

# Intergovernmental Regional Cooperation in European Higher Education

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**Abstract:** Intergovernmental regional cooperation is one of the defining characteristics of political Europe. This article investigates it in the area of higher education and research. Specifically it explores what types of intergovernmental regional alliances exist and to what extent their member countries coordinate their higher education and research policies. The article focuses on six most prominent and most formalized intergovernmental regional alliances: the Benelux, Norden–The Nordic Cooperation, the Visegrád Group, the Franco-German Cooperation, the Western Balkans, and the Baltic Cooperation. There has been much research devoted to study of policy diffusion from the European to the national level, but the intergovernmental regional level has largely been ignored. This article argues that there clearly exists a multi-level governance system in the area of higher education and research, in which regional intergovernmental alliances also perform policy coordination. Therefore, the politics of European higher education policy-making cannot be fully understood by ignoring intergovernmental regional cooperation.

**Keywords:** regional cooperation in higher education and research; higher education policy coordination; Europe; Benelux; Franco-German Cooperation; Nordic Cooperation; Baltic Cooperation; Visegrád Group; Western Balkans; European Union; the European Higher Education Area

## Introduction

Before the European Union's (EU) strengthened emphasis upon policy initiatives in the area of higher education, which began around 2001 with the Lisbon Strategy (European Council, 2000) and before the Bologna Process towards establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which commenced in 1999, government officials in European states when faced with legislative reforms or new policy would perform a "health-check" of the higher education system, and compare key indicators and policy ideas to several other comparable systems. It is to the systems in the same

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region that countries inevitably compare themselves; they benchmark themselves against the frontrunners and seek to replicate their successful policies and practices. The higher education systems in the same region tend to be similar in some ways; perhaps they originate from the same university tradition; have had similar political regimes and economic models into which higher education sector is embedded; and/or have developed similar policies and practices due to the extent of interactions and transactions which often come with geographic proximity. The intensity of political and economic transactions between countries, similarity in socio-economic circumstances and cultural affinities has motivated many countries in geographic proximity to form intergovernmental regional alliances. This is how regional alliances, such as the Benelux, the Norden–the Nordic Cooperation, the Baltic Cooperation, the Visegrád Group, and the Franco-German Cooperation came to existence. In the latter example, it was also the profound interest of both governments never to engage in war again as reflected in the Élysée Treaty of 1963. In other cases, such as in the case of the Western Balkan states, the incentive, even pressure, for formal intergovernmental regional cooperation came from outside: from the European Union and various donor agencies.

Intergovernmental regional cooperation is one of the defining characteristics of political Europe and has been reinforced by the emergence of the supranational political entities, such as the European Union and specific to the area of higher education, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It hence comes as a surprise that not more attention has been devoted to investigate intergovernmental regional cooperation. While ample studies exist on the policy convergence between European and national higher education systems (Curaj, Scott, Vlasceanu, & Wilson, 2012; Elken, Gornitzka, Maassen, & Vukasović, 2011; Klemenčič, 2013; Zgaga et al., 2013; Vukasović, 2014; Vukasović, Jungblut & Elken, 2015), regional policy coordination is largely absent from these studies or mentioned only in passing.

This article investigates the intergovernmental regional cooperation in the area of higher education in Europe. Specifically, it explores what types of intergovernmental regional alliances exist and to what extent their member countries coordinate their higher education policies.<sup>1</sup> It focuses on the six most prominent and most formalized intergovernmental regional alliances in Europe: the Benelux (Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands); Norden–The Nordic Cooperation (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden); the Visegrád Group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia); the Franco-German Cooperation (France and Germany); the Western Balkans, also called the South-East Europe (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, FYR Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, and Serbia); and the Baltic Cooperation (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania).

Empirical data was obtained from publically-accessible official documents and other documentary material and triangulated with interviews with officials from the national ministries responsible for higher education and/or quality assurance agencies. The historical accounts on the

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<sup>1</sup> Higher education policy typically includes research and also makes references to innovation.

development of the intergovernmental regional alliances has drawn for all cases, but the case of the Western Balkans, from the unpublished PhD thesis on the role of regional intergovernmental alliances in European Union negotiations (Klemenčič, 2006). For the Western Balkans, the author draws historical data from personal involvement in the Stability Pact of South East Europe, which was from 1999 until 2008 a political framework to coordinate donor relations to the countries in this region and offered a platform for regional cooperation. In 2008, this framework was replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council, which is discussed below.

