
European Neoliberal Discourse and Slovenian Educational Space

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Introduction

In the field of education, the global convergence on neoliberal discourses that direct domestic reforms has been increasingly discussed in the last few decades from the viewpoint of different social sciences (including the political and educational science). The important part of these scientific debates are the studies of neoliberal governmentality,¹ understood as the political philosophy of governance (Mitchell, 2006), which strategically use particular discourse and technology to steer society towards optimal market gains and profit. Its success lies in self-management, responsibility and calculative rationality/choices of individual actors. Neoliberalism is conceptualised not as standardized universal technology, but as the logic of governing that migrates and interacts with situated circumstances and is selectively taken up in diverse political contexts (Mitchell, 2006; Ong, 2007; Wahlström and Sundberg, 2018).² Within that framework, Europeanisation research attempts to determine how specific EU neoliberal governance structures and processes influence the development of national educational spaces (e.g. Dale and Robertson, 2012).

Although each EU member state is characterised by country-specific peculiarities in the educational system, some clusters of countries

- 1 According to Lerner (2000) studies of neoliberalism can be divided into three distinct analytical categories: policy framework, ideology, governmentality.
- 2 Mitchell (2006) argues that neoliberalism is often cohabiting and/or overlapping with other regimes. She explains that the socio-democratic project and neoliberalism in the EU present "a complex mix of 'third-way' type claims to fairness, social justice, social cohesion, and 'open' government, accompanied by a sharp institutional transition to a more market-driven logic".

share commonalities that can, to some extent, determine similarities in the manner by which they accept the EU (neoliberal) agenda. Researchers (e.g. Alexiadou and Lange, 2013) agree that from this perspective, new member states represent particularly interesting objects of investigation. Silova (2009: p. 295) argues that a special group of new member states, i.e. post-socialist member states, “share several educational characteristics, as reflected in a number of educational legacies inherited from the socialist regime and a proclaimed aspiration to embrace Western (neoliberal) educational values”. Chankseliani and Silova (2018) report that despite commonalities between post-socialist states in the reception of the EU neoliberal agenda, “there is little evidence of educational convergence towards neoliberal educational goals, when looking beyond policy rhetoric and digging deeper into local educational contexts”. By studying the reception of the EU neoliberal agenda, in particular member state specific cultural tradition, state-society-economy relationship and political competition should therefore be taken into consideration. Discursive institutionalism has been recognised (Schmidt, 2008) as a particularly promising theoretical approach for explaining Europeanization of education policy field (influence and reception of the EU neoliberal agenda and national policy changes).

The article is positioned in the heart of neoliberalism discourse research and fits into many identified research gaps in the field. Souto-Otero (2017) reports that “With respect to the provision of empirical data, it is neoliberalism as seen through the lens of governmentality that is most commonly under-researched”. The question of how neoliberal discourse becomes rearticulated in a specific national context and infiltrates into its educational system is commonly overlooked (Takayama, 2009) and most studies of neoliberal governmentality are generally abstracted from actually existing subject and spaces (Mitchell, 2006). Similarly, Alexiadou and Lange (2013) view the scope of impact of EU governance not only as being the most important for understanding its successful performance, but also being the most problematic due to lacking in depth information on whether, and how, its policy instruments are adopted and considered within (new) member states. Delanty and Rumford (2005) denote discursive institutionalism in theorizing Europeanization as a very promising, but still neglected field.

The article aims to offer new insights into how EU (neoliberal) governance has helped member states increasingly perceive themselves as being aligned with EU agendas in terms of which educational changes are important and necessary. By using discursive institutionalism approach, it sheds light on how using neoliberal discourses have contributed to new

modes of regulating educational policy, with real effects on policy and practice in national systems of education (Dale and Robertson, 2012). Here, the article does not examine neoliberal ideas and their value bases, origins, constructions and implications but is rather focused on communicative discourse through which ideas are translated to the national level (Alexiadou, 2016: p. 3; Schmidt, 2008). A case study on Slovenia is an interesting endeavour because it helps us ascertain how EU neoliberal educational discourse is received at the national level and how these influence the transformation and development of the post-socialist educational system (Silova, 2009).

