paper writes like every fall in Spring, it's like: “This university had to cut so many people to get there their financial.....to go through” [NSO_N's interview]

Budget cuts have started to limit the ability of student activists and organisations at the university to disseminate their work to the academic community and engage in activities that enhance their professional and academic skills, affecting the financial security of student organisations.

Slovakia has also done budget cuts in the HE in the last five years, according to OECD 2021's report on *“Improving Higher Education in Slovakia”* where the national government has reduced HE public investing from teaching, student accommodations, loans and scholarships⁵⁴. Reductions in public funding for teaching, student accommodation, loans, and scholarships have weakened institutional capacity and constrained students' access to basic welfare provisions.

In recent years, the national government has made a series of financial cuts to the Erasmus programmes⁵⁵. As noted by Chrancoková and his colleagues (2020) and Fisher et al. (2015), many Slovak students choose to complete part or all of their tertiary education abroad, particularly in the Czech Republic, Poland, or Hungary, where institutional systems are similar, tuition costs are comparable, and language barriers are minimal. This pattern reflects not only the limited domestic opportunities available to Slovak students but also the declining attractiveness of the national higher education system. It ultimately reduces students' capacity to plan their educational pathways autonomously and

⁵⁴ OECD's 2021 report “Improving Higher Education in Slovakian Republic” (https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2021/11/improving-higher-education-in-the-slovak-republic_805566a9/259e23ba-en.pdf)

⁵⁵ <https://uni-foundation.eu/2025/09/03/new-funding-cuts-for-higher-education-erasmus-projects/>

undermines the broader goal of academic freedom as a capability to choose and pursue one's learning trajectory.

Across all four cases, budgetary cuts have reduced students' substantive freedoms, defined according to Macfarlane (2011) and Sen's (1999) capability approach, by increasing their personal financial burdens and limiting access to academic and welfare resources. These developments highlight a structural tension between the formal recognition of student rights in policy frameworks and the material conditions required for their realisation.

4.2.1.2 CONCENTRATION OF ECONOMIC POWER

Buoso (2021) and Violini and his colleagues (2021) pointed out that the increased reliance on and implementation of performance-based criteria when assessing national and additional performance-based funding. This has created a situation in which fewer and fewer universities have the financial resources to not only achieve major institutional autonomy and power, but also to guarantee the delivery of welfare services. Even fewer are hindered by structural factors such as budget cuts.

As described by Agasisti (2008) and Buoso (2021), all universities across the EHEA have implemented performance-based criteria to assess national higher education funding more efficiently. These criteria apply to universities that attract a significant number of students, have received notable academic and research awards, and produce a substantial volume of research publications. However, SMIVEZ's 2023 reports emphasised that implementing these performance-based criteria has concentrated financial and economic power in the hands of larger universities with prestigious research consortia. This has led to a significant power imbalance between universities, as described by FAGE_M in relation to the current funding system adopted in France:

"In addition to this, there are changes in the funding methods of universities where they increasingly have to be funded often through calls for projects or action contracts with the state... Calls for projects are a source of competition,

differentiating universities. And so only the large universities can apply for this funding, the smaller ones have difficulty obtaining funding." [FAGE_M's interview]

This quotation is consistent with Musselin (2019; 2024) and Sursock (2024a), who demonstrate how project-based funding and research consortia, such as the COMUEs, favour large universities, particularly those with well-established research infrastructures. As mentioned in the previous section, nearly two-thirds of French universities were underfunded and have applied significant cuts to teaching courses, training courses and the number of students that can attend a university course. Universities with significant financial resources may be better able to absorb inflationary pressures and avoid the aforementioned drastic cuts.

Genelot (2024) further increased the concentration of economic power, which has also increased among SROs. As discussed in sub-paragraph 3.2.2.2.1.3, the number of reserved seats for student representatives in the CNESER and the CNOUS has been limited. In addition, the seats for the CNESER and CNOUS are renewed every two years. Consequently, the highly competitive national election system for student representation in these two councils systematically excludes smaller, less well-resourced SROs, leaving large, national SROs such as *FAGE*, *UNEF* and *UNI* in a dominant position. This restricts the range of student interests represented at a national level. Consequently, only a few French SROs have the financial power to influence HE governance and participate in public decision-making processes.

A similar pattern emerges in Italy, where the 2023 CGIL and FLC report "*Nuova Emergenza Universitaria*" shows that the *Gelmini Reform* (Law 240/2010) intensified performance-based criteria for funding allocation. Since the early 2000s, FFO has rewarded universities according to enrolment numbers and research performance (Agasisti, 2008). This framework deepened the divide between wealthier and weaker universities, influencing not only academic outcomes but also the distribution of welfare resources. Furthermore, SMIVEZ (2023) evidences a significant concentration of financial power in Northern and Centre Italian University rather than the Southern ones, reinforcing the existing welfare and richness gap between North and South of Italy.

Italian interview data underscore this disparity. Universities with stronger financial capacity, in particular private ones, can establish voluntary-based agreements either with private companies or municipal authorities, such as discounted public transport or affordable housing, while smaller institutions cannot. In addition, private universities can also have the power to dismantle these voluntary-based agreements:

“Until last year, my university offered the opportunity to get a discount with Trenitalia [...]” [BLAB_L’s Interview]

“There is a local agreement here which means that single rooms are around 300 euros per month.” [UDU_L2’ Interview]

Norway has also adopted a performance-based system, similar to those in Italy and France, to efficiently assess national funding across Norwegian public universities, university colleges, and universities of applied science (Bleiklie, 2023). However, the system adopted differs from those in France and Italy in that it does not focus on the results of research activities or the number of students enrolled, as described by NSO_N and NSO_O:

“Other things, they have connected the amount of money to Universities or Higher Education Institutions, they are connected to (thinking) how many students.....(pause) like how many study points the university produces” [NSO_N’s interview]

“So, there is definitely an incentive for institutions in Norway to make sure that as many students as possible finish their degrees on time because that just reflects a better quality of education on their students. But also it varies a lot from disciplines” [NSO_O’s interview]

These quotations illustrate the current funding system adopted in Norway, the *'student point system'*, whereby universities receive funding from the national state based on the number of students enrolled whose graduate within the timeframe required for a tertiary degree, whether Bachelor's or Master's. Therefore, the more students graduate from a university, the more funding will be allocated to it. Like in France, Italy, Norwegian, Universities that have major

funding face less negative impact on the budgetary cuts and they can provide further guarantee on the practical exercise of student academic freedom (Nordal, 2016). The student point system highlights important issues regarding students' perception of themselves as consumers of educational services provided by universities rather than as participants and designers of the academic community who contribute their knowledge (Bovill et al., 2016; Hauptman, 2013; Klemenčič, 2024; Nordal, 2016).

Like many EHEA countries, Slovakia has also adopted a performance-based model (OECD, 2021). However, its impact differs. It has not led to resource concentration based on research output or enrolment levels. Instead, concentration stems primarily from the historical prestige and geographic positioning of universities located in the capital and certain regional centres (Pisár & Šipikal, 2017). As one Slovakian interviewee explained, some faculties, such as veterinary medicine in Košice, attract both national and international students due to their reputation, rather than funding performance:

“[...] especially in the city of Marken, (Comment) there is one medical faculty and also in Kosice, which is the second largest city in the eastern part of Slovakia, there are a lot of who are studying veterinary medicine and also classical medicine [.....]. A second one with veterinary medicine is because the faculty who have this veterinary programme is quite really high awarded by one of the best in Europe. So this is the reason why some international students come for the veterinary in Kosice.” (SRVS_M's interview)

In sum, while in France, Italy, and Norway the concentration of economic power results directly from performance-based funding mechanisms, whether linked to research output (Italy), project contracts (France), or student completion rates (Norway), in Slovakia it is more closely tied to institutional prestige and geography (Pisár & Šipikal, 2017). Finally, in France, this dynamic also extends to SROs, where competition for limited CNESER seats entrenches the dominance of large national SROs such as FAGE and UNI (Genelot, 2024).

4.2.1.3 IMPLEMENTATION OF PAYMENT SERVICES IN THE HE

Hauptman (2013) argues that university administrations may seek to sustain or enhance the quality of teaching and learning by introducing payment-based services, such as new tuition fees or paid welfare provisions. According to the author, these initiatives often pursue a dual objective: generating additional revenue while ostensibly improving the student academic experience.

In this research, the code extends beyond Hauptman's (2013) interpretation to include both attempts to introduce new student fees and situations where students are required to pay for services, even when there are legal frameworks prohibiting implementing further charges on behalf of students. It also considers how the absence of clear regulations on cost-sharing can negatively affect students' capabilities to access HE (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999)

Two new tuition fees were recently proposed in Norway: one applicable to all university students, including Norwegians, and another targeting only international students. In the 2025 national budget, the Norwegian Parliament suggested introducing a fee for retaking exams, with the amount to be determined autonomously by each university. The stated rationale was to compensate for budgetary cuts to HE and to incentivise timely graduation⁵⁶. However, the proposal faced strong opposition from university rectors, vice-rectors, and the NSO, who argued that it would undermine the principle of free HE and penalise students facing structural or personal barriers to the completion of tertiary degree. Following this coordinated resistance, the measure was ultimately withdrawn.

The NSO has denounced the introduction of tuition fees reserved exclusively for non-EU and non-EHEA international students⁵⁷. This measure has been planned since 2023. The introduction of tuition fees has ended the universal free education in Norwegian HE, which has long been praised, creating a significant imbalance between EU and EHEA students and those from outside Europe, who

⁵⁶ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/proposed-resit-fee-could-deter-students-finishing-degree>

⁵⁷ <https://esu-online.org/policies/bm84-stop-the-introduction-of-tuition-fees-in-norway/>

have to cover the cost of their HE mobility. In June 2025, the government delegated responsibility for setting these fees to universities themselves⁵⁸, further decentralising the system, as NSO_O noted:

“[...] they are changing the rules in the sense they ask the institutions can choose how much they want to ask for the students for tuition fee. So instead of tuition fee set by the government, the institution can reduce them or increase them as they want” [NSO_O’s interview]

These measures risk creating inequalities between European and non-European students in the EHEA system and eroding Norway’s reputation of having a gracious and inclusive HE system, an aspect that will discuss in-depth in a dedicated paragraph.

As mentioned in Section 4.1.2 of 'Social and Political Rights of University Students', Italy has a fragmented series of localised welfare systems, SROs and university administrations are planning to set a series of voluntary agreements between private companies and local municipalities that make it more feasible to access the healthcare system without changing residence. Despite the presence of these agreements, UDU_L2 points out that Italian university students still have to pay to access the system in the absence of a clear legal national framework on student welfare:

“Unfortunately... the impact is quite significant. There are cities that have activated collaboration services between the city and the university so that out-of-town students can have access to a general practitioner, for example. In other cities, it's still a paid service, so you still have to pay for a visit at a reasonable price.” [UDU_L2’s interview]

This fragmentation generates territorial disparities, where the ability to access welfare services depends on local political will and institutional resources. Even

⁵⁸https://www.instagram.com/p/DLAK9AXMPPhR/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

when student SROs successfully advocate for implementing or improving services, such as transportation systems:

*“***** is a city lacking in transport... thanks to university students and the attention of the Municipality of ***** , the On-Off service was born, a night bus service on call that is working very well.” [UNITiN_E’s interview]*

Although the initiative was successfully implemented thanks to student advocacy mobilised by local SROs, users still have to pay for it, albeit at a reduced rate. This demonstrates a broader trend: even when SROs succeed in making the institution more responsive, the financial burden is transferred to students, thereby reinforcing existing socioeconomic inequalities.

The 22nd and 23rd editions of the *Indicateur du Coût de la Rentrée* (2024, 2025) report on hidden or supplementary costs specific to certain programmes. These include additional fees for training materials, textbooks, course-specific supplies, research, practical training and healthcare coverage. On average, these costs amount to €179. Students engaged in professional athletic or artistic activities pay an average of €570, while those studying odontology pay up to €1,241. Despite a 1993 court ruling by the Conseil d’État that it is illegal for universities to introduce further payments for academic materials⁵⁹, French students must cover the cost of all academic materials necessary for their studies, a fact confirmed by both FAGE reports and FAGE_M:

“No, this is illegal everywhere there is a ban on everywhere. More often than not, among the universities, among other parts, the payer font, note in santé, in staff etc” [FAGE_M’s interview]

In Slovakia, the national government has further raised the VAT on books from 10%, which is one of the highest rates in Europe (Pisár & Šipikal, 2017), to 23⁶⁰%.

⁵⁹ According to the 23rd edition of *Indicateur of Coûts de la Rentrée*, court ruling 1993 specifies that L 719-4 of the Code de l’éducation, which defines the funding system of the universities, explicitly states that universities cannot implement additional payments on behalf of student without a proper justification

⁶⁰ <https://esu-online.org/slovakia-open-letter-of-srvs-and-esu-to-the-minister-of-education-research-development-and-youth-of-the-slovak-republic/>

This effectively transforms academic materials into luxury goods. Despite repeated demands by SRVS for a reduction, the rate remains in place, making access to textbooks and research materials prohibitively expensive for many students.

Overall, these cases reveal distinct trajectories within a shared process: the gradual transformation of HE from a public entitlement into a conditional privilege (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999). In Norway, the introduction of tuition fees for international students undermines the universalist foundation of the Nordic model (Crosier & Haj, 2020). In France, hidden costs linked to academic materials and training quietly erode affordability. In Italy, the absence of national welfare criteria and reliance on local agreements translates into fragmented and unequal access (CNSU 2018; 2022). Finally, in Slovakia, fiscal constraints directly limit students' capabilities to pursue and complete higher education.

Across all four countries, these developments illustrate a gradual market-oriented restructuring of HE, whereby the financial responsibility for sustaining universities is increasingly shifted onto students (Hauptman, 2013). This shift constrains the material foundations of student academic freedom and narrows the capability for equitable participation across the EHEA.

4.2.1.4 EXPANSION OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR IN THE HE

Drawing on the work of Bleiklie (2023) and Hauptman (2013), it can be seen that private actors have become increasingly involved in university governance and the production and dissemination of research results. The authors have observed that university administrations have become more financially stable, ensuring that students have a choice of programme and making the university more accountable (Hauptman, 2013; Violini et al., 2021). This observable trend across four countries manifests through managerial participation in governance, corporate partnerships in research and the commercialisation of student life. Together, these forms of involvement reshape the boundaries of university

autonomy and restrict students' ability to act as autonomous agents within HE decision-making structures (Klemenčič, 2024; Macfarlane, 2011).

ESU's 2024 report, *'Bologna with Student Eyes'*, highlights the growing number of managerial figures on university boards in all four countries, often alongside political appointees. This shift in governance priorities moves the focus from collegial decision-making to performance management. In Italy, for instance, student representatives, who may be in the minority based on the number of seats on the Academic Senate and CDA, share boards with external managers appointed by ministries or regional authorities. This raises concerns about co-optation and reduced political agency (Klemenčič, 2024):

"Instead, the Board of Directors is made up of the Rector and all external people; they are managers chosen by either the Ministry or the Province or the University, basically. There, there is only one student, who is by right the President of the Student Council.

*"Even there, citing my experience, perhaps it is almost worth more, in the sense that he and the Rector are the only internal members; all the others are people who don't attend the University of *****, namely managers and so on."*
[UNITN_E's director]

This imbalance exemplifies the risk identified by Klemenčič (2024) that student representation may be instrumentalised to legitimise efficiency-oriented reforms rather than amplify student voice in the HE governance.

Similar dynamics are reported in France, where a 2020 Constitutional ruling required local governance committees to include at least 50% external members⁶¹, specifying that elected student representatives must still be involved in the HE governance and orienting HE policies to incorporate student experience in the HE; deepening managerial influence and weakening the collegial model. This highlights the necessity highlighted implicitly by Klemenčič's arguments on the presence of SROs in the HE system (See Table 1 & 2), that the elected

⁶¹ <https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/en/decision/2020/2020810DC.htm>

student representatives must possess the institutional knowledge to contrast the managerial turn that HE has gone to.

Moving on to issues regarding research partnerships and collaboration with third-party actors, primarily industries (Bleiklie, 2023), the ESU's 2024 report illustrates that Italy has the least regulated situation concerning the presence of third-party actors in HE. Private actors can legally audit study programmes at the faculty and department level. This may significantly affect students' employability after graduation and might face potential repercussions outside of university for those who oppose the study programmes' curricula.

A bigger concern in Norway is the increasing number of research collaborations between private companies and universities, specifically Norwegian gas and oil companies. This is mainly because there is a risk that negative comments or results relating to the research will not be published (Bleiklie, 2023). Student Parliaments and student democracies in HE can successfully demand the cancellation of contracts that violate and hinder academic freedom:

“One of the problems of that previous (corrects themselves) of these contracts previously with Equinor had at my home university and in other universities in Norway has been the wish not to criticise Equinor for its actions through research. That has been removed in a lot of I think in all of the intentions deals that have been made with Higher Education, made because it directly interferes with academic freedom” [NSO_O' interview]

As NSO_O later mentioned, the ability of Student Democracy and the Student Parliament to oversee research agreements with private industries is quite limited, as they can only demand the removal of such agreements on behalf of the entire university, rather than individual research consortia or researchers within the university. Consequently, student monitoring of corporate influence in higher education remains reactive and limited.

The commercialisation of student life further extends private influence into everyday university spaces. As another Norwegian student representative noted:

“in some institutions is that the students (correct themselves) that some student social lines are partnered with private companies to host social events. So that student unions can..... Like, for instance, the student union for Informatics for IT students have a lot of social events that are being paid for by private companies; and those private companies use these social events to recruit students into the company when they are finishing with their studies”
[NSO_O’s interview]

This example highlights how seemingly benign partnerships contribute to the marketisation of student identity, where representation and social participation become tools for corporate branding rather than for collective empowerment.

The situation in Slovakia is different. Although private actors are less involved in higher education, political interference and clientelism have become more prevalent. Following Fico’s return to power, anti-corruption oversight mechanisms were dismantled, allowing ideological influence to penetrate universities. According to the 2025 Artistic Freedom in Slovakia report, the new government is attempting to control every cultural activity. As one Slovak student representative reported:

“Both of them. Sometimes they have supporters and sometimes the government has some nominees in the faculty spots and in the University Board, sorry.”
[SRVS_E’s interview]

This testimony confirms that, even in the absence of strong private sector influence, political clientelism poses parallel threats to academic autonomy and student representation, mirroring the broader erosion of checks and balances in Slovak public institutions.

In all four countries, there has been an intensification of external interference in higher education governance, albeit in different ways. In Italy and France, the increasing managerialisation of HE governance has eroded collegiality and student participation, while corporate partnerships in Norway and political clientelism in Slovakia have had a similar effect. These trends collectively signal a transition from participatory to performance-oriented governance, thereby

diminishing students' autonomy and their ability to act as political and epistemic agents within academia (Klemenčič, 2024; Macfarlane, 2011).

4.2.1.5 COMMODIFICATIONS AND DISINCENTIVATION OF INTERNATIONALISATION

This sub-code analyses how financial, legal and bureaucratic constraints have turned the internationalisation of higher education into a selective and commercialised process. International mobility is a pillar of the EHEA and an aspect encouraged by the Bologna Process⁶². In recent years, it has been reframed as a privilege dependent on the economic capacity and geopolitical priorities of the national state.

In France and Norway, international students face disproportionate financial burdens. Data from the *Baromètre de la précarité étudiante* (2023, 2025) and *Coûts de la rentrée* (2024, 2025) in France reveal stark inequalities: while French students without a scholarship pay around €178 per year, international students pay approximately €4,000. As FAGE_M observed:

“And for international students, we are talking about 4000 euros.” [FAGE_M’s interview]

When combined with the costs of accommodation, transport and healthcare, the total annual cost for French students is €3,227, compared to €5,944 for international students⁶³. These figures confirm the notion that internationalisation in France increasingly operates through a logic of economic selectivity based on students' socio-financial situations, which aligns with Sursock's (2024b) criticism of the French principle of equality in French society, implying that the French HE system excludes, segregates, and penalises students who cannot afford to navigate it.

⁶² <https://ehea.info/page-mobility>

⁶³ Baromètre de la précarité étudiante, report redacted by FAGE, 2025

Norway, historically characterised by universal free access to HE (Fetvei, 1992), has similarly shifted towards tuition-based selectivity. Following the 2023 government decision, tuition fees were introduced for non-EU and non-EHEA students. As one NSO representative explained:

“They are changing the rules in the sense they ask the institutions can choose how much they want to ask for the students for tuition fee.” [NSO_O’s interview]

Some Norwegian universities, particularly those that rely heavily on international students, have incurred substantial financial losses. This further emphasises that, in the EHEA, internationalisation in HE was more of a means of attracting students than of establishing channels of collaboration:

“And then the universities and colleges were told: “Now you can ask students to pay”. So.....like the difference would be eventually covered by students, but that never happened because fewer international students apply for the institutions in Norway. For instance in my home university..... around 90%..... there was a 90% drop in applications from students outside the EU after the implementation of the tuition fee” [NSO_O’s Interview]

Legal and administrative discretion further restricts access to international students to access to the EHEA. In France, prefectures routinely deny residence permit renewals to international students who repeat a year, despite their formal entitlement to do so:

“In theory, they have the right, but in practice the Prefectures refuse to renew their residence permit when they repeat the year.” [FAGE_M’s Interview]

As FAGE_M pointed out, while international students are legally entitled to repeat a year, prefectures often deny permit renewals in practice, which illustrates how administrative discretion can undermine rights. This aligns with Sursock's (2024b) observation that France's formal commitment to equality is undermined by the structural barriers and institutionalised racism that international students face.

Italy is one of the EHEA countries that adopted policies and programmes to encourage international mobility exchanges relatively late (Esposti & Geraci, 2010; Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2014; Lumino et al., 2017). This delay is also reflected

in the agentic orientation of Italian SROs (Klemenčič, 2024). UDU is the only Italian SRO, alongside FAGE and NSO, that monitors the academic and material situation of international students. It has been mobilised to implement scholarships for students in conflict zones such as Ukraine and Palestine. Meanwhile, other regional and local SROs focus on supporting international students, helping them overcome bureaucratic and institutional barriers to continue their tertiary studies and incentivising their integration in the student academic community.

BLAB_L shows that administrative procedures remain a burden for EU students moving within the EHEA. This demonstrates that, despite the Bologna Process being intended to remove bureaucratic barriers to movement within the EHEA, these barriers still exist when moving to another country. This further highlights the uneven implementation of the Bologna Process:

“From a bureaucratic point of view... it's a huge burden... even for those coming from Bulgaria... it took a long time to complete all the bureaucratic documents.”

In contrast, Slovakia is an example of the reverse form of commodification. Rather than attracting international students, its higher education system struggles to retain its own. Fico's government has attempted to penalise Slovakian students who plan to study abroad. As one representative recounted:

“The Prime Minister said... if somebody studies here and then they go abroad, they will pay a fee... They want to charge us 10,000 euros.” [SRVS_E's interview]

Although the proposal was eventually withdrawn after SRO intervention, it underscores a persistent policy mindset that views student mobility as a national loss rather than a right or a collective investment in human capital and academic freedom.

Taken together, these cases illustrate that internationalisation across the EHEA is increasingly governed by market and geopolitical logics. France and Norway commodify access through tuition and selective stipends; Italy through bureaucratic and welfare fragmentation; and Slovakia through punitive nationalism. Across contexts, the universalist vision of the Bologna Process gives

way to a stratified system where mobility depends on financial capacity, institutional privilege, or political alignment. In response, SROs often act as compensatory agents, mitigating state shortcomings rather than serving purely political roles.

4.2.2 POLITICISATION OF THE HE

Building on De Gregorio (2022), Joly (2022) and Láncoş (2021), this code examines how governments, particularly those on the far-right, seek to extend their control over HE. Such control often manifests in funding cuts for disciplines perceived as critical of government policies or inconsistent with dominant ideological values. The code captures how political positions adopted by university governance, national authorities, or SROs affect the exercise of student academic freedom. It also shows how these positions shape the occurrence of targeted attacks against student organisations, as well as broader patterns of student activism.

4.2.2.1 POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL ALIGNMENT

This sub-code analyses how the political and ideological positions of national governments and SROs influence the dynamics of HE governance and representation. In all four countries, ideological orientation influences funding priorities, disciplinary legitimacy and the extent to which student representation can function autonomously. This sub-code can be divided into two sub-dimensions. The first is the national state's increasing attempt to control every aspect of the HE system, from funding to curricula. The second is the link to the divergence or convergence of political positions between SROs, HE, and political authorities. This section will focus on the first dimension.

In all four countries, the national state or political party in power, which represents the majority of the political landscape, has been incentivised to defund and disincentivise humanities disciplines in order to limit the counteraction of SROs.

In France, state intervention in university life has been increasingly justified through the language of political neutrality to dismantle humanistic academic courses. Since 2021, the term “*islamo-gauchisme*” has been used by government officials and some sections of the French academic community to discredit academic fields related to colonialism, racism, gender, and social movements (Joly, 2022; McNulty, 2022). In 2021, Minister of HE and Research, Frédérique Vidal launched an inquiry into universities to investigate such ideologies, ostensibly to guarantee academic neutrality in the French HE⁶⁴. The *Conférence des Présidents d’Universités* (CPU) criticised this as a pretext for government interference that threatened academic freedom⁶⁵. De Gregorio (2022) further notes that the previous French government has sought control through new legal instruments justified by the contrast of *islamo-gauchisme* within university sites. These legal measures include the obligation for universities to sign an annual pledge to respect republican values, the prohibition of public funding for disciplines linked to *islamo-gauchisme*, and the banning of radical student movements that promote *islamo-gauchisme* on university campuses⁶⁶. While these measures were evaluated as unconstitutional and rejected by the Constitutional Court, others have been implemented. One such measure is the *Contrat d’Engagement Républicain*, which subjects all NGOs active in France, including SROs, to state control of public funding. These NGOs must sign a contract promising not to promote political, ideological and social values contrary to those of France (DeGregorio, 2022). This significantly hinders the SROs’ political agency (Klemenčič, 2024) as they can lose financial resources by advancing criticism that is vaguely perceived as political discourse.

Similar tendencies have emerged in Italy through technocratic reforms. Decrees Article 1, comma 2, and Article 4 of the 1154/2021 and Article 1 and 2 of the

⁶⁴ <https://www.politico.eu/article/french-minister-wants-inquiry-into-so-called-islamo-leftist-bias-in-academia/>

⁶⁵ Ibidem

⁶⁶ <https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/decision/2021/2021823DC.htm>; <https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/decision/2022/2022838DC.htm>

1835/2024 strengthened ministerial control over accreditation and distance education, ostensibly to guarantee quality. This is achieved through periodic ministerial evaluation, which determines whether the course is renewed, and stricter monitoring of courses involving remote teaching modalities and non-conventional teaching methods⁶⁷. These regulations impose disproportionate administrative burdens on politically sensitive courses, such as gender and queer studies. The political and ideological positions of political representatives exercise significant pressure to demand the dismantling of research projects, university courses and student initiatives that deal with sensitive, controversial and highly political topics. Like in France, the Ministry of HE and Research has launched a ministerial investigation into a project on trans/gender creative childhoods at Roma Tre University for non-compliance⁶⁸. Later, at the University of Sassari, national politicians attempted to block a Gender and Queer Studies course⁶⁹. In January 2025, faculty resistance culminated in an open letter signed by 121 professors denouncing parliamentary inquiries into LGBTQ+ research as violations of academic freedom⁷⁰.

Also, SRVS, through its Instagram media page, has raised alarm over political pressures on research and teaching, including the expectation to produce results aligned with political-ideological interests⁷¹.

The following episodes highlight a series of practices connected by the *delegitimisation of bureaucracy* (DeGregorio, 2022), which emphasises how

⁶⁷ <https://www.mur.gov.it/sites/default/files/2021-10/Decreto%20ministeriale%20n.1154%20del%2014-10-2021.pdf>;
<https://www.mur.gov.it/sites/default/files/2025-01/Decreto%20Ministeriale%20n.%201835%20del%206-12-2024.pdf>

⁶⁸ https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cronaca/2024/09/24/un-laboratorio-per-giovanissimi-trans-e-gender-a-roma-tre_cad7183c-fe6a-4076-a5fa-9f12b6708d45.html

⁶⁹ <https://www.editorialedomani.it/fatti/la-lega-contro-luniversita-di-sassari-chiuda-il-corso-di-teorie-di-genere-e-queer-di-zappino-qh6dfhuf>

⁷⁰ https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2025/01/08/news/protesta_docenti_ispezioni_anti_gender_ministra_bernini-423926303/

⁷¹ https://www.instagram.com/p/DN_C5vjDFeJ/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

political actors implement new legal or bureaucratic procedures, or mobilise existing ones, to allow the state to exercise control over funding, curricula and teaching.

Even in Norway, traditionally characterised by broad consensus on academic autonomy, interviewees reported early signs of ideological pressure. NSO_O described the emergence of a far-right party promoting tuition fees for international students and defunding of the humanities:

“They are for the implementation of tuition fees for international students [...] and a reduction of students in the Humanities.” [NSO_O, Interview]

This represents a significant departure from Norway’s egalitarian HE ethos and signals how global trends of populism and utilitarianism, linking funding to labour market needs, are beginning to affect also EHEA countries, which have strong legal and institutional mechanisms on protecting and regulating student academic freedom.

In all four of the selected EHEA countries, there is an ongoing process of implementing legal and bureaucratic procedures that are often perceived as neutral. However, these procedures directly or indirectly implement a political lens that allows the state to exercise increasing control over every aspect of the HE system. This is achieved by investigating politically sensitive and controversial topics, particularly those related to the humanities, which demand either dismantling or realignment with the political and ideological position of the party in power.

4.2.2.2 INSTITUTIONAL RESTRICTION OF STUDENT RIGHTS

This subcode identifies existing institutional and/or legal limitations on student rights that emerge in financial, representational, and governance dimensions. These are not isolated administrative inefficiencies, but systemic flaws embedded in HE structures, which restrict students’ academic freedom (MacFarlane, 2011; Nordal, 2016; Sen, 1999). This subcode identifies either the existing gap between legal and practical dimensions, the lack of a clear legal framework and the

institutional and legal barriers of the existing HE, student welfare and national student representation system.