### **Regional cooperation in multi-level governance in Europe**

Higher education policy in Europe is far from being an exclusively national affair. Both the European Union and the Bologna Process have significantly influenced national higher education reforms (Curaj, Scott, Vlasceanu, & Wilson, 2012; Elken, Gornitzka, Maassen, & Vukasović, 2011; Vukasović, 2014; Vukasović, Jungblut & Elken, 2015). The European Union and the Bologna Process, and the EHEA – that resulted from it, have emerged as major supranational arenas for policy deliberation and sharing know-how and information on higher education. This is the case despite the fact that each member country, 29 in case of the European Union and 48 in the case of the EHEA, has retained full competencies, indeed full sovereignty, to legislate and regulate in their higher education systems. These two policy arenas have altered the pathways of diffusion of policy ideas and practices in national higher education systems, but they have not made regional comparisons nor regional cooperation superfluous. On the contrary, the fact that these two supranational entities are so influential makes national policymakers eager to influence the policy agenda of the European Union and the Bologna Process and not only to “download” the European policies. Regional partners often lend themselves convenient, like-minded coalitional partners in European-level policy deliberations; their systems are similar and often, but not always, they have shared interests and concerns. Intergovernmental regional alliances contribute to the efficiency of complex European policy negotiations, which are characterized by multiplicity of actors and heterogeneity of interests.

Two reasons speak to this effect. First, intergovernmental policy negotiations within supranational entities are extremely complex and difficult processes.<sup>2</sup> Coalition-building is the necessary mechanism to break down the complexity in terms of number of players and their preferences and add efficiency to the negotiations. Regional blocks prove convenient coalitional allies. Regional partners do not always vote the same in the negotiations’ end game, but they play a crucial role in the background work preceding the end negotiations. The bulk of policy-making is on technical issues and these are agreed upon by the government officials, not the politicians. Government officials have ample contacts to their regional partners in all policy areas; they exchange

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<sup>2</sup> For an elaborate account of the nature of intergovernmental negotiations within the EU, see Klemenčič (2006).

information and policy intelligence; jointly develop policy positions and help issue coalitions to emerge (Klemenčič, 2006).

EU negotiations are an extremely complex process with 29 member states, involvement of different EU institutions and interventions from European stakeholders. The pronounced differences in national higher education traditions often result in highly heterogeneous national preferences. The scope and depth of policy-making on higher education has accelerated since 2001, with the adoption of Education and Training Program (ET 2020) in association with the Lisbon Agenda (European Council, 2000), which paved the political way for deeper higher education policy-making within the EU (Klemenčič, 2012, 33). Since then, the EU institutions have regularly released a set of influential policy documents under a common label known as the ‘modernisation agenda for European higher education’ (Klemenčič, 2012). Since the EU institutions do not have legislative competences in the area of higher education, policy-making is subject to the so called open-method-of-coordination (OMC). OMC implies voluntary cooperation of member states and uses soft law mechanisms such as guidelines and indicators, benchmarking, and sharing of best practice to stimulate compliance and ensure policy convergence (Veiga & Amaral, 2006, 2009).

The policy developments within the EU have become intertwined with the Bologna Process, which resulted in the establishment of the EHEA. The Bologna Process is voluntary intergovernmental policy coordination, but comprises 48 member states well beyond the European Union, plus the European Commission and the consultative members which are European stakeholder organisations (Veiga & Amaral, 2006). These actors need to agree on common objectives, which are then transposed onto the national level by way of policy convergence through mechanisms of mutual policy learning processes; social benchmarking; and communities of practice (Klemenčič, 2015). Again, regional blocks can reduce complexity of players and heterogeneity of preferences in such negotiations.

Second, the European Union actively promotes intra-European cooperation, of which regional cooperation is an important part. Indeed, regional cooperation projects often tend to be favored in funding considerations because they directly address some of the EU’s primary objectives, such as the historical challenge of preventing animosity – and violent conflicts – among neighbouring nations. More specifically, the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) now combines the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), the Cohesion Fund (CF), and several others, which have strengthening of regional partnerships and cross-border collaboration as one of their primary objectives. They can be combined with Horizon 2020 – the EU’s research fund and with Erasmus+ which funds various higher education activities (European Union, 2014). Most of these Programs are conceived in a way that projects are necessarily transnational and require collaboration of partners from several Program countries. Regional alliances lend themselves as helpful platform for initiation of project proposals in both programs, Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+ (Ewert, 2012). For example, Germany and France pride themselves that 90% of projects in the New

Materials and Nanotechnology areas in Horizon 2020 include Franco-German collaboration, and that France and Germany are jointly involved in a large number of major European initiatives and networks, such as Joint Programming Initiatives, Era networks, European Technology Platforms (ETPs), European Infrastructure Consortia (ERICs) and Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) (BMBF & MESR, 2013).

### **Conceptualizing intergovernmental regional cooperation**

Intergovernmental regional alliances present political “sub-systems” within the larger political systems of the EU and the EHEA (Gänzle, 2011). These relationships involve geographically proximate members with shared historical experience and cultural affinities, as well as shared regional concerns. The formalization of cooperation ensures that intergovernmental interactions are reiterated regardless of the changes in domestic political and external circumstances. In fact, they display certain regularity over time and become a routine for governments involved. However, there are also substantial differences between these formal relationships in terms of depth and scope of policy coordination, and hence policy outcomes.