The article originates primarily from policy studies, which are recognised as important meso-level theories for explaining Europeanisation. It is qualitatively oriented and draws on theoretical and empirical evidence. To address the research aim, we employ the following methods: (a) an analysis of relevant literature and secondary sources (a comprehensive review of the academic literature on EU (neoliberal) governance), (b) an analysis of formal documents and legal sources at the EU and national levels (an analysis of Slovenian educational legislation, EU official documents in the field of educational policy, non-official documents, press releases), (f) questionnaire distribution [mailed questionnaires that were sent to Slovenian educational experts who are also active at the EU/international level (n = 22), educational policy makers (n = 8), and stakeholders (headmasters) (n = 91)] (Štremfel, 2013).³

The first section is a review of theoretical considerations and empirical evidence on EU (neoliberal) educational governance as governance of goals, comparisons, problems/crisis and knowledge. In the second section, we focus on theoretical considerations of discursive institutionalism and its implications for Europeanization research. The third section deals with empirical evidence regarding the reception of the EU neoliberal governance discourse in the Slovenian educational space. Finally, the main findings are synthesised to serve as an explanation of relative openness of Slovenia towards EU neoliberal discourse and the implications of these insights for the understanding of the widening and deepening of the European educational space.

European Neoliberal Educational Governance

A number of authors (e.g. Walters and Haahr, 2005; Mitchell, 2006; Dale, 2008; Lange and Alexiadou, 2010; Gunter et al., 2016) have confirmed that the EU governance in the field of education policies has deeply rooted

3 We found questionnaires distributed for the purpose of the study (Štremfel, 2013) particularly interesting for illustrating theoretical premises of this article.

neoliberal premises and, as an instrument, reflects the ideas and mechanisms of the new public management. The EU is thus involved in the definition, structuring, monitoring, as well the evaluation of education and through the use of “soft governance” tools such as goals, benchmarks, indicators and international comparative achievement scales it coordinates the thinking and acting of EU member states, institutions and individuals (Nordin, 2014: p. 115).⁴ In scientific debates, summarized below, EU educational governance is presented as governance of goals, comparisons, problems/crisis and knowledge.

Governance of Goals

Quantitative measurements of progress of commonly agreed goals have become a central instrument for governing education in the EU and, at the same time, an important part of the normative discourse communicating what course of action is considered desirable and persuading the actors to perform in a similar way. Indicators and benchmarks (also developed on the basis of the findings of international comparative assessment studies) enable the assessment and comparison of the performance of member states in achieving common EU goals (*governance of goals*). Grek (2009) believes that within *governance of goals*, data and their management play a key role. Data enables governance through goal setting, whereby participant output is directed towards achieving goals. Upon publishing, these data serve as the instruments of encouragement and judgement of participants in terms of their output. They thus simultaneously represent the control of context and the autonomy of the actors operating within the context in relation to how they will achieve their goals. This is a system of discipline based on the judgement and classification of participants in achieving (jointly defined) goals.

Governance of Comparisons

Knowledge about member state performance in achieving commonly agreed goals is almost always contextualised in relation to other systems. Comparisons (commonly shown as an international spectacle of achievement or underachievement on comparative achievement scales) strengthen participants’ mutual responsibility for achieving common goals, legitimise political actions and thus create a new mode of governance. They mostly encompass a rationalistic approach to policy making, wherein (assessed) participants are implicitly under pressure to arrive as close as possible to what is considered ‘the best’ in accordance with special criteria

4 Ball (2015) denotes such measurement and monitoring tools as preferred techniques within the normative ideal of neoliberalism.

within a certain context of comparisons. In this regard, the leading assumption is that the most efficient (rationalist approach) and the most suitable (constructivist approach) decisions are adopted on the basis of objective data (March and Olsen, 1998). International comparative achievement scales hence exert double pressure on EU member states [the sense of their own (un)competitiveness compared with the performance of other members states, the feeling of ineffectiveness resulting from (non)achievement of common goals] and direct them towards achieving the strategic goals of the EU (Alexiadou, 2007; Ioannidou, 2007). Some authors (e.g. Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal, 2003) point out that in this respect, governance by comparison not only creates convergence (of goals and outcomes), but may also lead to uniformity in activity and thinking. Within the neoliberal philosophy, such competitive neutrality establishes relationships of rivalry as a means of increasing productivity, accountability and oversight.

