

# **THE SEARCH FOR EUROPE**

Contrasting Approaches



**BBVA**



**ROBIN SHIELDS** is Senior Lecturer at the University of Bath, where he is also Director of the Doctor of Business Administration in Higher Education Management. He holds a PhD from University of California. His analysis of global international student flows received the George Bereday Award for the most outstanding article in *Comparative Education Review* in 2013. Robin has also acted as Principal Investigator on research funded by the Higher Education Academy, Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

This chapter examines policy initiatives that aim to coordinate and integrate higher education in Europe, focusing on the issue of international student mobility. From an inter-regional perspective, a key priority has been to build and maintain the preeminence of European higher education in relation to North America and East Asia. Intra-regional priorities center primarily on efforts to support the European Economic Area. These dynamics are examined through three policy initiatives: the Erasmus+ student mobility programme, the Erasmus Mundus post-graduate mobility programme, and the European Higher Education Area.

## **FROM THE “IMAGINED” TO THE “POST-BUREAUCRATIC” REGION: THE SEARCH FOR EUROPE IN HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY**

This chapter examines how international student mobility in higher education is used to construct Europe—both geographically and ideologically. It does so by analysing three distinct but interrelated policy initiatives: the Erasmus student mobility programme, the Erasmus Mundus postgraduate mobility programme and the European Higher Education Area. My argument is that the search for Europe has been a key concern and goal of international mobility in higher education. However, that search has entailed two parallel changes in recent years. The first change has involved a shift from Europe as a shared imaginary—akin to what Anderson (1983) calls an “imagined community” in his analysis of the formation of nation-states—to a collective resembling what Heckscher (1994) calls the “post-bureaucratic organization”, characterized by flexibility, self-organization and continuous internal dialog.

### **THE SEARCH FOR EUROPE HAS BEEN A KEY CONCERN AND GOAL OF INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

The second shift has involved an increasing emphasis on the relationship of Europe with the rest of the world since the construction of Europe is defined by the interaction between the European and non-European. Drawing upon data of international student mobility flows, I show that the benefits of international student mobility have come primarily from inter-regional flows, although both inter- and intra-regional mobility have experienced rapid growth.

The paper begins by introducing and analysing the Erasmus student mobility programme, the Erasmus Mundus programme and the European Higher Education programme. It then presents a brief analysis of trends in international student flows and compares the programmes to show how they provide evidence of changes in the construction of Europe through higher education policy. The paper concludes by linking

these changes to the changing nature of the search for Europe, both in higher education policy and in a more general sense.

### **Erasmus and Erasmus+**

The Erasmus student mobility programme represents the longest-standing higher education policy at the European level. Since its inception in 1987, more than 3 million students and 350,000 higher education staff have taken part in mobility funded by the programme (European Commission 2014a). During the same time, it has expanded from 11 to 33 participating countries, and its budget has increased from €13 to €550 million (European Commission 2014b). This sustained growth leads Papatsiba (2006, 98) to declare Erasmus as the “single most successful component of EU policy”. This view was reflected in the renewal of the programme, from 2014 to 2020 as Erasmus+, extending the Erasmus “brand” to include all programmes on education, training, youth and sport.

#### **ERASMUS SERVES TO DEVELOP A WORK FORCE THAT HAS EXPERIENCE WORK- ING ACROSS NATIONAL BORDERS**

At its core, the Erasmus programme supports student exchanges between European universities, particularly by offering student grants to support international mobility within Europe. Under the Erasmus programme, European universities can form partnerships (bilateral agreements), through which their students undertake exchanges of one or two semesters of study. Because credit systems can vary between countries, students learning while on exchange are measured by the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), with ECTS credits converted to those used by the home institution upon return. Erasmus mobility is thus often referred to as “exchange mobility” or “within cycle mobility”, in contrast to “degree mobility”, in which a full academic degree is obtained abroad.

