'*Equity of What?*'

Understanding Policy for Equity in Higher Education

By
Koen Geven

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Supervisor: Prof. Liviu Matei

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Abstract

Policy-makers are increasingly concerned about inequities in higher education in Central and Eastern Europe. They search for 'best practices', for 'rational' policy instruments to remedy this supposedly 'obvious' problem. Recent philosophical and sociological debates suggest, however, that 'equity' is far from an 'obvious' problem; in fact, it is a highly contested issue. In line with these debates, I ask the question 'How do policy-makers in Central and Eastern Europe understand equity in higher education and how does this influence their choice of policy instruments?' This research question is answered through a qualitative investigation of two cases (Croatia and Romania). I argue that policy-makers can be classified in three normative 'ideal-types', namely 'Meritocrats', 'Rawlsians' and 'Bourdieuians'. These compete for political influence, but not on a level playing field. As a result, the policy instruments to promote equity in higher education in these countries are largely based on 'Meritocratic' and 'Rawlsian' ideas, not on more critical perspectives. In conclusion, I argue that inequities in higher education are related to broader inequalities in power relations. An understanding of both is needed if higher education is to be made more equitable.

Acknowledgements

This thesis has grown out of two personal experiences. The first is a growing frustration with international policy discussions that still – in good imperialist fashion - emphasise the 'technical' over the 'political', the 'reformers' over the 'opposition' and the 'modern' over the 'traditional'. It has been my attempt here to turn frustration into a source of creativity and reflection for anyone with a continued interest in equity in higher education. The second is my fascination with the transition of higher education in Central and Eastern Europe. As such, it has been a pleasure to spend a year at CEU and to be able to delve into the questions of transition, more particularly on the growing social inequalities in the post-communist space.

My research is the result of many discussions and stimulating exchanges with various people. First, I would like to thank my supervisor, Liviu Matei, for his help in conceptualising the study and for his insights into higher education reform. Secondly, I would like to thank those people who helped me with the development of the case studies, identifying interviewees and answering my questions, most notably Ria Bilić, Jelena Baran Vanja Ivošević and Martina Prpic for Croatia, and Viorel Proteasa, Cezar Haj and Ligia Deca for Romania. Thirdly, I would like to thank Jana for her critical eyes and helping me to understand qualitative methods better than I did before.

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1. Introduction

'Educators have tried – I am afraid unsuccessfully – to place the world of politics and the state strictly outside the realm of education and schools. This is a futile attempt to prevent the clever (and yet elusive) nature of the fox and the sanguinary (although at times passive) nature of the lion from undermining the noble purposes of education' (Torres 1995/6, p. 261).

Higher education systems in post-communist countries have gone through a remarkable transformation over the last two decades. In almost all cases, they have expanded from highly elitist university systems in the early 1990s to the massive higher education systems that we know today (cf. Scott 2002; Kwiek 2008; Dobbins and Knill 2009; Koucký, Bartušek, and Kovařovic 2010). This expansion, however, has not benefitted all social groups equally. Koucký et al. (2010) show that higher education in 'Eastern Europe' has become progressively less equitable since the early 1980s. Most importantly, there was an explosion of inequities in the 1990s, which has, since then, slightly flattened. Other datasets themselves confirm the picture that Central and Eastern Europe is the only region in Europe where inequities in education are growing (Orr, Gwosć, and Netz 2011).

Partly as a consequence of the paradox between expansion and growing inequities, policy-makers and international organizations are discussing policy instruments to promote equity in higher education. For instance, organizations like the World Bank, and the OECD are undertaking reviews of equity in higher education and have committed substantial resources to this process. As part of the Bologna Process as well as the Europe 2020 agenda, these countries have set performance targets on equity. To meet these challenges, policy-makers are looking for technical support: they are sharing 'best practices' and looking for 'evidence-based policies'; most recently, the Bologna Process has created a 'peer-leaning initiative' in which countries can learn from each others policies (Bologna Process 2012).

As there are quite substantial inequities in higher education in Central and Eastern Europe, it may be expected that there is not much policy to promote equity. When reading the summary of my research project, one interviewee responded that some policy-makers in the

region will probably turn my question around and shout *'What? Equity?!'* But in fact, international comparisons suggest that a lot of policy is being made in the region (Eurydice 2012, p. 79): 15 out of 17 countries in the region use specific and/or general policy measures to widen participation in higher education.

The question is then whether searching for 'best practice' solutions really is the best way to promote equity in higher education. In his book 'Inequality Re-Examined', Amartya Sen (1992) argues that the essential question to ask about policies to promote equality is *'Equality of What?'* Indeed, even though most policy-makers agree that equity is important for higher education, they usually disagree about what type of equality is desired. Sen therefore argues that even in the present de-politicised public space, equity remains a highly contested and thus political notion. I therefore ask the following research question to investigate how policy-makers think about this problem:

'*How do policy-makers in Central and Eastern Europe understand equity in higher education and how does this influence their choice of policy instruments?*'

In turn, this is broken down into the following sub-questions:
- How do policy-makers understand equity in higher education?
- How have policy instruments to promote equity in higher education been selected and for what kind of purpose?
- To what extent is political contestation about equity in higher education reflected in the choice of policy instruments?

In answering these research questions, I aim to make a specific argument, namely that equity is a politically contested concept and that – equally - policy instruments to promote equity are subject to political contestation. More specifically, I aim to outline the political dynamic that influences a particular set of objectives and methods to promote equity in the post-communist space. In turn, this sets in motion a number of social and political effects that may be in contradiction the goal of achieving equity in higher education.

This argument will be made in a step-by-step fashion. Chapter 2 will outline the methodological framework, arguing why a qualitative investigation is needed to understand

the politics of equity in higher education. This chapter will also explain why two case studies have been chosen, namely Croatia and Romania. After the methodology, chapter 3 will set out the theoretical framework in which my thesis is embedded, paying particular attention to the normative and sociological dimensions of public policy. Chapters 4 and 5 will present the empirical work of the two case studies, respectively in Croatia and Romania. Chapter 6 will present an analysis of both these case studies and will aim to draw some generalisations for the wider population of countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Finally, chapter 7 will present the conclusions of the analysis by answering the sub-questions of the research question in an organised way.

2. Methodology

> *'... you have 'to follow the actors themselves', that is try to catch up with their often wild innovations in order to learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands, which methods they have elaborated to make it fit together, which accounts could best define the new associations that they have been forced to establish'* (Latour 2005, p. 12).

As is recommended by Latour in the opening quote, I have aimed to 'follow the actors themselves' and tried to figure out what kind of 'wild innovations' they have concocted to reshape the social relations in education. This has been inspired by Latour's attempt at 're-assembling the social', namely by taking a humble approach towards both 'methodology' and 'data'. This chapter aims to outline who or what these actors are, and how they have been followed.