In France, the *Baromètre de la Précarité* (FAGE, 2023; 2025) reveals significant disparities in treatment between scholarship recipients and non-recipients. Students at French universities without scholarships pay an average of €3,157 per year to pursue their tertiary studies, while scholarship holders are fully exempt, as noted by FAGE_M:

“And something else I forgot to say: scholarship holders don't pay anything.”
[FAGE_M's interview]

This creates an imbalance in financial and social support, as students who are not awarded scholarships must cover all academic and lifestyle expenses themselves, with support from their families.

As mentioned in Section 4.1.4, French students must pay illegal, recurring fees for academic materials, healthcare coverage, dental care and training materials, according to the *'Baromètre de la Précarité'* (2023, 2025). Despite the 1993 court ruling that prohibited university administrations from adding further fees for students, they continue to do so without being sanctioned. These practices demonstrate a power imbalance between the administration and the students, as the former is not subject to any sanctions from the state or the academic community.

Moreover, the French academic community tends to avoid discussing how the French state still replicates mechanisms and dynamics of racial and religious segregation in higher education (McNulty, 2022; Sursock, 2024b), as FAGE-M recalls.:

“On the subject of colonialism, it is very difficult to speak at universities, as even there we speak very little about France's responsibilities in colonialism.”
[FAGE_M's interview]

This systematic silencing of critical discussions on racism and Islamophobia, known as the *“colour-blind approach”* (McNulty, 2022), reflects a broader institutional reluctance to confront historical and contemporary racism, mobilising

both the state and the French academic community. This restricts students' ability to learn, debate and campaign on these issues, especially concerning how French institutions perpetuate overt and covert practices associated with racism and colonialism (McNulty, 2022).

In Italy, institutional limitations are most clearly evident in the electoral system for national student representation (see Section 3.2.2.2.2). At the local level, many universities have introduced online voting platforms to remove residence-based barriers and avoid interfering with exam periods. However, national elections to the CNSU still require students to vote in person:

“In reality, at most Italian universities, in-person elections are spread out over 2-3 days. This is clearly a major obstacle for students accustomed to voting online, because getting someone to a polling station, especially in a period like May, when perhaps we're already at the start of the session or the end of the elections, is complicated.” [UDU_L's interview]

The academic calendar, especially the exam schedule, varies greatly between HE departments. In addition, the ability of HE institutions to set up multiple voting sites in different HE institutions where students can register to vote depends greatly on the size of the institution. These factors further complicate students' ability to vote. This reflects the lack of recognition of distance voting at the university and national levels.

Furthermore, representation is allocated based on large electoral districts rather than individual universities (see Section 3.2.2.2.2). As BLAB_L points out, the current electoral system for student representation often fails to reflect the specific needs of each university community, as discussed in sections 4.1.2 and 4.2.4. Italian university students face issues that are specific to their place of study:

“However, it is obvious that it is a very minimal ratio, in the sense that one representative for the list, for the North-East constituency, not one for each university, is a bit minimal as a thing because each university, in my personal opinion, has its own needs.” [BLAB_L's interview]

As they noted, the current electoral design system tends to favour larger public universities, such as Sapienza, Bologna and Milan, as well as private universities, such as Bocconi. National and Regional SROs are located in universities that have the financial resources to present candidate lists more easily and maintain a strong national presence. This also enables local and regional SROs located within larger universities to access the CNSU, thereby mobilising the political positions of SROs and the concerns of the student population at these universities. SROs located in smaller or peripheral universities, by contrast, struggle to have their concerns represented in the CNSU. Local and regional SROs that are strong in certain electoral districts can dominate the national arena, while others remain absent. This imbalance limits the CNSU's ability to protect academic freedom in practice, as each university faces specific institutional deficits and inefficiencies that prevent students from exercising academic freedom. Consequently, the fragmentation of student representation undermines the CNSU's effectiveness in capturing the varied realities of students at each university.

In Norway, institutional limitations stem from the student point system (See Section 4.2.2). Norwegian interviews reveal that student representatives who pause their studies to engage in governance or who are unable to fulfil their academic commitments generate no study points. This indirectly costs universities the potential loss of funding. As NSO_N explained, the university administration does not like that risk:

“For the past three years, my study production, my student points has been zero because I didn’t study. I have been a student politician, I have been the vice president of my university, I have been the president of my university, now I am NSO. Those are full time..... full time jobs. I won’t call jobs, but I haven’t studied. I put my studies on pause legally, I put my studies on pause to do this. Since I am not producing any study points, I am costing my university a lot of money”
[NSO_N's interview]

Although the Universities and University Colleges Act (2024) requires both public and private universities to uphold and make working student democracy, there is

currently no systematic policy in place to provide academic flexibility or formal recognition for representative work (Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020). As Norwegian interviewees later mentioned, only a few larger universities have implemented temporary leave that allows elected student representatives to pause their studies without being academically penalised to fulfil their duties as student representatives, as is the case with NSO_N. Consequently, student representatives must choose between their studies and their governance duties, creating a contradiction between formal rights and institutional incentives. From a capability perspective, this exemplifies a '*conversion gap*' (Sen, 1999), which is the inability to translate a legal entitlement into a practical and actual freedom.

In Slovakia, institutional limitations on student academic freedom (Nordal, 2016) revolve around weak enforcement of accountability mechanisms over corruption in academia, specifically plagiarism and cheating. Despite the presence of a student representative on the ethics committee and the implementation of institutional initiatives such as the Black Box app, which allows users to report incidents of corrupt systems anonymously, they rarely lead to sanctions. As SRVS_E described:

"We are trying to solve that and trying to speak with the disciplinary or ethical committee. But usually at the end of the day... it happens like 'you don't have any proof.'" [SRVS_E's interview]

This evidentiary barrier, defined by the lack of evidence to take disciplinary action, prevents student representatives from holding staff accountable, particularly in severe cases of corruption or favouritism. Although SRVS_E and SRVS_M state that students still report some instances of corruption, and the ethical committee was able to dismiss a professor, this does not represent the norm in HE.

Across these contexts, institutional structures nominally recognise student rights but fail to support their effective exercise. In France, illegal fees and cultural silencing reduce students' capacity to learn and act critically. In Italy, electoral fragmentation and regional inequalities limit the representativeness of national student bodies. In Norway, institutional funding mechanisms penalise participation in governance, reducing it to a private cost rather than a public

contribution. In Slovakia, weak accountability frameworks deprive students of meaningful recourse.

Taken together, these findings reveal that student academic freedom (Nordal, 2016), though legally acknowledged, remains structurally constrained. As Klemenčič (2024) and Macfarlane (2011) suggest, participation must be both recognised and enabled to constitute a real capability. Without institutional recognition of the institutional commitment of student representatives, flexible academic arrangements that allow a balance between studies and institutional obligations of institutional intermediaries, and an effective accountability mechanism, student representation risks becoming a formal right devoid of practical agency

4.2.2.3 TARGETED ATTACKS TO STUDENT EXPRESSIONS

This sub-code collects all reported and documented attacks on university students, whether as individuals engaged in civic and political activism or as members of the SRO who have been attacked due to their agency and institutional commitment. It captures not only attacks by political actors and university administrations, but also those carried out by student movements and SROs against one another. While Norway reported no targeted attacks on student activists, France, Italy, and Slovakia provide multiple examples of how political pressures and confrontations threaten student expression.

In France, FAGE_M observes an increasing tendency by the *Président de l'Université* to authorise police intervention on campuses in 2024-2025, in particular in response to the protest over Palestine in Science Po⁷² and over budget cuts at the University of Lille⁷³:

“After the universities have a big problem, the police intervene. The police normally can't intervene in the university. Except that the President the next day,

⁷² <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2024-11-20-paris-institute-of-political-studies/>

⁷³ <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-02-12-university-of-lille/>

so the Presidents are encouraged to intervene more and more.” [FAGE_M’s interview]

Although police entry onto campuses is legally dependent on a request from the *Président de l’Université* (Beaud, 2022), the FAGE_M emphasised the increasing pressure exerted by the Ministry of HE on the *Présidents de l’Universités* to demand police intervention:

“Minister asks University President to call police” [FAGE_M’s interview]

A comparable pattern appears in Italy. Joint communications between ESU and UDU, published in December 2023, denounced violent police interventions at universities toward student demonstrations and protests that occurred at the university⁷⁴. Another joint communiqué between ESU and UDU, published in July of the same year, the Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni directly attacked UDU on public television for requesting transparency on PNRR funds⁷⁵. UDU_L2 added that the current government has allegedly conducted a series of undercover police investigations of the anti-terrorism section within student movements, not SROs. In this specific case, student movement *Cambiare Rotta*, which is affiliated to the radical left-wing political party *Potere al Popolo*, which has been established on some university sites such as Bologna and Rome⁷⁶:

“In some cases, they started out from the youth association Cambiare Rotta and then joined the Party. However, it's shocking that they're trying to infiltrate police academies and even enter university associations, a measure you adopt for terrorist groups.” [UDU_L’s interview]

Despite repeated calls from student movements, civic groups and left-wing politicians for the government to address the alleged incidents, it has remained silent. Individual students have also been targeted by politicians for their political

⁷⁴ <https://esu-online.org/policies/bm85-democracy-is-at-risk-in-italy-even-within-heis/>

⁷⁵ <https://esu-online.org/statement-on-the-vicious-attacks-of-prime-minister-meloni-against-the-national-union-of-students-in-italy-you-cannot-silence-the-student-voice/>

⁷⁶ <https://www.pressenza.com/it/2025/07/democrazia-e-poliziotti-infiltrati-in-cambiare-rotta/>

opinions. The Minister of Transport, Matteo Salvini, doxxed a student on social media after they published a video clip of their appearance on a local radio show in which they criticised the *Ponte sullo Stretto* project. They added that they were part of the national *NO Ponte sullo Stretto* movement. This has led to online harassment and threats to the student targeted⁷⁷.

These episodes raise concerns about the lack of accountability of the national state. In particular, there is a concern that political actors from both sides of the political spectrum cannot be held accountable for these targeted attacks to students and the consequences that those action carry.

A series of targeted attacks on members of the SRVS and individual university students have been documented by Slovakian interviewees:

*“[.....] the previous administration, our president of student union was ***** ,
*** quite of active because **** was also the *****. ***** also have a very
good working relationship with our former president. So, **** was very seen a lot
in the media. And *** was speaking loud because **** was kind of people who ***
see some problem, *** want to speak about it and work about it. So, for the
current administration, who at that time was at the opposition, some of the
politicians have really..... like saying vulgar on **** that: “***** is young and ****
not well know and *** should not speak about the problems because *** knows
nothing about”, which happened to ***.”*

*“But also because some situations during this year allows the Prime Minister
accused on social media some law student that *** is lying under the critic very
(in reference of the joint letter with ESU)..... Very a lot of vulgar things which
we are saying about it”*

[SRVS_M's interview]

The latter quotation refers to a joint report by the ESU and the ŠRVŠ, which stated that a Comenius University law student had been subjected to public attacks by

⁷⁷ The student reported the online attacks received after Salvini's video declaration on social media, which were later reprised by the Italian news outlet VDmedia, which has released on his social media account the video. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DNTADvmPViV/>

Prime Minister Robert Fico after criticising the plan to dismantle the Office of the Special Prosecutor for Corruption, and calling for a debate with the faculty dean⁷⁸. Both SRVS_E and SRVS_M underlined that SRVS intervenes immediately to support students subjected to political attacks, coordinating with university administrations that have publicly expressed solidarity with the affected individuals and demanded restraint from political representatives. This institutional solidarity plays a crucial role in enabling Slovak SROs to respond effectively to political intimidation and to hold the government accountable. By contrast, similar interventions are less frequent in France and Italy, where ideological alignments between SROs, the national government, and university administrations often limit the capacity of student representatives to openly challenge political actors

Political and ideological divides also translate into confrontations among student movements and SROs.

A violent confrontation occurred at the University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès between student groups Raised Fist and UNI during an election campaign event. According to a Scholars at Risk report, the clash began when Raised Fist members attempted to seize or disrupt UNI's election flyers, prompting police intervention. A second altercation followed later, and at least three students were injured. Each group accused the other of instigating the violence⁷⁹.

Similar dynamics have emerged in Italy. A pro-life event organised by the *Obiettivo Studenti* chapter, a Catholic-led regional SRO, at the University of Milano Bicocca has been criticised by left-wing student movements and SROs. One of the speakers is notably known for opposing the 194/1978 law that legalised abortion. While left-wing SROs and student movements contested the event, some of them interrupted it violently by unplugging microphones, turning off the lights and throwing water at one of the speakers. The event was

⁷⁸ <https://esu-online.org/joint-statement-by-esu-and-srvs-against-the-attacks-on-students-of-the-slovak-government/>

⁷⁹ <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-02-11-university-of-toulouse-jean-jaures/>

subsequently cancelled⁸⁰. At the University elections at Sapienza University of Rome, a violent clash erupted between AU and left-wing student movements. Protesters threw objects, injuring a security guard⁸¹.

As UDU_L2 recounted, far-right student organisations such as *F.U.A.N.* and *Blocco Studentesco*, which openly embrace neo-fascist ideologies, frequently rely on police intervention to legitimise or escalate violence against political opponents:

“For example, Turin with the F.U.A.N. organization. I don't know what it stands for, but if you want F-U-A-N, look it up. And they have also been involved in violent acts against other university organizations or in protests in general in which the police were also involved.” [UDU_L2's interview]

Taken together, these cases reveal that threats to student expression arise from multiple, intersecting sources: political actors, HE institutions and SROs.

In France and Italy, universities are increasingly governed as securitised rather than autonomous spaces, while in Slovakia, overt political repression targets student critics, mitigated only by university solidarity. At the same time, internal confrontations among student groups reveal a paradox of pluralism: although ideological diversity can strengthen democracy, polarisation and violence weaken collective representation and the moral authority of SROs. From a capability perspective (MacFarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999), these conditions demonstrate how formal guarantees of freedom fail to ensure the real freedom to dissent when co-optation, politicisation, and insufficient protections constrain SROs and student political agency (Klemenčič, 2024). As Monypenny (1963) warned, universities struggle to balance freedom and accountability, a tension that becomes acute when state interference and internal antagonism converge. Ultimately, ensuring student academic freedom requires not only legal safeguards but also institutional and cultural commitments that protect dissent as a core element of democratic higher education, in line with Klemenčič's (2024) view of SROs as

⁸⁰ <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2024-11-26-university-of-milan/>

⁸¹ <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2024-11-21-sapienza-university-of-rome/>

political actors fostering critical engagement in the HE system and promoting democratic values and participation also within their organisation.

4.2.3. SOCIO-ECONOMIC BARRIERS

This macro-code encapsulates the financial and material barriers that university students in the four selected countries face. In line with the capability approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999), these barriers restrict students' agentic opportunities to access in the HE, complete tertiary education and participate in the academic life (Klemenčič, 2024). Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are disproportionately affected, especially if they enter university via non-traditional routes, such as professional or vocational secondary education institutions, where progression to HE is less conventional (Romito, 2025).

The macro code is divided into the following sub-codes: Broad Social and Political Context Budgetary and financial constraints; lack of available and adequate student housing, mismatch between institutional capability and student necessity, and socio-economic student capability.

4.2.3.1 BROAD SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

This sub-code identifies both unique and recurrent contextual factors across the four selected countries that directly or indirectly shape university students' agentic opportunities within HE (Klemenčič, 2024). The capability of students to exercise academic freedom and participate meaningfully in governance depends not only on institutional frameworks but also on broader welfare regimes, social and financial parameters that define who is eligible of exemption, support and scholarship and socio-economic background (Crosier & Haj, 2020; Klemenčič, 2024). These external dynamics influence both students' lived conditions (Klemenčič, 2024).

In both Italy and Slovakia, a significant student brain drain has been documented, with many students planning to move abroad to pursue tertiary studies or

academic careers (Fischer & Lipsková, 2017; Saint-Blachant, 2019). However, the dynamics of this phenomenon differ markedly between the two countries. In Italy, interviewees UDU_L and UDU_L2 described a “double loss of talent”: internally, students from southern regions migrate to the North in search of better institutions and employment opportunities, while externally, many graduates move abroad for more stable academic and professional prospects (Saint-Chantal, 2019; SVIMEZ, 2023). As UDU_L explained:

“Many young people from the South come to the North not only for university, but also because here there are opportunities to work and continue their studies.”
[UDU_L’s interview]

This dynamic reinforces structural divides between Northern and Southern universities, exacerbated by differences in institutional size and resource concentration (SVIMEZ, 2023), thereby undermining equal access to tertiary education and concentrating financial and academic opportunities in a limited number of Northern institutions. UDU_L and UDU_L2 further observed that students pursuing academic careers often find greater opportunities abroad, contributing to a persistent loss of intellectual capital within the Italian HE system (Saint-Blachant, 2019).

By contrast, in Slovakia, students frequently choose to study abroad due to the inadequate research infrastructure and poor welfare provision at home. SRVS_M highlighted that:

“[...] many of our students go abroad because our universities do not offer proper research support or job opportunities afterwards” [SRVS_M’ interview]

SRVS_E added that outdated dormitories, under-resourced libraries, and rigid scheduling systems further discourage students from remaining in Slovakia. Although some graduates return after completing their studies in nearby Central European countries, the enduring perception of Slovak HE as outdated continues to drive outmigration (Chrancoková et al., 2020; Fischer & Lipovská, 2015).

In Norway, the risk of political instrumentalisation of HE (see Section 4.2.2) is less overt but increasingly visible. The NSO expressed concern over the diffusion of austerity and managerial reforms from neighbouring countries:

“In Sweden... student unions nationally have reduced their budget by 70%. In Denmark... they have reduced the amount of study time... So we get a bit concerned because there are some parties active in Parliament today that want to look at alternatives within the Swedish and Danish systems.” [NSO_O’s interview]

This statement reflects apprehension that managerial and austerity-driven reforms could erode the participatory and welfare-based foundation of the Norwegian model, aligning it with broader European trends (De Gregorio, 2022; Joly, 2022).

Meanwhile, reports and social media publications by FAGE highlight an ongoing situation of student precarity and poverty in France. These stem from the lack of structural reform in scholarship allocation, recurrent budget cuts in HE, and the insufficient capacity of student accommodation infrastructure⁸². As a result, fewer students qualify for institutional financial or material support, further aggravating socioeconomic inequality within the French HE system.

Across all four contexts, shifts in political priorities, social inequalities, institutional dependency, and state interference systematically constrain students’ agentic capabilities. This sub-code highlights how broader social and political dynamics further hinder students’ capacity to exercise agency, compounding the effects of the ongoing neoliberalisation and politicisation of HE (see Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2).

⁸²https://www.instagram.com/reel/DQHn46RDm3g/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==;
https://www.instagram.com/reel/DQMxf_7imJ8/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

4.2.3.1 BUDGETARY AND FINANCIAL CONSTRAINS

Unlike the sub-code '*Budgetary Cuts*' (see Section 4.2.1), this sub-code examines the negative impact of students' socio-economic conditions, cuts to public funding, and the lack of reform to funding mechanisms on student academic freedom. It emphasises how university students have mitigated these financial gaps and barriers by placing themselves in situations that do not further hinder their financial situation but which significantly impact their academic situation. This puts them at risk of being coerced by these factors in their choice of academic pathway or of being penalised academically.

Due to increasing budget cuts on the HE, the lacks of reformations of the welfare system and enlargement of scholarship and of the sections of the student population to benefit from, students from all countries have started to do a trade-off between their family financial situation and their academic inspirations and objectives. As mentioned in the previous section as Slovakian students are get used to plan to nearby Balkan countries, French, Italian and Norwegian students are getting used to choose between three of the most recurrent mitigation strategies: tend to stay in the nearby areas where they live with their parents, to move in a city where the lifestyle costs are lower than in major universities cities, to become a commute to save money instead of pouring it for the rent of the housing and health care as they are the most expensive area for student financial budget⁸³; pathways that are being confirmed by the interviewees of these countries:

“So, the beacoup of the students who choose to stay in their villas in the foctionne of the couts, more than once, they never go to Paris or Lions, (I think) of the villas in the small ones and a plein of different threads, but who in the couple are likely to stay more than their parents” [FAGE_M's interview]

“In particular, in many areas of Milan, it's the same story, there isn't an area that does much better, unless you go outside the center of Milan, so you also have to

⁸³ <https://student.no/studentpolitikk/studentvelferd/studentokonomi>; Baromètre de la précarité (2023; 2025): Cout de la rentrée (2024, 2025)

take into account the fact that you have to take into account a certain type of minutes for the whole [...] [BLAB_L's interview]

"[...] some students decide to live at home and then travel by train for two hours every way just to still go to school. Worst cases, students just don't end up studying that year, they just push the studies a year" [NSO_N's interview]

In the face of increasing living costs, university students have to make significant compromises between their economic capabilities and their desire to pursue tertiary studies at the university of their choice. This emphasises the importance of students carefully planning how to pursue their studies in a financially sustainable way. As NSO_N mentioned, if students are not eligible for institutional support and lack the financial means to cover the costs of tertiary education, it could result in delayed university entrance or interrupted studies.

As noted in Section 4.2.3.1, French university students face rising levels of precarity. According to FAGE reports and FAGE_M's testimony, one in five students skips meals several times per week, while nearly half delay or forgo medical or psychological care due to financial constraints. These mitigation financial strategies, sacrificing health and nutrition to cover tuition, rent, and the CVEC, illustrate how economic hardship restricts students' real freedoms to study and live with dignity. From the perspective of Macfarlane (2011) and Sen's (1999) capability approach and Klemenčič's (2024) concept of student agency, such material deprivation translates into a loss of capability for academic freedom, where survival replaces participation within HE.

In all four contexts, the reports collected and interviews conducted revealed that a growing proportion of students have started searching for part-time work while continuing their tertiary studies, to cover costs related to their education and any unexpected expenses.

Across all four countries, reports and interviews revealed a growing tendency for students to seek part-time work to cover essential costs such as rent, healthcare, and study materials. Except in Slovakia, students everywhere must compromise between their desired field of study and what they can afford. As a result, they

often choose nearby universities, commute daily or defer enrolment, decisions that are shaped more by economic necessity than intellectual interest. Ultimately, the freedom to choose what and where to study becomes dependent on family income and financial aid eligibility, thereby limiting the true extent of student academic freedom (Nordal, 2016) within the EHEA.

4.2.3.2 LACK OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Across all four selected countries, university students face increasing difficulties in securing adequate and affordable housing, both in public student residences and in the private rental market. Sotomayor and his colleagues (2022) were among the first to demonstrate how restricted access to housing directly affects students' academic freedom and participation, framing housing as a structural determinant of educational equality.

A common trend across contexts is the persistent mismatch between the capacity of universities and national welfare systems to provide student accommodation and the growing number of students moving to major university cities. Public housing options, including university dormitories and welfare-managed residences such as CROUS and *ente per il diritto allo studio*, remain limited in number and unevenly distributed. Students must often meet strict annual eligibility criteria to retain access to public housing, such as earning a minimum number of academic credits (Italy), maintaining excellent grades (Slovakia, Norway), or meeting income-based requirements (Italy, France, Norway). In some cases, tenancy agreements are contingent on continuous enrolment or proof of financial need (Norway)⁸⁴.

⁸⁴ Tenancy agreements are institutional instruments specifying the conditions and selection criteria for student housing eligibility. In practice, the details of those agreements, such as credit requirements, family income thresholds, or academic performance rules, differ by provider area, municipality, or university campus
https://assets.ctfassets.net/fezwk47sxuo5/6fQaZzV7i5ScbWD9YjfNUr/118714348c1c89f6640c74bc72a150bb/Tildelingskriterier_SSN_14.01.19_engelsk_2023.pdf

All four countries report a severe shortage of public housing, insufficient to meet rising demand. This shortage has been exacerbated by stagnant public investment and the slow renovation or expansion of university housing facilities. Yet, the underlying causes of this mismatch differ by country.

Italy and Norway have reported significant bureaucratic barriers to advancing requests and proposals for funding public student dormitories. As NSO_O emphasised, until this year, there was no specific bureaucratic and legal framework and criteria to define what a student dormitory is:

“And for the first time now, there's been an amendment to that building code in which student housing is registered as an independent, like as an own category for a building code. And that hasn't been done before. And one of the reasons this has been implemented is because previously, it usually depends, again on the municipality, to interpret the planning of the student, like the planning from the student welfare housing, whenever they apply for the municipality to build housing” [NSO_O's interview]

Despite this significant advancement in facilitating student housing requests, NSO_O added that, although the Student Welfare Organisation has a monopoly on managing student housing, it does not have legal priority in claiming and have the priority to get a building for student housing:

“So the difficulty is that till this day, there is no threshold in which the student welfare housings get like first of line rights to buy an area in a municipality” [NSO_O's interview]

As a consequence, Student Welfare organisations are significantly dependent on the political willingness and financial situation of the local municipality, which has authority over urban planning and construction.

UDU's 2025 report on student housing, *“È tutto sbagliato. Il PNRR sta fallendo: report sugli alloggi universitari”*, highlights the significant delays in the publication of ministerial guidelines regulating student housing under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR). The short application window forces university administrations to decide immediately whether to apply, despite being unable to

meet the stringent financial requirements necessary to co-finance construction. The government covers only around half of the total costs of building new student residences, a burden that public universities, already constrained by reduced state funding, often cannot sustain. As a result, many universities are compelled to rely on private investors to meet eligibility criteria, which deepens the ongoing trend toward the privatisation of public student housing. The report further notes that delays in public funding create chronic uncertainty, as universities must address students' housing needs while facing the risk of budgetary shortfalls or resorting to short-term, financially unsustainable strategies. Moreover, PNRR allocations have disproportionately favoured major northern cities such as Milan, leaving smaller and southern university towns, like *Rieti*, *Pescara*, *Forlì*, and *Catanzaro*, without sufficient resources. This uneven distribution reinforces the existing territorial divide in Italian HE, concentrating welfare and infrastructure in affluent areas and depriving others of essential resources. Overall, the report highlights how the PNRR, rather than reducing inequalities, reproduces them, transforming the right to housing into a selective opportunity dependent on geography and institutional wealth.

FAGE's 2024 report "*Bouge ton CROUS*" and testimonies from Slovak interviewees both draw attention to severe infrastructural and hygienic deficiencies in public student housing. In France, the report documents recurrent violations of hygiene and sustainability standards in CROUS residences, including infestations, mould on walls, and malfunctioning heating and water systems. It also highlights the absence of adequate common areas for studying or socialising and the lack of clear information from CROUS about the existence and accessibility of such spaces.

Similarly, in Slovakia, SRVS_E stressed that many dormitories date back to the Soviet era. These buildings not only fail to meet basic hygiene and safety standards but also lack accessibility features and adequate study facilities. While major university cities are currently renovating these structures, SRVS_E and SRVS_M noted that the renovation process has temporarily reduced the number of available housing units, exacerbating scarcity.

Taken together, these findings reveal a broader pattern of infrastructural neglect and underinvestment in public student housing. As a consequence, most students are forced to rely on the private rental market, where monthly rents absorb a substantial share of their income:

“Having to find or have to spend 800 or 900 euros a month on accommodation, rent is not a small thing” [BLAB_L’s interview]

“And then, a lot of private housing, there are more and more people who are forced to move into private housing. But it costs more.” [FAGE_M’s interview]

As discussed in the previous subsection, the lack of affordable housing compels students to make difficult financial and personal adjustments to sustain their tertiary studies. Many are forced to relocate closer to their families, commute long distances, or undertake part-time employment to afford rent.

Beyond these individual adaptations, structural market pressures further exacerbate housing scarcity. In France, Italy, and Norway, though less so in Slovakia, the expansion of short-term rental platforms such as Airbnb has significantly reduced the stock of long-term housing available to students. This process of *“touristification”* has inflated rental prices in major university cities, transforming student accommodation into a speculative asset rather than a social necessity:

“[...] when it comes to Airbnb, there has been a development recently where more students, when they apply for private housing.....they get an option in their contract to leave their student housing during the summer so that their landlords can put their apartments for Airbnb” [NSO_O’s interview]

Moreover, as NSO_O observed, illegal practices on Airbnb, such as the unregistered subletting of rooms originally intended for student housing, further distort the market and reduce transparency. Such dynamics illustrate how market mechanisms, rather than welfare-oriented policies, increasingly govern access to housing. UDU’s 2023 report *“Emergenza Fuori Sede”* also highlights that students increasingly face scams and illegal housing contracts when searching for accommodation. Many do not report these incidents to the authorities for fear

of losing their housing or facing bureaucratic repercussions, which further entrenches their vulnerability in the private rental market⁸⁵. In addition, UNITin_E added that, while some policies allow students to rent at affordable prices, some landlords have moved the costs onto bills and other housing costs. Despite this, the practice is illegal. This lack of institutional protection highlights the structural weaknesses in student welfare and the absence of effective oversight mechanisms.

As UNITin_E noted, another factor contributing to the housing shortage in some Italian cities is the phenomenon of *affitti sfitti*, properties that remain unoccupied, neither rented out nor used for commercial purposes such as Airbnb. Both UNITin_E and UDU_L2 stressed that the extent of this issue is difficult to assess due to the lack of systematic data at local, regional, and national levels. Nonetheless, they concur that these vacant properties significantly reduce the availability of affordable housing for students, exacerbating existing territorial inequalities in access to higher education.

In conclusion, student housing is a significant structural barrier to accessing higher education. The persistent shortage of affordable, sustainable accommodation forces students to allocate substantial financial resources, time and administrative effort to find somewhere to live. This constrains their ability to freely choose academic pathways and institutions and generates unequal study conditions by disproportionately burdening those without strong family or financial support. As Shahabul and his colleagues (2021) and Sotomayor and his colleagues (2022) have shown, having secure accommodation is essential not only for students but also for engagement in student activities, including associationism and activism.

⁸⁵ <https://unioneuniversitari.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/ricerca-udu-EMERGENZA-FUORISEDE.pdf>

4.2.3.3 MISMATCH BETWEEN INSTITUTIONAL CAPABILITY AND STUDENT NECESSITY

This sub-code highlights the inability of existing student welfare, financial aid and scholarship systems to meet the demands of university students for scholarships, tuition fee exemptions and social security support. This mismatch between institutional capability and student demand, and the real economic costs that students must sustain, is not only caused by reduced public funding for higher education (see Section 4.2.1.1), which has further reduced the number of scholarships and students eligible for financial and social support, but also by the criteria for providing welfare services. Students in all four reporting countries have reported significant institutional barriers to accessing existing financial support and scholarships, and that these are inadequate for delivering and disseminating them.