Since its inception, the Erasmus programme has seamlessly and simultaneously integrated both sociocultural and economic goals. As motivations for the initiation of Erasmus in 1987, the Council of Ministers (1987) referenced both “a view to consolidating the concept of a

People’s Europe” and “an adequate pool of manpower with first-hand experience of economic and social aspects of other Member States”. In respect to its sociocultural aspects, much research has identified the use of Erasmus as a means of producing and fostering European identity through the production of “self-identifying European citizens” who will support European integration in the future (Mitchell 2012, 494). However, evidence to date is very mixed on its success in accomplishing these goals, with studies reporting differing results on whether or not participation in Erasmus increases a sense of European identity (e.g., Siglas 2010; Mitchell 2012).

In addition to its social and cultural goals, the objective of European economic integration—and specifically the growth of a mobile and fully-integrated European workforce—is not far beneath the surface. From this perspective, Erasmus serves to develop a workforce that has experience working across national borders within Europe, familiarity with multiple European cultures and, possibly, competence in multiple European languages. Concerning workforce development, evidence is more limited, although the work of Parey and Waldinger (2010) suggests that participation in the Erasmus programme increases future mobility in the labour market.

The intertwined and inseparable processes of identity formation and economic integration closely resemble the process of nation-state formation described by Anderson (1983) in *Imagined Communities*. According to Anderson (1983), nation-states are “imagined communities” in the sense that their members “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). While acknowledging the limitations of direct analogies between the construction of Europe and the nation-state (Decker 2002; Siglas 2010), the concept of the imagined community applies very well to the rationales articulated in the Erasmus programme. Much as the advent of mass education systems was integral to producing the imagined community of the nation-state, the Erasmus programme aims to produce an imagined European identity that would facilitate economic and social integration. The ideological appeal of higher education—particularly its foundation in the search for universal knowledge—makes it an ideal medium for constructing identities that claim an equal or superior status to nationality.

With respect to the construction of Europe through higher education policy, three key features of the Erasmus programme are (i) a focus on

constructing Europe primarily in an intra-regional sense, by stimulating and fostering a sense of European identity among European youth; (ii) the prominence and importance of a common European identity through a shared imaginary; and (iii) strong institutional support, for example, from the European Commission, which commits to the ongoing funding of Erasmus mobility without the expectation of developing self-funding or market-based funding in the future. As discussed below, these three key features of the Erasmus programme are a useful reference point to analyse subsequent changes in policy on mobility. The long history and widely acknowledged success of the Erasmus programme provided a strong foundation for European higher education policy-making in other areas, especially inter-regional mobility.

### **Erasmus Mundus**

Unlike the Erasmus programme, the Erasmus Mundus programme focuses on mobility between European and non-European countries. More specifically, it funds and facilitates the establishment of Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters Degrees (EMJMDs), which are designed and delivered by a consortia of three or more European universities. These masters programmes are supported by student scholarships (typically 13 to 20 per EMJMD) and funding for visiting lecturers and scholars. The scholarships support the mobility of students from non-European countries, with a large share of funds earmarked for students from “partner countries” (i.e., those that receive funding from EU development programmes).

By guaranteeing a supply of fully-funded, well-prepared, post-graduate students, the Erasmus Mundus programme essentially “primes the pump” for the EMJMDs, which will offer the potential of recruiting larger numbers of self-funded students in the future. The programme was launched in 2004, renewed in 2009, and is now a partner of the larger Erasmus+ programme for education, youth, training and sport from 2014 to 2020. As of 2013, 285 joint degree programmes had been funded by the Erasmus Mundus programme, with 180 on offer in the 2014/15 academic year (European Commission 2014a). In addition, some 13,957 scholarships have been funded by the programme since 2004, with India (1,519), China (1,339) and Brazil (578) comprising the largest sending countries (European Commission 2013).

Rather than constructing Europe through internal mobility, Erasmus Mundus clearly focuses on the relationship between Europe and the world. Thus, instead of a shared imaginary, engagement with third countries (i.e., inter-regionalism) provides a mirror in which the vision of Europe is reflected. European-ness is defined less by interaction within Europe than by how Europe engages with the rest of the world. Although intra-regional integration is promoted through EMJMDPs and the cross-national collaboration they entail, this internal cooperation is no longer an end in itself but instead becomes a means to improve the attractiveness of European higher education from an external perspective. In emphasizing the need to attract students from around the world, the Erasmus Mundus programme introduces an interest in promoting the success of European higher education in a globally competitive environment.