2.1 Research Design

The research presented here aims to find out how policy-makers understand inequities in education and how they select their policy instruments to address this issue. To this aim, I have adopted a 'cross-sectional' design (Gerring 2001, p. 161) focusing on two states, namely Romania and Croatia. A comparative strategy is useful beyond a single case study as it allows for an investigation of why quite different countries – at least in Central and Eastern Europe – come up with relatively similar discourses on equity in higher education. Moreover, it allows for a detailed investigation of policy instruments, while trying to understand the context in which reforms have been implemented (Yin 2003).

The focus on this research lies on political contestation over different understandings of equity. For two main reasons, this merits a qualitative research strategy. First, because I would like to present the views of policy-makers in their own words, rather than in any previously defined categories (namely 'to follow the actors themselves'. Secondly, because the issue under investigation, namely 'political contestation' can be both *visible* - in protests,

in the Parliament, or in the newspaper - or *invisible* - behind closed doors, cloaked in technical discourse or in 'non-decisions' over the political agenda (cf. Lukes 1974).

Indeed, this is rooted in the tradition of discursive policy analysis that tries to untangle the (normative, causal or other) ideas embedded in public policies (Fischer 1995; Finlayson et al. 2004). The methodology used here is also roughly similar (although less formal) to 'process-tracing', i.e. to systematically map out the political process that leads to the adoption of one policy or the other (George and Bennett 2005). Indeed, the aim of this research is primarily explorative. As a consequence, I avoid language on 'independent and dependent variables' or 'hypotheses', as the aim is not to establish a causal mechanism.

The research is bound in space and time. It investigates university systems in two countries in the period from 1999-2011 in which the Bologna Process as well as European integration fuelled discussions on policy instruments for equity in higher education[1].

2.2 Case Selection

The two cases selected here are drawn from the wider population of countries in Central and Eastern Europe that have all passed through a number of transformations since the collapse of communism (cf. Offe 2004). Although these countries have different social structures and political histories, they are relatively similar in terms of the theoretical issues of interest, that is the policy instruments and the political contestation over equity. As such, they have been selected as 'typical' cases for the discussion at hand (Gerring 2008, , p. 647). Indeed, I have aimed to select one country from the region of former Yugoslavia (Croatia), as well as one country from the former Warsaw Pact (Romania).

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[1] *Arguably, policy instruments for equity in higher education are much older, certainly dating back to the communist period. From the early 2000s, however, these countries started to systematically present their policy towards an international audience, allowing for a systematic comparison. Moreover, these set in motion a qualitatively different set of reforms based on the principles of the Bologna Process as well as the integration with the European Union.*

As regards **policy instruments**, these countries combine both general and specific policy measures to widen participation in higher education, much like 15 out 17 countries in the region (Eurydice 2012, , p. 79)[2]. Moreover, the two countries have ' typical' student selection mechanisms (Sursock and Smidt 2010, , p. 114) and 'typical' student welfare systems for the region (Santiago and Ebersold 2008). As regards **political contestation**, the two countries have had relatively similar challenges (protests, negotiations with the EU, World Bank), even if they are in different phases of these political debates. More specifically, both countries have gone through international reviews that are likely to impact the wider region in the near future (OECD 2001; Duke et al. 2008). Finally, both countries have 'socially exclusive' higher education, leading to similar discussions in the public sphere (Orr, Gwość, and Netz 2011). A detailed case study will allow for a better understanding of the interpretation of political contestation to the adoption of policy instruments that will be important to consider for other countries in Central and Eastern Europe as well.

2.3 Methods

The investigation involves two primary methods: critical discourse analysis and elite-interviews.

1. Critical Discourse Analysis

The (adoption of) policy instruments will be studied through a systematic analysis of discourse, which includes a focus on political rhetoric, policy documents, statistical techniques and regulation. Critical discourse analysis is a particularly useful tool to problematise how these instruments become understood and used, as it takes a critical

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[2] *The 17 countries for which data are available are Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine (Eurydice, 2012, p. 79). Only Latvia and Slovakia do not use policy instruments to promote equity in higher education.*

attitude towards text. In short, this method presents a systematic exploration of the relation between '(a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes' and analyses how these 'arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power' (Fairclough 1995, , p. 132).. The term critical is important here, as this includes a review of 'connections that may be hidden from people' (ibid, , p. 5).

2. Semi-structured interviews with 'policy-makers'

Policy-makers are defined here in a broad manner, namely as people who are involved in any cycle of the policy process, i.e. that includes 'experts', 'civil servants', as well as 'politicians'. The analysis rests on interview data collected from 23 interviews with key policy-makers and observers in the two countries as well as 2 policy makers in the European Commission (see Annex 1). These interviews were undertaken during successive field trips to the countries in question (Croatia, Romania and Belgium) between 30 April and 16 May 2012. These policy-elites have been selected because they are able to engage in a reflexive discussion on the instruments they have elaborated, since they are used to defending their ideas in public or at least debate these with their colleagues or political principals (cf. Richards 1996). Interviewees have been selected on the basis of 'non-probability criteria', such as 'reputational' and 'positional' criteria (Tansey 2009). Indeed, interviewees were selected on the basis of advice from key informants, other interviewees ('snow-balling') or on the basis of an analysis of written input they have provided to policy discussions (this was particularly important to consult 'experts'). All interviewees have been presented with a short summary of the research project, and have been asked to sign a form to declare their

informed consent to being interviewed. As most interviewees asked to secure privacy, all interviewees were assigned codes[3].

2.4 Validity and Reliability

Any comparative design suffers from 'concept misformation' and 'conceptual travelling' (Sartori 1970). For instance, the term 'equity' may have very different meanings and connotations in different countries (perhaps particularly so in post-communist societies). This first of all poses a problem for internal validity – is there a clear concept to be measured and is this concept the actual object of measurement? Adcock and Collier (2001) suggest that validity can be improved by systematically mapping out a concept in a feedback loop between conceptualisation, operationalisation and scoring cases. The next chapter will try to clearly map out the concept of equity and their relation to policy. Moreover, following advice by Yin (2003, , p. 34), key informants have been involved in the description of case studies. As such, validity is improved by triangulating interview data with official policy documents and scholarly work on the topic. As opposed to internal validity, *external* validity is mostly concerned with the possibility to draw inferences and generalizations from the data. This has been addressed by selecting typical cases for the wider population of countries in Central and Eastern Europe (see case selection).

Reliability refers to the question of whether the methods to gather data produce consistent answers (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, , p. 25). This is a concern in all qualitative analysis, as questions may be interpreted differently at different moments in time. Alternatively, interviewees may not master the English language or fully understand the questions posed to them. To solve this problem, the issue will be 'attacked' from various angles as set out in the interview guide (Annex 2). For instance, interviewees will first be

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[3] *These codes will be kept in archive by the author of the study and can be requested in the case there is an academic need to do so.*

asked to define equity from a general perspective, after which the more concrete 'problems' with the issue will be discussed. Moreover, triangulation with other sources of data will help to ensure that there is some consistency in data collection.