French and Italian student welfare systems are income-based, with eligibility and funding amounts determined by family income. Scholarships and tuition exemptions are granted following income assessments conducted annually in Italy and biennially in France. However, interviewees from both countries emphasised that these systems are increasingly inefficient and inadequate. In practice, they fail to reflect students' real living costs, regional disparities, and sudden changes in family income, leaving many students either partially supported or entirely excluded from financial aid despite significant economic need.

FAGE_M emphasised that, as family income increases above the minimum and maximum eligibility criteria, state support is reduced or even removed:

“Except that the scholarship ceilings haven't changed. And so, higher salaries don't mean that parents live better. But as a result, since they have higher salaries, they fall outside the scholarship system. And as a result, there are fewer and fewer people who have access to scholarships. There are plenty of people who are on the edge and who don't have financial aid.” [FAGE_M's interview]

As FAGE_M, a precise increase in family income does not necessarily lead to an improvement in family welfare. This increase allows the family to cover the costs of tertiary education, both privately and through state funding. In addition, costs vary significantly from city to city, so family revenue may be insufficient to cover the costs. Consequently, students are systematically excluded when revenues start to increase, which is incompatible with the seven levels of scholarship support provided.

Also, a sudden change to the eligibility criteria for financial exemptions and provisions based on assumptions about how family wealth can grow may extend the mismatch between institutional capability and student necessity. UDU_L stressed that a change to the eligibility criteria for scholarships or tuition fee exemptions at national and regional levels, particularly due to a change in the government's political orientation, can result in a sudden loss of eligibility for any form of welfare provision:

*“But I'm thinking precisely of ***** who told me that since some criteria for small businesses or companies have changed. And since her family owns a farm, her ISEE has skyrocketed even though there wasn't an actual... That is, she was previously... she was entitled to the scholarship. Then the legislation changed (in reference to the Meloni Government), her ISEE skyrocketed out of nowhere because she was listed as the owner of a company (in reference to the family farm), consequently they took away her scholarship.”* [UDU_L's interview]

As mentioned in section 4.2.2.2.2, the eligibility criteria for scholarships and tuition fee exemptions can change significantly from one university to another, as they are legally permitted to decide how to assess national-based criteria for welfare provision, such as the ISEE. Consequently, Italian university students must pay close attention to how welfare criteria change from one university to another, as well as to the political positions of the national, regional and local governments.

This is not the only issue. As BLAB_L described, thanks to pressure from the student representative on the CDA at their private university, the eligibility scale for ISEE scholarships and tuition fee exemptions was expanded from three to five

brackets. Despite the university's increased investment in welfare provisions and financial aid to students, it is unable to meet the number of financial support requests submitted by students:

“[...]the benefit brackets were 3, now they are 5, so they have increased. [...] Currently, the 40 million euros have become 60 million, so much more, but now 1 in 3 receives benefits” [BLAB_L's interview]

The CNSU (2018; 2022) raised strong concerns about the effectiveness of the ISEE system as a tool for allocating and distributing student welfare resources. While the ISEE introduced greater uniformity and transparency in the assignment of scholarships and tuition exemptions, it remains inadequate in capturing students' real economic conditions. It overlooks factors such as sudden changes in family income, regional cost-of-living disparities, and hidden expenses related to study materials, housing, and transportation. Consequently, students who marginally exceed the eligibility threshold often experience significant financial hardship despite being formally ineligible for aid (CNSU, 2018).

Furthermore, the CNSU draws attention to the continued existence of the *studente non beneficiario* category, which are students who can fulfil all the criteria for scholarships and tuition fee exemptions and can be provided with, yet are excluded due to insufficient FFO funding. As UDU_L observed, this issue is not distributed uniformly across the country: some universities manage to meet demand and distribute scholarships and welfare provisions, while others face severe shortages. This unevenness of this category underscores the structural fragmentation of student welfare in Italy and the territorial disparities that continue to constrain students' real access to HE.

Both Norway and Slovakia have adopted a loan and stipend system (See Section 3.2.2.2.3.2 & 3.2.2.2.4.2), and both countries report significant shortcomings in meeting students' economic needs. As NSO_O emphasised, the current stipend provided to university students is insufficient to cover the real costs of housing, groceries, healthcare, cultural activities and telephone bills, corrected for inflation:

“So, in recent times, there has been a reduction, or not necessarily a reduction but..... when we look at the budget in comparison with how much the prices grow, like in the Norwegian society, like the percentage of growth every year. We usually say that we expect that the budget reserved to institutions to grow in accordance with that same growth rate” [NSO_O’s interview]

Consequently, students have to rely more on loans or money earned through work. However, as NSO_N emphasised, requesting loans from *Lånekassen* is no longer a suggested financial move to recur to cover HE costs, as NSO_N pointed out that interest rates on loans have increased significantly from 2.5% to 5% in recent years⁸⁶.

The OECD's 2021 report, *'Improving Higher Education in the Slovak Republic'*, states that the current loan and stipend system is unable to cover university students' actual costs. As in the French case, it is also unable to adapt to real lifestyle costs per city. Additionally, the type and amount of welfare provision depends on whether a student is a full-time or part-time student, a student worker, or is unable to attend university regularly due to circumstances such as pregnancy. Slovakia is still unable to adjust loans and scholarships to reflect the actual costs that students incur. SRVS_M has emphasised the lack of standardisation in the implementation of merit-based scholarships, particularly for those from a lower financial background who have achieved excellent academic results.

In all four countries, current scholarship financial support systems, whether income-based (Italy and France) or loan/stipend-based (Norway and Slovakia), fail to meet the demand and real economic needs of university students. Eligibility thresholds, regional cost variations and rising living expenses create persistent discrepancies between institutional provision and student necessity. Even incremental increases in aid, such as expanding ISEE brackets or increasing scholarship funds, struggle to keep pace with demand, leaving students just

⁸⁶ The official website of the LakenKassen confirms that the actual interest rate for loans fluctuates around 5%. <https://lanekassen.no/en-US/#samtykke-banner>

above the eligibility threshold particularly vulnerable. These findings highlight a structural mismatch: while existing welfare mechanisms provide formal coverage, they do not sufficiently account for the lived experience costs of tertiary education that students incur. This underscores the need for adaptive, context-sensitive policies that bridge the gap between institutional capability and the economic reality faced by students.

4.2.3.4 SOCIO-ECONOMIC STUDENT CAPABILITY

This sub-code highlights how the social characteristics of university students, such as their ethnicity, social class, financial situation and academic career, alongside institutional structures and mechanisms, impact their access to and navigation of the HE system (Romito, 2025).

As France and Italy have pre-specialised and pre-addressed educational systems based on the secondary educational institution attended, it has been established that attending either high school or professional secondary school greatly affects access HE. Consequently, students navigate a heavily segregated system based on social class (Musselin, 2024; Paradise, 2017; Romito, 2025). FAGE_M emphasised that despite *PACOURSUP* and *MONMASTER*, the institutional pages for applying for tertiary studies in France (the former for Bachelor's degrees and the latter for Master's degrees), which anonymise sensitive information about the candidate, such as their name and surname to avoid discrimination, discrimination persists based on the candidate's high school of attendance and its reputation, As this information has not been anonymised:

“But on the other hand, there are the original lists, so the lists where people come (she looks for her water bottle) there is often discrimination on the high schools of origin because there are high schools that have a bad reputation, others less so. So depending on the high school, there is discrimination” [FAGE_M's interview]

Another element of discrimination in accessing French HE is linked to the *patronimie*, a French term referring to students of Maghrebi origin, from French overseas territories and international students:

“But also the patronimie (FEDERICA tries to stop FAGE_M), we know that in the Master for example, Maghrebi or foreign students have less chance of entering the university because their patronimie is taken into consideration by their name and first name.” [FAGE_M’s interview]

This is further strengthened the practical application of the color-blind approach (McNulty, 2022) in the French HE system as despite the French State promote that every French citizen has equal opportunity to access, in practice it still replicates social and racial divide in the educational system, where students with working class and migration background still face barriers to access to the HE (Sursock, 2024b)

Despite reforms implemented to democratise access to HE, it is still significantly influenced by social class (Abbiati et al., 2018; Romito, 2025; Sursock, 2024b). BLAB_L and FAGE_M emphasised that belonging to a certain social class, and having at least one parent with a tertiary degree, has a significant impact on one’s educational trajectory. Furthermore, students from working-class backgrounds continue to encounter informational, institutional, and material barriers when attempting to access and persist in tertiary education, despite legal obligations to inform students about the HE landscape and how to access it:

“Normally, every high school student must have 54 hours of guidance counseling annually. And today, this is almost never done. So, there is no guidance counseling, so there is a lot of social reproduction in the fields they are applying for. In addition, the impact of social inequality on academic results, on the choice you made, there is also an impact.” [FAGE_M’s interview]

UDU_L2 added that Italian university administrations are not obliged to inform students of the criteria for scholarships, tuition fee exemptions and financial provisions unless students seek out the relevant information on the website of *the Ente per il Diritto allo Studio* of their university. This highlights an implicit

informational barrier, whereby students from families with a tertiary education face fewer bureaucratic burdens when navigating HE. Consequently, they can navigate the system more effectively and make more considered choices about which universities to apply to, as well as which scholarships and welfare provisions to apply for (Abbiati et al., 2018). Coming from a family with significant financial resources and tertiary qualifications is relevant, as they have more resources to cover the costs of entrance exam preparation and moving:

“It occurs to me that if you have a family member who has already attended the university you intend to attend, perhaps you already have a network of acquaintances who are able to help you or you are given a series of information that allows you to find your way around the university system which can be very complicated, especially at the beginning.” [UDU_L’s interview]

As mentioned in subparagraph 4.2.3.1, students in all four countries are beginning to seek part-time employment to cover costs and sustain their tertiary studies. However, the focus on this issue and the state's response to student workers in these countries varies greatly.

Norwegian and Slovakian SROs have been mobilised not to hinder further conditions of student workers as students are getting used to work while they are study to sustain themselves. In 2023, SRVS released a press statement expressing their opposition to the proposal to close Sunday trading, as the majority of Slovakian students work part-time in the commercial sector to fund their tertiary costs and cover the costs related to rent and groceries. SRVS therefore oppose the legal proposal, as it could harm students' economic situations and subsequently penalise them academically⁸⁷. Thanks to SRVS’s advocacy action this proposal was never approved.

The situation and reality of student workers is more difficult to recognise in France and Italy. *'Bouge ton Crous'* (2024) and *'Baromètre de la précarité'* (2023; 2025) reveal that nearly 88% of French students without scholarships must find employment to fund their tertiary education studies. In fact, 42% of the French

⁸⁷ <https://srvs.eu/zakaz-nedelneho-predaja-bude-najviac-skodit-studentom/>

students are student workers. However, due to the lack of flexible study programmes that allow students to balance academic commitments and work, having a job represents a significant penalty for students, with 77% reporting this. Consequently, having a job can result in delays or even dropping out of tertiary education, as confirmed by the FAGE's reports and the video testimony published by the Instagram page of FAGE⁸⁸.

As UDU_L2 emphasised in their interview, UDU has tried to raise awareness among a broader audience of the issues faced by student workers by drafting a joint report with CGIL and FDV, which highlights an unrecognised struggle within HE. The report aims to highlight the academic and financial barriers faced by part-time students⁸⁹. UDU_L2 added that student workers may lose local welfare provisions and exemptions reserved for students:

“However, many Italian regulations are designed to discriminate against these student workers, for example, by imposing a criterion for getting transportation at a more advantageous price, such as the agreement the university usually has with the local transportation company. There is a limit in the sense that if you're a student, you could apply for this, but if you're a worker and work more than 20 or so hours a week, then you can't apply.” [UDU_L2's interview]

Consequently, student workers in France and Italy are systematically excluded from any welfare provisions, whether from the university administration or the local municipality. This is because it is assumed that they can finance their studies themselves. Furthermore, the lack of institutional policies for student workers in France and the restrictive criteria for accessing reductions and benefits reserved for university students in Italy mean that working students are not perceived as individuals who can dedicate all their time to studying and representation. This highlights another contradiction in the EHEA regarding the social dimension,

⁸⁸ https://www.instagram.com/reel/DF53NXLChly/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==;

⁸⁹ Inchiesta sulle persone che studiano e che lavorano, joint report of UDU, CGIL and FDV (https://unioneuniversitari.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/FDV-UDU-CGIL_Studente-Lavoratore_29apr2024-conferenza.pdf)

which emphasises expanding student involvement and participation to working-class and working students.

SRVS_M noted that students with strong academic performance but limited financial means are often discouraged from studying in Slovakia, as existing financial aid fails to cover living and study costs. SRVS_E further highlighted the difficulties faced by female students, particularly those who become pregnant, in continuing their education. Although specific scholarships for pregnant students exist, as mentioned in the previous section, Slovakia's welfare system remains inefficient and poorly adapted to the diverse needs of the student population. As a result, even targeted aid often fails to translate into real accessibility, reinforcing the gap between institutional provision and students' lived realities.

Students' socio-economic background strongly influences their access to and persistence in higher education. In France and Italy, parental income and education largely determine who undertakes tertiary studies and who can navigate the system effectively. In Norway and Slovakia, universal stipend-and-loan schemes provide more equitable support, but they remain insufficient to cover real living costs, forcing many students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to work part-time. In France and Italy, student workers face academic penalties, and reporting employment may jeopardise welfare benefits. Across all four countries, socio-economic factors shape students' capacity to engage fully in HE, supporting Macfarlane (2011) and Sen's (1999) claim that academic freedom is effectively a privilege of those who can afford full-time study. This stresses another contrast with the Bologna Process objectives and the exercise of student academic freedom (Nordal, 2016) in the HE.

4.3 STUDENT REPRESENTATION AGENCY STRATEGIES AND TOOL

This macro-code examines the repertoire of collective action, both institutional and non-institutional, their uses and purposes through which SROs assert their agency and secure influence in university and national governance (Cinci, 2017;

Linder et al., 2019). The choice of repertoire reflects how SROs navigate formal arenas while mobilising broader student support as student representatives beyond academia. Despite legal entitlement, Klemenčič (2024) stresses that the impact of Student Representation depends greatly on the power relationship dynamics between HE and political authorities, and on the organisational structure of SROs. As previous research has identified the institutional and political barriers that SROs face (Cinci, 2017), they have to recur and use different channels to influence HE and political authorities, as well as broader society, beyond parliamentary meetings.

The findings show that, across the four countries, the collective action strategies of SROs pursue two aims: (1) raising the visibility of student issues beyond academia and (2) influencing HE policy. Through these strategies, SROs seek to transform formal student participation into a decisional force that shapes political agency, enhancing students' ability to influence their educational trajectories and financial and material conditions.

4.3.1 ADVOCACY REPERTOIRE

This subcode encompasses all forms of collective action that blur the distinction between institutional and non-institutional forms, and arenas that highlight student situations and conditions in HE and their perspective on broader issues. Examples include conducting reports, analyses and research; having a presence in the media; and running social and online campaigns and advocacy campaigns on specific, broader topics, such as mental health.

SROs from all of the four countries have reported that they greatly rely on conducting annual reports to monitor the evolution and transformation of legal, institutional and material barriers. These reports serve as a basis for policy proposals by SROs that can contribute to the national public decision-making process and illustrate student issues to a broader audience, both within and outside academia. They have shown that the lack of structural reforms within the institutional welfare system impedes students' ability to pursue tertiary studies,

the financial and social barriers that students face, lack of access to student housing (See Section 4.2.1, 4.2.2 & 4.2.3). Reporting is a crucial activity and instrument for objectively documenting the erosion of academic freedom for students in higher education institutions and for presenting this information to political authorities. It provides a basis for policy proposals and the development of new objectives and actions.

SROs in all four countries rely heavily on social media pages. These have been used to inform people about bureaucratic procedures, such as applying for scholarships and tuition fee exemptions, as well as to promote their political agency and positions, and to illustrate how HE governmental policies have affected student academic freedom and financial and material conditions.

During the interview, SRVS_M mentioned the evaluation of the implementation a new educational law proposal, which is due to be implemented between September and October. Later in the interview, SRVS published a video on its Instagram page in which one of its representatives shared their observations and evaluation of the draft of the new HE proposal, emphasising what could be its positive and negative impacts on students' academic career and freedom⁹⁰. This allows us to reduce the distance between students and HE and political authorities in the process of public decision-making processe, dissemination information on national HE policy proposals, SROs' positions and opinion about a HE policy. Social media pages are used as platforms to seminate information on future mobilization and manifestation organised or co-supported by SROs⁹¹. In addition to having a social media presence, SROs also appear in traditional media outlets, such as radio and television. They provide interventions from a student perspective on material and financial issues facing students, as well as violations and limitations of academic freedom. While SROS in Norway, Slovakia

⁹⁰https://www.instagram.com/reel/DMXq7DmiZ2i/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

⁹¹https://www.instagram.com/p/DPPJQluCpXc/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==;
https://www.instagram.com/p/DPLvqUZiFUr/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

and France have a regular presence in traditional media, as UNITin_E explains, this is quite limited for SROS in Italy, particularly for local SROS, who tend only to be present in local news media when topics also interest the local population. Furthermore, the limited media presence of Italian SROs depends significantly on public and independent broadcasters dedicating airtime to student issues and academic freedom. As a consequence, Italian SROs relies significantly on social media.

Advocacy repertoire demonstrates how SROs strategically combine evidence production, digital campaigning, and media engagement to articulate student perspectives on higher education issues. These practices enable them not only to raise awareness and mobilise support but also to monitor the policymaking process, from the drafting of proposals to their implementation, and to provide evaluations and observations that highlight the implications for students. Advocacy repertoire serves as both a tool of visibility and a mechanism of accountability, ensuring that student experiences and concerns remain present throughout the policy cycle.

4.3.2 EXPRESSIVE AND EMBODIED STUDENT AGENCY

This sub-code encompasses non-institutionalised forms of student activism, including protests, sit-ins, leafleting, and informal gatherings (Piazza, 2018; Linder et al., 2019). Expressive and embodied forms of student agency emerge particularly when university administrations or political actors impose barriers that limit SROs' participation in HE governance or exclude specific issues from the policy agenda.

Interviewees from FAGE, UDU, and UNITin consistently highlighted the lack of political will to meaningfully incorporate SRO evaluations into HE policy-making, especially at the national level, where student representatives are typically involved only during the agenda-setting phase. This exclusion is particularly evident in discussions concerning the worsening material and financial conditions

of students, which, as noted in Section 4.2.3, have rendered access to tertiary education a conditional privilege rather than a guaranteed right.

In France and Italy, SROs have sought to address these systemic shortcomings through advocacy repertoires (see Section 4.4.1) and parliamentary lobbying. However, their policy proposals for structural reform have largely been ignored or sidelined. In this context, collective mobilization, including demonstrations, sit-ins, has become the primary channel through which student organisations exert pressure on national institutions and reclaim visibility within the HE decision-making process

In 2025, FAGE organised three main manifestations: '*Uni à la dérive*' in February, which was a manifestation against the precarisation and underfunding of HE sectors⁹²; "*Reformez nos bourses*" in April, which emphasised the necessity to reform the scholarship structure and conditions and to contrast student precarisation⁹³; and a manifestation against student precarisation in France in October.⁹⁴ These manifestations have the objective further pressure to be exerted influence on the political authority to discuss student issues and barriers, and to advocate for the inclusion of these topics in the national agenda, alongside the advocacy strategy.

UDU_L and UDU_L2 have reported on how often they have reprised protest initiatives by individual students. An example is the 'tent protest', which was held to highlight the shortage of student housing, UDU has been extended this initiative to transform into a national campaign. These protests aimed to raise awareness of the shortage of student housing nationwide (see section 4.2.3.3) and put pressure on local municipalities to establish discussion tables on the issue. They

⁹² https://www.instagram.com/reel/DDH7I3oonYx/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

⁹³ https://www.instagram.com/reel/DIB9WrAivhu/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

⁹⁴ https://www.instagram.com/p/DPPJQluCpXc/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

also urged the national government to develop a national plan to increase the number of public student housing units.

SRVS_M stressed that SRVS is getting used to organise protest to put pressure on the government when it does refuse to integrate SRVS' evaluations and observation on the draft of HE policies:

"[...] when the previous administration wanted to change a law of Higher Education, and for the student union and for representatives of the university were not okay with this process. For that, they were protesting and this bill didn't go to the Parliament. So it is the way also we can use some kind of soft power and public protesting to enhance Higher Education" [SRVS_M's interview]

Protesting is a form of soft power. With Fico's government in power, protesting has become a way to express broader criticism of its political agenda, not only regarding HE, but also its international policies⁹⁵. Thereby, protesting is increasingly incorporated in the SRVS collective action repertoire

NSO_N emphasises that protesting is one of the collective actions that students, as members of the academic community and representatives of the student parliament, can express criticism about the institutional decisions take by the university and the national government alongside advocacy and parliamentary lobbying.

Beyond formal protest, SROs also engage in community-building activities such as cultural and social events to strengthen cohesion and gather informal feedback from students. SRVS_M described ongoing plans to organise social events for international students to foster inclusion and gather qualitative insights into their experiences in Slovak HE:

"So we're trying to think about some events where we just invite them, [...] for the weekend, and we give them some extra activities where they will work with it,

⁹⁵ <https://www.euronews.com/2024/02/08/thousands-protest-in-slovakia-claiming-government-is-softening-on-corruption>; <https://www.euronews.com/video/2024/05/03/thousands-rally-in-slovakia-to-protest-overhaul-of-public-broadcasting>

and then just speak with them about the problems to get more information. Also, some people were like, maybe we should organise some pop quizzes”
[SVRS_M’s interview]

Similarly, interview and social media data indicate that SROs in all four countries use cultural and sporting initiatives to reinforce student belonging and solidarity, necessary conditions that, as Nordal (2016) argues, are essential for sustaining awareness and mobilisation around academic freedom. As discussed in Section 4.2.4, however, it is crucial that these initiatives remain student-led and not co-opted by private actors, as commercial involvement risks commodifying student community life.

Overall, expressive and embodied forms of student agency remain a vital complement to institutional representation across all four contexts. While their functions differ: agenda-setting in France and Italy, soft power in Slovakia, and democratic expression in Norway, they collectively compensate for the limitations of formal participation mechanisms. From the perspective of student impact theory (Klemenčič, 2024), protests and informal gatherings extend the visibility, legitimacy, and moral authority of SROs beyond formal governance structures, ensuring that student concerns remain embedded within broader public and political debates.

4.3.3 INSTITUTIONAL REPERTOIRE OF STUDENT AGENCY

This sub-code encompasses institutionally based repertoires of collective action, consultation, lobbying, policy proposals, and evaluations that are embedded to varying degrees in national systems of student representation (Bovill et al., 2016; Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020; Klemenčič, 2024).

In Norway and Slovakia, detailed legal frameworks ensure that student representatives are regularly consulted on university governance and national policymaking. Thanks to these legal frameworks, student representatives are able to periodically lobby on the barriers that students face and the student perspective on HE. Following Lizzio and Wilson’s (2009) interpretation of student

representation, the presence and lobbying of SROs in Norway and Slovakia serve to address higher education (HE) policies and ensure that national HE policies are student-oriented.

Norwegian and Slovakian Interviewees stressed that parliamentary lobbying often extends beyond formal mandates:

“But if the president of the student democracy isn't in the leadership group, they still have meetings with the rector beforehand. So they still have a voice into that leader group, but they're not a part of it because that's not required by law.”

[NSO_N's interview]

“Also during our BM's which always try to have some representatives of the Ministry because our BM's are four times during the academic year. Or during the start of the semester or during the end of the semester.” [SRVS_M's interview]

These quotations illustrate that the lobbying of Norwegian and Slovakian SROs is also oriented towards improving student conditions beyond the academic sphere and on a societal level.

Although Norwegian and Slovakian SROs emphasise their independence from party politics, they nonetheless formulate recommendations on sensitive issues such as research collaboration with third parties (Norway) and plagiarism and cheating (Slovakia). This positions them as guardians of academic integrity and freedom, and demonstrates that the SROs' lobbying extends to broader societal and political issues.

French and Italian SROs still recur on institutional repertoires of action to be considered as legitimate intermediaries between HE governance and the student community (Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020). The direction and efficiency of the institutional repertoire of collective operate unevenly across governance levels. At the institutional level, French SROs' consultation within university governance is guaranteed thanks to the legal provision of Savary Law, which ensures regular exchanges with academic staff and administrators. However, the incorporation of SROs' observations remains important in the national CNOUS policymaking arena, even if its influence is sometimes limited. In Italy, lobbying and policy

proposals tend to be most effective at the local and regional levels (CNUS, 2018, 2022). University statutes often allow student representatives to present motions in governing bodies, and municipal youth councils grant students meaningful decision-making roles, sometimes on par with local officials. However, national-level engagement is frequently constrained by political unwillingness to enact structural reforms, pushing SROs to supplement institutional participation with advocacy campaigns and protest actions.

Overall, institutional student agency constitutes an essential dimension of representation in HE governance (Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020). In Norway and Slovakia, structured consultation mechanisms provide students with stable, regularised influence in policymaking. In contrast, in France and Italy, institutional participation remains more uneven and contingent on the responsiveness of political and academic authorities. From the perspective of student impact theory (Klemenčič, 2024), these institutional repertoires serve as formal platforms through which students transform their collective voice into sustained policy influence, complementing the expressive and embodied forms of agency discussed in Section 4.3.2.

4.3.4 STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

This sub-code draws on the theoretical framework of student partnerships defined by Matthews and Dollinger (2022), understood as collaborative processes between student representatives, academic staff, and external societal actors who work together in HE to pursue shared objectives. In this context, the analysis focuses on the construction of coalitions with academic trade unions, associations of rectors, civic and political NGOs, and political parties as specific forms of collective action aimed at strengthening student influence over HE and political authorities (Cinci, 2017; Vespa et al., 2024).

Interviewees from France, Norway, and Slovakia underscored the importance of cultivating collaborations with academic staff and trade unions. As FAGE_M explained, FAGE has forged partnerships with academic unions and the rectors'

association France Université based on shared grievances over the chronic underfunding of HE:

“We collaborate with student unions, others, as well as with professional unions, as well as with France Université, which brings together all university presidents. We collaborate with rectors.” [FAGE_M’s interview]

Sharing grievances about the precariousness of professors and students enables the formation of coalitions which aim to improve financial and material conditions within and outside academia. These coalitions demand financial stability, not only to guarantee professional tenure, but also to ensure the stability and quality of teaching and learning for students. Furthermore, FAGE's coalition-building extends to other SROs that share the same political positions. These coalitions are also based on shared grievances regarding student precarity and poverty.

In Norway and Slovakia, student partnerships are further institutionalised through national legislation requiring rectors and university presidents to meet regularly with SROs:

“The students in the student parliament, in the executive committee of the local democracies, the presidents most likely have meetings with the principal often or director, whatever you want to call the person” [NSO_N’s interview]

“And so we also have meetings with them..... to find some kind of solution because some problems can have different views from the view of students. Also from the teachers and the deans of the faculties. So we are working in this process that we are like a kind of institutions they are dealing with” [SRVS_M’s interview]

These examples illustrate a partnership model closely aligned with Matthews and Dollinger’s (2022) conception of students as partners, where collaboration extends beyond consultation to shared problem-solving and co-responsibility for educational improvement. In these contexts, alliances with rectors and academic unions not only reinforce the legitimacy of student voice in parliamentary discussions but also enhance the influence of SROs within national policymaking processes.

In contrast, Italian SROs rarely establish partnerships with academic trade unions or external actors, as their activity remains largely focused on the university site (Vespa et al., 2024). UDU represents a notable exception. It maintains long-term collaborations with civic, labour trade unions and student organisations such as CGIL, SUNIA, and ESU, contributing data for policy reports, advocacy campaigns, and initiatives on issues of student rights. However, as BLAB_L's interview revealed, regional and local SROs often prioritise short-term coalitions with other student groups to secure representation in university governance bodies, such as the CDA. This short-term strategic logic, as Klemenčič (2024) warns, risks reducing the transformative potential of student representation to a struggle for institutional presence rather than long-term structural reform. Moreover, academic unions and rectors in Italy tend to consolidate power rather than share it with students, limiting opportunities for genuine partnership (Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2013), as UDU_L2 describes the refusal of CRUI to support the implementation of the *Statuto dei Diritti e del Dovere degli Studenti* (2011) on a national level.

Across all four countries, SROs also attempt to build alliances with local and national political actors to facilitate bureaucratic processes, such as access to housing or welfare benefits, and to influence policy agendas. However, while Norwegian and Slovakian partnerships are grounded in formal cooperation mechanisms, in France and Italy, ideological alignment often shapes the scope and sustainability of collaboration (see Section 4.2.3.3). Similar dynamics appear in inter-SRO relations. In France, FAGE and UNEF have recently united in campaigns against student poverty, demonstrating the potential of broad-based alliances to amplify student influence⁹⁶. In Italy, however, the SRO coalition's efforts to build alliances tend to remain confined within politically homogeneous networks. They mainly focus on the university site to ensure their presence in higher education governance structures, such as the CDA.

⁹⁶https://www.instagram.com/p/DPPJQluCpXc/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

Within Matthews and Dollinger's (2022) framework, student partnerships function as relational strategies that extend the capacity of SROs to share resources, coordinate advocacy, and legitimise the student perspective in academic and political arenas. However, their effectiveness varies widely depending on institutional design, political context, and the degree to which students are recognised as legitimate partners rather than subordinate stakeholders. From the perspective of student impact theory (Klemenčič, 2024), partnerships constitute a key relational capability that transforms student representation from a consultative exercise into a collaborative process of co-governance with national government and HE governance (Bovill et al., 2016).

4.4 CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE OF STUDENT POLITICAL AGENCY IN NATIONAL POLITICS

This macro-code addresses Research Question 3 (RQ3), which examines whether and how student political agency (Klemenčič, 2024) converges or diverges with national policymaking processes. Rather than assessing whether student organisations' objectives are ultimately translated into legislation, the focus is on whether they succeed in entering the agenda-setting phase and how the student voice is incorporated into HE policy-making (Bovill & al., 2016; Klemenčič, 2024, Matthews & Dollinger, 2022).

Building on the Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024), SROs are conceptualised as both political and institutional actors within HE, capable of responding to breaches in students' academic and material rights and advocating for their protection at multiple governance levels (Nordal, 2016) (see Section 4.2).