### **The European Higher Education Area**

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is an initiative of 47 higher education ministries, which aims to reform national higher education systems to improve the comparability and compatibility of degrees. It was launched with the Bologna Declaration in 1999, in which 29 European countries started a decade-long process of ministerial conferences that focused on the mutual recognition of degrees and credit transfers. The Bologna Process culminated in the formation of the EHEA in 2010, by which time the initiative had expanded to include 47 countries, reaching well outside the borders of the EU to include Turkey, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan.

While the EHEA entails a set of broad changes that increases the comparability and compatibility of higher education institutions, Papat-siba notes that “the promotion of mobility is clearly the most concrete, easily interpreted and uncontroversial aim” of the EHEA. Mobility is considered on two respects: first, maintaining and developing Europe as a destination for students from outside the EHEA (inter-regional mobility), particularly in relation to competing destinations such as North America, Australia and, increasingly, East Asia (Teichler 2012; Croché 2009); and second, furthering the longstanding goal of internal mobility first promoted by Erasmus in 1987. However, rather than funding such mobility directly, the EHEA promotes mobility by lowering barriers and

increasing compatibility. It proposes a three-cycle degree system (i.e., Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral degrees) with common credit systems and degree lengths. The rationale is that these commonalities should promote mobility both within cycles (e.g., studying abroad or transferring in the middle of a degree) and between cycles (e.g., completing bachelors and masters degrees in different countries).

Unlike the Erasmus student mobility and Erasmus Mundus programmes, the European Higher Education Area is not an initiative of the European Commission, although the Commission has been directly involved and supportive since its inception (Keeling 2006). Instead, it is coordinated by a rotating secretariat and executive chair, with implementation of and adherence to the work programme largely delegated to the higher education ministries of its members. As Papatsiba (2006) notes, the EHEA is not a binding agreement and therefore relies on the shared self-interests of its members to provide impetus for the reforms entailed.

#### **EHEA AIMS TO REFORM NATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS TO IMPROVE THE COMPARABIL- ITY AND COMPATIBILITY OF DEGREES**

Research on the EHEA has noted its similarities to the project of European Economic Integration (i.e., the European Economic Community and the Eurozone), with a common currency (ECTS) and free movement of people (Wachter 2004). However, the ways in which the EHEA differs from other initiatives in European integration is of equal interest, particularly in understanding its methods for the construction of Europe. For example, the organizational model of the EHEA is notably different from that of the European Union. While the latter has been driven by a relatively strong institution (the European Commission), to which powers are delegated from member states, the organization of the EHEA is far more flexible and ambiguous. Unlike the European Commission—which has substantial purview over its members’ policies through its policy directives and regulations—the EHEA works only by establishing agreement on and commitment to harmonization principles (i.e., recognition of ECTS, agreement on the three-cycle system of bachelors, masters and doctoral degrees and corresponding numbers of credits), which are implemented by members.

Jayasuriya (2008) and Robertson (2010) use the label “Regulatory Regionalism” to describe the flexible and largely non-institutionalised

model of governance employed by the EHEA. In Jayasuriya's words, this approach relies

more on the active participation of national agencies in the practices of regulation than on formal international treaties or international organisations for their enforcement [...] a decisive characteristic of these new modes of governance [...] is the reliance on the national application or ownership of internationally formulated standards (Jayasuriya 2008, 22).

Rather than scaling up traditional functions of the nation-state (i.e., higher education policy) to the regional level, regulatory regionalism embeds regional objectives within national policy-making. Key to this form of governance are what Jayasuriya (2010) terms accountability communities, which are processes and forms of interaction that ensure national compliance and adherence to regional priorities.

This approach to regional organization also resembles what Heckscher (1994) calls the post-bureaucratic type, in which authority and control are not exercised by central hierarchies but rather operate through ongoing dialog, network structures and systemic patterns of preference and behaviour. Features of the EHEA, such as the ongoing ministerial conferences (ongoing dialog), nationally-led implementation (non-hierarchical structures) and an open and flexible approach to membership (extending well outside most geographic definitions of Europe), suggest that a form of organization that in many ways resembles Heckscher's "ideal type" is emerging in the realm of higher education policy. Mutual self-interest—rather than binding agreements or powers scaled "up" to the regional institution—drives the process forward and ensures the cohesiveness of the region. Some evidence of the ability of this form of organization to coordinate regionalization is provided in trends in international student flows.