3. Theoretical Framework

> *'the battles on distributional issues tend to be not about 'why equality?', but about 'equality of what?' ... it is equality in those spaces (for example, income, wealth, utilities) that tends to go under the heading of 'egalitarianism', whereas equality in other spaces (for example, rights, liberties or what are see as just deserts of people) looks like anti-egalitarian claims. But we should not be too trapped in the conventions of characterization, and must also note the basic similarity among all these theories in arguing for equality in some space' (Sen 2009, , p. 295).*

This project aims to make a connection between three fields that have developed quite separately from each other, namely political philosophy, the sociology of education and the sociology of public policy. As the previous chapter has set out the empirical part of this analysis, this chapter will outline how it relates to the broader literature in these three fields.

3.1 Understanding Equity in Higher Education

Firstly, there is a philosophical question of what is meant by 'equity'. There is a lively debate in contemporary philosophy about what is considered fair and how inequalities should be distributed in society. Secondly, there exists a sociological debate on how to understand reproduction and change of social inequalities in education.

1. The philosophical debate on notions of fairness

In his book 'Inequality Re-Examined', Amartya Sen (1992) argues that the essential question to ask about the politics of equality is *'Equality of What?'* The same question can be posed for debates about equity in education. The term 'equity' stems from welfare economics and indicates a desire to combine individual choice with concerns of fairness. 'Equity' is typically juxtaposed with the notion of 'equality' that is perceived to bypass notions of individual choice and personal effort. Yet even the term 'equity' is underspecified. If it just means a formal level of equal opportunities, this may lead to very unequal outcomes. This is particularly so in education, which emphasises meritocratic notions of talent and effort. As

Rawls writes in his 'Theory of Justice', a too strong emphasis on equality of opportunity simply means 'an equal chance to leave the less fortunate behind in the personal quest for influence and social position' (Rawls 1972, , p. 106).According to Rawls, what should be considered instead is how different groups may have opportunity costs to attain higher education. Indeed, he emphasises that what should be equalised are 'primary goods'; a number of basic resources that every person would both want and need to live a decent life.

This philosophical debate has an important implications for discussions on equity in higher education. If we are to understand the different approaches to social inequities, then, we need to be more specific about what we mean by that. Do policies aim to equalise rights, opportunities or outcomes? Or something in between like 'primary goods' (Rawls 1972) or 'capabilities' (Sen 2009)? Another question is for whom they aim to equalise something. Should there be equity in education for a universal category of citizens or for very specific groups of citizens? This implies here that policy-makers will be asked to identify what is being equalised by a certain policy instrument.

2. The sociological debate on equity in education

To understand the behavioural implications of these tools and instruments, the project draws on major theories in the sociology of education. Three main approaches can be distinguished. Firstly, *meritocracy-theorists* (cf. Young 1994; Goldthorpe and Jackson 2008) argue that education is a system that rewards a combination of effort and talent. This is important, as education has a signalling function for the labour market as well as for society; a person with a degree has some skills that should be rewarded. Meritocrats emphasise the need for equal opportunities (regardless of social class or parental status) as it cannot be decided at birth that someone will perform in education. As such, policy instruments should be geared towards supporting the best students, no matter their social background. The idea

of the meritocracy was mostly developed as a critique of the system based on inheritance. It is often assumed that a meritocracy benefits 'hard working' (i.e. lower) classes, even if this may not appear to be the case in practice (Goldthorpe and Jackson 2008).

Secondly, **social reproduction theorists** (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) contend that education is designed not just to reduce, but also to *reproduce* social inequalities. While higher levels of education may benefit individual social mobility, the education system as a whole benefits dominant social classes. Indeed, in the work of Bourdieu education is understood as a mechanism of transmitting 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 2004 [1986]). The education system, however, is designed and maintained by those who already have this cultural capital. As such, education systems take the 'habitus of the dominant group as the natural and only proper sort of habitus and treat all children as if they had equal access to it' (Harker 1990, , p. 87). The goal of policy favoured by these theorists is to equalise cultural capital as much as social and economic capital. As such, the focus is on the education system as a whole, rather than on a specific sub-section like higher education (for an application, cf. Thomson 2010).

Finally, there is sociological **rational choice theory** (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997, Becker, 2003). These theorists assume that all status groups weigh costs and benefits in their decisions to pursue higher levels of education. Important variables in this equation are *costs* of education, *estimated returns* in the labour market, the *risk of status decline* and the *probability of failing* (ibid). As a result of a higher or lower social status, different groups make a different subjective assessment of their chances for social mobility through education. As such, policy can have a straightforward role in reducing costs (e.g. through loans, scholarships) or increasing returns to education (e.g. changing loan conditions) for specific social groups. Table 1 below sets out these basic sociological models and the views of policy instruments to promote equity in higher education

Sociological Theory	Goals of policy instruments to increase equity in higher education	General opinion about policy instruments to increase equity in higher education	Examples of policy instruments to increase equity in higher education
Meritocratic Theory	Promoting equal opportunities	Should aim at both supporting the best students and promoting equal opportunities	Merit-based scholarships, awards for good students, honours programmes
Social Reproduction Theory	Redistribution of the positions of dominant groups	Should aim at equalising economic, social and cultural capital	Affirmative action policies, 'lottery'-schemes, university outreach-programes
(Sociological) Rational Choice Theory	Increasing social fluidity in higher education	Policy instruments can improve the chances of certain groups to enroll in and graduate from higher education	'Needs'-based loans, scholarships, tuition waivers for lower socio-economic strata

Table 1: An overview of different theories of social exclusion in (higher) education and associated policy instruments to bring about more equitable outcomes.

3.2 A 'Governmentality' Approach to Public Policy

French historian Michel Foucault (1991) has argued that what matters for an understanding of the modern state is not its constitution per se - but the tools and methods through which it governs its subjects. 'Government' is not a universal category that embraces our entire life, but rather a set of technical and social instruments of control. This led him to analyse modern institutions such as the prison system, hospitals and mental clinics as well as the broader dynamic between ways of thinking and forms of control ('knowledge and power') that are exercised by government. He named this approach 'governmentality' – a contraction of the words 'government' and 'mentality' – broadly associated with the 'art of government' (Burchell, Gordon, and Miller 1991). Indeed, 'governmentality' comprises a research strategy that asks a specific set of questions about public administration. It does not 'start from the apparently obvious historical or sociological question: what happened and why? It is to start by asking what authorities of various sorts wanted to happen, in relation to problems defined how, in pursuit of what objectives, through what strategies and techniques' (Rose 2004).

Foucault's approach has led to an important insight into the reforms of the public sector over the last few decades, namely that these led to 'hyper-innovation' and 'high-modernism' at an operational level (cf. Moran 2003). Paradoxically, although reformers advocated a distancing of the state through slogans such as from 'rowing to steering' (Osborne and Gaebler 1992), they created a complex apparatus of oversight that led to a de facto increase in the amount of regulation imposed on bureaucracy and citizens. Whereas governments − in the Weberian tradition - previously used rather straightforward lines of control, they now operate 'a dizzying array of loans, loan guarantees, grants, contracts, social regulation, economic regulation, insurance, tax expenditures, vouchers, and more' (Salamon 2002, , p. 2). As such, 'New Public Management' has signified both a qualititative and quantitative change in the policy instruments used by government. Policy instruments, then, carry an important value for any comparison of (the paradoxes of) public sector reforms over the last few decades (Hesse, Hood, and Peters 2003).