To capture these dynamics, this macro-code is divided into the following sub-codes:

- ***Level of involvement*** (Klemenčič, 2024): substantive/empowered involvement, consultative/advisory involvement, tokenistic/marginal involvement.

- ***Structural and Perceptual Determinants of Student Political Agency:*** authoritative power of student representatives; legitimacy and effectiveness of their actions; institutional and organisational barriers, including structural conditions.
- ***Discursive and systemic dimensions:*** student representation as political agency, the effectiveness of welfare provision, and the social-normative discourse on higher education.

This structure allows for a comparative examination of the factors that foster either convergence, whereby SROs influence HE policy agendas, or divergence, where institutional and political barriers marginalise student voices (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022). From a capability perspective (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999), convergence reflects an expansion of students' agentic opportunities to shape their academic environment, whereas divergence exposes the limitations of formal rights in the absence of political will and institutional responsiveness (Klemenčič, 2024)

4.4.1 ACCOUNTABILITY OF HE AND POLITICAL AUTHORITIES

This sub-code builds on Monypenny's (1963) evaluation of the dual role of university administrations and state authorities in monitoring, enabling, and at times constraining student-led activity. It examines the formal and informal mechanisms through which SROs hold HE and political authorities accountable, ensuring both their inclusion in the HE policy-making process and the continuity of their representative functions.

At the same time, this sub-code explores how HE institutions and political authorities develop counter-strategies that limit or condition SRO participation, despite their legally established role in governance. By analysing these dynamics, this section highlights the tension between formal recognition of student representation and the informal practices that restrict its effective exercise.

Norway and Slovakia are examples of EHEA countries where a degree of stability has allowed SROs to continue their work despite changes in the political position and orientation of the political authorities. The NSO benefits from a well-defined legal framework that guarantees regular contact with the Ministry of Higher Education and Research. At the time of the interview with NSO_O, parliamentary meetings were temporarily suspended due to the upcoming elections. NSO_O emphasised that previous parliamentary legislation had already mandated that the next legislature must discuss a proposal to align student stipends with the national social security system:

“So now, Parliament has voted that they obliged themselves to form a proposal to formally connect the student stipend to the social security in the next Parliamentary period” [NSO_O's interview]

This legal manoeuvre allows NSO to develop its advocacy and lobbying strategies, to influence the approval of reforms to the student welfare system. In the meantime, NSO can concentrate their resources and energies on encouraging students to vote for the Parliamentary election, inform on the candidates and to advocate for the reform of other policies.

During the 2022 parliamentary elections in Slovakia, SRVS was able to maintain activity even during a period governed by a temporary *'professional government'*. As noted by SRVS_E:

“It was like it was called the government of professionals. So, it was like for 8 months, we had like just the professionals in certain sector who lead the Ministries and the Government until the next election. It was like the first time things like this happened” [SRVS_E's interview]

As in Norway, implementing a temporary government of reference during elections enables SRVS to continue working regularly, developing proposals and strategies, and collaborating with other stakeholders. At the same time, SRVS reported incidents of intentional exclusion, such as last-minute meeting notifications clearly designed to limit their capacity to prepare counteraction and policy proposals:

“Sometimes it happened that they mentioned in the morning that in one hour the meeting is coming. So it looks like they do it..... like intentionally to pull us on the last possible time. Maybe like we are not able to come there or we are not able to possible prepare for the discussion of the meeting or something”
[SRVS_E’s interview]

As specified by SRVS_E, this does not occur every time. Furthermore, thanks to the readiness of SRVS and the support of the Ministry of HE technical staff member, the Research and Sport departments were able to prepare SROs proposal and counteraction on time.

In France and Italy, SROs’ involvement is more fragmented and conflictual, despite legal references that obliged their presence. Although CNESER meetings are relatively infrequent, French student representatives maintain regular and informal contact with deputies and senators:

“It’s very regular, it depends on the week, but we have regular contact with deputies and senators on different subjects.” [FAGE_M’s interview]

This practice compensates for limited formal channels, allowing SROs to anticipate and prepare counter-action and create coalition building with political actors. Yet accountability gaps remain evident as the national government does not involve student representatives in discussions on HE policies. For example, FAGE recently criticised the government for excluding SROs from budgetary discussions on the CVEC and funding for student associative life⁹⁷.

The Italian case illustrates even deeper conflict. The CNSU, the official student representative body, has been repeatedly constrained by governmental instability and deliberate delays (CNSU; 2018, 2022). Furthermore, the national government has never responded to CNSU proposals and concerns within the legally mandated 60-day period. In the absence of accountability mechanisms for student involvement, not only do SROs navigate a fragmented system, but political authorities are also never sanctioned. UDU_L2 described systematic

⁹⁷https://www.instagram.com/p/DFgKwJTUgCn/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

attempts by the Ministers to delay the convening of the CNSU's first post-election meeting, where leadership and commissions are appointed:

“However, this is something that comes up at the inauguration of each new term because the first meeting of the new National Council of University Students after the elections must be convened by the Minister of Universities, and as soon as they can, they try to delay the first meeting where the Presidency and the heads of the various committees are appointed. They try to delay it as much as possible.” [UDU_L2's interview]

By way of comparison, Norway is the only country where accountability is ensured through a robust legal framework and an independent QAA agency, such as NOKUT, that monitors whether the authorities fulfil their obligations towards SROs. In France and Slovakia, sporadic issues of exclusion arise, but legal and administrative structures still provide SROs with the means to respond to attempts by political authorities to exclude them. In Italy, however, recurring governmental crises and weak accountability mechanisms systematically undermine the capacity of student representatives to exercise political agency (Klemenčič, 2024)

This subcode reveals a spectrum of institutional relationships: from stable convergence (Norway), through conditional cooperation with sporadic conflict (Slovakia and France), to structural marginalisation (Italy). The accountability of authorities emerges as a critical determinant of whether SROs can transform legal entitlements into effective participation in policymaking.

4.4.2 POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL ALIGNMENT

As discussed in Section 4.2.2, this sub-code analyses how the political and ideological orientation of national authorities influences HE objectives, governance mechanisms, and ultimately, student political agency. It focuses on the second sub-dimension: the convergence and divergence of political positions between SROs, HE institutions, and political authorities. This includes not only cases of overt political opposition but also situations in which SROs and

governments share similar diagnoses of structural problems, such as the impact of socio-economic barriers on academic freedom (see Section 4.2.3) yet diverge in their proposed solutions or values.

With the partial exception of Norway, where the rise of the far-right Progress Party (see Section 4.2.2.1) has not significantly constrained student activism, political and ideological alignments shape SRO agency most visibly in France, Italy, and Slovakia.

In France, despite rulings by the Constitutional Council prohibiting restrictions on associations based on political beliefs (De Gregorio, 2022), government attempts to curtail student union autonomy persist. The 2021 “*UNEF amendment*”, introduced under the *loi sur le séparatisme* (DeGregorio, 2022), permits the dissolution of SROs deemed to promote values contrary to those of the Republic. This measure exemplifies a growing tendency to subordinate student representation to political authority, narrowing the space for ideological pluralism in HE⁹⁸. Consequently, SROs must carefully navigate politically sensitive issues to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of both the state and the student community.

In Italy, the ideological orientation of the ruling government strongly conditions both national and local negotiations with student representatives. As UDU_L explained:

“So, as has always been the case, when you have a more political minister, such as Bernini, there is a more heated debate.” [UDU_L’s interview]

UNITin_E illustrated this dynamic at the local level, describing how a student housing project was halted following a change of the political orientation in provincial leadership:

⁹⁸ [https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2021/04/02/les-senateurs-adoptent-un-amendement-
unef-permettant-de-dissoudre-les-associations-faisant-des-reunions-non-mixtes-
racisees_6075311_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2021/04/02/les-senateurs-adoptent-un-amendement-unef-permettant-de-dissoudre-les-associations-faisant-des-reunions-non-mixtes-racisees_6075311_3224.html)

[...] *without an air of motivation [...] the agreement was there, it was advantageous for TEA [...] but she arrived and this agreement is no longer advantageous*” [UNITin_E’s interview]

Such cases demonstrate what Klemenčič (2024) terms political conditionality, which illustrates the dependence of SROs on the ideological alignment and goodwill of political authorities. Italian SROs must continually recalibrate their strategies to shifting political position and priorities of the political institutions, blurring the boundary between representation and negotiation.

In Slovakia, similar dynamics emerge under changing political leadership. SRVS_E recalled that a committee on student brain drain, established under a technocratic government (see Section 4.4.1), was dismantled following the election of Prime Minister Fico:

“The previous government created a committee including student representatives [...] but the new government came and this committee does not exist anymore.”

[SRVS_E, Interview]

The extent of political conditionality (Klemenčič, 2024) varies across contexts. In Slovakia, institutional cooperation of the Ministry of HE and university administration mitigates the effects of shift of the political orientation of the national government; in France, large and well-established SROs such as FAGE and UNEF retain partial influence through their digital advocacy, coalition building and initiatives with academic trade unions and external NGOs; in Italy, by contrast, SROs remain heavily dependent on the political orientation of governing authorities at all levels, often unable to advance proposals or sustain long-term initiatives.

In France and Italy, ideological alignment is not only external, between the state and universities, but also internal to the student representation itself, as mentioned in section 4.2.3. SROs with opposing political views tend to compete with each other for influence within the university (Ince et al., 2018).

In France, SROs represent competing ideological projects. While FAGE, UNEF and *Union Étudiante* advocate redistributive reforms, UNI, a conservative SRO

which sympathises with the far right⁹⁹, opposes redistributive policies. FAGE_M recalled the internal conflict surrounding the '*Repas pour Tous*' campaign, which aimed to provide €1 meals in CROUS canteens for all students:

"FAGE and other organizations except UNI charge €1 for meals for everyone."
[FAGE_M, Interview]

In relation to Table 2 of Klemenčič's (2024) arguments against the presence of SROs, the political cooperation or political ideology of SROs hinders the advancement of structural reform.

In Italy, the problem is exacerbated by the historical legacy of political patronage of SROs within and outside universities (Vespa & al., 2024). The most visible example is: *Azione Universitaria* (AU), other than being politically affiliated with the youth section of political party Fratelli d'Italia, traces its roots back to the post-fascist political party *Movimento Sociale* Italiano and its affiliated student group, *F.U.A.N* (Vespa et al., 2024). In addition, *Gioventù Nazionale* has been investigated for promoting antisemitism, racism, and fascism¹⁰⁰. This raises significant concerns as reprising Klemenčič's (2024) definition of SROs that elicits that this specific type of student organisation must promote democratic values and procedures within their organisation.

As UDU_L2 asserts, not all AU chapters are characterised by undemocratic values. However, the presence of such values within certain chapters is a cause for concern. At the end of May 2025, the chapter of AU of the University of Trento was at the centre of controversy after reported chat messages with homophobic insults and references to the *Repubblica di Salò* with a local representative of *Fratelli d'Italia*¹⁰¹. After that, several SROs and student organisations called for

⁹⁹ FAGE has reported incidents on his social media pages where militants and members of UNI have been denounced for performing the Roman salute at university sites https://www.instagram.com/p/DG_Yrn1CXm/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==;
https://www.instagram.com/p/DGBUWH9C7NA/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.fanpage.it/backstair/story/gioventu-meloniana-inchiesta-su-giovani-di-fdi/>

¹⁰¹ <https://www.iltquotidiano.it/articoli/inni-alla-repubblica-di-salo-e-insulti-omofobi-nelle-chat-di-azione-universitaria-trento-il-pride-vomito/>

its deregistration, specifically the ineligibility to receive public funding by the university as it violates articles 4 and 9 of the University code the prohibition of promotion of anti-democratic values at the university site¹⁰².

This case illustrates how student representation can paradoxically hinder academic freedom and agency when organisations reproduce exclusionary or extremist ideologies (Klemenčič, 2024; Mazzero, 2025; Nordal, 2016). At the same time, ideological divisions fragmented the possibility of coalition-building between left-wing SROs, as UDU_L observed:

“We often find ourselves in conflict with other left-wing associations [...] there is a tendency to believe that the associations are not sufficiently left-wing.” [UDU_L, Interview]

Political polarisation weakens collective advocacy, transforming student politics into a microcosm of national confrontation. Instead of a deliberative and pluralist arena (Klemenčič, 2012, 2024), the student sphere risks becoming dominated by factional competition, where legitimacy derives from ideological purity rather than representational effectiveness.

Across all cases, political and ideological alignment emerges as a structural determinant of both academic and representational freedom. France and Italy exemplify how governments instrumentalise neutrality to constrain academic discourse, while Norway and Slovakia demonstrate how ideological instability can erode established participatory structures. Within SROs, alignment both enables access to power and limits independence, producing what Macfarlane (2011) terms the paradox of embedded agency, which stresses that although SROs are recognised as institutional and political actors, they remain constrained by the very structures that legitimise them.

¹⁰²https://www.instagram.com/p/DKMLMWptsok/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

In pluralist systems (Klemenčič, 2012; 2024), formal democracy can mask fragmentation and co-optation, undermining collective advocacy. When student representation becomes politicised or captured, SROs risk shifting from defending academic freedom to reproducing partisan agendas. Ideological alignment, whether imposed from political authorities or reproduced within SROs, thus constitutes one of the central obstacles to the realisation of student academic freedom (Nordal, 2016).

4.4.3 LEVELS OF INVOLVEMENT

This sub-code builds on Klemenčič's (2024) framework concerning the formal involvement of student representatives in HE and QAA. While Klemenčič (2024) focuses primarily on legal and institutional dimensions, such as structured consultations with government bodies, QAA agencies, and the mandatory inclusion of student representatives, this sub-code expands the analysis to include informal forms of participation, such as ad hoc negotiations, lobbying, and interaction through public events or media interventions. In addition, involvement is conceptualised here as dynamic rather than static, recognising that student participation in public decision-making can fluctuate significantly in response to changes in political and ideological alignment (see Sections 4.2.2 and 4.4.2), accountability mechanisms (see Section 4.4.1), and organisational or structural constraints within SROs (see Section 4.4.6).

Drawing from both the theoretical literature (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022; Klemenčič, 2024) and the empirical material analysed, three categories of involvement are identified:

- ***Substantive / Empowered involvement***: student representatives hold effective decision-making power, contribute at the agenda-setting stage, and maintain a regular and institutionalised presence across HE policy processes and governance structures.
- ***Consultative / Advocacy involvement***: student representatives are invited to provide input or feedback, but their recommendations remain

non-binding; their influence depends primarily on advocacy, persuasion, and public visibility.

- ***Tokenistic / Marginal involvement***: student participation is largely symbolic, fulfilling procedural requirements without exerting real impact on decision-making or policy outcomes.

This category classification underscores the distinction between representation as procedural compliance and representation as an exercise of substantive political agency, a distinction central to understanding the real, rather than formal, capacity of SROs to shape higher education governance and protect student academic freedom.

4.4.3.1 SUBSTANTIVE/EMPOWERED INVOLVEMENT

NSO_N emphasised that, upon enrolling at a Norwegian university, students automatically become part of the institution's governance framework by being entitled to attend meetings, voice opinions, and participate in decision-making processes—even without holding an elected position:

“[...] every student that are enrolled in the university is automatically a part of the student democracy or parliament of that university. So if you're enrolled as a student, you are automatically a part of the student parliament. That doesn't mean you have to go to every parliament meeting or you have to vote on everything, but you are..... you are allowed to go to the parliament meetings [...] You're allowed to say your opinion and everything in private, like for private higher education institution” [NSO_N's interview]

University administrations are legally required to incorporate student feedback into policy design, both in public and private universities. NSO_N further noted that the NSO maintains regular contact with the Norwegian Parliament and the Ministry of HE and Research:

“They inform each other. But over that, they meet each other regularly at events, they always see each other, they see each other what feels like once a week (laught) because there are discussions, there are talks..... They are getting

invited to talk on the same topic, you know, from different sides. If there is a big thing in the media, both getting called to talk, you know on the news” [NSO_N’s interview]

These interactions demonstrate how student representation in Norway transcends consultation, shaping public debate and influencing higher education policy. The NSO thus acts as a key political stakeholder in national education governance.

In Slovakia, SRVS_E noted that student representatives are legally included in all aspects of university governance, including ethics and housing committees:

“But we have like the students accommodation committee, let’s say, or it means like they are managing all the accommodation process” [SRVS_E’s interview]

Moreover, some Slovak universities have expanded participation to include non-elected students, fostering inclusive discussion on institutional policies:

“But sometimes it happens that we meet all of us. So the Head of the of our faculty, Students members of the Academic Senate, Students from the associations and we are act together” [SRVS_E’s interview]

Although it does not occur at the national level or all the time, this emphasises how students are involved in the decision-making process and co-design policies at the university level. At the national level, SRVS_E emphasised that the Ministry of HE’s technical staff have involved SRVS in subject matters where their presence is not mandatory:

“And sometimes officers from the Ministry (Higher Education and Research and Sport), they are like open-minded because they are not politicians, they are just the normal officers so they contact us even when it is not necessary” [SRVS_E’s interview]

While student involvement in the CNSU in Italy is constrained by bureaucratic and political delays, as well as a lack of accountability and transparency mechanisms, local-level SRO involvement can be highly substantive when

universities and municipalities provide formal co-decision mechanisms. As UNITiN_E and UDU_L explained:

“In addition, there is the Municipal Student Council, in which several members (specify) seven members are appointed by the Student Council. So, there too, in short, there is a particular pervasiveness of the university component in relations with the Municipality because there too, the Student Council is a municipal body, and there is a president elected from among the students, who interfaces directly with the Municipality, with the Department of Youth Policies.” [UNITiN_E’s interview]

“In addition to examining and dividing into committees that address various issues concerning the city and the province of Trentino, they are also responsible for organizing a series of events, including informational and simply entertaining ones. Therefore, even in these cases, the opera representatives do not have a simple consultative role, but express their opinion or even vote against a proposal they do not like.” [UDU_L’s interview]

These experiences show that, despite limited national influence, local governance can empower students to shape policies on issues such as housing and transport (CNSU, 2018; 2022).

In France, the depth of student involvement varies widely across institutions. While the law ensures representation, the effective integration of student observations depends on the political orientation and openness of individual university administrations. As FAGE_M noted, collaboration often reflects the relational climate between the SRO and the local academic leadership rather than formal entitlement.

Across all four cases, substantive involvement emerges where student representatives exercise tangible influence over agenda-setting and policy design, supported by stable institutional procedures and relational trust. In Norway, this empowerment is fully institutionalised through legal frameworks and regular parliamentary contact; in Slovakia, it extends through ministerial cooperation and informal openness; in Italy, it is localised within municipal

structures; and in France, it remains contingent on institutional culture. These findings demonstrate that substantive student involvement depends not only on legal mandates but also on political will, organisational culture, and the relational capital that SROs cultivate within and beyond HE.

4.4.3.2 CONSULTATIVE/ADVOCACY INVOLVEMENT

In Norway and Slovakia, the legal framework mandates student involvement at both the university and national levels. However, as NSO_N and SRVS_M clarified, SROs' evaluation on HE policies are formally binding only at the institutional level, not in national policymaking:

"[...] we are most often a hearing (pause) group which means if a law is going to be discussed, it gets sent out to (thinking) the University, the Higher Education institutions and often also us. And then, we can say if we agree with, if we do not agree with, what we agree with and we come up with recommendations. At the end of the day, our recommendations are just recommendations, if the politicians want to include them or not to include them, that's up to me." [NSO_N's Interview]

"It really depends on the Ministry and the representatives of the Ministry of Education. If they want to accept our amendments or not." [SRVS_M's interview]

As discussed in Section 4.4.2, the political and ideological stance of the authorities strongly shapes how student observations are received and integrated. Norwegian and Slovak respondents also noted that the impact of consultations depends on the topic under discussion. While SRVS reported that the Ministry of HE often implements its recommendations, NSO representatives described variable results, ranging from tangible policy influence to symbolic inclusion. This variation underscores that consultation processes, even when formalised, do not necessarily translate into the desired outcomes that SROs pursue.

In France, student involvement follows a dual structure within the CNESER and CNOUS. According to FAGE_M, student representatives exert significant influence over student welfare and social life policies in the CNOUS, while their

role in the CNESER remains primarily consultative, limited to providing legally mandated opinions on issues such as budgets, curricula, and accreditation procedures¹⁰³.

In Italy, consultative involvement displays the highest degree of fragmentation. As reported by the CNSU (2018; 2022), the influence of elected representatives varies widely across regions. In Tuscany, students hold meaningful decision-making power, while in Emilia-Romagna and other regions, their role is restricted to consultation. This pattern aligns with CNSU (2018, 2022), which note that institutional capacity and the strength of local youth councils largely determine student influence. At the national level, UDU_L2 observed that the CNSU should, in principle, have powers comparable to SROs in Slovakia and Norway, yet these remain largely theoretical due to the absence of effective accountability and enforcement mechanisms.

Across cases, consultative involvement emerges as the most widespread mode of student involvement in HE policymaking. In Norway and Slovakia, consultation is institutionalised through mandatory hearings but ultimately conditional on political willingness. In France, student influence varies by policy domain, substantive in welfare matters, consultative in academic governance. In Italy, it depends heavily on regional infrastructures and political receptiveness, with the national level remaining largely formalistic.

Overall, these findings confirm that legal provisions alone do not guarantee empowered representation. Consultation becomes substantive involvement only when supported by (1) political openness of authorities, (2) strong accountability mechanisms ensuring follow-up, and (3) a participatory culture that values student input as a form of democratic co-governance rather than symbolic inclusion

¹⁰³ <https://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/fr/le-conseil-national-de-l-enseignement-superieur-et-de-la-recherche-cneser-87955>

4.4.3.3 TOKENISTIC MARGINAL LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT

While France, Norway, and Slovakia tend to oscillate between empowered and consultative forms of student involvement, depending on accountability structures, political alignment, and institutional context (see Sections 4.4.1 and 4.4.2), Italy represents the clearest case of marginalised participation at the national level. As emphasised by UDU_L, UDU_L2, and the CNSU (2018; 2022), the absence of effective checks and balances leaves elected student representatives with little influence over higher education (HE) policy or the implementation of Bologna Process commitments. Instead, their role is often reactive, limited to responding to incidents on university campuses (see Section 4.2.3) and to governmental manoeuvres that bypass formal consultation mechanisms.

A recent example is the *DDL Sicurezza*, initially proposed as ordinary legislation but later converted into a decree law¹⁰⁴, thereby circumventing the mandatory consultation of the CNSU. This legal manoeuvre prevented student representatives from issuing an official opinion on the potential negative consequences of the law for students. As Vespa and his colleagues (2024) argue, the CNSU has increasingly become a body of formal recognition rather than a space of substantive co-decision, reducing student participation to a procedural formality rather than a genuine expression of political agency.

At the local level, marginalisation often follows a decline in public attention and mobilisation. As UDU_L explained:

“It lost importance, probably because once the demonstration exploded, it received huge media coverage, because this whole sleeping in tents in front of public institutions caused quite a stir and attracted a lot of attention. Once the tents were dismantled, it became less and less talked about (FEDERICA groans). Consequently, perhaps also feeling less social, external, and media pressure, the

¹⁰⁴ <https://pagellapolitica.it/articoli/che-cose-rimasto-del-ddl-sicurezza-diventato-un-decreto>

public administration itself lost interest in developing shared policies.” [UDU_L’s interview]

This testimony illustrates how student visibility and media engagement can temporarily enhance participation, but once public pressure fades, institutional responsiveness declines. Consequently, the level of student involvement in Italy fluctuates across political arenas and geographical contexts: some regions promote meaningful participation, while others maintain restrictive or purely symbolic practices.

A further distinction must be made between public and private universities. While public universities are bound by national regulations under Law 240/2010 (see Section 4.1.1), private institutions are not legally required to comply, leading to asymmetric power relations. As BLAB_L observed:

“More than anything, it’s a relationship of dependency. In the sense that it remains a private university, so they’re the ones who hold the upper hand no matter what.”

[BLAB_L’s interview]

This situation underscores how, in the absence of robust accountability mechanisms, student representation in private institutions is contingent on administrative goodwill rather than guaranteed rights.

Unlike France, Norway, and Slovakia, where consultation mechanisms, though imperfect, provide student representatives with a degree of influence and decision-making power, Italian student representation at the national level remains largely symbolic, constrained by political instability, legal loopholes, and uneven implementation across territories. The Italian case thus demonstrates how tokenistic involvement emerges when institutional frameworks fail to safeguard student participation in the HE decision-making process from political manipulation and when representation becomes detached from both policy influence and social mobilisation.

4.4.4. STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE AUTHORATIVE POWER

This sub-code examines the domains in which SROs exercise decision-making authority in HE, including welfare, accreditation, representation, and budgeting. It also explores whether students hold equal status with other academic actors in governance bodies or whether their participation remains secondary and consultative.

Starting with the policy-making authority, in Norway and Slovakia, SROs such as the NSO and SRVS are legally entitled to review draft HE policies, assess their potential impact on students, and submit formal recommendations before parliamentary discussions with stakeholders. Their authority covers a wide range of policy domains, tuition fees, exam accreditation, and financial aid. Yet, as discussed in Section 4.4.3.2, the extent to which their feedback is incorporated into final legislation depends heavily on the political will and orientation of the relevant authorities.

In France, by contrast, SROs represented within the CNESER do not possess the same prerogatives as their Norwegian and Slovak counterparts. As FAGE_M explained, elected student representatives may act as consultants (Bovill et al., 2016) during CNESER sessions but cannot intervene directly in the drafting phase of policy evaluation. Their influence is therefore indirect and largely mediated through advisory mechanisms.

In Italy, the CNSU formally holds similar responsibilities: reviewing HE policy drafts and providing feedback on their student impact, but faces significant obstacles in exercising them. As UDU_L2 noted, despite repeated demands for greater decisional power and autonomy (CNSU, 2018; 2022), these requests are consistently disregarded. The result is a structurally weak form of student authority, characterised by dependence on ministerial discretion rather than institutionalised right

Moving on the student welfare system, In Norway, Student Welfare Organisations enjoy a near monopoly over the management and distribution of welfare services, ensuring responsiveness to student needs. However, their operational capacity

remains constrained by the fiscal and legal authority of municipalities and the national government. In France, student representatives hold stronger decision-making power within the CNOUS, particularly regarding the CVEC tariff, student canteens, public housing affiliated with CNOUS, and the allocation of the CVEC budget. While the CNOUS provides a meaningful arena for student input, its broader influence on national welfare policy remains limited.

In Slovakia, the Ministry of HE, Research and Sport has direct control over welfare management. Nevertheless, student referees, such as the student referee for student housing, who are nominated by universities, play a monitoring role. They ensure access to welfare benefits and document any obstacles or conflicts that students may face.

In Italy, SROs possess limited formal authority over welfare management. They can advocate for the expansion of the ISEE threshold or adjustments to existing welfare provisions, but cannot enact them. Greater influence exists at the local level, where student representatives may propose or negotiate for the improvement of locally-based services related to student life and well-being.

Across cases, student authoritative power emerges as a multidimensional concept and capability resource that is shaped by the intersection of institutional design, political opportunity, and financial control (ESU, 2024; Klemenčič, 2024). Formal recognition of SROs' authority proves to be a necessary but insufficient condition for meaningful influence. While Norway and Slovakia exemplify semi-corporatist and institutionalised models of student representation, France and Italy illustrate the persistence of consultative or hybrid pluralist systems where authority is fragmented and often contingent on political goodwill (Klemenčič, 2024).

The comparison underscores a structural tension within the EHEA. Despite shared principles of co-governance and democratic participation, the translation of formal rights into effective agency remains uneven. Student authoritative power thus depends not only on legal frameworks but also on the political and financial autonomy that allows SROs to transform representation into genuine co-decision and policy impact.

4.4.5 STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE POLITICAL AGENCY ORIENTATION

Building on Klemenčič's (2024) conceptualisation of student political agency, this sub-code analyses the strategic orientations adopted by SROs to defend or promote student interests despite legal, financial, and institutional constraints. Within the coding framework, political agency orientation refers to the specific objectives pursued by SROs in response to the violations and restrictions discussed in Section 4.2, as well as to the strategies through which these organisations mobilise to influence HE and political decision-making. This sub-code, therefore, serves two analytical purposes: first, it identifies the material, institutional, and political goals toward which SROs direct their agency; second, it situates these goals within a cross-national perspective, highlighting both convergences and contextual specificities (Komotar, 2022).

As discussed in Sections 4.2.3.2 and 4.2.3.3, shortages of student housing, inadequate reform of scholarships and welfare mechanisms, and the mismatch between student demand and institutional capacity have substantially hindered students' ability to exercise academic freedom. Consequently, SROs across the four selected countries have expressed a shared goal of expanding the supply of student housing, ensuring its affordability, and guaranteeing minimum standards of hygiene, safety, and functionality. The principle of accessibility, both economic and geographical, was consistently emphasised as an urgent necessity in all cases

Alongside housing, SROs have repeatedly called for comprehensive reforms to stipends, loans, scholarships, and financial aid systems. Evidence from both interviews and documentary sources indicates that these demands are driven by students' widespread financial anxiety and the pressures associated with combining work and study. In Norway, the NSO has proposed linking stipends to students' social security numbers to better reflect real living costs. In Slovakia, SRVS has promoted expanding merit-based scholarships, which are currently concentrated in medical, STEM, and technical disciplines. However, as SRVS_M

explained, these proposals encounter resistance from academic staff who question their applicability beyond STEM fields:

“[...] But in Medicine it is getting stopped by saying: “No. This is not the way how we should get students to be at home“. So this is like how they are trying . But this is not everything systematical” [SRVS_M's interview]

In France, FAGE has advocated for a differentiated scholarship system that takes into account both student income and cost-of-living disparities across cities:

“[.....] FAGE is calling for grants that are dependent on the students' income but also on the city in which the student lives, for example, with the need for higher grants when living in Paris than when living in Limoges or other cities that cost less.” [FAGE_M's interview]

Italian SROs have also prioritised these objectives. However, given Italy's hybrid HE governance system, where responsibilities are divided among the national government, regional authorities, student welfare bodies, and university administrations (Serpieri & Grimaldi, 2014; Lumino et al., 2017), their strategies differ. BLAB_L, UDU_L and UDU_L2 have expressed a desire to harmonise welfare provisions nationally, while maintaining sufficient autonomy for universities and regional governments to adapt financial aid to local needs. Italian student representatives also advocate for reinforcing the decision-making CNSU, enabling it to monitor regional compliance with national welfare criteria and to ensure equal rights and representative power for student delegates across institutions (CNSU, 2018; 2022).