### **Policy and Trends in European Student Mobility**

The changes discussed above have taken place in the context of unprecedented growth in international student mobility. In 1999 (the first year for which data are available), approximately 1.4 million students undertook degree level studies outside their home country; by 2012, this number had increased to over 3.5 million students.

A key objective of both Erasmus Mundus and the EHEA is increasing the "attractiveness" of European higher education, which is often

operationalized through its choice as a destination for international study (Croché 2009; Wächter 2004). Chart 1 displays growth in inter-regional international students in the EHEA and to Erasmus programme countries, using 1999 as a baseline, with global growth indicated as a reference. Inter-regional students include only those whose country of origin (i.e., the country of prior residence or study) is outside EHEA or Erasmus programme countries. These data—collected by a collaboration between UNESCO Institute for Statistics, OECD and Eurostat and reported by UNESCO—measure degree mobile students, that is, those who go abroad to complete a whole degree-level qualification. Thus, students on short-term exchange programmes, including Erasmus student mobility, would not be counted (although those on EMJMDPs would be included).

Trends show that inter-regional mobility grew steadily between 1999 and 2012. Additionally, the growth of inter-regional mobility to the EHEA outpaced global growth in international student numbers, which

## INTER-REGIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY GROWTH In percentages

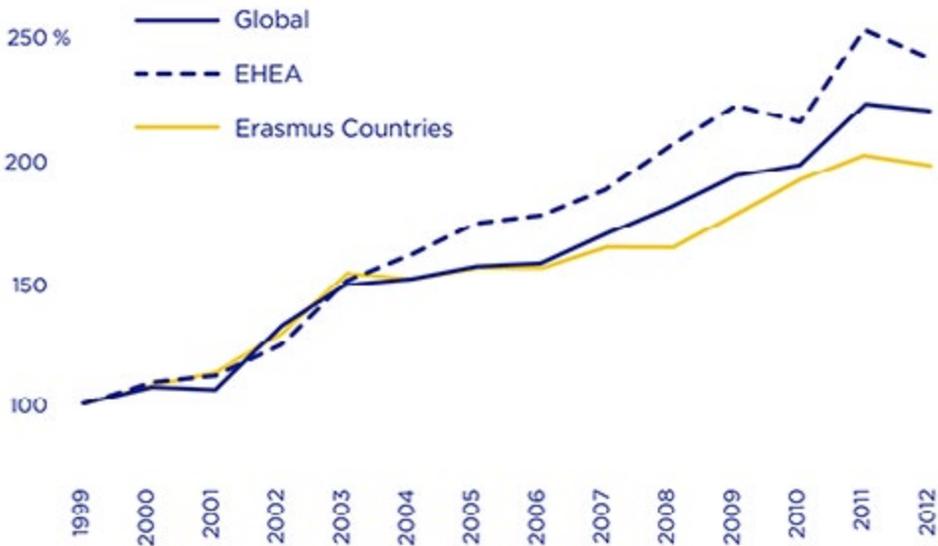


Chart 1. Trends in inter-regional degree mobile international students, 1999-2012. Data from 1999 are used as a baseline (100%). Degree mobile students include only those who undertake a full degree abroad, and do not include exchange students. Data show that student-flows from other regions to the EHEA have outpaced global growth in international student mobility.

was very strong itself. Thus, in inter-regional terms, the EHEA can be considered a fairly effective initiative insofar as its formation has been associated with very high growth in inter-regional student flows, a key measure of the “attractiveness” it seeks.