But what is a policy instrument exactly? For Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007), a policy instrument should be understood as *'a device that is both technical and social, that organizes specific social relations between the state and those it is addressed to, according to the representations and meanings it carries . It is a particular type of institution, a technical device with the generic purpose of carrying a concrete concept of the politics/society relationship and sustained by a concept of regulation'* (Lascoumes and Le Gales 2007, , p. 4, italics in original). What is important in this definition is that a policy instrument has a technical and a social dimension. (a) There is a 'means-end' relationship embedded in the instrument, relating to a '*technical'* understanding of what it is supposed to achieve. If a government uses a specific subsidy such as a means-tested student grant, it aims to incentivise a group of citizens to change their behaviour (i.e. to enrol or stay in education).

The technical question relates to how much money would be most effective, or who should provide the subsidy and to how many people. (b) Precisely because an instrument of public policy is aimed at changing behaviour – of civil servants or citizens – it also has to be analysed in a '*social*' structure, however. Because of this reason, it is also politically contested and produces political effects. People respond, or mobilise in response to an ill-favoured policy instruments, or when a policy instrument that they appreciate is taken away, for instance.

3.4 Conclusion: which solutions for what type of problems?

As the sociologist Robert K. Merton once remarked, '[t]he honeymoon of intellectuals and policy-makers is often nasty, brutish, and short' (Merton 1968, , p. 276). The reason is that as much as politicians may claim otherwise, policies usually do not arise out of only the merits of a policy-problem itself. The literature on policy instruments therefore recognises that policies do not arise as a 'rational' answer to an 'obvious' problem but that are formed in a 'politics of tool choice' (Peters 2002). This does not mean that the choice of instruments is completely arbitrary, but rather that the definition of both 'problem' and the 'solution' can be contested in the political domain. Indeed, even to the distant observer of the politics of higher education, it should be clear that any change in the level of tuition fees or student loans is rarely implemented without any form of public protest. Similarly, the central notion of austerity in public finance typically leads politicians to search for 'budget-neutral' solutions rather than for solutions that have proven their effectiveness. The important point here is that politicians may have various incentives when trying to solve the 'problem' of (in)equity. The next chapters will try to identify how policy-makers do so in Croatia and Romania.

4. Research Findings: Croatia

*'Free higher education is a terrible idea, it means supporting the worst performing students'
(Interviewee HR1).*

4.1 General Background to the Policy Discussion

Equity in higher education is a relatively new concern for policy-makers in Croatia. The issue was not even mentioned in the 1993 law on higher education (Parliament of the Croatian Republic 1993) that liberalised tuition fees for Croatian universities[4]. The 2003 law on higher education (Parliament of the Croatian Republic 2003) did establish equity as a principle, and included a clause on non-discrimination (Art. 77). 'Equity' as such was not to become a policy priority up until late 2009, however. It is

> **Main background statistics:**
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> *According to Eurostat data, there were 121.700 students in Croatian higher education in 2003, which went up to 139.100 in 2009. Although this seems like a small growth, it is considerable in relation to the demographic decline. Indeed, the percentage of graduates in the age group 30-34 year olds went up from 16.2 % in 2002 to 24,3 % in 2010, a fifty per cent increase (although still nowhere near the European target of 40% attainment).*
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> *According to the Eurostudent report, Croatian higher education is socially exclusive on two counts (Orr, Gwosć, and Netz 2011). There is an underrepresentation of students with lower education parents and from blue collar-backgrounds. Recently, Bilić (2012) found that there are also wide disparities in access to university in terms of geographic backgrounds, with students from rural areas at a structural disadvantage.*

now a politically salient issue, particularly as a result of two successive waves of student protests in the spring and autumn of 2009.

4.2 Political Contestation over the Understanding of Equity

In 2009, a number of large student protests put the issues of 'free education' and the 'commercialisation of higher education' firmly on the political agenda. Some interviewees claim that the protests had little to do with equity as such, and more with 'middle class demands' for universally free public education (interviewee HR9). Another lament about the protesters is that 'those who are loudest about equity are usually also the most privileged

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[4] *In the Communist period, students studied for free in former Yugoslavia. In the early 1990s, the Croatian government changed this to a system where universities could charge fees to generate more income. This allowed universities to 'print money' by enrolling more students, facilitating the expansion of higher education (interviewee HR11).*

students' (interviewee HR4). Other interviewees contest this view, however, and claim that the protests have opened up the political space for debates on equity (interviewee HR8). For instance, a number of people engaged in the 'Institute for the Development of Education' (IRO) wrote blog-entries and organised public discussions on equity in higher education. As a result, policy-makers found it necessary to develop more research on the topic and to engage in a search for policies to deal with inequities.

This conflict over the interpretation of the protests reflects a deeper disagreement between policy-makers about their vision of higher education. One group is strongly attached to the principle of merit, and see this as the sole principle that should govern decisions on higher education. As such, this group could be referred to as the 'Meritocrats', operating by and large within a meritocratic notion of equity in higher education. This group blames 'lazy students' or 'bad students' for ruining their previously high quality universities. In their eyes, it were 'lazy students' who were protesting and – in their attachment to their privileges - ruined the wish of the 'good students' to study. Another group of policy-makers and observers sees higher education as a tool of social reproduction, and thereby as a source of social inequalities. This second group – these could be called the '*Bourdieuians*' - is not fully against the idea of 'merit', but is strongly against the provision of student support on this principle. Moreover, they emphasise that advantaged students benefit from an excess of cultural capital, which anyway privileges them in education. There is also a third group of interviewees who stand more or less in between these two positions. These do not have a strong view about the protests, but are interested in the debate on equity that has followed. These interviewees – they could be called the 'Rawlsians' – emphasise the structural disadvantages for different groups of students to attain a higher education qualification.

These groups also compete over the meaning of European integration for Croatia's higher education system. Interviewees note that the language on equity in higher education is

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not 'home-grown', but arises in large part from 'British and European debates about higher education reforms' (interviewee HR8). Indeed, there is no specific word for 'equity' in the Croatian language; 'jednako' simply means equality. International developments, such as Croatia's accession to the European Union as well as involvement in the Bologna Process is driving equity up the policy agenda (cf. Farnell and Kovač 2010). But it does so in a paradoxical way. 'Europeanisation' drives the Croatian higher education into a transition where a number of different discourses are competing (cf. Doolan 2011). First of all, 'equity'-discourse has to compete with a number of more dominant European discourses including the 'knowledge economy' and the related 'commercialisation' of higher education (ibid). As a result, the political agenda is biased towards other priorities, most notably EU accession, in which equity concerns play only a secondary role. Secondly, 'Europeanisation' does not promote a coherent discourse on equity, but is itself a contested political space, providing plenty of space for interpretation and modification by dominant domestic actors. Indeed, as becomes visible from the policy instruments in use in Croatia, only 'Meritocrats' and 'Rawlsians' have been dominant.