SROs' orientations are also shaped by the political and institutional environments of their domestic contexts. In France, the *Baromètre de la précarité étudiante* (2023, 2025), *Bouge ton cours* (2024) and *Coût de la rentrée* (2024, 2025) illustrate FAGE's focus on combating student poverty by offering material support, health assistance, and cultural initiatives to reduce financial hardship and ensure students can complete their education without foregoing meals or medical care

In Italy, as discussed in Section 4.1.2, restrictions on student voting rights due to residence-based criteria have prompted left-wing SROs to mobilise politically.

Left-wing SROs have formed coalitions with civic NGOs to support national campaigns, including “VOTO DOVE VIVO”¹⁰⁵ and “RETE VOTO FUORISEDE”¹⁰⁶, advocating for remote voting options for off-residence students.

In Slovakia, SRVS has targeted systemic corruption within academia, particularly plagiarism, cheating, and imbalanced power relations between students and staff. Interview data and public reports reveal that SRVS has pressured politicians found guilty of plagiarism to return their degrees to their respective universities:

“Talking about plagiarism which is really often in Slovakia, especially in our politicians because we knew because the former Ministry of Education had a problem with his MA Thesis because he copied his BA thesis and he did not do the correct citation. [...] Since 2020, we have the law that if you are accused about of plagiarism and it is very frightened, you can say that you don’t want this title and give it back to the university. But, most of these politicians didn’t do it.”
[SVRS_M’s interview]

In Norway, the NSO identified a recurrent issue: many student representatives lack proper training on institutional functioning and decision-making procedures. NSO representatives have therefore pressured universities to provide newly elected students with the necessary resources and training to perform their representative duties effectively:

“[...] , they don't necessarily receive courses from the institution to learn about how the institution is structured and how things are structured in order to participate in those councils. And so our position has been that we wish that the universities prioritize to give the students..... the resources that they need in terms of learning of their possibilities and to be advocates in their institution”
[NSO_O’s interview]

Across the four cases, SROs’ political agency exhibits a dual orientation. On one hand, SROs converge on material and institutional goals, especially affordable

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/votodovevivo/>

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.instagram.com/votofuorisede/>

housing, fair financial aid, and equitable access to education, which reflect widespread limitations of students' economic and social rights across the EHEA. On the other hand, their priorities diverge according to national contexts: voting rights in Italy, anti-poverty measures in France, anti-corruption advocacy in Slovakia, and representative training in Norway.

This cross-national variation confirms that the political agency of SROs is neither uniform nor merely reactive. Rather, as Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024) suggests, it is strategically oriented, shaped by both the specific legal–political configurations of each higher education system and by transnational student concerns. Their consistent focus on defending social rights, enhancing institutional legitimacy, and promoting democratic participation demonstrates that SROs act also as political actors engaged in broader societal struggles for equity, transparency, and democratic accountability within and beyond academia.

However, in line with the findings discussed in Section 4.4.2 and with Klemenčič's (2024) definition of SROs, the concept of student political agency must remain open to scrutiny. SROs may be politically affiliated, co-opted by institutional or partisan interests, or may deliberately avoid confronting the political direction of higher education policy and governance when doing so could jeopardise their access to decision-making arenas, funding, or legitimacy. Recognising this tension highlights that student political agency is contingent and negotiated, rather than absolute, and that it depends on the capacity of SROs to balance advocacy with institutional dependency.

4.4.6 STUDENT REPRESENTATION LEGITIMACY AND EFFECTIVENESS

This sub-code draws on Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024), which conceives SROs as both reactive and strategic agents that navigate institutional constraints while seeking to influence HE governance. The analysis focuses on two interrelated dimensions:

- **Legitimacy:** understood as the extent to which SROs are perceived as credible, accountable, and rightful actors within the HE system and broader society;
- **Effectiveness:** defined as their actual capacity to respond to student needs, influence policy, and secure change within the legal and institutional frameworks that govern them (Klemenčič, 2024; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Meeuwissen & al., 2019; Nordal, 2016; Shahabul et al., 2021).

By examining both internal barriers: institutional and organisational constraints embedded in national representation systems; and external factors, societal perceptions and normative expectations surrounding student voice. This sub-code assesses whether student representation effectively empowers students as political actors or, conversely, constrains their agency within bureaucratic and hierarchical structures (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022).

Functioning as an integrative analytical category, this section brings together three key sub-dimensions:

- The effectiveness of SROs in advancing student welfare and rights;
- The institutional and organisational barriers that restrict their agency
- The social and normative discourses that define their perceived legitimacy.

Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for evaluating how SROs operate at the intersection of representation, governance, and accountability. They also establish a basis for future comparative research on the evolving role of student voice and agency within the EHEA.

4.4.6.1 EFFECTIVENESS OF STUDENT REPRESENTATION AND STUDENT WELFARE

This subsection analyses the effectiveness of SROs within national systems of student representation and welfare. Drawing on the Capability Approach (MacFarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999) and Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024),

effectiveness is conceptualised as a relational capacity, that is, the ability of SROs to mobilise the student voice and transform individual experiences of need or exclusion into collective political claims (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022). Effectiveness, therefore, extends beyond representational activity or service provision. It captures the extent to which SROs can convert welfare-related inequalities into policy change and democratic participation within higher education (Bovill et al., 2016; Meeuwissen et al., 2019; Piazza, 2018).

The student welfare system is understood here as a composite field encompassing scholarships, housing schemes, social and financial aid, and targeted measures addressing disadvantaged or underrepresented student groups (Crosier & Haj, 2020). Yet welfare is not merely a distributive or technical domain. It also constitutes a representational arena in which SROs claim legitimacy for students as holders of distinct rights and exercise either monopoly or limited responsibility to ensure that welfare institutions meet student needs. Through welfare advocacy, SROs contest institutional boundaries and articulate collective claims concerning access, inclusion, and recognition. This section examines the legal and institutional structures that define student welfare, the initiatives implemented by SROs to mitigate inequalities, and how these initiatives enhance or constrain their agency and legitimacy.

Across the four countries analysed, SROs have established formal or semi-formal structures for legal protection and welfare monitoring, though the degree of institutionalisation varies. In Norway and Slovakia, students' right, from student representation to social and political rights, is guaranteed by the *University and University College Act (2024)* and the *Higher Education Act (2002)*. Both frameworks recognise students as members of the academic community, entitled to legal protection and participation in governance. Within this setting, students may appeal to the ombudsman, who is an elected figure responsible for providing legal defence on behalf of students within the university, enabling them to contest violations or limitations of their rights by professors, the HE administration and their peers.

Slovakia adds an informal, trust-based layer to these mechanisms. As reported by SRVS_M, each university typically designates a *trustworthy person*, who is often a volunteer professor, who serves as a confidential contact for students seeking to report misconduct or welfare issues. In parallel, student-led initiative “*student offices*” collect anonymous testimonies regarding harassment, administrative violations, or discrimination. These offices regularly liaise with the national SRO, transmitting anonymised information that informs collective advocacy and policy dialogue. Although not yet standardised nationwide, this intersection between formal and informal mechanisms reflects ongoing efforts to institutionalise trust-based academic transparency systems. From a capability perspective, such hybrid systems expand students’ conversion factors by reducing informational and psychological barriers and transforming welfare protection into a shared collective good.

In France and Italy, large national SROs, such as *FAGE*, *UNEF* and *UDU*, employ legal representatives who act as mediators between students and the relevant administrative or judicial authorities. These figures can be contacted directly to report violations or to initiate legal proceedings on behalf of students. During the ministerial inquiry into *islamo-gauchisme* in French universities between 2021 and 2022 (See Section 4.2.1), *UNEF* launched several legal actions opposing government interventions that threatened academic freedom and student expression¹⁰⁷. By translating welfare and rights violations into formal litigation, *UNEF* strengthened its position as a guardian of democratic legitimacy within the HE system. Similarly, *UDU* consults its national legal representative to decide which cases merit legal action, given the limited resources of the organisations. As explained by UDU_L:

“We usually consult with the national executive... at that point the executive asks the lawyer for an opinion to understand whether it is possible to proceed or better

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.politico.eu/article/french-minister-wants-inquiry-into-so-called-islamo-leftist-bias-in-academia/>

to leave it alone... At that point we can proceed with legal action." [UDU_L's interview]

This selective approach illustrates how SROs prioritise cases of high collective relevance in resource-constrained environments, exercising agency through targeted mobilisation rather than volume. Within the Capability Approach (MacFarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999), the Italian and French examples demonstrate strategic conversion, which is the deliberate transformation of limited resources, such as funds or legal expertise, into high-impact political action.

Beyond legal advocacy, SROs play a significant role in addressing students' material conditions. Housing shortages, financial insecurity, and rising living costs remain major barriers to access and completion in higher education. SRO initiatives in this area demonstrate the connection between welfare and democratic capability by alleviating material inequalities and thereby expanding students' genuine opportunities to participate in academic life (Klemenčič, 2024; Nordal, 2016).

FAGE launched the *Dispositif des Logements Solidaires* (2025), a programme providing affordable housing through partnerships with NGOs and private citizens who rent rooms at reduced rates based on students' economic status. This initiative, presented in *FAGE's Baromètre de la Précarité Étudiante* (2025), not only mitigates housing scarcity but also reframes student welfare as a collective societal responsibility. Similarly, UDU created the *Guida agli affitti per gli studenti fuorisede*, a digital guide pamphlet that informs students about their housing rights, contractual obligations, and strategies to avoid fraud¹⁰⁸. Both initiatives exemplify how SROs convert individual material constraints into political leverage by making welfare knowledge itself a tool of empowerment.

In Norway, several student welfare organisations have also introduced provisional housing schemes, converting unused university spaces, such as cafeterias, into

¹⁰⁸ <https://unioneuniversitari.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Guida-fuorisede-UDU-CGIL-SUNIA-al-17-MAGGIO-2024.pdf>

temporary dormitories for students awaiting accommodation¹⁰⁹. In Slovakia, welfare practices vary between institutions, but generally include online platforms that connect students seeking accommodation with landlords, as well as inter-university collaborations that map available low-cost housing options in the private market.

FAGE's AGORAE network, established in 2011, illustrates another dimension of welfare activism. By providing solidarity groceries that sell food at subsidised prices, AGORAE enables students to access adequate nutrition while preserving dignity and autonomy. Through such redistributive actions, SROs assert welfare as a political space, a site where recognition, legitimacy, and belonging are negotiated. From the perspective of Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024), these initiatives enhance SROs' legitimacy capital, the degree to which their actions are perceived as advancing the collective good rather than narrow interests

Nevertheless, the persistence of housing shortages, regional inequalities, and funding limitations highlights the fragility of welfare systems across all four countries. SROs' redistributive initiatives remain largely compensatory, addressing immediate symptoms rather than structural causes. Their effectiveness is therefore relational. It depends on the level of decisional power within the student system and how SROs and the student body can address students' financial and material burdens. This can be achieved by adjusting the system, introducing student-led spaces and initiatives, and providing informative pamphlets to help students navigate the system more easily.

A further dimension of effectiveness concerns the responsiveness of both SROs and public authorities. The capacity to hold institutions accountable represents a crucial indicator of democratic health and student agency (Kronfeldner, 2024). In Norway and Slovakia, SROs can contact the national QAA to report governance breaches. As explained by NSO_N:

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.thelocal.no/20240815/deeply-concerning-is-airbnb-eating-away-norways-student-housing-supply>

“Every five years, they do a check-up of the university... they talk to the student representatives and ask: have you been involved? Have you been heard? Do you feel part of the quality assurance? If the student parliament says no, the university fails the check.” [NSO_N’s interview]

This mechanism establishes SROs as watchdogs within the HE governance structure. Their feedback directly affects institutional accreditation, which creates a strong incentive for universities to meaningfully involve students in decision-making. Such processes convert formal representation into an effective, outcome-oriented voice.

In Slovakia, similar oversight functions are carried out by ethical committees that include student representatives. These bodies provide confidential platforms for peer-level accountability, enabling students to report breaches of academic integrity. As SRVS_E noted, however, enforcing sanctions in severe cases of plagiarism or power abuse remains difficult due to limited evidence and procedural rigidity. Still, regular communication between committees and SROs strengthens ethical norms and transparency.

By contrast, Italian SROs face greater challenges in operationalising their watchdog role, particularly concerning compensation and enforcement mechanisms. UDU_L2 referred to recurring cases in which universities exceeded the legal tuition-fee cap established by national law:

“If this regulation exists... why doesn't it automatically happen that universities that exceed this limit give money back to students or reduce their taxes?” [UDU_L’s Interview]

According to UDU's 2024 report, *'Università, quanto mi costi – Inchiesta sulle tasse'*, eleven public universities violated the tuition fee cap of 20%. However, there was no systematic procedure in place to compensate students affected by this violation. These cases demonstrate how institutional inertia and resource scarcity can undermine the enforcement of student rights and reduce the capacity of SROs to act as effective guarantors of welfare. When SROs lack the means and legal basis to convert violations into compensation, their role shifts from that

of proactive watchdogs to reactive intermediaries. SROs are only able to communicate violations, not pursue them legally. This limits their democratic impact.

Overall, student welfare mechanisms across the four countries demonstrate that the effectiveness of SROs depends less on their legal recognition or service provision than on their capacity to convert welfare issues into politically consequential claims. Where SROs possess recognised authority within institutional frameworks, as in Norway and Slovakia, they act as watchdogs that secure both access to welfare and accountability of HE institutions. In the HE systems where SROs' decisional power is consultative or, such as Italy and France, their role remains largely compensatory, addressing gaps left by the state rather than reshaping welfare governance itself.

From a capabilities perspective (MacFarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999), this variation illustrates that formal welfare rights do not automatically translate into real freedoms. Only where SROs have the institutional means and legal capacity to monitor and enforce those rights do students acquire the substantive capability to exercise academic freedom. Thus, the effectiveness of SROs in the welfare domain becomes a proxy for the overall health of student democracy: when advocacy moves beyond service delivery to influence policy and governance, it affirms the legitimacy of students as political actors within HE. Conversely, where SROs remain confined to mitigating inequalities without achieving structural transformation, student academic freedom (Nordal, 2016), though formally guaranteed, remains materially constrained.

4.4.6.2 INSTITUTIONAL AND ORGANISATIONAL BARRIERS

This subsection examines the institutional and organisational barriers that constrain the autonomy and effectiveness of SROs within national HE systems. Drawing on the ESU's 2024 report *Bologna Process with Student Eyes* and Klemenčič's (2024) models of national systems of student representation (see Table 3), these barriers are conceptualised as structural constraints arising from

the legal and systemic design of student representation. Such constraints limit SROs' capability to act as autonomous political agents and to influence decision-making within HE governance. The analysis builds on earlier findings concerning the concentration of economic power (see Section 4.2.2), political alignment and strategic partnerships (see Sections 4.3.4 and 4.4.2), and evaluates how organisational arrangements, funding mechanisms, and governance hierarchies shape SROs' potential for impact at both national and institutional levels.

Following the Capability Approach (MacFarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999), institutional and organisational barriers are conceptualised as forms of unfreedom, factors that restrict the conversion of formal rights into real opportunities for agency. Through this lens, the section analyses three interrelated dimensions of constraint: (1) governance hierarchies and structural dependencies; (2) financial and administrative barriers; (3) organisational fragmentation and disparities of scale.

Together, these dimensions reveal how institutional structures and resource dependencies condition the extent to which SROs can exercise meaningful political agency within higher education systems.

Across the cases examined, formal governance structures often restrict the autonomy of student representation. While SROs are institutionally recognised within HE governance, their role frequently remains consultative rather than decision-making (see section 4.4.3.2). This reproduces what Klemenčič (2024) calls bounded autonomy, a condition in which SRO authority is confined to specific policy areas without legally binding mechanisms to enforce student perspectives in the HE policy-making process.

In France, for instance, student representatives in the CNESER and CNOUS participate in national consultations every two years. However, as noted by Genelot (2024), these representatives possess limited authority compared to academic and ministerial members, who hold the majority of votes. The competitive nature of CNESER elections, coupled with the scarcity of seats, compels SROs to prioritise electoral success over long-term advocacy, narrowing their scope for sustained political agency. As FAGE_M observed, this competitive

system hinders coalition-building among SROs, preventing them from jointly challenging universities or public authorities when student academic freedom is restricted (Monypenny, 1963; Nordal, 2016).

Italian interviewees also highlighted the implications of such competition. BLAB_L and UDU_L both stressed that the current electoral configuration fails to capture regional disparities in students' experiences, as one elected candidate often represents four to six regions with distinct welfare systems, university structures, and power dynamics. The political fragmentation of SROs further undermines their legitimacy and effectiveness, as UDU_L explained, due to differing repertoires of action and ideological distance from institutionalised arenas (See Section 4.4.2). These findings confirm that the French and Italian systems of representation mask regional inequalities and generate internal divisions, resulting in conversion inefficiencies (Sen, 1999), the inability to convert formal representation into effective influence.

Norway and Slovakia offer formally inclusive frameworks but reveal similar hierarchical asymmetries. Under section 2 of the University and University College Act (2024), both public and private universities are legally required to maintain student parliaments and allocate budgets for representative activities. Yet student participation is constrained by bureaucratic procedures, performance-based funding systems, and the financial capacity of individual universities. As NSO_O explained, larger institutions can provide study leave and stipends for representatives, recognising student representation as either part-time or full-time work. In contrast, smaller universities, where student representation remains voluntary, often penalise students for absences related to representative duties as this results in financial losses under the student points system. Such dependencies reproduce inequalities of agentic opportunity (Klemenčič, 2024) even within the same national context. The structural reliance of SROs on institutional goodwill limits their autonomy, aligning with Klemenčič's (2024) concept of procedural representation, in which inclusion does not necessarily equate to power.

The financial dimension represents one of the most significant constraints on SRO autonomy. Across all four countries, financial resources shape both the scope and sustainability of student representation, though the nature of dependency varies.

In Norway, funding for the NSO is stable, indexed to inflation, and disbursed annually through the national budget. This guarantees operational continuity and enables strategic planning. In contrast, France presents the most extreme case of financial dependency, as public subsidies are tied to electoral performance. As FAGE_M explained:

“There are plenty of points that help fund student associations. But the government provides the money it gives for the training of student representatives. So the more representatives an association has, the more money it has.” [FAGE_M’s interview]

This mechanism further fosters competition among SROs and prioritises election outcomes over collective advocacy, thereby fragmenting the representative landscape.

Since 2021, the *Contrat d’Engagement Républicain* (DeGregorio, 2022) has introduced an additional layer of control (See Section 4.2.1). As FAGE_M clarified:

“It is a contract that associations are obliged to sign in order to receive public subsidies... But this is to better control the actions of associations, and some are refused funding under the pretext that they have carried out work against secularism or the values of the Republic.” [FAGE_M’s interview]

This contractual mechanism exemplifies what Klemenčič (2024) calls instrumental dependency, which is the use of financial leverage to regulate the ideological orientation of SROs. From a capability perspective, such conditional funding constrains SROs’ freedom to articulate dissent or challenge institutional power (Macfarlane, 1963; Monypenny, 1963; Sen, 1999)

Italian and Slovak cases exhibit similar financial vulnerabilities, albeit through different channels. In Italy, SROs rely on a combination of university allocations, membership fees, and local fundraising. As UNITin_E noted:

“There is no system in which the Municipality or the University gives 1000 or 2000 euros to associations by default every year... Present us with projects, and the best ones will receive the money.” [UNITin_E’s interview]

This project-based model fosters competition and short-termism, diverting energy from long-term policy engagement. Local SROs often depend on voluntary contributions from students (Klemenčič, 2012, 2024):

“If you want to support UDU, you can do so by paying the UDU membership card—2 euros go to the national coffers, 1 euro stays at the local base.” [UDU_L2’interviews]

While this provides flexibility and independency, it also underscores the financial precariousness of SROs in decentralised systems.

Partnerships with external organisations can mitigate these constraints but also pose risks to autonomy. For instance, UDU’s collaboration with the national trade union CGIL guarantees a fixed annual funding, alongside students’ contribution for annual membership, while AU receives support from *Gioventù Nazionale*, the youth right-wing section of *Fratelli d’Italia*. Although strategically advantageous, such alliances embed SROs within partisan networks, blurring the boundary between student advocacy and political mobilisation.

In Slovakia, the SRVS operates under a neo-corporatist model (Klemenčič, 2024) where government funds are distributed through intermediary bodies. As SRVS_E described:

“The Ministry doesn’t send money directly to the union. It sends our budget to another national organisation, which delays everything. Sometimes we have to request a refund months later.” [SRVS_E’s interview]

This administrative complexity creates uncertainty and delays. Dependence on project-based European funding compels SRVS to prioritise externally financed initiatives over domestic advocacy, weakening its long-term strategic capacity.

Overall, financial and administrative dependencies limit SROs' conversion capacity (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999), their ability to transform resources into sustained political influence. Whether through conditional state funding, project competition, or bureaucratic mediation, the financial independence and power of SROs remain circumscribed by institutional hierarchies.

This asymmetry creates unequal opportunities for political participation and reproduces a hierarchy of student representation. Those based in resource-rich universities are better positioned to engage in governance and sustain long-term involvement in SRO activities (Klemenčič, 2024).

In Italy, where student representation is highly fragmented (CNSU, 2018, 2022; SMIVEZ, 2023), disparities between large and small universities are pronounced. Larger institutions can expand welfare services, such as psychological counselling or support desks for victims of sexual violence, and adjust scholarship thresholds within national guidelines (Serpieri & Grimaldi, 2014; Lumino et al., 2017). Smaller universities remain financially dependent on regional administrations and local politics, reinforcing territorial inequalities. The SMIVEZ Report (2023) confirms that these imbalances stem less from differential funding than from larger universities' capacity to exercise discretionary control over internal budgets.

In France, the competitive nature of national elections further intensifies organisational fragmentation (Genelot, 2024). To secure CNESER representation, smaller associations must form alliances with national SROs, yet their local priorities might often remain unaddressed. This mirrors what Klemenčič (2024) terms institutional asymmetry, when representation mechanisms reproduce hierarchies instead of counteracting them. The French and Italian cases thus reveal that both electoral and financial competition undermine collective representation, transforming cooperation into rivalry.

Across the four contexts, institutional and organisational barriers constrain SROs' agency through interlocking mechanisms of governance hierarchy, financial dependency, and organisational inequality. In France and Slovakia, control is exerted vertically through centralised funding and bureaucratic oversight: SROs are legally recognised but politically subordinated, operating as consultative bodies rather than co-governors. In Italy and Norway, decentralised governance produces uneven opportunities across institutions: financial dependence on university administrations and performance-based funding reinforces disparities between large and small universities.

From the perspective of the Capability Approach (MacFarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999), these constraints represent institutional unfreedoms that impede the conversion of formal rights into real capacities for action. While all four countries recognise student representatives as legitimate stakeholders in the HE decisional-making process, only Norway demonstrates partial alignment between legal inclusion and actual capability expansion. In the remaining cases, institutional recognition coexists with systemic dependency, confirming that autonomy requires not only legal status but also stable material and organisational resources.

According to Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024), the uneven distribution of agency among SROs reflects differing levels of impact potential. Where SROs possess stable funding and institutional legitimacy, their actions influence both policy outcomes and governance culture. Where resources are precarious and control mechanisms pervasive, representation risks remaining symbolic, procedural inclusion without substantive power (Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020; Klemenčič, 2024; Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999).

4.4.6.3 SOCIAL AND NORMATIVE DISCOURSE ON HE AND STUDENT REPRESENTATION

This sub-code examines the social and normative discourses that shape perceptions of students and student representation in HE. Although the absence of third-layer qualitative data limits the depth of analysis, the available material

allows for the construction of an analytical framework to interpret how higher education and political authorities perceive students and SROs, and how these perceptions position them within the academic, political, and public spheres.

Across the four cases, the empirical material reveals a persistent reluctance among political and institutional actors to recognise students as co-actors in HE governance (Bovill et al., 2016). Consequently, student issues are seldom regarded as urgent matters requiring structural reform. This denial of full recognition is not merely ideological or partisan (see Section 4.4.2) but reflects enduring normative assumptions that define students primarily as recipients of policy rather than as capable agents in shaping it (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Meeuwissen et al., 2019; Nordal, 2016; Shahabul et al., 2021).

According to Italian and Slovak interviewees, this infantilisation deeply undermines both the political agency and legitimacy of SROs (Klemenčič, 2024):

“And this is very, very serious because once again university students are seen as the lowest of the low, especially.....” [UDU_L’s interview]

“But, at the end of day as I mentioned few depend on who is Minister, who is elected in this position (the Ministry of Education) and if they are listening to us trying to listen to us like we are partners or like somebody just: “ Oh it is written in the law, they need to be sit there, but we are not listening to them because they are just “stupid students” because they do not know anything because they do not have experience”

[SRVS_E’s interview]

These testimonies illustrate a structural form of epistemic devaluation. Students’ experiential knowledge of HE systems and advocacy processes is dismissed as inferior to that of academic or political authorities. As Klemenčič (2024) notes, student representatives acquire institutional knowledge through active engagement in representation and policy monitoring. Such knowledge is essential for building the political capability of SROs, yet it is often disregarded. This discursive marginalisation functions as a mechanism of containment that restricts the legitimacy of student voices within decision-making arenas.

Institutional discourse reinforces these dynamics through appeals to Bologna Process principles, especially institutional autonomy, used rhetorically to deflect responsibility for reform. This strategy shifts accountability from state actors to universities and reframes participation as a procedural rather than substantive right:

“The institutional autonomy of the university is essential... but it is used a little for convenience both by the government...” [UDU_L’s interview]

“A lot of (thinking)..... (Reshaping the statement) But a lot of think that the universities is there when it come to that example (meaning that they supposed that universities support student involved and engaged in politics or activities): “Oh but you can go to the EU and get research funds from the EU.... and Erasmus” [NSO_N’s interview]

This reflects what Cinci (2017) calls discursive recontextualisation, whereby autonomy is invoked as a rhetorical shield to neutralise demands for redistribution and accountability. As NSO_N’s quotation suggests, governments and HE authorities often justify the reduction of national funding for student activism by pointing to European-level opportunities, thereby transferring responsibility to students themselves.

The social dimension of these discourses also emerges in France and Italy, where family background and early educational tracking reproduce normative expectations about who “belongs” in HE (Romito, 2025):

“Families... discourage their children from going to university... because there is a wrong narrative.” [BLAB_L’s interview]

“There are parents... more oriented towards the professional path.” [FAGE_M’s interview]

Such narratives exemplify what Romito (2025) and Sotomayor and his colleagues (2022) define as the normalisation of inequalities, whereby social structures and discourse naturalise stratified educational trajectories. Working-class students are discouraged from entering university and, when they do, face institutional barriers that restrict their participation in student life and representation (see

Section 4.2.3.5). Consequently, the diversity of voices represented in academic spaces is limited, contradicting the Yerevan Communiqué's (2015) principle of removing material and social barriers to inclusion and involvement of students from marginalised background.

In Slovakia, the persistence of public indifference toward institutional malpractice, such as plagiarism, further illustrates how moral disengagement erodes accountability:

“There is some way on dealing with it (in reference with the problem of plagiarism), but it is not like thatthe thing why politicians and public figures should step back from their positions (.....). And I think, maybe 40% of the population is like: “Okay, it’s happening”; “Okay, I don’t care” [SVRS_M’s interview]

This moral disengagement dilutes both student and institutional agency (Klemenčič, 2024), transforming systemic issues into accepted realities. Similarly, in Norway, the marketisation of higher education (see Section 4.2.1.4) fosters a consumerist perception of students:

“Like the universities will have to look at the students as money makers instead than... you know, students.” [NSO_N’s interview]

The growing influence of market logic (Buoso, 2021) redefines education as a private investment rather than a public right, reinforcing the neoliberal transformation of HE and limiting the perceived civic function of student representation.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that student representation is constrained not only by institutional structures but also by social and normative discourses that depict students as passive beneficiaries rather than political actors. Such narratives, reproduced by both political and institutional authorities, normalise inequality and justify exclusion from decision-making, echoing the normalisation of inequalities identified by Romito (2025) and Sotomayor and his colleagues (2022). Consequently, student representation risks remaining symbolic, procedural inclusion without substantive influence.

According to Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024), the legitimacy and impact of SROs depend on their ability to challenge these normative constructions and assert students as equal partners in shaping HE policy. Only by transforming these discursive structures can SROs expand the real capabilities of students as political agents within HE governance.

CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS

5.1 IDENTIFICATION OF CROSS-NATIONAL TRENDS

According to Anckar's (2008) theoretical assumptions on the MDSD research model, this section will briefly illustrate the recurrent and cross-national limitations and violations of student academic freedom (RQ1); the repertoire of collective action that SROs rely on to encourage student participation in higher education (HE) (RQ2); and the factors that lead to the convergence or divergence of HE policies, independently of differences in HE and student representation systems (Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2013; Klemenčič, 2024; Lumino et al., 2017), implemented in the four selected countries (RQ3). Building on the findings of ESU's 2024 report, "*Bologna Report with Student Eye*", this section will explore the financial, institutional, legal, and material barriers hindering students' ability to pursue tertiary education and their involvement, as well as the political agency of SROs in the higher education decision-making process. Following the Capability Approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999), this master's thesis will explore the discrepancy between the EHEA's commitment to student academic freedom (Nordal, 2016) and its practical implementation and student representation. It will also explore the tension between supranational and national authorities regarding the harmonisation of higher education and the preservation of national systems (Komotar, 2022; Matei & D'Aquila, 2024).

5.1.1. VIOLATIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF STUDENT ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Across all four analysed countries, student academic freedom (Nordal, 2016) has been eroded by the combined effects of economic, structural, and political

transformations in HE. Declining public investment (Hauptman, 2013), the rise of performance-based funding mechanisms (Buoso, 2021; Violini & al., 2021), the marketisation of HE (Violini et al., 2021), and increasing state control over universities (De Gregorio, 2022; Joly, 2022; Láncoš, 2021) have collectively undermined the institutional autonomy of universities and students' capacity to participate as autonomous actors in academic life. These dynamics constrain students' freedom to choose their academic pathways, engage in teaching and research, and be represented in decision-making structures.