The primary motivations for intergovernmental regional cooperation, as for any strategic partnership, are political and economic. Countries cooperate when cooperation yields advantages which exceed the costs (Klemenčič, 2006). Intergovernmental policy coordination on political and economic issues is followed by policy coordination in other areas, such as higher education and research, which are seen as complementary to reaching the primary objectives. Often the sheer volume and complexity of transactions between the countries prompt them to formalize the cooperation. If countries negotiate as a block with other larger entities, such as, for example the EU or Russia, they have stronger bargaining power. Or countries develop intergovernmental cooperation to maintain peace, such as in the case of Franco-German Cooperation and the Western Balkan states.

The drive to form intergovernmental regional cooperation can be *endogenous* or *exogenous*. In the case of endogenous cooperation, countries come to a collective decision to cooperate. They typically sign some form of agreement which specifies the objectives and terms of cooperation. They may also decide to form joint institutions to which they confer competencies to initiate, implement, and enforce common policies. Exogenous regional cooperation is initiated by an outside body. The only example of exogenously initiated policy coordination among alliances discussed here is Western Balkan cooperation. It was the EU together with foreign donor agencies which initiated and financially supported the formalization of regional cooperation.

What is common to all the above-mentioned relationships is the existence of some official document that defines the purpose, the terms, and scope of cooperation. In other words, partner states *formalize* their intent to cooperate. Although the relationships described are all based on formal documents, the character of these documents differs significantly. Benelux, Nordic and

Franco-German Cooperation are based on international treaties, which under international law impose legal obligations upon the signatory countries. Governments legally bind themselves to commonly agreed rights and obligations. International agreement, as in the case of the Baltic Cooperation, also has the status of a treaty as defined by the Vienna Convention. The Visegrád Declaration has, however, a purely 'declarative character' without being legally binding. The same is the case with the declaration establishing the Regional Cooperation Council in the Western Balkan cooperation.

Governments typically decide to formalize their relationships if they have a number of policy areas and issues on which they wish to cooperate (Klemenčič, 2006). Formal structures of cooperation are costly in terms of investment of administrative resources and risky in terms of lost opportunities to cooperate with other countries; such investment would not pay out had there been only a single area of cooperation. Hence, one of the prevailing characteristics of formalized cooperation is the breadth of policy areas covered. The structures of relationships ensure certain regularity in contacts between government officials regardless of changes in domestic politics. These, in turn, foster mutual understanding and create opportunities for sharing information and exploring further opportunities for cooperation. In other words, these cooperative arrangements develop their own polity with rules, procedures, and norms of appropriateness pertaining to the relationship, as well as a common framework of ideas and shared meanings among the partners (Krotz, 2002). With longevity of relationship, certain routines may be established which may make cooperation between the governments in the future more 'automatic' and more 'convenient' (ibid.).

Furthermore, the partner governments *institutionalize* their cooperation in the sense that they develop an institutional framework for regular and structured interactions and that these relationships permeate different levels of government structures (Klemenčič, 2006). Policy coordination may be institutionalized informally only as a set of norms and rules guiding collective decision-processes or partners may decide to form joint supranational institutions. In cases where they exist, joint institutions can perform executive, advisory, and/or judicial functions. In terms of the depth of cooperation, the Benelux Union is the most formalized and institutionalized among all regional intergovernmental alliances; its institutions have legislative, executive, and judicial powers (Klemenčič, 2006). In other alliances, the meetings of Prime Ministers result in the main political directions for the intergovernmental cooperation, supported by various sectorial ministerial councils (Table 1). All alliances rely on national coordinators, but Nordic and Baltic Cooperation also have Ministers responsible for regional cooperation and joint Ministerial Councils responsible for cooperation. The Benelux, Norden, Baltic Cooperation and the Western Balkan states (as of 2014) have also formal inter-parliamentary cooperation by a way of regional inter-parliamentary structures (Table 1).