4.3 Policy Instruments

As may be expected from the political salience of the topic, there is an elaborate system of policy instrumentation in place to combat inequities in higher education. As will become clear below, the language used is mostly 'Meritocratic' and 'Rawlsian'. This is clearly visible in the reports prepared for international audiences such as in the Bologna Process. Table 2 gives an overview over these different policy instruments, their declared aims in policy documents, and the theoretical framework that is most appropriate.

Policy documents argue that scholarships are the main policy instrument to promote 'equal opportunities'. Yet, only about 6,5 % of the Croatian student population receives a

scholarship from public institutions (Bilić 2012, , p. 59). Scholarships are provided at multiple levels of government (state, regional and local) with varying amounts (MZOS 2007). A student from Zagreb, for instance, can obtain a maximum scholarship of 3900 HRK (approx. 520 euro) per month, whereas a student on a state scholarship can receive a maximum of 800 HRK (approx. 107 euro) per month. Even as government documents refer to the need to increase 'needs-based' scholarships (cf. MZOS 2007, , p. 78ff), the majority of grants are still based on merit criteria, such as the place obtained in national exams or the place in overall course rankings.

Policy Instrument	Aims	Type
'Free' higher education for first year students, then tuition fees based on accumulated ECTS-points	Improving access, incentivising students to work hard	'Meritocratic'
Scholarships based on academic merit and needs assessments	Improving access for good students, incentivising students to work hard	'Meritocratic' / 'Rawlsian'
Tuition fee waivers and **special scholarships** for students with disabilities of over 50% on a national scale	Improving access for students with disabilities	'Rawlsian'
State scholarship for Roma students	Improving access for Roma students	'Rawlsian'
Competitive scholarships for various groups of students who are seen to be disadvantaged	Improving access, incentivising students to work hard	'Meritocratic'
Scholarships provided by local authorities for students from these regions/cities based on merit	Improving access for students from a certain region	'Meritocratic'
Support for **dormitories** for good students	Improving access, incentivising students to work hard	'Meritocratic'
Subsidising **student meals, transportation, health insurance, tax deductions**	Improving access universally	'General'

Table 2: an overview of different tools used to promote equity in educational access and attainment in use in Croatia. Note that only public policies are mentioned here, i.e. private initiatives within universities, by international actors or by corporations are not taken into account (based on Duke et al. 2008; MZOS 2005, 2007, 2008; 2012, , own empirical work).

The system of tuition fees was changed following the student protests in 2009. Previously, about two-thirds of the student population paid quite substantial tuition fees ranging from 750 to 1270 euro (Doolan, Dolenec, and Domazet, 2010, in Doolan 2011, , p. 3). Now, students don't pay any fees in their first year and will continue to do so if they fulfil a certain number of academic criteria. As such, this tool reflects a 'Meritocratic' understanding of equity, quite in opposition to what students demanded in the protests. This is reflected in the language of the minister, who stated that 'We want education in Croatia

from kindergarten to postgraduate studies to be free, *but only for the deserving ones'* (Minister Primorac, quoted in Radic 2009, , emphasis added).

There are a number of specific measures in place. For instance, there are special scholarships and places for Roma, that follows the action plan of the Roma decade (Government of the Republic of Croatia 2005) as well as special place for students with disabilities (Ministry of Health & Social Welfare and European Commission 2007). The language surrounding these policies is mostly 'Rawlsian', referring to the different opportunity costs for different groups of students.

4.4 Conclusion

Policy-makers in Croatian higher education seem to be divided in three groups, namely the 'Meritocrats', 'the 'Rawlsians' and the 'Bourdieuians'. The former two have been most dominant in the elaboration of policy instruments to promote equity in higher education. The policy that has been made is mostly aimed at equalising opportunities, not outcomes or cultural capital. Many policies have been designed to look good in international comparisons. 'European' principles and ideas are open for different interpretations, which the 'Meritocrats' and 'Rawlsians' have used to their advantage.

5. Research Findings: Romania

'In Romania, it is the lion who eats first' (Interviewee RO5).

5.1 General Background to the Policy Discussion

Romania has one of the most unequal higher education systems in Europe (see box). Despite this fact, however, the discourse of equitable opportunities is present in policy documents. For instance, it is a principle of the higher education system as outlined in the law on education (MERYS 2011). Indeed, the Romanian word 'echitate' is a neologism that has had a steep career in policy-circles, even though it is not often used in daily language. 'Equity' is a relatively recent policy priority, however, and is cloaked in a number of controversies.

> **Main background statistics:**
>
> *According to Eurostat figures, the number of students enrolled in Romanian higher education grew from 407.700 in 1999 to 1.098.200 in 2009. The near tripling of the number of students did not lead to a very equitable system, however.*
>
> *Recent figures from Eurydice show that it is 13 times more likely for a student with highly educated parents to attain higher education than a student with medium-educated parents (Eurydice 2012, , p. 78). Moreover, the most recent Eurostudent report classifies Romania as socially exclusive on two counts: based on parental educational background and parental occupation status (Orr, Gwosć,*

5.2 Political Contestation over the Understanding of Equity

Interviewees point out that one of the reasons is that 'equity' in higher education is perceived to have a communist connotation. As one interviewee puts it 'it is either a non-issue or a communist issue' (interviewee RO6). This connotation makes it hard for policy-makers to argue for far-reaching policies in the public sphere. Indeed, one policy-maker apologises that his discourse 'sounds very left-wing' and he immediately adds that 'he is actually a conservative who simply cares about the rural areas of Romania' (interviewee RO5).

Partly as a result of this political connotation, the conflicts between policy-makers express themselves in 'technical' preferences for certain policy instruments over others. But

in essence, this is a conflict over values, not over technical details. Like in Croatia, there is a clear group of policy-makers that promotes higher education as a 'Meritocracy'. As one interviewee put it, 'if you are good, you can become exceptional, but if you are mediocre, you can become median in your performance' (Interviewee RO4). Another group of policy-makers – these could again be called the 'Rawlsians' - emphasises the need of the Romanian higher education system to 'cater to the whole of Romanian society' (interviewee RO11). This latter group speaks about the higher 'opportunity costs' of marginalised groups to enter and finish higher education, thereby indicating a sympathy to the notion of primary goods. There are a few people who describe themselves as 'Bourdieuians' as well, but these are hardly active in policy debates on equity in higher education (interviewee RO6).

Both these groups – the 'Meritocrats' and 'Rawlsians' - identify a common enemy. The enemy is alternatively referred to as the 'bad guys', the 'profiteers' or the 'corrupt'. As these are mostly associated with a number of shady private universities[5], these could be called the 'Plutocrats'. The fight between these three groups strongly limits the agenda of higher education reform. 'Rawlsians' and 'Meritocrats' spend most of their energy on fighting of the plutocrats, not on opening a discourse on equity in higher education. Moreover, this leads to a perception that those who control the means of power also receive the financial resources (as referred to in the opening quote). As a result, the power relations in Romanian society strongly affect discussions on equity in higher education (interviewee RO1).