Reductions in public funding have compelled universities to rely on tuition fees and competitive grants. As a result, student fees, tuition fees or VAT fees for students have risen, or been introduced, particularly for those from outside the EU and EHEA (Hauptman, 2013). Meanwhile, performance-based allocation systems, such as project-based funding in France, outcome-based mechanisms in Italy and student-point systems in Norway, financially reward stable institutions (Agasisti, 2008; Musselin, 2024 SMIVEZ, 2023). Larger universities can partially absorb the impact of disinvestment, whereas smaller and peripheral ones face reduced budgets, limited course offerings, and diminished financial support for student organisations. For SROs, this translates into shrinking spaces for participation and weaker institutional support. From a capability perspective (Sen, 1999; MacFarlane, 2011), economic scarcity limits students' conversion factors, their ability to transform formal rights into real freedoms of participation and expression.

At the governance level, managerialisation further restricts autonomy. According to ESU (2024), there has been an increase in the number of university managers appointed by governments or academic boards. These managers are dominating decision-making bodies in the university, while the academic side, including elected student representatives, is becoming a minority. As Klemenčič (2024) notes, SROs autonomy can be restricted when student representatives are embedded in hierarchical structures or dependent on private partnerships, which limits their ability to influence HE policy. This also highlights the risk of SROs being co-opted by private actors, who can provide financial stability and further concentrate power within SROs.

Although the EHEA promotes academic mobility and cooperation, internationalisation increasingly reflects market and geopolitical logics of the national state. The introduction or expansion of tuition fees for non-EHEA students, the removal of mobility programmes for international students and higher tuition fees and living costs exacerbate inequalities between national and international students. Due to the uneven implementation of the Bologna Process, even EU and EHEA students face bureaucratic and administrative barriers when moving to another EHEA country and having their qualifications recognised. Consequently, internationalisation in the EHEA often reinforces global hierarchies rather than expanding access to knowledge, which contradicts another principle of the Bologna Process.

Students' academic freedom (Nordal, 2016) is further restricted by material conditions and students' socio-economic situations. The shortage of affordable housing poses a significant threat to students' academic freedom, as securing stable accommodation is essential for participating in the HE decision-making structures (Shahabul et al., 2021; Sotomayor et al., 2022). Access to public dormitories is already restricted by rigid criteria such as family income (France, Italy & Norway), credit accumulation (Italy), academic performance (Slovakia) and tenure agreements (Norway). University administrations are unable to satisfy the increasing demand for student accommodation as they are dependent on institutional procedures, which are delayed or do not specifically assess what constitutes as student accommodation. In addition, to satisfy the demand for student accommodation and the limited costs covered by the state, the university administration must be careful when advancing the candidature, leaving space for private actors to invest in student housing.

Consequently, students are forced to seek accommodation on the private rental market, where prices are prohibitive. Students often spend almost half of their monthly budget on rent, leaving them with insufficient funds to cover other essential expenses besides tuition and student fees. Consequently, many are compelled to commute long distances, change universities or cities, or work part-time to cover living costs or to save money. These conditions delay degree completion and reduce students' engagement in governance and activism,

thereby reinforcing the social exclusion of marginalised groups within student representation.

Student welfare mechanisms remain insufficient to offset rising living costs. The eligibility criteria for scholarships, stipends and tuition fee exemptions are often arbitrary and inflexible, excluding students who exceed the minimum and maximum criteria for receiving welfare provisions. Sudden changes to these criteria, based on shifts in political priorities, can restrict access further, potentially excluding students who were previously eligible for support. These dynamics contradict the principles of the Yerevan Communiqué (2015), which calls on EHEA members to remove material and social barriers and promote inclusion in HE governance for people from different social and economic backgrounds. This includes students from non-traditional educational pathways, the working classes, and those from migrant backgrounds (Crosier & Haj, 2020; Romito, 2025).

Beyond structural and economic constraints, student academic freedom (Nordal, 2016) is undermined by targeted attacks on SROs and students. Cases of administrative retaliation, defamation campaigns, and police intervention against students engaged in peaceful protest or criticism of government policies have been reported in all four countries. While these practices vary in form and intensity, they reflect a broader pattern of delegitimising the student voice and depoliticising student dissent (ESU, 2024). As Mazzero (2025), Monypenny (1963), Nordal (2016) argue, such repression undermines the right to challenge institutional and political power dependent on unjustified conditions. The impunity of the authorities involved, as well as their compliance with state control and police intervention, reinforces what Klemenčič (2024) terms bounded autonomy. This is where student representation is formally guaranteed, yet materially constrained by coercive mechanisms that limit their ability to take action and influence the HE system.

The findings demonstrate that limitations and violations of student academic freedom are structural and relational (Nordal, 2016). Structurally, these limitations and violations emerge from transformations in HE governance and funding

mechanisms, including performance-based funding, managerialisation, and the growing role of private actors. These trends reduce students' decision-making power and the stability of SROs. Despite there being no recognised commitment from student representatives, student representation is still conceptualised as a voluntary activity in HE (Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020). Relationally, they reflect enduring hierarchies between national governments, higher education institutions, and SROs, which determine which academic disciplines are subject to state scrutiny, which criticisms are accepted, and which dimensions of student voices are legitimised or marginalised. They also influence how the responsibility for the gaps and inefficiencies in the convergence of student rights into practical freedom is assessed (Sen, 1999).

As Komotar (2022) and Matei and d'Aquila (2024) emphasise, a central tension persists between supranational and national authorities in defining academic freedom and student representation. While the Bologna Process, according to the Tirana Communiqué (2024), formally enshrine student representation as a fundamental right in the EHEA, its practical implementation depends on national political will and administrative interpretation. Supranational actors such as the EU or EHEA institutions lack binding authority, leaving states considerable autonomy to define how student representation operates in practice (Demuro, 2021; Matei & d'Acquila, 2024). This results in a fragmented and uneven application of student academic freedom (Nordal, 2016) across EHEA, where formal commitments coexist with political dependency and selective recognition of SROs.

National governments exercise control through financial means bureaucratic regulation and direct intervention in HE governance maintain authoritative power over SROs' agency, thereby reinforcing convergence gaps (Sen, 1999) between formal entitlements and real freedoms. These gaps manifest as SROs' inability to convert their legal rights into representation into effective capabilities for participation, expression and influence.

Moreover, SROs are not merely passive victims of this system. As Klemenčič (2024) observes, their autonomy can be bounded not only by structural

dependency but also by internal political struggles and co-optation. Certain SROs replicate existing hierarchies, prioritising institutional proximity and visibility over critical advocacy, thereby weakening collective student agency. This echoes Monypenny's (1963) warning that universities and societies have a "delicate duty" to prevent political initiatives within academia, whether from states or student movements, from escalating into violence or disruption. Such tensions persist between progressive and conservative student SROs competing for influence in the university (Ince et al., 2018), demonstrating that student representation is both a source of empowerment and a point of contention.

In sum, constraints on student academic freedom (Nordal, 2016) are multidimensional. They derive from structural reforms that commodify tertiary education, national control that overrides supranational commitments, and internal dependencies that fragment student representation. From the perspective of the Capability Approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999) and Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024), these findings confirm that the potential of SROs to act as guarantors of student rights depends on their ability to bridge the convergence gap through institutional autonomy, material stability, and collective legitimacy.

5.1.2 STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE AGENCY STRATEGIES AND TOOLS

Building on Gasteiger and Wulz's (2020) definition of student representation as a voluntary and practical activity, SROs exercise agency through both formal and informal repertoires of collective action. These include institutional lobbying, parliamentary consultations, and participation in governance structures, as well as demonstrations, petitions, and awareness campaigns that mobilise broader student and civic support. Within and beyond academia, SROs forge coalitions with university unions, rectors, professors, supranational student bodies such as the ESU, and civil society organisations (Cinci, 2017; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022; Vespa et al., 2024).

As discussed in the subcodes political and ideological alignment (see Sections 4.2.1, 4.4.1) and level of involvement of SROs in HE governance (see Section 4.4.3), SROs' involvement in HE governance is often limited to a consultative role. Their recommendations on draft legislation or policy reforms are not legally binding, leaving political and HE authorities free to reject them based on political priorities. This institutional configuration reflects what Klemenčič (2024) defines as bounded autonomy: formal inclusion without substantive power. In response, SROs across all four countries employ a combination of advocacy repertoires and strategic partnerships to indirectly influence the policy process and ensure that student experiences and perspectives are represented within national and supranational HE agendas.

The advocacy repertoires, which include research reports, online campaigns, press interventions and public statements, emerge as a key means of expanding SROs' political agency when formal autonomy is constrained (Klemenčič, 2024). These practices serve multiple purposes. First, they raise public awareness of how student academic freedom has been either restricted or enhanced through the years, by collecting data and documents to report trends and to advance recommendations on how student academic freedom should be strengthened. Through reporting and campaigns, SROs frame student academic freedom as a societal right (Vrienlink et al., 2023), emphasising that student representation is an essential practice that must be protected and enhanced, as it improves student engagement in civic education and encourages critical enquiry into power relationships in the HE, provides counter-mechanisms to institutional inertia and inefficiencies (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Monypenny, 1963; Nordal, 2016). Second, they bridge the gap between students and HE decision-making by documenting policy processes, analysing draft reforms, and disseminating their potential implications for students' academic and material well-being. This facilitates broader engagement, as students become co-participants in shaping HE policy-making process. Third, advocacy repertoires enable SROs to monitor and hold authorities accountable, collecting testimonies, recording cases of administrative retaliation or police intervention, and publicising them through media channels. These practices transform formal rights into practical capabilities, addressing

what convergence gap (Sen, 1999) of Student Representation related to the consultative roles relied on.

A second, complementary strategy involves coalition-building with unions, civic NGOs, and other HE stakeholders (Cinci, 2017; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022; Vespa et al., 2024). These partnerships are grounded in shared grievances, such as the reductions in public funding in the HE and its detrimental effects (See Section 4.2.1), and in shared commitments to promoting self-formation and academic rights. They pursue three main objectives: (1) Strengthen policy influence, ensuring that SRO proposals are incorporated into national HE agendas (Cinci, 2017); (2) Reinforce SRO legitimacy as intermediaries within HE governance, despite their legal supranational and national references; and (3) frame student academic freedom as a distinctive set of rights and protections, reflecting students' unique position of dependency on professors, state authorities, and family support (Romito, 2025; Klemenčič, 2024).

The nature of these coalitions varies across national contexts. French, Norwegian, and Slovak SROs have established durable partnerships with academic unions and civic NGOs to pursue systemic reform, whereas most Italian SROs, except UDU, tend to form alliances with other SROs, based on political affinity to secure seats on decision-making bodies in the university site such as the CDA, Student Council, and Academic Senate. This short-term, electoral orientation (Klemenčič, 2024) limits their capacity for long-term advocacy and transparency reforms.

According to the Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024), both advocacy and coalition-building repertoires expand SROs' impact potential, which is the potential capability to transform structural dependency into political agency. However, as Monypenny (1963) warned, student representation must strike a balance between political mobilisation and institutional responsibility to prevent political factionalism or coercion, whether from HE and political authorities or the SROs themselves. The coexistence of progressive and conservative SROs, especially in Italy and France, demonstrates how student representation remains

a contested field, contested between an integrative force in governance or as a catalyst for reform (Ince et al., 2018; Linder et al., 2019).

Overall, the cross-national evidence of the four countries indicates that SROs' agency lies not in transcending but in adapting to structural constraints. Through advocacy, coalition-building, and sustained media presence, SROs mitigate the effects of limited decision-making power and resource dependency. From the perspective of the Capability Approach (MacFarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999), these practices operate as conversion mechanisms that transform formal recognition into real opportunities for voice, influence, and accountability. Within these dynamics, SROs function simultaneously as constrained and transformative actors, agents who, despite institutional limitations, sustain and redefine student academic freedom as both a collective and societal right. Advocacy repertoires and coalition-building strategies (Cinci, 2017; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022) serve to increase agentic possibilities of SROs to exercise influence in the HE decision-making process by overcoming and adapting institutional barriers of the system of student representation.

5.1.3 CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE OF STUDENT POLITICAL AGENCY

As discussed in Section 4.4, the purpose of this section is to address RQ3 by analysing the factors that explain the convergence and divergence of SROs political agency across the four national contexts. The aim is not to verify whether SROs' claims are formally incorporated into HE policies, but to identify the institutional, political, and relational mechanisms that determine their inclusion, exclusion, or transformation within national decision-making arenas. In this analysis, convergence refers to the emergence of similar adaptive or compensatory strategies adopted by SROs in response to structural inefficiencies and violations of student academic freedom, whereas divergence denotes the differentiated capacity of these organisations to convert structural dependency into sustained political influence within and beyond HE governance (Bovill & al., 2016; Klemenčič, 2012, 2024; Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999). The section also

examines whether SROs operate merely as formal intermediaries, restricted to consultative functions, or as practical intermediaries capable of reshaping governance dynamics and redistributing decision-making power. Finally, it shows how SROs are increasingly substituting national governments in addressing student welfare and financial burdens, revealing the persistence of Sen's (1999) convergence gap between formal entitlements and real freedoms.

All SROs across the four countries reported organising their political agency around the expansion of student accommodation and the reform of welfare systems to better reflect students' real living costs. In line with Shahabul and his colleagues (2021) and Sotomayor and his colleagues (2022), access to affordable housing is a fundamental precondition for entering HE, which also determines students' ability to engage in activism and governance. SROs therefore advocate for structural reforms to scholarship allocation criteria and welfare provisions to ensure more equitable access to HE. The comparative findings reveal that SROs in all four contexts have responded to convergences of inefficiency (Sen 1999) in state policy, instances where governments fail to translate formal commitments to academic freedom into effective capabilities (Macfarlane, 2011; Nordal, 2016; Sen, 1999). Regardless of organisational setting, SROs have financed their own initiatives and produced advocacy materials, such as pamphlets on housing rights, scholarship access guides, and digital campaigns, intended to reduce the financial and informational burdens that hinder students' presence and involvement in academic life. These compensatory practices embody reactive impact potential, whereby SROs mobilise their limited resources to act politically within structural constraints rather than through formal empowerment mechanisms (Klemenčič, 2024). While such measures cannot eliminate inefficiency convergence, they mitigate its detrimental effects, positioning SROs as substitute actors filling welfare gaps left by state inaction (Klemenčič, 2024; Sen, 1999). Yet their agency remains bound by the HE system, which is materially and politically subordinate to national authorities. This makes their potential impact quite precarious, as they depend on funding from HE and the national government.

At the same time, SROs' involvement in HE governance remains significant (Klemenčič, 2024). They contribute to national discussions through consultations, opinion papers, and formal participation in decision-making bodies, thus exerting indirect influence on the political agenda. This research extends Klemenčič's (2024) conception of student impact theory beyond academia by showing that SROs' agency depends on the relational dynamics between HE and political authorities (Monypenny, 1963; Klemenčič, 2024). The extent to which their influence materialises depends on how power circulates between these actors. As Demuro (2021) and Matei & d'Aquila (2024) note, national governments retain interpretive authority over the meaning of student academic freedom, including student representation. This asymmetry explains why SROs in the EHEA, even when they resort to similar strategies and pursue the same goals, generate different levels of institutional recognition across countries.

At the national level, SROs' consultative role is universally recognised, but their evaluations of HE policy drafts are not legally binding. Their incorporation depends on political willingness and institutional priorities, reflecting a convergence gap (Sen, 1999) between procedural inclusion and effective influence. This lack of legal enforceability constitutes a structural inefficiency in student representation (Klemenčič, 2024), compounded by limited autonomy and uneven implementation of the Bologna Process objectives (ESU, 2024). Moreover, SROs' degree of involvement can fluctuate over time: withdrawal of media attention, the erosion of partnerships, or reduced access to decision-making spaces can marginalise their role, transforming substantive participation into tokenistic consultation. Such dynamics undermine impact potential of student representation, which is the capability of SROs to sustain influence over time and across shifting political environments (Klemenčič, 2024).

The persistence of these dynamics underscores the need for long-term projection in SRO objectives. As Klemenčič (2024) highlights, student impact must be continuously maintained to avoid reversal through ideological shifts, bureaucratic retrenchment, or the delegitimisation of student bodies. In several contexts, accountability mechanisms designed to support SROs, such as transparent election processes, budgetary autonomy, and guaranteed access to information,

have been undermined by last-minute meeting notices, funding restrictions, or procedural obstacles. Where accountability is robust, as in Norway and Slovakia, student participation translates into stable influence; where it is weak, as in Italy and France, agency remains precarious and reversible. These contrasts confirm that convergence and divergence in student political agency are not static outcomes but contingent upon institutional design, resource autonomy, and political recognition (Bovill & al., 2016; Klemenčič, 2024; Matthews & Dollinger, 2020; Macfarlane, 2011; Monypenny, 1963; Serpieri & Grimaldi, 2014).

Beyond formal structures, SROs demonstrate adaptability in the absence of governmental response by creating student-led spaces, initiatives, and partnerships with civil society organisations. These practices illustrate how SROs navigate into a series of institutional unfreedom (Sen, 1999), transforming dependency into provisional forms of autonomy. However, they also risk normalising conditional access to HE, where fundamental rights depend on the capacity of SROs to compensate for state inefficiency. Finally, the discursive recontextualisation of student representation (Cinci, 2017) functions as a rhetorical mechanism through which HE authorities symbolically acknowledge SRO participation while shifting responsibility for structural reform onto SROs themselves. This process infantilises student representatives, portraying them as inexperienced or unqualified to participate in decision-making, thus reinforcing hierarchical governance logics and constraining their transformative potential.

Cross-national comparison demonstrates that the convergence and divergence of SROs' political agency depend on three interrelated dimensions: institutional design, political recognition, and resource autonomy. Convergence arises as SROs across the four countries adopt similar compensatory roles to mitigate the effects of state inefficiency, thereby reaffirming Sen's (1999) notion of a gap between formal entitlements and real freedoms. Divergence, by contrast, stems from uneven power distributions and accountability mechanisms, which determine whether student representation achieves lasting influence or remains symbolically integrated. Across all contexts, SROs oscillate between formal consultation and practical substitution, acting simultaneously as constrained and transformative actors. From the perspective of the Capability Approach

(Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999) and Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024), these findings confirm that the transformative capacity of student representation lies not in institutional entrenchment, but in its ability to mobilise collective claims, sustain legitimacy, and convert structural dependency into agency, thus redefining student academic freedom as both a political and societal right (Vrielink & al., 2023).

5.2 IDENTIFICATION OF DIVERGENCE TRENDS

Following Anckar's (2008) theoretical assumptions on MDSM, this section addresses it explores how contextual specificities, economic, legal, and political, shape unique violations of student academic freedom and distinct repertoires of collective action (RQ1 & RQ2) and the factors that lead either to the convergence or divergence of SROs' political agency (Klemenčič, 2024) into the national political HE policy.

This analysis considers how student representation functions as a mechanism for either enhancing or constraining academic freedom for students, examining how this intersects with each national higher education system's student representation systems (see Figure 4). It assesses the extent to which SROs can influence decision-making processes, defend student rights and maintain autonomous agency.

Finally, this section further investigates the uneven implementation of the Bologna Process communiqués, particularly regarding the assessment and recognition of student representation as a fundamental component of academic freedom and participatory governance in the EHEA. By comparing how student representation is defined, institutionalised, and evaluated across the four cases, this section identifies the main trends of divergence in students' capacity to navigate national HE systems and exercise their rights as academic and political actors.

5.2.2 VIOLATIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF STUDENT ACADEMIC FREEDOM

The French and Italian higher education systems exemplify both explicit and implicit forms of social segregation in access to tertiary education (Musselin, 2024; Paradeise, 2017; Romito, 2025). Convergent inefficiencies (Sen, 1999) persist in the French and Italian cases due to the absence of clear legal frameworks for assessing academic freedom in HE. Alternatively, political authorities may violate legal frameworks and references to illicit practices. These systemic shortcomings reveal how national institutional designs produce differentiated yet comparable patterns of unfreedom, in line with Anckar's (2008) MDSM theoretical assumptions. Students who lack financial support, belong to non-traditional educational pathways, or come from working-class or migrant backgrounds are disproportionately penalised, demonstrating how formal equality coexists with practical exclusion (Macfarlane, 2011; Musselin, 2024; Romito, 2025; Sursock, 2024b).

Despite the formal commitment to equal opportunity, access to French HE remains stratified. Students graduating from professional or vocational high schools, or those from working-class and migrant backgrounds, are still systematically excluded from competitive academic tracks (Musselin, 2024, Sursock, 2024b). In practice, this demonstrates that the French HE system continues to reproduce social and racial segregation, despite its declared meritocratic goals (McNulty, 2022; Musselin, 2024). The state's principle of anonymous admission, where the choice of institution should not depend on social or ethnic background, remains largely rhetorical. According to FAGE's "*Baromètre de la précarité*" (2023, 2025) and "*Coûts de la rentrée*" (2024, 2025) reports, students without scholarships must cover tuition and living costs entirely, without priority access to CNOUS welfare services. To afford accommodation and keep up with student loans and tuition fees, many resort to skipping meals, delaying healthcare or working part-time. These coping strategies can delay or interrupt academic progress and are what Sen (1999) defines as 'unfreedom', which are conditions in which individuals must prioritise material survival over academic participation.

While France institutionalises inequality through selective access mechanisms, Italy reproduces it through fragmented welfare systems and territorial disparities in resource allocation. Italian interviewees emphasised that, due to the lack of a coherent national legal framework defining minimum welfare standards, universities operate autonomously with divergent criteria and mechanisms (CNSU, 2018, 2022). The persistent reduction in public funding and the concentration of financial resources in larger northern universities exacerbate disparities between regions. Reports redacted by SMIVEZ (2023) and UDU (2023, 2025) reveal that scholarships, accommodation, and welfare benefits are disproportionately concentrated in northern and central university cities, while southern and peripheral institutions lack adequate funding. This creates the “*studente idoneo non beneficiario*” category, students eligible for scholarships but denied benefits due to insufficient resources. Furthermore, since student rights are tied to residency status, non-resident students face barriers to healthcare access, voting rights, and participation in local governance unless supported by voluntary local agreements ad hoc agreements. These findings reveal that student academic freedom in Italy is locally defined and unevenly recognised, depending on university and regional governance structures (Komotar, 2022; Matei & d’Aquila, 2024; Popovic, 2023). The Italian interviewees emphasised the lack of action by national authorities to implement a national legal reference on student academic freedom, which would allow the harmonisation of welfare settings, criteria and provisions while maintaining a certain degree of institutional autonomy for universities in allocating financial resources and welfare provisions.

In Norway, the growing influence of private actors, particularly those in the oil and gas industries, extends beyond research partnerships into the commercialisation of student life (Bleiklie, 2023). Some private and public universities' local SROs collaborate with private companies that sponsor campus events and recruitment programmes, which aligns with Klemenčič's (2024) concern about the political co-option of SROs. While national-level SROs protect academic freedom and institutional autonomy, local SROs may inadvertently reinforce neoliberalisation by commercialising the university experience. This highlights a divergence in representation: national organisations act as protectors of student rights,

whereas local ones risk undermining these rights through market-oriented practices. These dynamics reflect Klemenčič's (2024) concept of 'bounded autonomy', where formal representation is guaranteed but materially constrained by dependence on external actors.

In Slovakia, the situation reflects a distinct but comparable form of unfreedom. Under Fico's government, the dismantling of anti-corruption agencies such as NAKA and direct political control over academia have eroded institutional integrity¹¹⁰. Slovak interviewees reported widespread plagiarism, which is one of most recurrent forms of academic corruption. In this context, the SRVS has emerged as one of the few civic actors advocating for academic integrity and transparency both within and beyond universities¹¹¹. As Fico's administration has expanded censorship and reduced funding for artistic and critical academic projects, particularly those addressing gender and LGBTQIA+ issues¹¹², SRVS has assumed a broader civic role, defending both student rights and democratic freedoms.

In summary, the four national cases reveal distinct ways in which student academic freedom is constrained and negotiated. Consistent with Anckar's (2008) MDSM theoretical framework, the analysis shows that different institutional arrangements generate functionally equivalent outcomes of constraint, albeit through divergent causal routes. From a capability perspective (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999), these divergences demonstrate that the obstacles to converting formal entitlements into real freedoms are context-specific, shaped by national political cultures of higher education and activism, welfare regimes, and the autonomy of HE institutions (Bovill et al., 2016; Klemenčič, 2024; Matei & Iwińska, 2018).

¹¹⁰ <https://www.politico.eu/article/slovakia-corruption-europe-robert-fico-politics-tv-culture/>

¹¹¹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/DO8jvWojHxM/>

¹¹² https://artisticfreedominitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Early-Warning_AFI-and-Open-Culture_2025_Report.pdf

Ultimately, what differentiates the four countries is not the type of limitation or violation, but the form that these take and the mechanisms and actors that generate convergence gaps or inefficiencies (Sen, 1999). Student academic freedom thus remains a negotiated and contingent right, realised unevenly according to administrative capacity, legal interpretation, political will, and the recognition of students as legitimate political agents in shaping higher education systems and policies (Klemenčič, 2012, 2024; Macfarlane, 2011; Matei & d'Aquila, 2024; Matei & Iwińska, 2018; Nordal, 2016; Sen, 1999).

5.2.2 STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE COLLECTIVE ACTION STRATEGY

This section addresses how SROs across the four national contexts selected select a specific form of collective action to navigate and contest structural constraints on student academic freedom. Beyond the common advocacy repertoire (see Section 4.3.1) and partnerships (see Section 4.3.3), national differences emerge in the degree of institutional openness and accountability that shape the choice of repertoires of collective of action.

In France and Italy, SROs operate within systems characterised by limited institutional responsiveness and weak accountability mechanisms. In France, SROs such as *FAGE* perform a consultative function at the CNESER but face persistent governmental reluctance to address the material barriers affecting university students, particularly those linked to financial precarity and welfare inequality. Consequently, *FAGE* has mobilised national protests alongside academic trade unions and other student organisations sharing similar goals. The national protest “*Uni à la dérive*”, for instance, was organised to denounce the deepening precarisation of students and underfunding of HE¹¹³. Similarly, Italian SROs rely heavily on protests and campaigns as alternative mechanisms to exert influence, given that the Ministry frequently delays or avoids engaging with the CNSU’s policy proposals (CNSU, 2018, 2022). Although some institutionalised

¹¹³https://www.instagram.com/reel/DJW0BsrqJaC/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

practices, such as the drafting of local policies, do occur, their effectiveness depends on the regional context and the political openness and willingness to implement local welfare-based agreements that reduce financial and material barriers (CNSU, 2018; 2022). These dynamics exemplify what Klemenčič (2024) defines as contested participation, whereby SROs must utilise external expressive strategies to assert their legitimacy and influence decision-makers when there are no binding accountability mechanisms in place or have little decisional power over HE governance.

In contrast, Norway and Slovakia represent cases of institutionalised participation (Klemenčič, 2024), where structured consultation and accountability systems enable consistent student influence. Both countries maintain detailed higher education legislation and independent Quality Assurance Agencies (QAA) that monitor whether student participation is effectively implemented. National SROs actively engage in policy drafting, parliamentary hearings, and formal evaluations of HE policies. Protests and expressive forms of action are used only when institutional dialogue fails, serving as supplementary rather than primary tools. In these contexts, SROs exercise what Klemenčič (2024) describes as embedded agency, acting as recognised partners in governance processes rather than oppositional actors.

From a comparative perspective, these findings reveal a clear divergence in collective action strategies. In France and Italy where formal student involvement and participation in the HE decision-making process is legally enshrined, but its exercise is weakened due to relegation to a consultative role or an active intent to limit the presence of SROs in the HE decision-making process, SROs externalise their influence through contentious and visible forms of collective mobilisation. In Norway and Slovakia where institutional inclusion and involvement is stronger, they internalise their strategies through structured negotiation and co-production of policies. This divergence reflects the relational dimension of student impact (Klemenčič, 2024), which emphasises that the form of collective action depends on the distribution of power and accountability within HE governance systems.

Ultimately, protests in France and Italy function as compensatory mechanisms to offset the inefficiency convergence (Sen, 1999) of institutional neglect, while Norway and Slovakia demonstrate that stable accountability frameworks transform student representation into sustained participation.

5.2.3 CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE OF STUDENT POLITICAL AGENCY IN THE HE

As discussed in Section 5.1.3, the trajectories of convergence and divergence in student political agency (Klemenčič, 2024) are shaped by three interrelated dimensions: institutional openness, financial autonomy, and political recognition. While these factors recur across national contexts, the ways in which they generate similar patterns of dependency yet produce divergent agency outcomes vary significantly.

French and Italian SROs exemplify contested participation, whereas Norwegian and Slovak SROs demonstrate more embedded participation (Klemenčič, 2024). This marks the first layer of divergence. A second arises from the extent of authoritative power SROs hold in higher education governance. In France, SROs at the CNESER have a consultative role in budget allocation and accreditation, while in the CNOUS they exercise greater decision-making power over student welfare (Genelot, 2024). By contrast, student representation and its impact in Italy is fragmented. At the national level, the CNSU operates within a weak legal framework and limited accountability mechanisms, as political authorities have deliberately delayed CNSU meetings, set appointments at the last meeting, and avoided answering the CNSU's concerns. Locally, influence depends on participation in youth councils and partnerships with municipal or university authorities (CNSU, 2018, 2022). As interviewees noted, delayed appointments and the political marginalisation of the CNSU reinforce its largely symbolic role (CNSU, 2018, 2022; Vespa et al., 2024). While CNSU have been demanded to have more formalised roles and decisional power, requests which are being unattended.

Although Norwegian and Slovak SROs enjoy embedded forms of participation (Klemenčič, 2024), both face context-specific challenges. In Norway, stipends and academic leave for elected representatives are available mainly in larger universities, while smaller institutions rely on voluntary participation. This uneven implementation creates disparities in the effectiveness of student representation. Despite sections 2 and 10 not obliging the implementation of a stipend, they do oblige universities to establish an effective student government. Forms of financial and material insecurity force students to choose between engaging in HE governance and keeping their HE institution afloat (Sen, 1999). In Slovakia have been implemented voluntary-based mechanisms, such as student offices and trustworthy persons, which serve as crucial yet non-binding safeguards that compensate for formal limitations in institutional support. In Slovakia, formal recognition coexists with growing political interference under Fico's government. The SRVS continues to play a critical civic role by promoting transparency, academic integrity, and freedom of expression amid increasing repression.