In sum, all regional intergovernmental alliances here have formalized coordination processes, i.e. they have committed in formal documents to align their policies with another state or states in chosen areas, and they institutionalized policy coordination by establishing rules of how to come to collective

**Table 1. Depth of cooperation in European intergovernmental regional alliances  
(updated from Klemenčič 2006)**

Regional alliance	The Benelux	Norden –The Nordic Cooperation	The Franco-German Cooperation	The Baltic Cooperation	The Visegrád Group	The Western Balkan (South-East Europe)
Year established	1944/1958	1952/1962/1971	1963	1990/1994	1991	1999/2008
Member Countries	Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands	Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden	France and Germany	Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania	Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, FYR Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia
Legal Bases of the Cooperation	Treaty Establishing the Benelux Economic Union (1958) subsequently extended through various protocols on new areas of cooperation	Treaty of Cooperation between Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden (the Helsinki Treaty) (1962, subsequently amended); in 1972 the Council of Ministers was established	Élysée Treaty (1963), Declarations (2003, 2013)	The Agreement on Inter-parliamentary and Intergovernmental Cooperation between the Baltic States (1994, 2003 Protocol) and Terms of Reference for the Baltic Council of Ministers (1994, amended in 2003) [All need to be ratified by the national parliaments.]	The Declaration of cooperation (1991); Contents of Visegrád Cooperation (2001); Declaration on Visegrád Cooperation (2004) [All signed by the Prime Ministers, not binding to ratification by the parliaments.]	The Stability Pact (1999) and Sarajevo Summit Declaration (1999); Joint Declaration on the Establishment of the Regional Co-operation Council (RCC) (2008); Statute of the RCC (2013); Memorandum of understanding on inter-parliamentary cooperation in SEE (2008)
Highest Legislative/Governing Body/Bodies	Committee of Ministers [All government ministers responsible for different policies]	Nordic Council of Ministers (Prime Ministers level) and Ministers for Nordic Cooperation and the Nordic Committee for Cooperation [Nordic Council of Ministers consists of almost 20 individual councils.]	Joint Ministerial Councils: Franco-German Defence and Security Council; Franco-German Economic and Financial Council and Franco-German Environmental Council	Baltic Council of Ministers and Baltic Assembly, i.e. the Baltic Council which meets annually; Co-operation Council of the Baltic Council of Ministers	Meeting of Prime Ministers; Meetings of Sectorial Ministers [Not a governing body]	RCC Board; RCC National Coordinators (senior civil officials in each RCC participant country plus representatives of the EU and other funding bodies)
Other Institutions and Bodies	Council of Economic Union; Benelux Court of Justice; Committees and working groups (responsible for implementation)	Committee of Senior Officials responsible for implementation [More than 30 joint Nordic institutions]	Joint Franco-German committees reporting to the national ministers; Franco-German Youth Office; Franco-German High Cultural Council	Presidium of Baltic Assembly; expert committees of both institutions	International Visegrád Fund	South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECPP); SEECPP Chairmanship in Office; RCC National Coordinators
Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation	Inter-parliamentary Consultative Council ('Benelux Parliament'): consultative with own secretariat and two advisory bodies (the Economic and Social Committee and the College of Arbitrators)	Nordic Council (established in 1952); the Plenary Assembly, the Presidium and Standing Committees	Franco-German Friendship Group at the Bundesrat and the Senate of the French Republic (no legislative function); regular inter-parliamentary meetings	Baltic Assembly (a Presidium)	Inter-parliamentary meetings	Declaration on the inauguration of the SEECPP Parliamentary Assembly (2014)
Independent Secretariat	General Secretariat: approx. 60 permanent civil servants in Brussels (Secretary General)	General Secretariat: approx. 100 staff in Copenhagen (Secretary General)	No: each governments appoints a Commissioner for Franco-German Cooperation and (since 2013) joint Franco-German Committees reporting to national ministries	No: rotating Secretariat held by the Presidency	No: Visegrád coordinators in each administration responsible for cooperation (meet twice annually)	Secretariat: 38 staff (36 in Sarajevo) and 2 in Brussels (Secretary general)
Financial Independence	Yes – annual budget prepared by the Secretary General and confirmed by the Committee of Ministers	Yes – approx. 130 mio EUR in 2015	No - Both countries co-finance joint institutions and initiatives	No	No – only for the Visegrád Fund (approx. 8 mio EUR annually)	Yes – through EU and donor funding
Presidency	Yes: 6-month rotating Chair of the Committee	Yes: rotating annually	No	Yes: rotating annually	Yes: rotating annually	No

decisions on joint policies; have created norms and expectations for cooperation; and organized structures and processes providing for regular interactions of national policy makers. The question raised by this article is about the nature of policy coordination within regional alliances in the area of higher education. One aspect of this question concerns the existence of specific governing or advisory bodies responsible for the area of higher education, and the ability of these bodies to carry out the executive function in this policy area. The other aspect concerns whether the regional groupings have a joint budget to fund cooperative activities in order to ensure implementation of policies. These questions are addressed in the remainder of the article.

### **Higher education policy convergence among intergovernmental regional alliances**

This section explores formalization and institutionalization of policy coordination in the area of higher education among the six regional alliances.