Both figures highlight the phenomenal growth in mobility, both in Europe and globally. Thus, even the programmes and regions that have experienced lower growth in relative terms have experienced strong growth in absolute terms. This growth is also evident in the Erasmus programme, which relies heavily on grants funded by the European Commission rather than more market-based (self-funded) mobility. Erasmus mobility has nearly doubled since 1999. However, these trends suggest that the primary benefits of international student mobility have been in inter- rather than intra-regional terms. While the EHEA is also supportive of intra-regional integration by encouraging a flexible and mobile European workforce (Papatsiba, 2006), evidence suggests that

## INTRA-REGIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY GROWTH In percentages

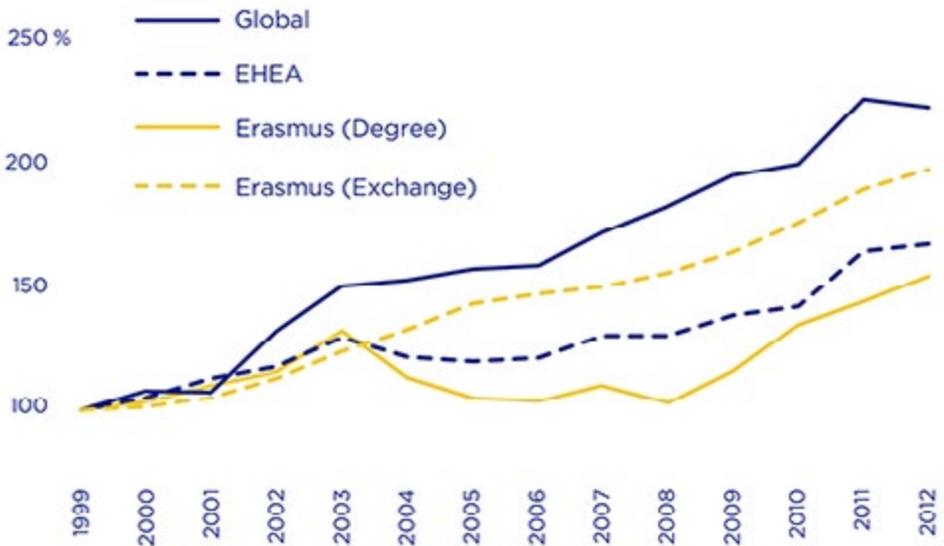


Chart 2. Trends in intra-regional mobility. Degree mobile students are those undertaking a full degree abroad (either in Erasmus programme countries or the larger set of EHEA countries). Erasmus exchange students are those undertaking short-term mobility (with-in a degree programme) through the Erasmus programme. All types of mobility have increased, although at a slower pace than global international student mobility.

growth in this area has been more limited than the development of the EHEA as a destination for students from other regions of the world. In this respect, the EHEA has outpaced the global growth in international student mobility.

The analysis provided above shows that, in most senses, inter-regional growth has outpaced intra-regional growth, and development of the EHEA as a destination for inter-regional students is the only area in which European student mobility has outpaced global mobility growth. However, it is important to use caution when applying this evidence to the interpretation of higher education policies on mobility. The data alone are not sufficient to establish cause and effect, but rather provide an indication of the trends that have accompanied policy implementation.

### **Analysis: Change and Continuity in European Higher Education Policy**

In order to best interpret how higher education and international mobility are used in the search for Europe, it is helpful to first identify the points of difference and commonality in the policies discussed above. First, these three initiatives share a point of commonality in that they do not seek complete integration of higher education, implicitly acknowledging this would “neither be desirable nor achievable” (Papsiba 2006, 96). Instead, they are all premised on the duality of national independence and European integration. In other words, the European dimension does not erode or supersede the authority of the nation-state, but rather works through it. In Hartman’s words, regionalism in higher education “penetrates borders without dissolving them” (Hartman 2008, 209), and the primacy of the nation is maintained in the construction of the region.

Second, it is important to note that all the initiatives discussed above remain active contemporaneously. Rather than new initiatives superseding their predecessors, the programmes are largely complementary in nature and provide a structure of mutual legitimation and reinforcement. For example, the Erasmus student mobility programme first established a systems of credit transfers (ECTS) that would later become the basis for the EHEA. Similarly, a key goal of the Erasmus Mundus programme is to “increase the quality and the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area” (European Commission 2015, 93). However, although the three initiatives discussed above coexist and

reinforce one another; they also evince a shifting emphasis in how Europe is understood. Concerns that were not considered relevant at the inception of Erasmus (global competition and self-sustained funding) become central in the Erasmus Mundus programme and the European Higher Education Area.<sup>1</sup>