Apart from Norway, funding mechanisms remain a central axis of convergence. French SROs have become increasingly dependent on state funding due to competitive electoral systems and restrictive bureaucratic procedures, such as the *Contrat d'Engagement Républicain*, which suspends funding if any civic and political organisation organise activities and promotes values that are deemed contrary to republican values (DeGregorio, 2022; Genelot, 2024). Italian SROs compete for limited funding from universities and civic foundations, as well as for membership renewal from the student community. This fosters autonomy, but leaves them financially precarious, as the national state reduces public funding for student organisations and they lose support from the student community. Similarly, Slovak SROs face time-consuming administrative procedures for obtaining funds, illustrating how bureaucratic conditioning constrains agency.

Another point of divergence concerns how SROs mobilise reactive impact, that is, their capacity to mitigate financial and material barriers within structural limits rather than through formal empowerment (Klemenčič, 2024). Italian SROs face particular challenges in implementing welfare-oriented interventions without

external political support, due to scarce resources and the absence of legal recognition of students' compensatory rights.

Additionally, in pluralist systems of student representation (Klemenčič, 2012, 2024), internal ideological orientations can shape and sometimes distort SROs' political agency. As SROs may promote either a progressive or conservative agenda, their internal politics can hinder democratic practices and values within the organisations themselves. This issue extends beyond the question of co-optation (Klemenčič, 2024). SROs' political positioning becomes particularly problematic when they fail to contest hierarchical power dynamics, obstruct distributive welfare policies, or refrain from challenging HE and political authorities, especially when these authorities are implicated in targeted attacks against students.

These findings demonstrate that convergence in structural dependency coexists with divergence in agency outcomes. While SROs across the four countries face comparable systemic constraints, their ability to convert formal rights into effective influence depends on accountability frameworks, material support, and political legitimacy within higher education governance. Student political agency thus appears as a negotiated and dynamic process, oscillating between consultation and contestation, dependency and transformation, whose trajectory reflects the interplay between institutional design, political will, and the collective capacity to generate and sustain student impact over time.

5.3 CONTRIBUTIONS

5.3.1 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This Master's Thesis advances the theoretical understanding of student academic freedom by analysing one of its core dimensions: student representation as a distinctive right that sustains student voice within HE governance and decision-making structures (Bovill & al., 2016; Klemenčič, 2024; Matthews & Dollinger, 2022; Mazzero, 2025; Nordal, 2016). Building on Klemenčič's (2024) definition of Student Representative Organisations (SROs)

and her theoretical assumptions about student politics in HE, this research examines how SROs navigate governance arenas, exercise influence in policy processes, and respond to institutional inertia, bureaucratic constraints, resource scarcity, and targeted attacks against students.

By combining the Capability Approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999) and the Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024), this thesis conceptualises student representation as both a right and a capability instrument for enhancing student voice in the HE system. It argues that the effectiveness of student representation depends on the conversion mechanisms: institutional, political, and material, that enable students to transform formal recognition into genuine influence. As demonstrated in Sections 5.1 and 5.2, the comparative findings show that while structural and relational power dependency is a common condition across all four contexts selected for this research, SROs' capacity to convert representation into agency varies depending on institutional design, welfare systems, and political willingness.

Following Lizzio and Wilson's (2009) functional, developmental, and social interpretation of student representation, this thesis distinguishes between instrumental and transformative modes of agency. When SROs focus primarily on improving students' material conditions and self-formation without questioning the power asymmetries that structure their relationship with higher education and political authorities, their actions remain functional, aimed at adaptation rather than change. When SROs attempt to alleviate structural barriers, such as financial or welfare-related constraints, and orient the system toward more student-centred practices without seeking greater decisional authority or accountability from HE and political actors, their agency can be described as developmental. However, when SROs mobilise collective action and advocacy to challenge exclusionary governance structures and demand systemic reform, student representation becomes transformative, serving as a mechanism of democratic renewal and institutional accountability within HE.

This research further deepens Klemenčič's (2024) Student Impact Theory by empirically illustrating how different forms of student impact: reactive,

contributory, and transformative, coexist and interact across diverse HE and student representation systems. While Klemenčič (2024) conceptualises these forms as part of a continuum of student agency rather than discrete categories, the comparative findings show how they materialise simultaneously through varying degrees of institutional embeddedness, legitimacy, and autonomy. In all four countries, SROs in the EHEA primarily act to mitigate structural and political limitations, compensate for welfare deficiencies, and respond to institutional inertia, rather than to reshape governance structures or expand decisional authority. The contributory dimension (Klemenčič, 2024), where SROs influence policymaking or contribute to the co-production of governance, emerges unevenly and remains contingent on accountability frameworks and institutional openness. Only under specific conditions, such as the presence of robust monitoring mechanisms or recognition within ministerial or university bodies, can this form of impact translate into transformative agency. However, as evidenced by the cross-national comparison, transformative capacity has declined, with SROs' roles becoming increasingly procedural, consultative, and dependent on the political openness of the national government.

These findings illustrate a broader shift in student political agency (Klemenčič, 2024) within the EHEA, from proactive and co-decisional engagement to reactive adaptation. This empirical evidence extends Klemenčič's (2024) theoretical continuum by showing that the balance between reactive, contributory, and transformative impact is not static but contextually determined by welfare capacity, legal clarity, and the recognition of students as legitimate political actors in higher education governance.

At the same time, the comparative evidence demonstrates that the effectiveness of student representation is non-homogeneous. In Italy, student participation can be empowering at the local level, where voluntary-based partnerships between local municipalities and universities foster responsiveness and visibility, but remain largely symbolic at the national level within the CNSU, whose consultative power is limited and politically dependent. Conversely, in Norway, SROs benefit from national-level institutionalisation through clear legal frameworks and accountability mechanisms, yet local participation remains fragmented, as

stipends and academic leave for elected representatives are offered only in larger universities. Smaller institutions rely on voluntary engagement, reinforcing disparities in representation effectiveness. These contrasts confirm that the impact of student representation should be considered as a contextualised capability, determined by local resources, institutional culture, governance structures (Klemenčič, 2012, 2024; Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2014; Matei & Iwinska, 2018; Popovic, 2023).

The findings are also aligned with those collected by ESU (2024), which state that, while student representation within the EHEA is formally recognised, it is materially constrained. Although the London Communiqué (2007), the Bucharest Communiqué (2012) and the Tirana Communiqué (2024) define student representation as a core dimension of student academic freedom in the EHEA, its implementation remains inconsistent. Student participation is still often treated as voluntary labour rather than a recognised part of governance (Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020), which leaves representatives feeling overworked and unsupported.

Finally, this research critically engages with Klemenčič's (2024) discussion on the legitimacy and limits of student representation. SROs are not inherently guarantors of student academic freedom; they can also act as instruments of its dismantling when co-opted by political parties or private interests, or when internal ideological divisions prevent them from contesting unequal power relations. Such cases, evident in both France and Italy, demonstrate that representation itself can reproduce dependency rather than autonomy, particularly when political alignment overshadows collective welfare objectives or when SROs fail to challenge discriminatory or exclusionary practices.

This Master's Thesis contributes to the theoretical literature and empirical analysis of Student Representation by:

- ***Reframing Student representation as both a right and a capability instrument***
- ***Illustrating the interdependence of contributory, reactive, and transformative impacts within SROs political agency (Klemenčič, 2024),*** showing how institutional and political constraints shape their impact, decisional

power and effectiveness in mobilising student voice in the HE (Matthews & Dollinger, 2020)

- ***Demonstrating the non-homogeneous and context-dependent nature of student representation effectiveness***, through comparative insights in all of the four countries selected
- ***Exposing the declining transformative capacity of student representation in the EHEA***, where formal recognition coexists with material dependency and bureaucratic control.

Student representation, as evidenced across the four national cases, thus emerges as a negotiated and conditional capability, a right whose effectiveness depends on the institutional arrangements, political recognition, and material support that define students' capacity to act as legitimate agents of academic freedom and democratic governance.

5.3.2 POLICY CONTRIBUTIONS

This Master's Thesis reinforces and empirically supports the critique advanced by the ESU and its member SROs that the Bologna Process, while successful in harmonising degree structures and quality assurance, remains uneven in recognising and implementing student rights and representation. Within the EHEA, student representation continues to be conceptualised as a voluntary activity rather than a recognised dimension of civic and academic engagement. This paradox, expecting students to act as institutional intermediaries while denying them the financial, temporal, and legal support necessary to fulfil that role, creates chronic overwork and under-recognition (Gasteiger & Wulz, 2020; Linder et al., 2019).

In line with Klemenčič's (2012, 2024) pluralist model, assessing the effectiveness of SROs requires attention not only to institutional legitimacy, but also to political and ideological orientation adopted by SROs. What determines their legitimacy presence in the HE system is not ideological position alone, but whether SROs expand or restrict students' real freedoms in practice.

The findings show that, across the EHEA, SROs are increasingly operating through reactive agency (Klemenčič, 2024). They are acting to compensate institutional inertia for the structural constraints on student voice and academic freedom, adapting within the system to mobilise student voice rather than transforming it (Klemenčič, 2024; Sen, 1999). This convergence in function reveals shared limitations, but divergence in form, each country adapts to its institutional and political context.

- **France:** Reactive agency remains primarily compensatory, shaped by bureaucratic dependence and restrictive measures such as the *Contrat d'Engagement Républicain* (De Gregorio, 2022), which limit SRO financial autonomy, making them more precarious on budgetary cuts on HE, despite large-scale mobilisation on student precarisation
- **Italy:** Reactive agency is fragmented as local SROs can influence local welfare policies when local municipalities are willing to collaborate with student representatives, while national-level representation through the CNSU remains marginalised by political avoidance and weak legal frameworks (CNSU, 2018, 2022).
- **Norway:** Embedded participation of student representative of HE governance coexists with uneven implementation. Even though it is not legally mandatory, larger universities provide stipends or academic leave, while smaller ones rely on voluntary participation, reinforcing inequalities in representational effectiveness
- **Slovakia:** Reactive agency assumes a civic-defensive role, as the SRVS navigates state interference and corruption, compensating for weak institutional safeguards through voluntary mechanisms such as student offices and trust-worthy person

Together, these cases demonstrate functional convergence and contextual divergence. While reactive agency sustains student voice within HE, it also signals a decline in the transformative agency of SROs (Klemenčič, 2024). These findings reveal how political and institutional actors across the EHEA have constrained the transformative capacity of SROs, either by avoiding welfare

reform, limiting their decision-making authority, or subjecting their activities to restrictive oversight.

While this Thesis does not advocate the full professionalisation of student representation, it emphasises the need to institutionally recognise it as a capability-enhancing instrument (Sen, 1999). Translating formal commitments into substantive freedoms requires addressing both structural inequities and institutional dependencies to ensure that student representation remains democratic, inclusive, and effective. To strengthen the democratic and capability-enhancing function of student representation, the following policy measures are proposed:

- ***Guarantee inclusive student welfare and housing access:*** As Shahahabul and his colleagues (2021) and Sotomayor and his colleagues emphasised, ensuring access to accommodation, scholarships and financial support is a prerequisite for accessing HE and contributing to HE governance. Binding standards for welfare and housing provision should be established to address material insecurity that limits student engagement in student representation.
- ***Reform accountability and recognition frameworks:*** Introduce or reform accountability and transparency mechanisms to evaluate the presence of SROs in HE decision-making processes and discussions, as well as how the national government incorporates SRO evaluations. Additionally, the national authority should recognise the efforts and workload of student representatives by offering academic leave, stipends or time allocations, depending on the university's financial and administrative capabilities.
- ***Reinforce the legal authority of the EU and the EHEA on academic freedom:*** Strengthen the monitoring and enforcement capacity of the EHEA and EU to ensure compliance with the 2024 Tirana Communiqué, embedding student representation as a fundamental right within the EHEA.

- ***Safeguard the autonomy of SROs at every level:*** Enact or dismantle any legislative provision that misuses or restricts access to funding, dismantles the organisation for illicit political reasons or makes it politically dependent on the national government. Dismantle any provision that silences the agency of SROs.

In conclusion, the Thesis highlights that the architecture of student representation within the EHEA remains structurally uneven and socially exclusive. To convert formal rights into real freedoms, both national and supranational authorities must pair harmonisation efforts with redistributive and capability-enhancing measures that secure effective and equitable student political agency across all institutional contexts.

5.3 LIMITATIONS

This Master's Thesis and its findings present several limitations, primarily linked to sampling, access, and the temporal scope of the data collected. As discussed in Sections 3.4 and 3.5, the semi-structured interviews were conducted during an electoral phase in student national governments and their representative bodies in Italy, France, and Norway. The timing of these elections significantly affected access to interviewees, as many SRO members were involved in campaigns or administrative transitions. Consequently, participation rates were uneven across national contexts, resulting in an unbalanced sample that limited the possibility of systematically comparing national and local dynamics of student representation.

Another layer of limitation relates to the selection process and gatekeeping by SROs. Although I was introduced to national SROs in the countries selected for this study through my internship experience with the ESU and informed their presidents about the aims of this research, this did not automatically translate into higher participation. Some SROs, such as FAGE and NSO, delegated their international or youth representatives as interviewees, as they were more familiar with the topics addressed and better positioned to handle potentially sensitive questions. This process underscores how SROs often appoint specific

intermediaries for external communication, which, while ensuring institutional coherence and message control, may lead them to avoid disseminating sensitive or controversial information.

The imbalance within the sample also shaped the range of political perspectives represented. Interviewees in France and Italy mainly identified with left-wing or progressive organisations, leading to an underrepresentation of centrist or conservative SROs that might have provided contrasting insights into how student representation can preserve institutional hierarchies or political compliance (Ince & al., 2018; Klemenčič, 2024). Furthermore, the absence of regional or local SROs, often acting as intermediaries between students and university governance structures, limited the analysis of bottom-up forms of agency and influence in HE governance. Contacting local SROs via social media, such as Instagram or LinkedIn, proved challenging, as these platforms restrict unsolicited communication, further constraining the diversity and responsiveness of the sample.

Additionally, most of the SROs interviewed claimed to pursue transformative agency, seeking to reform the structures of student representation to gain greater influence and decision-making power (Klemenčič, 2024). In practice, however, their activity largely reflected reactive agency, constrained by limited consultative roles, restricted authority, and scarce material resources (Klemenčič, 2024). Beyond the two Italian local and regional SROs included, a larger and more politically diverse sample could have provided deeper insights into the range of agencies mobilised, the motivations behind them, and the organisational settings that sustain or inhibit transformative action. Such perspectives would further illuminate the conditions under which student representation converges or diverges from student activism and expand Klemenčič's (2024) arguments on the legitimacy and effectiveness of SROs in HE.

A further limitation arises from the reliance on online documentary sources and social media resources. Most of the policy documents, reports and press releases examined, as well as the social media posts selected from the organisational pages of national SROs, were published between 2020 and 2025, offering only a

partial and contemporary perspective on the institutional evolution of SROs. This temporal scope restricted the possibility of assessing how student representation and dependency structures have developed since the early implementation of the Bologna Process. In addition, the selected Instagram posts mainly come from the organisational pages of the SROs' ESU members. It further limits the nuanced and divergent voices of student representation in the EHEA.

In addition, ESU (2024) reports highlight that the uneven implementation of Bologna Process commitments across the four cases, particularly the gap between local and national SROs in France and Italy, remains a persistent issue. This uneven implementation may partly stem from the prioritisation choices made by local SROs, which might concentrate their efforts on ensuring students' material survival (Sen, 1999) rather than engaging with supranational frameworks perceived as distant from their immediate concerns. This may also be reinforced by the limited awareness or interest of the wider student community in Bologna-related reforms (ESU, 2024; Nordal, 2016), which further reduces the incentive for local organisations to translate such commitments into practice.

During interviews, participants were asked to write in the Zoom chat the specific terms used to describe institutional figures, mechanisms, or concepts, and to provide a brief explanation. This approach mitigated some linguistic barriers and ensured terminological consistency. However, translation and interpretation challenges—especially in the Norwegian and Slovak cases, may have limited the depth of qualitative analysis and the precision with which conceptual nuances were captured.

Finally, this research did not include the perspectives of students outside formal representation structures. Previous studies on student representation and activism (e.g., Cinci, 2017; Piazza, 2018; Linder et al., 2019; Meeuwissen et al., 2019; Shahabul et al., 2021) have tended to focus on students already engaged in activism or representative roles. As Nordal (2016) highlights, students' understanding of academic freedom is a fundamental component of their academic well-being and agency. Without capturing how student communities perceive SRO effectiveness, how they are acknowledge of the institutional

mechanisms of student representation and its gaps, or their views on the relevance of student representation within HE, his thesis cannot fully assess how knowledge gaps, informational barriers or disinterest affect the legitimacy, stability and agency direction of SROs in the HE.

Future qualitative comparative research on student representation SROs should include multiple samples to better capture SROs' agentic orientations, types of agency, and the objectives and impact of their actions within specific systems of student representation (Klemenčič, 2012; 2024). This should involve SROs with different political positions, organisational structures, and operating levels: local, national, and supranational. To explore the factors shaping students' understanding of academic freedom, their perceptions of SRO effectiveness, and the significance they attribute to representation in higher education, a complementary sample should include students with no experience in student representation or activism.

As with most research on this topic, the use of a third qualitative method, such as participatory observation or focus groups, would strengthen triangulation and enable a more in-depth analysis of the trajectory of student agency and the discrepancies between the intended objectives and their practical implementation (Genelot, 2024; Klemenčič, 2024; Mazzero, 2025; Shahabul et al., 2021; Sotomayor et al., 2022).

5.4 CONCLUSION

This Master's Thesis examined how SROs contribute to the realisation of student academic freedom (Nordal, 2016) within the EHEA. Focusing on four national contexts: France, Italy, Norway, and Slovakia, each characterised by distinct higher education systems, political cultures, and governance structures, the study analysed how institutional frameworks, organisational capacities, and contextual conditions shape SROs' agency and their capacity to act as intermediaries and guarantors of student academic freedom (Bovill & al., 2016; Klemenčič, 2024; Mathews & Dollinger, 2020; Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999).

Guided by three interrelated research questions, the analysis investigated: (1) the institutional, political, and material factors enabling or constraining student academic freedom; (2) the forms and repertoires through which SROs exercise political agency (Klemenčič, 2024); and (3) the trajectories of convergence and divergence of SRO agency across national higher education systems. The theoretical framework combined the Capability Approach (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999) and the Student Impact Theory (Klemenčič, 2024), allowing an exploration of how formal entitlements are translated or fail to be translated into real freedoms through student representation. The Most Different System Design research design (Anckar, 2008) was implemented to conduct a qualitative comparative study aiming to identify similar or divergent patterns, as well as the tensions between the EHEA and national authorities regarding the assessment of student academic freedom (Komotar, 2022; Matei & d'Aquila, 2024). This study integrated documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews with national and local SROs, most of them are all members of the ESU.

The findings reveal that, while student academic freedom is formally recognised in all four national contexts, its realisation remains structurally uneven. As Nordal (2016) argues, academic freedom for students depends less on legal codification than on the alignment of material, institutional, and political conditions that allow them to act autonomously within higher education. In the comparative perspective adopted here, these conditions vary not by presence or absence but by degree and configuration. In Norway, stable welfare mechanisms, institutionalised participatory structures, and predictable public funding create the most favourable environment for students to exercise agency and voice in governance. Slovakia presents a similar institutional framework, but its effectiveness is weakened by political interference and administrative opacity that limit the substantive autonomy of SROs. By contrast, France and Italy display formally codified yet operationally fragile models, where limited access to decision-making arenas, bureaucratic inertia, and financial dependence on public or university funding constrain the translation of formal rights into real capabilities. Across all cases, the evidence shows that obstacles to student academic freedom arise less from legal restrictions than from structural and material unfreedoms

(Sen, 1999), including budgetary cuts on HE, augmentation or implementation of tuition fees or student fees, incapability to , and the uneven institutional responsiveness of higher education systems. These factors confirm that the degree to which student academic freedom is realised depends on how national systems configure resources, accountability, and institutional openness rather than on their formal legal recognition alone.

The research further demonstrates that SROs' political agency unfolds across two interconnected dimensions. The first, institutional agency, concerns formal participation and recognition within HE governance (Klemenčič, 2024). The second, collective agency, refers to the mobilisation and articulation of student interests in the broader public sphere (ibidem). In Norway and Slovakia, where participatory structures and accountability mechanisms are legally embedded, these dimensions operate synergistically, enabling SROs to act as recognised partners in shaping student welfare, quality assurance, and academic policy. Conversely, in France and Italy, student representation functions primarily through advocacy, negotiation, and protest, compensating for exclusion from formal decision-making. Their agency is thus largely reactive or compensatory (Klemenčič, 2024), oriented toward adaptation rather than transformation. These variations show how institutional design, political opportunity, and resource distribution determine whether student representation serves as a lever of democratic influence or remains a procedural formality.

Cross-nationally, the comparative analysis identifies both convergence and divergence pattern in SROs' political agency in national HE politics. Convergence emerges in the formal commitment to student participation embedded in national legislation and EHEA principles. Divergence, however, persists in the degree of autonomy, legitimacy, and effectiveness enjoyed by SROs. Norway and Slovakia represent models of embedded and resource-supported participation, while France and Italy are characterised by politicisation, fragmentation, and dependency. These differences are not accidental but structurally rooted in national governance traditions, welfare regimes, and political cultures, which condition whether student agency can evolve from consultative to transformative forms.

This research is one of the first qualitative comparative analyses to link student academic freedom with student representation in a variety of higher education (HE) systems. It shows that student representation and activism do not necessarily go hand in hand, and that this has a significant impact on how higher education systems allocate resources, establish participatory structures, and promote institutional openness. It also shapes the agentic orientation of SROs with regard to enhancing student academic freedom. The findings confirm that student representation should be understood as a capability-enhancing mechanism, enabling students to exercise agency and a collective voice within HE (Macfarlane, 2011; Sen, 1999). However, as Klemenčič (2024) cautions, SROs do not consistently act as transformative agents. When they fail to contest existing power dynamics or become too embedded in bureaucratic structures, they risk reproducing the very hierarchies that they were created to democratise. This tension is evident in France and Italy, where the multitude of SROs with diverse political positions and agentic orientations can transform entitled involvement into compliance.

At the same time, the gap between local and national levels of representation emerges as a key determinant of impact. In a more hybrid HE system, such as in Italy, local SROs can occasionally influence welfare or housing policies at the university level. Yet their national counterparts remain marginalised in broader policy discussions. By contrast, in Norway, nationally embedded structures ensure more consistent recognition, though they can also obscure local disparities in participation and support. This uneven articulation between levels of representation illustrates how reactive, contributory, and transformative forms of student agency (Klemenčič, 2024) coexist and interact across governance scales, shaping both the reach and limits of student political influence. Ultimately, this research advances the theoretical understanding of student representation as a dynamic capability system, one that translates formal rights into substantive freedoms only when supported by material resources, institutional legitimacy, and the political will to sustain democratic participation in HE.

Despite these contributions, the methodological constraints of the study, outlined in Section 5.3, limit the scope of the generalised findings. The overlap with

student elections reduced the political diversity of participants, while the reliance on online sources between 2020 and 2025 restricted longitudinal analysis. Furthermore, the absence of students outside representative structures narrowed the understanding of how academic freedom is perceived within the wider student community. Therefore, future research should adopt multi-level and longitudinal designs that incorporate diverse SRO typologies and students who are not involved in representation, to better capture how legitimacy and influence evolve through time

From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the need to strengthen the structural conditions that make student participation both feasible and meaningful. This requires enforceable participatory frameworks, redistributive welfare policies, and the formal recognition of SROs as co-governance actors within higher education institutions. Such reforms are capability-enhancing rather than merely procedural: they expand the material and institutional freedoms through which students can exercise agency and contribute to decision-making on equal terms. These results resonate with the ESU's (2024) critique of the Bologna Process as predominantly accreditation-oriented and insufficiently rights-based, revealing the persistence of governance models that privilege compliance over participation. Embedding student representation and academic freedom within binding governance principles would help shift the EHEA from a space of technocratic coordination toward a genuinely democratic and inclusive arena for the co-production of knowledge, where students act as partners rather than consultees in shaping the future of HE.

From an academic standpoint, this thesis advances the limited literature on student academic freedom (Nordal, 2016) by reconceptualising student representation not as a formal entitlement but as a capability-enhancing mechanism that enables students to exercise agency within HE (Sen, 1999). It refines Klemenčič's (2024) Student Impact Theory by empirically demonstrating how reactive, contributory, and transformative forms of student agency coexist and interact within specific systems of student representation. In doing so, it extends the capability-based understanding of student academic freedom as a relational and institutional practice sustained by material, political, and

organisational conditions. By situating SROs at the intersection of welfare regimes, governance frameworks, and political cultures, the thesis contributes a comparative lens through which to analyse how contextual configurations shape SROs' capability to act as autonomous and legitimate actors. Ultimately, it proposes an understanding of student representation as a constitutive component of academic democracy, a mechanism through which formal rights are translated into substantive freedoms and collective agency within HE

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<https://www.thelocal.no/20240815/deeply-concerning-is-airbnb-eating-away-norways-student-housing-supply>

<https://www.politico.eu/article/slovakia-corruption-europe-robert-fico-politics-tv-culture/>

6.4.6 Scholar at Risk – Monitoring and Reporting

<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2024-11-20-paris-institute-of-political-studies/>

<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-02-12-university-of-lille/>

<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-02-11-university-of-toulouse-jean-jaures/>

<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2024-11-26-university-of-milan/>

<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2024-11-21-sapienza-university-of-rome/>

APPENDIX

TABLE A: CODING BOOK

Parental Code	Description of the Parental Code	Description of the Sub codes
Legal and Institutional Setting of Student Rights	As highlighted by Karran (2007), Matei e d'Aquila (2024), and Popovic (2023), national legal frameworks are a key reference point for interpreting academic freedom at multiple levels. They not only define the recognition of student representative organisations (SROs) within higher education but also regulate their scope of action within institutional arenas, including intermediary representative bodies (Klemenčič, 2012; 2024).	<p>University Student Legal Position: This sub-code focuses on whether university students are recognised as part of the academic community, what legal position have at different levels in the HE system</p> <p>Social and Political Right: This code captures the social and political right are being recognised to the student by the national HE law, tertiary legal source such as constitutional court sentence</p>
Neo-liberalisation of Higher Education	According to Hauptman (2013) and Buoso (2021), the increasing implementation of performance-based criteria in HE quality assessment emphasises how university administrations, due to the reduction in public investment in HE and the increasing reliance on additional performative-based funds, implement performative-based criteria. This is done to increase the production of paper research, collaboration, and the number of students registered, in order to gain further finances.	<p>Budgetary cuts: According to Hauptman (2013), budgetary cuts made mainly by the national government are one of the main reasons why university administrations have to reassess their budgets.</p> <p>Concentration of economic power: According to Buoso (2021), the implementation of performance-based funding has created a significant imbalance of economic power among universities, favouring large, prestigious ones</p> <p>Implementation of payment service in the HE: According to Hauptman (2013), this is one of the main solutions adopted by universities to increase their budget</p> <p>Expansion of Private Sector in the HE: This code focuses on a recent concern expresses by ESU's 2024 report of Bologna report the increasing presence of external non-academic actors and companies in the HE system. The code captures the presence of third parties in the HE university governance, the power to deal research agreement</p> <p>Commodification and Disicentivation of Internationalisation: This code captures how internationalisation, specifically the inclusion of non-EU/EHEA international students, has been dismantled due to a change in political priorities or the perception of their presence in higher education, even if only temporary.</p>
Politicisation of the HE	Based on the work of DeGregorio (2022), Joly (2022) and Láncoš (2021), it has been documented that there has been an increasing attempt to politicise higher education in the EHEA. These	Broader social and political context: This code captures the impact of the national political context, societal change and existing national social and economic

	<p>attempts are mainly made by right-wing politicians (Láncos, 2021), but could also involve political actors with different political orientations (DeGregorio, 2022). Attempts to politicise HE have also extended to student representation organisations, especially when they are explicitly affiliated with a political party (Klemenčič, 2024).</p>	<p>factors on HE. This code is connected to the above parent code and captures how national social and economic issues and a lack of legal recognition affect students' capabilities. It also captures recurrent</p> <p><i>Institutional Restriction on Student Rights:</i> This code captures both attempted and implement national policies that hinder some aspect of student academic freedom. This code also captures political institutions refusal to implement SROs demands and opinions</p> <p><i>Targeted Political attack to/from Student Expression:</i> This code captures episodes in which university students and student representatives have been subjected to attacks ranging from defamation to violent police intervention, which hinder academic freedom. The code also covers attacks made by political institutions and SROs</p>
<p><i>Socio-Economic Barriers in the HE</i></p>	<p>Based on the work of Abbiati and his colleagues (2018) and Romito (2025), a student's socioeconomic background significantly affects their access to the HE system, how they navigate it and the decisions they make, including those relating to specific student support and aid, and adjusting their financial situation without being penalised.</p>	<p><i>Budgetary and Financial Constrains:</i> This code emphasises how the costs of tuition fees, rent, school materials, healthcare, etc. hinder students' presence in higher education</p> <p><i>Lack of Affordable Student Housing:</i> Building on the findings of Shahabul and his colleagues (2021) and Sotomayor and his colleagues (2022), secure access to accommodation on public student campuses and in the private rental sector has become a prerequisite for engaging in academic life. This code illustrates the factors contributing to this structural phenomenon and the limited intervention of either SROs or the student-owned body.</p> <p><i>Mismatch between institutional capability and student necessity:</i> This code highlights how the university administration and student welfare institutions may be unable to fulfil student requests, from providing scholarships to allocating places in student dormitories. This mismatch can be caused by multiple factors, such as a mismatch between the legal and material dimensions, or student organisations not having legal priority or lacking funding from the national government</p> <p><i>Socio-economic student capability:</i> Based on Romito's (2025) research into</p>

		educational inequalities in higher education HE, a student's socio-economic background significantly impacts not only their access, but also how they navigate the system. This code captures not only financial situation, but also ethical belonging and family educational history.
Student Representative Agency Strategies and Tools	Based on Cinci (2017) and Piazza (2018) research on the factors that lead to successful or failed outcome of student activism. This code aims to address what are the main strategies and collective action tools to overcome potential institutional, political and material barriers and lack of political intervention to compensate students	<p>Advocacy Repertoire: This code captures how SROs use a media presence and interventions to exert influence, prepare informative banquets, author reports and conduct research</p> <p>Expressive or Embodied Student Agency: This code captures student protests and manifestations, as well as informal student meetings, such as student parties.</p> <p>Institutional Student Governance Agency: This code captures how SROS navigate into a pre-established institutional decisional making structure, have a defined role and use this role to exercise influence</p> <p>Strategic Partnership: According to Bovill and his colleagues (2016) and Cinci (2017), Student representative to increase their presence in the university and to the national institution and to exercise influence to the political arena and to reach their objective. decide to entrench alliance with political, academic trade union, trade unions, civic organisation and other SROs</p>
Convergence and Divergence of Student Political Agency in National Politics	This code illustrates the institutional and organizational factors within and outside SROs organizational setting, power relationship dynamics with HE and political authorities and accountability mechanisms and the effectiveness and legitimacy of SROs that can lead either to convergence or divergence of	<p>Accountability of HE and political authorities: Following Klemenčič's (2024) student impact theory, this code encompasses both the formal, legally defined relationship and the informal relationship defined by social and historical tradition. It captures the responsiveness of academic and political institutions towards SROs' requests and how they address them</p> <p>Levels of Involvement: Based on Klemenčič's (2024) theoretical framework of student impact theory, this study examines the level of involvement of student representation organisations in the higher education decision-making process, both formally and informally. The level of involvement defines the decisional authority of Student Representation Organisations</p>