#### *Formalization of policy coordination in the areas of higher education and research*

Intergovernmental regional alliances in Europe differ greatly in the way their policy coordination in the areas of higher education is being formalized (Table 2). Not all treaties or agreements establishing intergovernmental regional cooperation have affirmed explicitly the intent of these governments to cooperate in the field of higher education. The most explicit commitment to policy coordination in this area is in the founding treaties of the Franco-German and Nordic Cooperation. The Élysée Treaty (1963) establishing formal cooperation between France and Germany states unambiguously that:

Regular meetings will take place between the responsible authorities of the two countries in the fields of defense, **education** and youth...

... The competent authorities in both countries will be asked to speed up the adoption of arrangements ensuring that terms of study, examinations, university awards, and diplomas correspond.

... Research organizations and scientific institutions will develop their contacts beginning with the fullest possible exchange of information. **Coordinated research programs** will be set up in disciplines where this is feasible.

... Young people in the two countries will be given every opportunity to strengthen the bonds which link them and to increase mutual cooperation. In particular, collective exchanges will be increased... This organization will have at its disposal a joint Franco-German fund to be used for exchanges between the two countries, of school children, students, young artisans and workers.

Similarly, the Treaty of Cooperation between Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, the Helsinki Treaty (1962), contains provisions on cooperation in education and research:

Article 9: Each High Contracting Party should maintain and extend the range of opportunities for students from other Nordic countries to pursue courses of study and sit examinations at its educational establishments. A student should be permitted to count part of an examination



passed in one Nordic country towards a final examination taken in another Nordic country, whenever it is realistic. It should be possible for students to receive financial assistance from their home countries, irrespective of the country in which their studies are being pursued.

...

Article 12: **Co-operation in the field of research** should be so organised that research grants and other resources are coordinated and used in the best possible way, including the establishment of joint institutions.

In both cases, the provisions were further elaborated and extended in subsequent formal agreements. The declaration establishing the Regional Cooperation Council also refers explicitly to cooperation in “building human capital” as one of the priority areas and in subsequent documents this provision is further elaborated.

In other alliances, the initial formal documents do not refer to cooperation in this area, but are added or made explicit in later official documents, as, for example, in the case of the Visegrád Declaration (2004). In the case of Baltic cooperation, formalization of cooperation in the area of higher education only began in 2000 with agreement on recognition of educational qualifications. However, this agreement was followed by several official documents which affirm the commitment of the Baltic States governments to develop a common Baltic higher education area: a Resolution on the Development of a Common Baltic Higher Education Area (2001) and a Resolution on a Uniform Higher Education Policy in the Baltic States (2007). The latter states explicitly the objective

...to strengthen interstate cooperation in developing a common higher education area in the Baltic States by harmonizing normative acts and by creating common or competing institutions with equal legal power for assessing the quality of higher education;  
 ...to coordinate and target the use of EU funds in order to avoid duplication in the Baltic States;  
 ...to take into consideration the need for balanced growth of our states by ensuring development of study programmes in the regions; and  
 ...to coordinate, insofar as possible, the number and location of specific study programmes requiring substantial funding and to create a uniform system for conferring academic degrees...

The most recent official document in this area passed by the three Baltic States is a memorandum of understanding on closer cooperation in higher education, research and innovation (2012), which makes clear that the motivation for the document comes among other things also from “the conditionality recommendations of the EU for structural funds”. The respective governments evidently recognize that enhanced regional cooperation would be beneficial also in terms of access to EU funding. A similar memorandum was also agreed to by the Visegrád Group in 2015 specifically committing to regional policy coordination in the areas of innovation and startups (Table 2).

Finally, the Benelux’s first formal document, which was adopted in 2015, in the area of education and research concerns mutual recognition of qualifications. Despite heavily formalized and institutionalized policy convergence, the Benelux countries have not formalized policy coordination in the areas of higher education and research beyond this single official document.

*Institutionalization of policy coordination in the areas of higher education and research*

Formalization of policy coordination as described above is reflected in the types of joint governing structures that the different alliances have established to organize their cooperation, i.e. in the institutionalization of policy convergence (Table 2). The most institutionalized policy coordination is the Nordic Cooperation. Nordic states cooperate through a Nordic Council of Ministers of Education and Research, which consists of Ministers responsible for education and research in the member countries. The Nordic Council of Ministers also has its own secretariat consisting of senior advisers in the respective ministries and a committee of senior officials for education and research, which consists of national coordinators and senior government officials. There is also a Culture and Education Committee under the Nordic Council, the inter-parliamentary structure. Highly institutionalized policy coordination in higher education and research is also present in Franco-German Cooperation which has the Franco-German (Ministerial) Council on Cultural Exchange. Most high-level decisions in the area of higher education and research are typically taken at the Franco-German Ministerial Council, which is the biannual regular meeting of the ministerial cabinets of both governments. The joint declarations from these Ministerial Councils frequently refer to policy coordination in the area of higher education. The Benelux, the Western Balkans and the Baltics have specific inter-parliamentary committees covering this policy area, but not specifically designated intergovernmental bodies. The Visegrád Group has neither. However, in all these alliances more or less regular intergovernmental meetings take place on political level — Prime Ministers and Ministers — or senior official level, which then result in the resolutions, declarations, memoranda of understanding, and other official documents discussed earlier.