Third, the three policy initiatives demonstrate shifts in the model of support and involvement from European institutions. Erasmus student mobility has been initiated, coordinated and funded by institutions of the European Union (i.e., the European Commission), with implementation delegated to the national level and universities. Thus, the European institution plays a strong, central role in the ongoing operation and funding of the programme, very similar to that of national governments in welfare states. There is no expectation that the programme would function without direct and continuing institutional support. However,

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NOT ONLY FOR ITS OWN INTERESTS**

in the Erasmus Mundus programme, the role of European institutions is much more limited: instead of ongoing funding for programmes, the European Commission “primes the pump” by guaranteeing a supply of internationally mobile students through the scholarship programme. The supply-side focus of Erasmus Mundus contrasts quite starkly with the institutionally-led model of Erasmus European mobility, although the two operate through very similar mechanisms (i.e., scholarships for mobility). With the EHEA, the role of European institutions is further reduced: rather than a central actor that coordinates regional integration, the European Commission becomes a member in a larger process—ironically holding a status that is nominally equal to its own member states.

Fourth, policymaking in relation to mobility displays a clear shift from an intra-regional to an inter-regional focus. The Erasmus student mobility initiative displays virtually no concern for Europe in an

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that more recent policy documents on the Erasmus programme speak favourably of “Zero Grant” students—those who were unable to obtain a grant for their mobility and so use their own funds instead. This also indicates a shift towards a self-funding mechanisms within the Erasmus programme.

inter-regional perspective; instead, the focus is entirely on fostering and mobilizing mobility within the region. However, the inter-regional focus of Erasmus Mundus and the EHEA is very clearly on the relationship between Europe and other regions of the world, and it is closely connected to the “attractiveness” of European Higher Education, that is, its ability to attract students from other parts of the world.

Cross-cutting analysis of the initiatives and trends discussed above thus reveals both continuity and change. It is important to keep in mind that there have been few radical disjunctures or reversals in mobility-related policies. However, it is equally important to note that where change has occurred, it has consistently been in the direction of programmes that rely less on formal institutions, are more market-oriented and are more concerned with Europe in the world rather than Europe in itself. These models of regional coordination and governance could hold important implications for the wider search for Europe.

### **Higher Education Policy and the Search for Europe**

The search for Europe, as it has unfolded in the domain of higher education policy, raises interesting questions about the changing ways in which Europe as a region is constructed and defined. Specifically, the shift from institutionally-led to self-organizing forms of regional integration and governance raises the question of whether Europe in a larger sense relies upon institutions and a shared identity that underpins them. Conversely, is it possible to have “Europe” without European institutions and a European identity?

To date, Europe integration has adopted many of the tradition symbols of the nation: flag, currency and—through programmes such as Erasmus—an “imagined community” or shared identity. However, widespread social and economic changes call into question the durability and necessity of these symbols as a basis for regional integration. In many areas of social and economic life, forms of organization that have traditionally been institutionally-led are coordinated through more flexible and self-organizing approaches. Just as decentralized systems such as Bitcoin hint at the possibility of currency without institutional management, the recent trends in higher education policy discussed above suggest that more self-organizing approaches to regionalism may be possible. This approach relies upon common self-interests among

regional members and non-hierarchical approaches to implementation, rather an institutional bureaucracy.

The current model of regional integration in Europe—that is, a strong regional institution underpinned by a shared imaginary—may undergo profound transformation, becoming less institutionally-based and less reliant on a shared identity. This is not due to a shortcoming or failure of the particular institutions and approaches of European integration, but rather because the models on which this approach is based are themselves undergoing profound transformation. Changes in higher education policy with respect to international student mobility suggest that such a transformation does not take place in the form of a radical disjuncture, but rather through a gradual shift in which institutionally-led models coexist with a shift towards forms of organization that more resemble the post-bureaucratic type.

Furthermore, changes in the construction of Europe through student mobility establish the region less through its internal constitution than through its interface to and engagement with other regions (i.e., inter-regional dynamics). Europe is defined much less through its internal identity than through its encounter with the non-European, which in many senses becomes a mirror in which the region appears. These changes suggest a future in which some cornerstones of regional organization to date—identity and institutions—will become less necessary and foundational to the construction of the region, bringing new complexity and possibilities to the search for Europe.

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