Partly as a result of the fight with the 'Plutocrats', discussions on equity are not a political priority, and most of the discourse is 'imported' from international organisations. This creates two problems. First, like in Croatia, there is a problem of interpretation. Interviewees are unclear about which international organisation to follow and which

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[5] *It is often implied in interviewees that the influence of these groups extends strongly into the public system as well. As they are still associated with gaining money from their positions, the label 'plutocrats' could still apply to those in the public sector.*

philosophy to apply. Second, policies that have been developed are just meant to 'look good in international forums, but are not aligned to local needs' (Interviewee RO9).

5.3 Policy Instruments to Promote Equity

The political context sketched above affects the policy instruments to promote equity. Like in Croatia, there exists an elaborate system of policy instrumentation (see Table 3 below). This system makes Romania look good on the surface, particularly in international policy studies such as those conducted in the Bologna Process (Eurydice 2012, , p. 79). It seems to do little else than look good on paper, however. Indeed, policy-makers agree that there is no 'overall vision or overall policy to promote equity' (interviewee RO3), but that it is only a 'concern within specific policies'. There has been no overall evaluation of these policy instruments because they are seen as 'too new to be evaluated' (interviewee RO3).

The most often mentioned policy instruments are the system of scholarships and public subsidies for dormitories. The scholarship system is rather symbolic and is estimated to contain approximately 17 euro (69 LEI) per publicly enrolled student, which is then redistributed to a small group of students based on principles of merit and need (Interviewee RO3). Places in the dormitory are divided along similar criteria, although having 'connections' can play an important role as well. Several attempts have been made to reform this system, attributing more money to students based on need. Interviewees mention that each time, however, either the group of students benefitting from this system or university leadership and faculty express opposition as they see the principle of merit being harmed (Interviewee RO1).

Policy Instrument	Aims	Type
Tuition fee waivers based on academic merit and need (depending on the university)	Improving access for good students as well as some social categories, incentivising students to work hard	'Meritocratic' / 'Rawlsian'
Special **government fund for scholarships** that is transferred to universities, redistributed based on merit and need	Improving access for good students, incentivising students to work hard	'Meritocratic' / 'Rawlsian'
Subsidies for **dormitories**	Improving access for good students, improving access for disadvantaged students	'Meritocratic' / 'Rawlsian'
Subsidies of **student meals, transportation** and **health insurance**	Improving access for all students	'General'
Special **quota** and **subsidised study places for Roma students**	Improving access for Roma students	'Rawlsian'
Special **quota** and **subsidised study places for students from the Republic of Moldova** and **students from rural areas of Romania;**	Improving access for students from the Republic of Moldova and from rural areas of Romania	'Rawlsian'
Creation of an **'Agency for Loans and Scholarship Grants'**	Improving access for all students	'General'
Special access means for **students with disabilities**	Improving access for students with disabilities	'Rawlsian'

Table 3: an overview of different tools used to promote equity in educational access and attainment in use in Romania. Note that only public policies are mentioned here, i.e. private initiatives within universities, by international actors or by corporations are not taken into account (based on OECD 2001; based on MERYS 2008; MERYS 2011; 2012, , own empirical work).

The system of tuition fees is based on a similar logic. According to interviewees, fees are being set on two criteria (Interviewee RO10), (a) an assessment of what 'the competition' charges and (b) 'a calculation of how much money the university needs'. When prompted whether equity concerns play a role, the answer is usually 'no'. There are some 'Rawlsian' and 'Meritocratic' influences, however. Most universities provide tuition waivers for students based on categories of merit and need, although the ratios differ between different universities and the amount is usually small.

Loans are another salient topic, following several years of discussions with the World Bank. In the last decade, a number of policy-makers were courted to create a loan system, which resulted in a feasibility study with quite elaborate policy proposals (World Bank and MERYS 2008/9). The goals of this system were largely *'Rawlsian',* namely to promote access for disadvantaged groups (ibid). This has been taken quite seriously by policy-makers

who have made sure this was integrated into the recent law on education and created an agency to provide the loans to students (MERYS 2011). Now it has been created, however, it seems to be a source of confusion and contention. Several interviewees mention that the instrument was naïvely constructed, as there are too many Romanians living below the poverty line. Neither poor students nor their families can provide any collateral for these loans, having led private banks away from providing capital for the system. The resulting picture is that 'all formal steps have been undertaken to enact policy but the policy instrument is not in operation' (interviewee RO5).

Roma students are a particularly salient group. There have been elaborate discussions on Roma in education, partly as a result of local pressure, but mostly as a result of international attention. This has translated into 'Rawlsian' principles. Universities have special quota for students from these backgrounds and provide both scholarships and tuition waivers. In most universities, these are not filled, however, partly as a result of a lack of applications, and partly because students regard these places with a certain stigma (interviewee RO10). More importantly, interviewees explain that there is no alignment of these instruments with other fields of public policy. For instance, many schools have been closed in rural areas, and there is now pressure to close 'underperforming' universities in these areas as well. This impacts all people living in these areas, including Roma, who are mostly lodged outside urban centres. Paradoxically, these are the result of reforms of the governance and financing system that have been supported by European programmes.

5.4 Conclusion

Policy-makers in Romanian higher education seem to be divided into 'Meritocrats', 'Rawlsians' and 'Plutocrats'. The first two groups have been mostly in power in the last ten years, although they spend much of their time on fighting the 'Plutocrats'. As a result, the

policy agenda has been rather limited. The system of policy instrumentation is quite clearly based on 'Meritocratic' and 'Rawlsian' principles, yet this system mostly exists on paper, and does little in reality.

6. Analysis and Discussion

'Equity was seen as a luxury problem compared to the other problems these countries were dealing with'

(Interviewee EU3)

The previous two chapters have how policy instruments have been developed in a specific political context. The empirical data has shown how such a political context interprets and modifies the notion of equity. In turn, this influences the goals and methods of policy instruments. There are two questions that still remain open, however. First, there is still the question of what this all means in terms of the theoretical framework. The previous two chapters have occasionally referred to political contestation over policy instruments; yet this has not done so in a very systematic way. This chapter aims to do this by presenting an analysis of different levels of political contestation that takes place in these countries. It will also aim to present a number of generalisations beyond the two case studies.

6.1 Political Contestation and Understandings of Equity

Political contestation has been defined very broadly, including contestation in visible politics and agenda-politics. In the two cases presented here, equity was politically contested on both levels. The most clearly identified contestation is on the level of pluralist politics. This is the level at which policies are more or less openly debated and in which different actors compete for political attention.

Competition between 'Ideal Types' of Policy Makers and Policy Instruments

It is useful to present these policy-makers as 'ideal-types' that highlights certain elements from the political contestation over equity. It should be noted that these are 'ideal-types' in a Weberian sense, namely, these are 'formed by the one-sided *accentuation* of one

or more points of view' that form 'utopia [that] cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality' (Weber 1904, quoted in Kim 2008). Three of these 'ideal-types' were drawn from the data collected in the cases (see Table 4).