In addition, various advisory bodies have been formed to assist with implementation of policy objectives, such as the V4 innovation Task Force established by Visegrád Group or in the case of Baltic cooperation, the Joint Ministerial Working Group for closer collaboration in higher education, research and innovation and the Joint Baltic research infrastructure expert group. The Regional Cooperation Council has one advisory body, which is the Task Force Fostering and Building Human Capital of the Regional Cooperation Council.

Intergovernmental cooperation tends to also initiate cooperation in other sectors. In the higher education sector, various non-governmental regional groupings exist, all of which reflect or are directly initiated by intergovernmental alliances. There are regional associations of universities, for example, the Visegrád University Association (VUA);<sup>3</sup> the Franco-German University (FGU);<sup>4</sup> the Association of Nordic University Rectors Conferences (NUS); and the Nordic Association of University Administrators (NUAS)<sup>5</sup>. There exist also regional cooperation agreements between

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<sup>3</sup> <http://vua.uniag.sk/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.dfh-ufa.org/hilfe/english/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.nordforsk.org/en/policy/norden/forskningssamarbeid-pa-universitets-og-institusjonsniva>

national unions of students active within the European Students' Union, such as the Nordic Organisational Meeting (NOM),<sup>6</sup> Baltic Organisational Meeting (BOM),<sup>7</sup> V4+ Student Alliance for student representatives from Central and Eastern Europe, and student representatives in South-East Initiative (SEI).

### *Joint funding bodies and cooperative bodies and programs*

Only the Benelux, Norden, and the Regional Cooperation Council have budget to support joint cooperation structures and activities. Among these regional alliances, the Nordic cooperation stands out from the rest in terms of the number of joint programs. The NordForsk is the alliances' joint funding body (Table 2). Its budget is funded directly from the Nordic Council of Ministers and amounts to approximately 16 million EUR annually, which are matched by additional two-thirds from national research funds through a "common pot" system, i.e. funding contributed by each country is combined in a shared pool. This is the most developed intergovernmental regional research funding body in Europe. Another similar body is the International Visegrád Fund, which, however, has a smaller budget and not the same formal relationship to national research agencies. Norden also has a joint funding program for intra-Nordic (plus Baltic) lifelong learning activities (Nordplus), which is in some objectives, for example mobility, similar to the Franco-German Office for Youth.

The Nordic Cooperation comprises a large number of cooperative bodies and programs financed through the Norden budget. Their regional network of quality assurance agencies (NOQA); regional center for recognition of qualifications (NORRIC); and cooperation to establish joint study programs in the Nordic region, The Nordic Master Program, are only some of such bodies, which clearly contribute to implementation of joint policies. Under the Nordic Cooperation several joint research institutes also exist (Table 2). No other alliance comes close to Norden's policy output in terms of joint programming. Joint research funding in Franco-German collaboration happens only on the initiative of both research agencies which make a specific call or otherwise encourage collaboration. There are, however, two other notable joint institutions in Franco-German cooperation. One is the Franco-German University, which does not provide training itself but supports and approves Franco-German and multinational courses of excellence, and Franco-German graduate schools (BMBF & MERS, 2013). The other is Centre Marc Bloch, which is a collaborative social science research center (ibid.).

Within the Regional Cooperation Council, the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE) is the regional platform for cooperation in the field of education and training, whose purpose is among other things to link regional reforms and capacity development to European frameworks for education development. Another similar platform for research cooperation (WISE)

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<sup>6</sup> <http://lss.lt/en/nordic-organisational-meeting/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://lss.lt/en/baltic-organisational-meeting/>