		<p>and their relationship with political institutions</p> <p>Student Representative Authoritative Power: Following Klemenčič's (2024) theoretical framework on student impact theory, this code identifies areas in which SROs exercise decisional or consultative power in higher education decision-making.</p> <p>Student Representative Political Agency: Following Klemenčič's (2024) theoretical framework on student impact theory, this code encapsulates the objectives of SROs that they have pursued, are currently pursuing or will pursue, their political orientation and position on specific issues, and how they will exercise influence</p> <p>Effectiveness and Legitimacy of SROs: This code elicitates what are the institutional and organizational factors that explicitly or implicitly convey effectiveness and legitimacy of SROs</p>
<p>Levels of Involvement</p>	<p>Based on Klemenčič's (2024) theoretical framework of student impact theory, this study examines the level of involvement of student representation organisations in the higher education decision-making process, both formally and informally. The level of involvement defines the decisional authority of Student Representation Organisations and their relationship with political institutions.</p>	<p>Substantive/Empowered: Student representatives are legally and informally involved in decision-making processes in the HE sector at all levels. They have an ongoing, albeit sometimes tense, relationship with political institutions, which recognize student representatives as equal partners</p> <p>Consulted/Advocacy involvement: The student representative takes part in a specific phase of the decision-making process, as defined by law, historical tradition or implicit agreement. The student representative has limited power, mainly consultative, but can still influence the political actors, university administration or student community when a positive relationship exists</p> <p>Tokenistic/marginal involvement: The Student Representation Organisation only takes part in the agenda-setting phase and is excluded from the others. They have no authoritative power and are excluded from the discussion, being considered subordinate to those in authority. They have minimal or no relationship with political and academic authorities</p>

<p>Effectiveness and Legitimacy of Student Representative Organisation</p>	<p>This code elicitates what are the institutional and organizational factors that explicitly or implicitly convey effectiveness and legitimacy of SROs</p>	<p>Effectiveness of Student Welfare: From the interview, student representatives have continuous contact with the student welfare institution and the guarantee of student rights, as the SROs' objectives also represent student interests and welfare. At an institutional level, this code captures how HE settings are structured to guarantee student welfare and the services offered by universities and SROs. It also captures how they are able to respond.</p> <p>Institutional Organisational Barriers of Student Rights: This code captures the organisational and institutional dimension of the SROs, showing how the national organisational setting of student representation can enhance or hinder the legal dimension of student representation agency, the authoritative power exercised, and the level of involvement in public decision-making processes.</p> <p>Social Normative Discourse on HE: This code captures how public opinion, political institutions and civil society perceive HE, including students. In line with Sotomayor and his colleagues' (2022) research on student housing, perceptions of the relevance and priority of HE significantly impact the definition of students as members of the academic community or individuals under the authority of academic staff. It also determines how much the university administration and institutions prioritise HE.</p>
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TABLE B. NATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON STUDENT ACADEMIC FREEDOM

B.1 FRANCE

B.1.1 LEGAL NATIONAL REFERENCE ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM

<p>Academic Freedom in the French Constitution of 1958 and its preamble do not explicitly or implicitly mention academic freedom</p>	<p>Academic Freedom in the French Constitution of 1958 and its preamble do not explicitly or implicitly mention academic freedom</p>
<p>Academic Freedom in the French Court Constitutional Sentences</p>	<p>1984 Loi Savary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognises academic freedom as a constitutional principle • Obligates universities to promote and protect academic freedom

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It makes mandatory student representation in the academic senate with decision-making rights • University professors are not subordinate to the university administration, but are appointed by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research <p>2015:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandates gender equality in the election and participation of academic senate members • Guarantees equal access to representation, academic treatment, and tenure, without enforcing gender quotas <p>2020:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlights the need for structural reform in tenure selection processes • Authorises the creation of local Committees (with up to 50% external members) involved in academic governance.
Academic Freedom in Higher Education Ordinary Law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fauvre Law 1969 • Savary Law 1984 • Code of Education 2000 [from Livre VI to Livre VIII] • Law on the Liberties and Responsibilities of Universities 2007

B.1.2 SUMMARISATION OF THE CODE DE L'EDUCATION (2013)

<p>LIVRE VI "Organisation of Higher Education and Research" defines the institutional framework for public and private universities and research institutions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article L611-1 "Principles of Academic Freedom" affirms academic freedom and institutional autonomy; prohibits political interference in teaching and research • Article L612-1 'Objectives of Higher Education' Outlines higher education's mission: knowledge development, professional training, and research contribution
<p>LIVRE VII "Higher Education Institutions" Establishes the structure of universities and grandes écoles, including accreditation and student admissions procedures</p>
<p>LIVRE VIII "Student Life (La Vie Universitaire)" regulates students' rights, representation, and access to services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article L811-1 "Freedom of Expression and Access to Information": Guarantees freedom of expression and access to information, provided public order and academic activity are not disrupted. • Article L811-3 "Student Representation in Governance": recognises student representation on institutional councils (e.g. conseil académique, conseil d'administration). • Article L821-1 "Financial Support to Student" Mandates national financial support through scholarships and targeted assistance funds • Article L821-2 "Conditions d'attribution des aides": specifies that aid is awarded based on merit and social criteria, administered by the CROUS network.

• **Article L831- 1 to Article L832-1 “Healthcare and social Protection of University Student”** ensures access to preventive health services and social protection (e.g. student health insurance), coordinated with the national healthcare system

B.2 ITALY

B.2.1 NATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM

<p>Academic Freedom in the Italian Constitution</p>	<p>The Italian Constitution of 1946 mentions some core aspects of academic freedom:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First section “Fundamental Right”: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article 9: The right of scientific and artistic research and dissemination. • Second section, 'Ethics and Social Rapport': <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Article 33: Freedom of teaching and research is constitutionally protected. It recognises the institutional autonomy to a certain degree, provided that it does not violate Italian law on institutional settings in higher education. • Article 34 emphasises the State's role in providing merit scholarships to Italian citizens and noncitizens, as well as the necessary social support to enable them to pursue their education.
<p>Academic Freedom in Italian Higher Education Ordinary Law</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Law 537/1993 Grants universities significant financial autonomy, allowing them to manage their budgets and set tuition fees • Article 1 and 2, Law 203/2005 stresses the right to scientific research and dissemination through research and didactic activities, that institutional autonomy is on a certain degree on the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education and Research freedom and freedom of teaching • Article 21 of 240/2010 law (Gelmini Reform) implies mandatory cup of percentage of student representative of 15% in every university body and structure • The Statute on the Rights and Duties of University Students (2011) explicitly states which values and rights of academic freedom are recognised for Italian university students, as well as their duties

B.2.2 SUMMARY OF THE STATUTE OF RIGHTS AND DUTIES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS 2011¹¹⁴

<p>Article 5 - Feasibility of Pursuing Tertiary Education: obliges the university administration and the national government to make tertiary education feasible for all students. This includes providing the necessary resources and support to ensure accessibility to higher education</p> <p>Article 7 - Right to Assembly and Political Expression: guarantees students the right to assembly and to express their political consciousness without repercussions. This right is crucial for fostering a vibrant and engaged student body.</p> <p>Article 8 - Right to Representation by Elected Student Representatives: students have the right to be represented by elected student representatives in various academic bodies, including the Academic Council and the Academic Senate. This representation must respect political pluralism and ensure that student voices are heard in university governance</p> <p>Article 35 - University Elections: specifies that university elections must be held in a manner that guarantees maximum participation. It requires that at least 15% of eligible students exercise their right to vote to validate the election. This article ensures that elections are conducted fairly and with significant student involvement</p> <p>Article 37 - Participation in Academic Senate and Council: states that student representatives have the right and duty to participate in the working commissions and meetings of the Academic Senate and Council. The university administration is obligated to guarantee this right and duty, ensuring that student representatives can effectively contribute to university governance</p>

B.3 NORWAY

B.3.1 LEGAL NATIONAL FRAMEWORK ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM

<p>Academic Freedom in the Norwegian Constitution</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Norwegian Constitution does not explicitly or implicitly mention academic freedom. • February 2024, the Norwegian National Student Union (NOS) and professional academic organisations are continuing to advocate for the introduction of the concept of academic freedom into the Constitution
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¹¹⁴ As mentioned in section 4.1.1 on university student positions, the statute has not been implemented at a national level. The following document presents the content of the Statute as adopted by the University of Rome without modification, as it is one of the Italian higher education institutions that has adopted the code as part of its university regulations. This table will provide insight into how the recognition of student academic freedom and student representation was supposed to work.
https://smfn.web.uniroma1.it/sites/default/files/allegati/Statuto_studenti%20MIUR.pdf

<p>Academic Freedom in Ordinary Law</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The University and University College Act of 2024 mentions academic freedom and the quality assurance of teaching and learning in Norwegian higher education. The Act explicitly recognises the right to pursue and disseminate knowledge, the institutional autonomy of universities, and the right to participate in and pursue tertiary education. Lastly, the Act states that university students are part of the academic community. Consequently, they must guarantee not only that they have their own representative and a seat on the Academic Senate at the university or university college, but also that student input and feedback are included in academic decision making processes. • The working conditions of academic staff and copyright rights and obligations are being regulated by the former one by the “Working Environment Act” of 2006 and the latter one by • the “Copyright Act” of 2018
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B.3.2 SUMMARISATION OF THE UNIVERSITY AND UNIVERSITY COLLEGE ACT 2024

<p>SECTION 1: “JOINT SECTION”:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Section 1.1 “Objective of the Act”: Both public and private institutions must deliver high-quality tertiary education, conduct advanced research and artistic work, and promote academic freedom and scientific integrity. • Section 2.1 “The Activities of the Institution”: Universities are granted the right to produce and disseminate knowledge and must ensure that both faculty and students actively participate in academic governance. • Section 2.2 “Academic freedom and responsibility”: Institutions are required to protect academic freedom, uphold quality standards in teaching and research, and operate with institutional autonomy, designing curricula within legal and ethical boundaries. Transparency in academic outputs is also mandated.
<p>SECTION 10: “LEARNING ENVIRONMENT, STUDENTS’ RIGHTS AND STUDENT REPRESENTATION”:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Section 10.11 “Student Bodies”: Students are entitled to form representative bodies to safeguard their rights and interests. These bodies must be democratically elected and are formally consulted by university administrations on all matters affecting student welfare • Section 10.12 “The students’ representation in the institution’s bodies”: At least 20% of seats on institutional academic bodies (e.g. Academic Senate) must be reserved for student representatives, who have full rights to speak, propose, and vote on matters, including the possibility to appoint additional representatives when seats are available

B.4 SLOVAKIA

B.4.1 NATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM

<p>Academic Freedom in the Slovakian Constitution</p>	<p>The 1992 Slovakian Constitution explicitly mentions freedom of expression, the right to pursue a tertiary education, the right to disseminate knowledge, the right of assembly, right of association and the right to pursue scientific and artistic work They are being mentioned in the following sections:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Section Two “Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms”: • Article 24: guarantees freedom of expression; may be limited under specific conditions (e.g. public safety or health) • Section Three “Political Rights”: • Article 26: prohibits censorship and protects the dissemination of ideas and information • Article 28: ensures the right to peaceful assembly • Article 29: ensures freedom of association, with limitations to protect public order or rights of others • Section Five “Economic, Social and Cultural Rights”: • Article 42: establishes the right to tertiary education and the right to apply for financial support. • Article 43: protects freedom of scientific and artistic activity and access to cultural heritage.
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B.4.2 SUMMARISATION OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION ACT 2002 (AMENDED IN 2025)

<p>1st section of the second article “Mission of Higher Education”</p>	<p>HE institutions are tasked with contributing to the development of education, science, culture, and the creative arts, aligning their activities with the needs of society</p>
<p>2nd section of the second article “Functions of HEIs”</p>	<p>HE Institutions provide tertiary education, engage in scientific and artistic research, and disseminate knowledge through various forms of publication and other means.</p>
<p>3rd section of the second article</p>	<p>The main objectives include offering</p>

“Primary Objectives”	HE that meets societal needs and conducting research and artistic activities that contribute to the advancement of knowledge and culture.
4th section of the second article “Academic Freedoms and Institutional Autonomy”	HE Institutions are guaranteed the freedom to teach, research, and engage in artistic expression. They possess the autonomy to self-govern, including the election of academic bodies and the management of internal affairs, following the law.

C. LIMITATIONS AND VIOLATIONS OF STUDENT ACADEMIC FREEDOM

C.1 FRANCE

VIOLATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing Attempts to politicise the legal definition of republican values, laïcité and professional academic duties (DeGregorio, 2022) • Ongoing Attempts to exercise control over teaching and research by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research (DeGregorio, 2022; Joly, 2022; wieworka, 2023) • Lack of involvement of the student syndicates and movements regarding the plan for the HE budgeting of 2025 • Police Intervention in student peaceful occupation and protest in support of Palestine and budget cuts on HE • Violents Attacks between right wing and left wing SROs and student movements
LIMITATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in funding for higher education and research, leading to a reduction in the number of students attending courses and even the dismantling of entire academic courses. • French university students are increasingly facing the risk of being poor due to the rise of the price of rent and the costs related to academic material, transportation and healthcare services such as dentistry (FAGE, 2023, 2024) • French university students make budgetary adjustments by skipping meals at least three times per week (FAGE 2023, 2024) French academia often denies critical perspectives on racism and Islamophobia, which further contributes to the reproduction and normalisation of exclusionary attitudes within the academy and broader society (McNulty, 2022) • Lack of annual reform of the eligibility criteria for grants and scholarships (non-merit-based). • Highly competitive environment for securing one of the eleven seats on the CNESER due to the short-term nature of student mandates (two years), which favours established groups such as UNEF and FAGE and limits broad student representation (Genelot, 2024).

C.2 ITALY

<p>VIOLATIONS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11 Italian universities violated the 1993 law capping tuition revenue at 20% of <i>Fondo di Finanziamento Ordinario</i> (FFO) (CGIL-FLC, 2023; UDU 2024). • Cuts to public HE funding and reliance on <i>quota premiale</i> reinforce territorial disparities, benefiting northern/central institutions (CGIL-FLC 2023; SVIMEZ, 2023) • <i>Idoneo non beneficiario</i> status reflects structural welfare failures and perpetuates inequality (CNSU, 2018) • Italy ranks among the most expensive HE systems in the EHEA (CGIL-FCL 2023) • The CNSU continues to face limitations in effectively incorporating and acting on student input at the national level due to a lack of persistent involvement and consultation with the Ministry of Higher Education in response to the CNSU's recommendations and feedback (CNSU, 2018, 2022; ESU, 2024) • University students face challenges, particularly those living away from home, in finding affordable student and private accommodations due to the housing costs and a shortage of affordable accommodations (UDU, 2023; 2025) • The DDL Sicurezza was approved at the beginning of June. Article 31 vaguely mentions how the secret service will extract private information on students' and professors' political positions in the name of security threats without expressing any opposition. This article was removed in the final version, but it remains in the original draft. • Target Attack on SROs and individual students • Illegal Police Operation of Infiltration in student left wing movements affiliated to left-wing political party • Violents encounters, interruptions and confrontation between left-wing and right-wing SROs
<p>LIMITATIONS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational Pathways and Network Support are greatly shaped by family socio-economic background (Abbiati & al., 2018) • Student decision-making power is fragmented across Italian Regions and academic institutions due to the political willingness of the political party at every level and the institutional willingness of the university administration, making an imbalance of student representation on a regional and national level (CNSU, 2018) • Several student movements or unions are quite fragmented into specific geographical areas delimited by the Region in which student unions are active or even within a Specific University Site (Vespa & al., 2024) • Strong Alignment with the Political Ideology of student movements and unions can hinder broad student engagement and representation. On one hand, Azione Universitaria's ongoing and openly declared association with values related to the Fascist Period (Vespa & al, 2024). On the other hand, left-wing student unions attempt to disrupt events that do not align with their political affiliation • Ongoing struggle of university administration to guarantee a balance between fostering political expression and engagement and institutional neutrality

C.3 NORWAY

VIOLATIONS	As noted in the 2024 report Academic Freedom in the Nordics: Legislation, Practice and Challenges , the strong historical and political tradition of student participation and activism in Nordic higher education has contributed to a generally supportive environment for student academic freedom. While there are no widely documented cases of direct violations, the report acknowledges certain structural and contextual limitations
LIMITATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget Cut: Ongoing reductions in funding for higher education and scholarship rescue programmes, undermining long-term academic support (Bleiklie, 2023) • Resource Concentration: Performance-based funding has driven institutional mergers, concentrating resources and decision-making power in larger universities and exacerbating disparities in student access and experience (Bleiklie, 2023). • Unequal Tuition Policy: Since 2023, non-EU/EHEA international students have been required to pay tuition fees, creating unequal treatment and limiting access for many. • Mismatch between financial aids and real economic costs: The current student stipend does not equvalate with the increasing costs that university students must sustain. In addition, student must renew the demand for a student stipend every year which is has generally remain stagnant around 12 thousand euros • Third-Party Influence: Increased collaboration with oil companies has raised concerns over institutional autonomy and the ability to critique such partnerships (Bleiklie, 2023). • Student Housing Shortage: A lack of affordable housing has led some universities to repurpose cafeterias or partner with hotels, increasing living costs for students. • Financial Dependence: Norwegian universities remain heavily reliant on state funding and support from EHEA structures, limiting their financial autonomy (Bleiklie, 2023)

C.4 SLOVAKIA

VIOLATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corruption in Academia: Dismantling of NAKA and other anti-corruption bodies under the Fico government that aim to dismantle corruption in every public spaces including academia where they have been registered episodes of bribery, cheating, plagiarism and unbalance dynamic relationship between professor and student • Student Welfare Backlash: VAT increase on academic books (from 5% to 23%), limiting access to learningmaterials. • Targeting Student Activism: • Public targeting of a university student by the Prime Minister for raising questions about anti-corruption reforms. • Politicisation of cultural institutions; Fico allies appointed to key roles, with reduced support for LGBTQ+ and marginalised content
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LIMITATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student Brain Drain: Slovakian student project to move to neighbouring countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland) due to institutional setting similarity, better infrastructure and comparable HE systems• Student Housing Crisis: Lack of affordable student housing, exacerbated by delayed renovation works and rising rent prices• Institutional Barriers of the Ethical Committee: in addressing any major ethical and academic breach in over cheating and plagiarism within university site and with a proper sanctions
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D. INFORMED CONSENT AND PRIVACY¹¹⁵

PROJECT OUTLINE, PRIVACY NOTICE AND INFORMED CONSENT

SECTION I

Student Unions and Academic Freedom in the EHEA: A Comparative Study of Institutional Dependency

Abstract

While the Bologna Process has standardised certain dimensions of higher education in the EHEA and recognised students as part of the academic community, national systems still exhibit considerable institutional and organisational diversity. This diversity has significant implications for how student unions, organisations or associations operate, advocate for academic freedom and engage with university governance and national governments. Existing research on academic freedom, particularly on student unions, has often overlooked institutional, financial and organisational dependencies. These forms of dependency raise important questions about how the existence of student unions is secured and how students' academic freedom is guaranteed both inside and outside the university. Using the capability approach, which allows to identify what are the institutional, organisational and financial barriers that hinder students' academic freedom inside and outside the university. This research aims to identify (a) what are the violations and restrictions associated with institutional dependency, (b) how these types of violations and restrictions affect students' academic rights, (c) what are the formal and substantive roles of student unions, (d) how student unions guarantee students' academic freedom by navigating institutional dependency. This is a comparative exploratory research between France, Italy, Norway and Slovakia.

¹¹⁵ This is the May 2025 version review, as it only contains permissions for conducting interviews on Zoom.

Potential Research Participants:

- 1) Student members of representative unions from France, Italy, Norway, and Slovakia (baseline for all of the four countries: 10 to 15 participants; baseline for each country: 2 to 4).
- 2) Student unions, organisations or associations that are part of ESU (European Student Union) (baseline: 4 to 6 members of the national executive and/or ESU).
- 3) Student members holding a significant position in their student union organisations (baseline: 4 to 6 members of the National Executive covering a specific area such as student welfare, student housing, finance, etc.).

Research team:

Federica Capitani, second-year Master's student in Sociology and Social Research. During her undergraduate degree in Sociology, she worked on a group report on the state of academic freedom in post-Soviet countries: Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. She attended the European Student Advocacy Day as a guest and participant, presenting her report together with her colleagues. Contact: federica.capitani@studenti.unitn.it

Ester Gallo, Research coordinator for the current project is an associate professor in Social Anthropology at the Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento. Her research areas are migration and transnationalism, religion, diaspora, colonial history and memory, kinship. Contact: ester.gallo@unitn.it.

Interview: Duration and Contents

The project is based on semi-structured interviews, conducted in English and/or Italian and/or French, and conducted online via Zoom. The interview session will be conducted by myself.

They will last on average 75 (min.) to 120 (max.) minutes. The interviews will articulate broad transversal themes: housing, brain drain, student participation and the backlash of student activism. In addition, they will also inquire on a particular topic that is limited to one of the four countries of this comparative study,

such as student poverty, which is a problem that greatly affects French students, and the lack of recognition of the remote vote for Italian university students. Upon the research participant's permission, the interview will be recorded for the sole purpose of data analysis and recordings will not be shared with anyone beyond the research team. In the focus group section and the interview session, this research will highlight how student unions guarantee students' academic rights, taking into account the institutional setting of higher education in the country and how social, political and family backgrounds shape the strategies and initiatives advanced by student unions.

The research is carried in full adherence to the ethical standards and guidelines of individual dignity, right to the privacy and data protection regulations. No remuneration is foreseen for research participants.

SECTION II

NOTICE ON THE PROCESSING OF PERSONAL DATA FOR SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH PURPOSES

(ART.13 REG. UE 2016/679)

“Student Unions and Academic Freedom in the EHEA: A Comparative Study of Institutional Dependency”

(hereinafter “Project”):

Dear participant, we would like to inform you that the current legislation on the protection of personal data with particular regard to scientific research establishes the right of every natural person to protect their personal data. As Research Participants ('data subject'), you are provided with the following information regarding the processing of your personal data.

DATA CONTROLLER

The Data Controller is the University of Trento, via Calepina n. 14, 38122 Trento, email: ateneo@unitn.it; ateneo@pec.unitn.it.

DATA PROTECTION OFFICER

For any information regarding your personal data, the University's Data Protection Officer (DPO) can be contacted at the following e-mail address: dpo@unitn.it.

PURPOSE AND LEGAL BASIS FOR THE PROCESSING

The processing of your data is carried out by the Data Controller for the realization of the scientific purposes outlined in the information sheet for the participation to the following research Project: "Student Unions and Academic Freedom in the EHEA: A Comparative Study of Institutional Dependency". In particular, your data are processed in compliance with letter (e) of Article 6, paragraph 1, letter (e) of the GDPR (performance of tasks carried in the public interest):

- The processing of special categories of data is carried out on the basis of the consent of the data subject pursuant to Article 9, paragraph 2, letter (a) of the GDPR and Article 7, paragraph 2 of the Rules of conduct for processing for statistical or scientific research purposes (Regole deontologiche per i trattamenti a fini statistici o di ricerca scientifica);
- The processing of personal data relating to criminal convictions and offences is based on Articles 6 and 10 GDPR;
- The processing of data based solely on automated decision-making, including profiling, is based on the data subject's consent in accordance with Article 22 GDPR. The Project has been set up in compliance with specific methodological standards of the disciplinary fields herein concerned and is deposited in the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Trento where it will be stored for one (1) year from 30 of December 2026.

SOURCE AND CATEGORIES OF PERSONAL DATA

Personal data are collected from: the data subject. In the implementation of the Project the following personal data will be processed: (a) personal demographic data: (participants may choose not to reveal their name or country of origin) anonymized or abbreviated; contact data;(used merely for the access propose

and subject to delete immediately afterwards); (b) recorded voice; (c) personal opinion, experiences and future goals.

METHODS OF PROCESSING

The processing of your data will be carried out using the following tools/methods:

- data analysis platforms, in particular: Atlas.ti

And by adopting the following security measures:

- pseudonymisation;
- secure storage;

In particular, in the case of using interviews:

- Responses to the questions in the interview questions will NOT be linked to the user's name or any contact information provided, thus the data will remain anonymous.

The processing of personal data will be carried out by authorized persons (the research team) in relation to the activities to be carried out in the Research Project and in compliance with the principles of lawfulness, fairness, transparency, adequacy, relevance, accuracy, non-excessiveness, integrity, and confidentiality, as well as the principles of privacy by design and by default (Articles 5 and 25 GDPR).

DATA RETENTION PERIOD

At the end of the Project, your personal data will be retained for 1 year, after which the raw data will be destroyed, and the anonymized data will be retained for a further 1 year.

NATURE OF DATA PROVISION

The provision of data is essential for the implementation of the research Project, and failure to provide the data will result in the inability to participate in it.

RECIPIENTS OF DATA AND POSSIBLE TRANSFER ABROAD

- Personal data will not be disclosed to third parties.
- Data will not be disclosed to home university or officials of other universities
- Data will not be disclosed to any other governmental authorities
- Data will not be transferred to countries outside the European Economic Area (EEA)

DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS

The dissemination of statistical and/or scientific results (for example, through the publication of scientific articles and/or the creation of databases, including open access formats, participation in conferences, etc.) will only occur in anonymous, abbreviated and/or aggregated form to establish the findings related to core themes that correspond to the central aim of the research and in a manner that does not make the data subject identifiable.

RIGHTS OF THE DATA SUBJECTS

Data subjects have the right to request at any time from the Data Controller, using the contact details provided above, the exercise of rights under Articles 15 et seq. of the GDPR, including access to their personal data, rectification, supplementation, as well as, where applicable, erasure, restriction of data processing, and the right to object to processing. Data subjects have the right to withdraw consent at any time, without affecting the lawfulness of processing based on consent before its withdrawal

The right to lodge a complaint with the Data Protection Authority under Article 77 of the GDPR or to pursue appropriate legal action remains unaffected. For information related to the data processing conducted in the research Project, please contact the Scientific Responsible for the Project Ester Gallo and Federica Capitani at the following contact: ester.gallo@unitn.it, federica.capitani@studenti.unitn.it

SECTION III

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

I, _____ the
Undersigned.....

Born _____ in _____ on
.....

Resident _____ in
.....Address..... n.

DECLARE

That the purposes and methods of the study have been explained to me in a clear and detailed manner by (name and surname of the person collecting consent):

.....
.....

- To have had the opportunity to explain my considerations and to ask for further clarifications, as well as to have had the necessary time to make a spontaneous, considered and unsolicited decision;
- That the consent expressed by me regarding participation in the aforementioned study is a free decision, not influenced by promises of economic or other benefits, nor by obligations towards the researchers responsible for the study.
- That I understand that the data collected here have no clinical validity, but are intended for research purposes only;
- To know that I can withdraw from the study at any time without having to provide explanations;
- To consent to the collection of my interview today as part of the research project;

- To consent/not consent to the audio and/or video recording of today's interview as part of the research project

Therefore, I am aware of the planned activities and the methods of my membership.

Given this,

I GIVE MY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE PROPOSED STUDY.

In case of paper delivery:

For acknowledgment of the outline, privacy notice and informed consent:

_____ Signature
_____ (Location) (Date)

In case of electronic delivery:

for acknowledgment of the outline, privacy and informed consent notice

The research who conducted the interview:

Name and Surname _____

Signature _____

In case the second researcher is present:

The research who conducted the interview:

Name and Surname _____

Signature _____

E. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- 1) Send an email with the institutional email to the referent contacts provided by ESU; the contacts collected through social media pages (Instagram, LinkedIn & Telegram) where you explain briefly the Master research and the researcher objectives that aim to pursue through the interview; the structure of the interview and where it takes place and the fact that it will be registered only with signed informed consent of the participant
- 2) Once confirmed the participants' availability or the participants available for the research, send the Informed Consent and Privacy, the link to access to the DOODLE POOL of June and July (encourage the participants to select more than one date and time period to re-plan the interview without recontacting several times the participants)
- 3) Be quite flexible on the dates of the interview and be available to plan the interview on Zoom when the participants are available to participate.
- 4) Once received the Informed Consent and Privacy signed and after the participants have been compiled Dates and Timelines of availability of participation, send the Zoom link of the Zoom Chamber Room assigned to the UNITN IT office.
- 5) Before sending the Zoom meeting link on the email of the participants, remember to limit access to participants with the link and the registration method, and save the interview video to the cloud in the Zoom room meeting.
- 6) At the day of the interview, enter in the Zoom ten minutes before the arrival of the participant to suspend the registration
- 7) Once the participant has been entered to the Zoom welcome them, briefly explain the research objective, the structure of the interview,

research aims and the topics that you will be touched (see the folder DRAFT_FOCUS GROUP QUESTION, section interview and select the document of the country of the participant)

- 8) Activate the hotspot of the wi-fi of the phone to avoid to lose wi-fi connection during the interview
- 9) Take notes during the interview
- 10) Ask the participant to write the name of the institutions referred to by the HE figures during the interview in the Zoom chat.
- 11) Encourage them to avoid to insert during the interview sensitive information for example where they study, their tertiary title, what they study
- 12) Poses further question to reach clarification around a concept or a dynamic in the HE system and student representation