(a) 'Meritocrats' emphasise talent and effort as categories of fairness and often distinguish 'good' and 'deserving' from 'bad' or 'undeserving' students. They are sympathetic to the idea of equal educational opportunities as everyone should be able to prove their talent in education. The preferred policy instruments reflect the principle of merit. 'Good' students get a scholarship and/or free tuition no matter their social background. 'Bad' students get nothing.

(b) 'Rawlsians' are more aware of the structural barriers facing different social groups. They often list a number of groups that face problems in access and completing higher education, such as ethnic categories, students from rural areas or students with low-education parents. These are sympathetic to equalising the 'opportunity costs' or 'primary goods' for different groups to access and complete higher education. They prefer policy instruments

(c) 'Bourdieuians' are the most critical of the structural exclusion of certain groups of students. They point out that many categories of exclusion are subsumed under the lack of cultural capital (education) of parents as well as their belonging to a certain class (occupational status). Preferred policy instruments aim at equalising economic, social and cultural capital.

Type	Equality of What?	Policy Preferences
'Meritocrats'	Educational Opportunities	- Merit-based instruments; - Support for 'good students' from previously categorised 'disadvantaged' categories
'Rawlsians'	Primary Goods	- 'Needs-based' student support for students from disadvantaged categories;
'Bourdieuians'	Economic, Social and Cultural Capital	- Extensive (or even universal) student support systems; - Free (or nearly free) higher education; - Role models for disadvantaged students; - University outreach programmes; - Reforms of primary, secondary education;

Table 4: 'Ideal-type' policy makers in the cases presented here. This table excludes the category 'plutocrats' for two reasons. First, it is assumed that these have no clear notion of fairness, and second, too few of these have been interviewed to give a definite answer.

It should be pointed out that these categories are slightly different than those described in the theoretical framework (there are no representatives of rational choice, for instance). This should not be seen as a problem, as there is no reason to assume that the world of policy-makers is directly informed by developments in sociological theory. Perhaps it should rather be surprising that there are so many overlaps. Another point of interest is that 'Meritocratic' and 'Rawlsian' policy instruments are most prominent. To understand this phenomenon, I have tried to analyse the shape of political contestation, namely the 'agenda-politics'.

Equity and the Political Agenda

In both cases, the issue of equity has surfaced onto the political agenda because of a combination of pressure from local actors and international organisations. Yet, as there are many inequities in higher education in both countries, the question is which equity issues become debated and how. First, the discourse on 'equity' competes with a number of other discourses on higher education. In Croatia, for instance, equity is not seen as a policy priority, because other policy discourses associated with 'education for profit' are dominant (cf.

Doolan 2011). In Romania, policy-makers are afraid to be branded a 'communist' and are therefore careful not to make equity a salient issue. In both cases, the effect is that equity is not the main policy priority. One of the interviewees referred to the politics over the agenda by stating that 'equity was seen as a luxury problem compared to the other problems these countries were dealing with' (Interviewee EU3).

A second issue that should be noted is that international organisations do not promote an unambiguous agenda with regards to equity. First of all, the idea of 'meritocracy' also an important principle in international documents, most notably in the constitution of UNESCO (cf. Tannock 2009). European documents have emphasised that there is no trade-off between 'equity' and 'efficiency', implying a happy marriage between meritocratic notions and equal outcomes (European Commission 2006). Even though the European institutions are now searching for a more critical perspective on equity, the emphasis still lies on equal opportunities (interviewee EU3). In other words, when international organisations intervene, they adopt a 'Meritocratic perspective or – at most - a 'Rawlsian' perspective. As such, it should come as no surprise that these perspectives are favoured in national policy as well.

This may help to explain why certain equity issues become salient and how, whereas other issues hardly surface at all. The issue of Roma in Romanian higher education is a case in point. Roma have become a salient issue precisely because it has had so much attention from international policy-makers. Yet, the discourse on Roma has typically been couched in 'Meritocratic' or 'Rawlsian' language. As such, policy recommendations have been developed for Roma as a group, while ignoring wider problems of social reproduction in education[6]. There has been little discussion of a lack of cultural capital, for instance, that may affect many groups, including the Roma population. Yet such a 'Bourdieuian' perspective

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[6] *That is not to say that Roma – as a group - do not need special, tailored policies, indeed, they probably do. The problems facing Roma, however, may very well be embedded in more structural problems relating to wider social inequalities in the countries in this region.*

may be useful; for example, it could draw a connection between the closure of rural schools and universities and the disadvantages facing Roma, an issue that is currently being ignored.

6.2 The Future of Equity in Education in Central and Eastern Europe

Koucky et al (2010) recently provided a European (including Eastern European[7]) overview of educational inequities between 1950 and 2009. Based on an analysis of descriptive statistics, they found that countries are a 'relatively homogenous group' in which inequities in educational attainment have consistently grown since the early 1980s (ibid, p. 27). One could therefore expect that inequities in higher education will be a concern for policy-makers in the years to come. This is particularly so as the European Union is setting ambitious targets for attainment of higher education. There seems to be little reflection, however, about how policy is made in these countries as well as how growing educational inequalities are linked to growing inequalities in other spheres, including in the political sphere.

First of all, it can be expected that there is some pluralism in the views of policy-makers just like has been observed here. Even if in slightly different shapes and sizes, there could be more 'Meritocrats', 'Rawlsians', and 'Bourdieuians' out there in Central and Eastern Europe. One could also expect that 'Meritocrats' and 'Rawlsians' perspectives are dominant in national policy instruments. As a result, one can expect that there is a set of policy instruments in place to combat inequities in higher education throughout the post-communist space. Yet, these policy instruments may produce many paradoxical effects as they may reflect different visions over the goals of equity-policy.

Secondly, and very much related, 'equity' has to compete with other policy priorities. As most countries in the region are drastically reforming their higher education systems,

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[7] *It should be noted here that the countries of former Yugoslavia were not included in the study. Recent empirical research, however, indicates a similar dynamic in Croatia as in other Eastern European countries included in the study (cf. Matković, 2010).*

'equity' is likely not to be the highest on the lists of priorities. It is often still seen as a 'luxury problem' even if it could be argued that 'equity' should be a concern for any policy instrument. One of the implications of this lack of priority is that there is little reflection about the contradictions and tensions between different priorities for higher education. One could even say that when equity policy is being made, it is usually to redress some inequity generated in another field of policy. As such, these contradictions and tensions should perhaps be a main object of future study.

Finally, there is an implication for international organisations that engage with the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. These often assume that policy-making is a straightforward process of copying 'best practices' from one context to another. This study has aimed to contribute to a critical review of such approaches by showing how similar discourses may lead to very different results (Evans 2009). These differences arise because of different economic, ideological, cultural and institutional environments in which policy is being made.

7. Conclusion

Post-communist society can be described as a unique social structure in which cultural capital is the main source of power, prestige, and privilege (Eyal, Szelényi, and Townsley 2001 [1998], , p. 853).