**Table 2. Intergovernmental regional policy coordination in the area of higher education  
(Compiled by the author)**

Regional alliance	The Benelux	Norden –The Nordic Cooperation	The Franco-German Cooperation	The Baltic Cooperation	The Visegrád Group	The Western Balkan (South-East Europe)
<b>Established</b>	1944/1958	1952/1962/1971	1963	1990/1994	1991	1999/2008
<b>Member Countries</b>	Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands	Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden	France and Germany	Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania	Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, FYR Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia
<b>Agreements and Declarations</b>	Decision of Benelux Committee of Ministers on automatic mutual recognition of higher education diplomas (2015)	Treaty of Cooperation between Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden (the Helsinki Treaty) (1962, subsequently amended); Agreement on Cultural Co-operation (1971); Nordic Co-operation Programme for Higher Education (1991); Nordic Declaration on Recognition of Diplomas, Degrees and Other Qualifications in Higher Education (The "Reykjavik Declaration") (2004); Agreement concluded by Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden on Admission to Higher Education (1996, amended 2012)	Élysée Treaty (1963); Joint Declaration at 40 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Élysée Treaty (2003), 50 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Élysée Treaty (2013); Joint declaration of the Franco-German Ministerial Council (2003; 2014); Franco-German Agenda 2020 (2010); Schedule of measures of the Franco-German Ministerial Council (2012)	Agreement on Academic Recognition of Educational Qualifications in the Baltic Educational Space (2000); Resolution on the Development of a Common Baltic Education Area (2001); Resolution on a Uniform Higher Education Policy in the Baltic States (2007); Memorandum of Understanding on Closer Co-operation in Higher Education, Research and Innovation (2012)	Contents of Visegrád Cooperation (1999); Visegrád Declaration (2004); Memorandum of Understanding for Regional Cooperation in the Areas of Innovation and Startups (2015); Agreement on the Visegrád Patent Institute (VPI) (2015)	Memorandum of understanding between Ministers responsible for education, research and science in South-Eastern Europe (2003; 2007); Joint Declaration on the Establishment of the Regional Co-operation Council (RCC) (2008); Memorandum of understanding on the role and organisation of education reform initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE) (2010); Statute of the RCC ("building human capital") (2013); Strategy and Work Programme of RCC (SWP) 2014 – 2016); SEE 2020 Strategy (2013)
<b>Specific Governing/ Advisory Bodies on higher education</b>	The Benelux Inter-parliamentary Consultative Council (Benelux Parliament): Culture, Education and Public Health Committee	Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research (MR-U); Nordic Secretariat of to the Nordic Council of Ministers; The Nordic Council/ Culture and Education Committee; Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Education & Research (EK-U)	Joint council on cultural exchange (1988) (HCCFA / DFKR) <sup>2</sup> ; Forum for Franco-German research cooperation (2002-)	Baltic Assembly: Education, Science and Culture Committee; The Baltic Higher Education Co-ordination Committee (BHECC) (rectors, QA, ENIC NARIC, etc.) (1994); Joint Ministerial Working Group (for implementation of Memorandum) (2013); Joint Baltic Research Infrastructure Expert Group (2013)	None specific: V4 Innovation Task Force	South-East European Cooperation Process (SEEC): SEEC Parliamentary Assembly/Committee on Social Development, Education, Research and Science <sup>3</sup> ; RCC/The Task Force Fostering and Building Human Capital (2008)
<b>Non-Governmental Bodies</b>		Association of Nordic Universities Rectors' Conferences; The Nordic Association of University Administrators; Nordic Organisational Meeting of Student Unions (NOM) <sup>4</sup>		Baltic Organisational Meeting for student unions (BOM) <sup>6</sup>	Visegrád University Association <sup>5</sup> ; V4+ Student Alliance for student representatives from Central and Eastern Europe	South-East Initiative of student unions (SEI)
<b>Joint Funding Bodies/ Programs</b>		Nordic research board (NordForsk) <sup>7</sup> (research funding and cooperation) (under Council of Ministers);	The OFAJ (Franco-German Office for Youth) <sup>12</sup> ; bilateral	Nordplus (Baltic states are eligible)	International Visegrád Fund (2000) <sup>11</sup>	

		Nordplus (Nordic CoM programme in lifelong learning for the Nordic and Baltic countries) <sup>8</sup> ; Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils for the Humanities and the Social Sciences (NOS-HS) <sup>9</sup> ; Nordic Network for Adult Learning (NVL); Joint Committee of the Nordic Medical Research Councils (NOS-M) <sup>10</sup> ; Joint Committee for Nordic research councils for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOS-H); Nordic Co-operation Board of Natural Sciences (NOS-N)	collaboration between research agencies			
<b>Cooperative Bodies and Programs</b>		The Nordic Master Programme <sup>11</sup> ; Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS); Nordic Institute of Maritime Law (NIFS); Nordic Volcanological Center (NORDVULK); Nordic Institute for Theoretical Physics (NORDITA); Nordic Sami Institute (NSI); The Nordic Africa Institute; Nordic National Recognition Information Centres (NORRIC) <sup>14</sup> ; Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA) <sup>15</sup>	Franco-German University <sup>16</sup> ; Centre Marc Bloch (social science research centre)			RCC/Education Reform Initiative (ERI SEE) <sup>17</sup> ; Western Balkans Research and Innovation Strategy Exercise (WISE) Facility (under construction) <sup>18</sup> ; Southeast Center for Entrepreneurship Learning (SEECEL) <sup>19</sup>
<b>Policy Coordination in the Area of Higher Education/ Research</b>	No explicit policy coordination except recognition of degrees	High	Medium-High	Medium-High	Low	Low

Note: <sup>1</sup> <http://www.rcc.int/pages/72/about-see-2020>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dfkr.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://rspcsee.org/en/pages/read/seeep-parliamentary-assembly/social-development-education-research-and-science-committee>

<sup>4</sup> <http://lss.lt/en/nordic-organisational-meeting/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://vua.uniag.sk/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://lss.lt/en/baltic-organisational-meeting/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.nordforsk.org/en/about-nordforsk>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.nordplusonline.org/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.nos-hs.org/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.norden.org/en/nordic-council-of-ministers/council-of-ministers/nordic-council-of-ministers-for-education-and-research-mr-u/institutions-co-operative-bodies-working-groups-and-projects/co-operative-bodies/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://visegradfund.org/home/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ofaj.org/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.norden.org/en/nordic-council-of-ministers/council-of-ministers/nordic-council-of-ministers-for-education-and-research-mr-u/apply-for-funding/nordic-master-programme>

<sup>14</sup> <http://norrlic.org/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.nokut.no/noqa>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.dfh-ufa.org/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.erisee.org/>

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.wbc-inno.kg.ac.rs/pub/download/13947917541282\\_wbc\\_inno\\_university\\_innovation\\_platform.pdf](http://www.wbc-inno.kg.ac.rs/pub/download/13947917541282_wbc_inno_university_innovation_platform.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.seecel.hr/>

is being developed. Both work under coordination of the Task Force Fostering and Building Human Capital of the Regional Cooperation Council.

### **Discussion on regional perspectives in European higher education**

Despite the fact that each EU country is responsible for its own higher education system, certain functions of the national higher education systems have been delegated to the intergovernmental regional level, as well as to the supranational European level. Although national frames of reference in higher education policies are still important, other modes of coordination on the intergovernmental regional and European levels have emerged. There clearly exists a multi-level governance system in the area of higher education in which intergovernmental regional alliances also conduct intergovernmental policy coordination. Indeed, in Europe the borders between different arenas for policy coordination — national, intergovernmental regional and European — are blurred.

There has been much research devoted to study of policy diffusion from the European to the national level, but the intergovernmental regional level has largely been ignored. International policy coordination also exists in this “middle” level between the national and the European. Given the policy deliberations that take place in regional alliances, one cannot speak about “two-level games” in higher education policy-making, but indeed “three-level games” (cf. Klemenčič, 2006). Putnam (1988: 435) argues that “the politics of many international negotiations can usefully be conceived as a two-level game. At the national level, domestic groups pursue their interests by pressuring the government to adopt favourable policies, and politicians seek power by constructing coalitions among those groups. At the international level, national government seek to maximise their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures, while minimising the adverse consequences of foreign developments.” Besides the policy deliberations within domestic political fora and the European policy arenas, both the European Union and the EHEA, government representatives also engage in policy deliberations with their partners within intergovernmental regional alliances. Therefore, the politics of European higher education policy-making cannot be fully understood by ignoring this notable policy arena.

As in any international policy coordination, formal institutionalization, by way of joint governing bodies, results in more extensive and better programming. The Nordic Cooperation is a case in point. Joint decision structures provide durable rules and procedures and recurrent and continuous interactions between policy-makers and officials at multiple levels of government and beyond. They also shape expectations of durability of cooperation; finding joint objectives; and advancing shared interests. Having joint governing structures also reduces the transaction costs of reaching agreements on cooperation activities. Joint funding programs are essential for implementation of policies and for programming.

While formal regional alliances are difficult to dissolve, they can lay dormant unless there is sufficient collective interest to implement the policy commitments or further advance policy

coordination. Access to the EU funding proves to be a powerful incentive for regional intergovernmental policy coordination and diligent implementation of joint policies. The various funding mechanisms of the EU, especially the Horizon 2020, Erasmus+ and the Structural Funds have presented an important impetus for both regional policy coordination and its implementation. This is especially the case for those regional alliances, such as Visegrád and the Baltic Cooperation as well as the Western Balkan states, whose members are economically weaker. But it also holds true for other alliances like the Franco-German Cooperation in Horizon 2020 program. The EU framework program for Education and Training (ET 2020) uses the Education and Training Monitor, which is synchronized with the European Semester, the EU's instrument for economic policy "surveillance" and policy guidance. In regular intervals, EU member states receive from the European Commission country-specific economic and budgetary recommendations, which are binding and the European Commission monitors their implementation. Targeted "to boost growth; job creation; training and education opportunities; and research and innovation",<sup>8</sup> these recommendations may also refer to intergovernmental regional cooperation as attested to by the official documents agreed by the Baltic states.

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<sup>8</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/economy\\_finance/economic\\_governance/the\\_european\\_semester/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/economic_governance/the_european_semester/index_en.htm)

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