This thesis has argued that there is something specific about the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. As Eyal , Szelényi and Townsley (2001 [1998]) have argued, the post-communist space gives particular attention to cultural capital as a source of political power. I will try to outline how this happens by answering the research questions in a systematic way.

- *How do policy-makers understand equity in higher education?*

The notion of 'equity' is by no means straightforward; it is used and understood as a flexible term that means different things for different policy-makers. Broadly, three 'ideal-type' policy-makers have been identified that can be referred to as 'Meritocrats', 'Rawlsians' and 'Bourdieuians'. 'Meritocrats' emphasise (minimal) equal opportunities for all students no matter their background. These policy-makers mostly see student support as an incentive to perform. 'Rawlsians' have a more elaborate notion of fairness and emphasise a variance in the opportunity costs for different students to enrol and complete higher education. These are sympathetic to more elaborate support mechanisms for different groups of (disadvantaged) students. Finally, 'Bourdieuians' have a more critical understanding of education as a system of social reproduction. These policy-makers search for policy instruments that can equalise economic, social and cultural capital within the education system as a whole.

- *How have policy instruments to promote equity in higher education been selected and for what kind of purpose?*

Policies to promote equity in higher education are not made on a 'level playing field'. Interviewees have noted that the discourse on 'equity' is not 'home-grown'; it is mostly a reflection of priorities of international organisations. As such, the discourse on 'equity' becomes appropriated and modified by dominant political actors (and policy-makers). For instance, politicians have appropriated the language of protesting students in Croatia simply to diffuse social unrest. While doing so, they have modified the discourse to reflect a meritocratic understanding of 'free' higher education that benefits 'good' students over the 'bad' students. As such, the policy of 'free' higher education becomes a tool to incentivise students to study, rather than a tool to promote equity in higher education.

- *To what extent is political contestation about equity in higher education reflected in the choice of policy instruments?*

The policy instruments that are officially reported as tools to promote equity mostly reflect 'Meritocratic' principles. This is clearly visible in the systems of student support. Decisions on tuition fees and scholarships are mostly a reflection of merit. A small number of 'good' students study for free and get a scholarship to pay for some of their expenses. There is some impact of 'Rawlsian' ideas as well. A small number of students receive some form of students support because of their identified 'need'. This applies to a variety of social groups, such as Roma, students with disabilities, students from poor families or students from rural areas. Sometimes this includes groups for which even policy-makers are sceptical about 'needs'. Indeed, these policies are not based on a systematic assessment of needs, but rather

exist because they look good on paper or because they were useful for some specific political purpose other than addressing inequities (dissolving public protests, for instance). This strongly reflects the shape of the political contestation over equity in higher education. Indeed, there are almost no policy instruments in place that address disparities in social or cultural capital.

'How do policy-makers in Central and Eastern Europe understand equity in higher education and how does this influence their choice of policy instruments?'

This thesis has sought to argue that there is no 'one-dimensional' transmission belt from a specific understanding of a policy-problem to the solution of that problem. As such it has sought to contribute to a growing - scholarly and political - debate about policy-making to promote equity in higher education. Especially in domains of policy that are heavily contested, policy-making follows a process of interpretation, appropriation and modification by political actors. Indeed, the shape of the political system in Central and Eastern Europe is highly unequal, and is a reflection of the wider growing social inequalities in the region. This strongly affects higher education; Eastern Europe is the only European region where educational inequalities have steadily grown since the early 1980s. It should be a telling sign that the marginalised groups that equity policy should be addressing are often not involved in the elaboration of such policy instruments. The message for both national and international policy-makers is clear even if it is far from easy to follow. If policies are to become a priority, they will need to be a reflection of local political pressures by marginalised groups. Inequality in higher education and inequality in power are strongly linked in post-communist societies. One cannot be addressed without the other.

Annex 1 – List of Interviewees

Name	**Position**	**Institution**
Croatia:		
Teo Matković	*Assistant Professor*	Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb
Hrvoje Jurić	*Assistant Professor*	Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zagreb
Danijela Dolenec	*Assistant Professor*	Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb
Thomas Farnell	*Programme Manager*	Institute for Educational Development
Mladen Domazet	*Research Associate*	Institute for Social Research
Ante Bajo	*Professor*	Institute of Public Finance
Luka Juroš	*Head of Higher Education Division*	Ministry of Research, Education and Sports
Karin Doolan	*Assistant Professor*	University of Zadar
Aleksa Bjeliš	*Rector*	University of Zagreb
Blaženka Divjak	*Vice-Rector*	University of Zagreb
Romania:		
Adrian Miroiu	*Director*	Agency for Financing Higher Education
Mihai Korka	*Professor*	Academy of Economic Studies
Maria Pădure	*Vice-President*	National Union of Students (ANOSR)
Radu Damian	*Director of Quality Assurance*	Quality Assurance Agency (ARACIS)
Melinda Szábo	*Social Dimension Coordinator*	Bologna Secretariat
Cristina Moise	*Technical Staff*	Agency for Financing Higher Education
Lazăr Vlăsceanu	*Professor*	Faculty of Sociology, University of Bucharest
Daniel Funeriu	*Former Minister of Education*	Government of Romania
Dalina Dumitrescu	*Director General for Higher Education*	Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports
Ion Ciucã	*Director of Financing*	Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports
Tudor Stanciu	*Counsellor*	Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports
Remus Pricopie	*Rector*	National School of Political Studies and Public Administration
Tudor Prisecaru	*Vice-Rector*	Polytechnic Bucharest
European Commission:		
Adam Tyson	*Head of Unit*	European Commission
Lene Mejer	*Policy Officer*	European Commission

Annex 2 - Interview Guide

Practical Issues:

The interview is semi-structured. This means that it follows a pre-defined template, although it is possible to divert from this in case the discussions requires so. Interviews are conducted in person and should last a maximum of one hour. All interview data will be handled confidentially and will be used only for the purposes of this research. All participants will be asked to sign a form to declare their consent to being interviewed.

The following issues may be covered during the interview

Topic 1: Personal Experiences
- Could you tell me something how you became interested in the topic of equity in higher education?
- Have you been involved in any policy debates on equity in higher education? If so, what was your role in these debates?

Topic 2: What is equity and how does higher education relate to it?
- How do you approach the issue of equity?
- How important do you think equity is in your country? Why do you think so?
- How does higher education relate to the concept of equity?

Topic 3: Equity challenges in higher education
- What do you see as the major challenges for equity in higher education in your country?
- Are there any statistics on equity in higher education in your country? By whom and to what purpose are these collected?
- Are these challenges being discussed on a political level? If so, how and why?
- Is there any disagreement about the challenges for equity in your country?
- Do you feel that these challenges are unique to your country?

Topic 4: Policy Instruments
- Are there any policy instruments that are being used in your country to address these equity challenges?
- What – in your view - are the aims and methods of these policy instruments?
- What – in your view - were the main reasons to adopt these policy instruments?
- How were these policy instruments decided upon? Were there any alternative options?

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