Governance of Problems/Crisis

As far as transnational problem resolution is concerned, the governance of problems pertains to a situation wherein a group of countries recognise a common policy problem and unite their efforts in resolving this problem. Nóvoa (2002: p. 145) argues that the 'expert discourses' that emerge from the European Commission tend to homogenise 'problems' and 'solutions' and create the illusion of a common agenda. When an EU member state perceives a policy-related problem based on its ranking on an international comparative achievement scale, the most efficient policy models for problem resolution have often already been developed at the EU level. Member state uncertainty, how to resolve the problem itself and the pressure of competitiveness can explain their receptiveness to apparently neutral external solutions. Under this approach, then, the EU governance is seen as a way of gradually solving national problems by shifting problem solving capacity from the national to the supranational level (see also Alexiadou, 2014: p. 128).

Nordin (2014) points out that *crisis discourse* presents an important instrument of EU neoliberal educational governance.⁵ The crisis discourse has an epistemological approach coordinating ideas and exercising persuasive power to guide human thinking and action in a certain direction when communicated by powerful policy actors such as the EU. The crisis

5 Nordin (2014) recognised the similarities between crisis discourse and risk society (Beck, 1992). He argues that "While the risk society calculates possible risks in a distant and unknown future, the crisis discourse calls for immediate action in response to a situation already known (at least for those powerful actors communicating the crisis), changing the time horizon for those involved in the policy-making process in a more reactive direction" (Nordin, 2014: pp. 122–123).

discourse implies that action has to be taken urgently and immediately and that there is no option other than to act. According to Nordin (2014), it is especially evident in the EU documents from 2005 onwards, when EU realised its progress towards realizing Lisbon goals was very limited and from 2008 onwards, when global economic crisis emerged.⁶ The result shows that this normative discourse is becoming an important and powerful instrument of the EU seeking public legitimacy for extensive (EU and national) reforms (Robertson, 2008; Nordin, 2014: p. 109).

Governance of Knowledge

As evident from the discussion above in all presented forms of governance – governance of goals, comparisons and problems/crisis, apparently objective expert data play a key role. Apple (2001: p. 413) points out the essential advantage of the neoliberal discourse is in its efforts for political strategies to become neutral. When public policies and policy instruments are considered to be neutral, they turn into technical solutions to policy problems and are thus in lesser need of critical assessment or of being discussed by a wide circle of actors (Cort, 2010). With apparent neutrality (and the resulting emphasised role of experts and the expert knowledge), the EU neoliberal educational governance steers the member states towards achieving political (economic oriented) goals. The neoliberal shift towards economic goals is not only a shift in terms of the content of education, but also encompasses the entire ideology on how to steer society.

The neoliberal ideology as a means of steering society in the early stages of reinforcement of mutual cooperation in the field of education, was not only appealing for the EU because of the changes in the aim of education towards economic objectives (e.g. Holford and Mohorčič Špolar, 2012), but has also proven highly suitable when the EU was entering a sensitive policy field, where the member states had previously not been willing to relinquish their political power. It seems that it was only neutrality of the neoliberal discourse that was able to persuade them into a more committed mutual cooperation. Although cooperation between member states in the field of education remains non-mandatory, the new mode of EU (neoliberal) governance instruments contain a number of drivers that steer member states towards acting in the agreed-upon direction. Haahr

6 Schmidt (2008) recognizes the contribution of similar approaches – ideational institutionalism (Hay, 2001); constructivist institutionalism (Hay, 2006) and strategic constructivism (Jabko, 2006) – to this understanding. She justifies the added value of discursive institutionalism in terms of its focus on understanding discourse as interactive process. Since the main aim of this article is to explain the interactive process of translating neoliberal discourse from the EU to the national level, the article uses particularly discursive institutionalism as theoretical background.

(2004: p.210) argues that neoliberal governance includes a touch of freedom, yet simultaneously also the appeal of its use. Jacobsson (2004) attributes the secret behind it to a special combination of pressure it exerts and the actors' initiative and desire for voluntary policy change that it triggers. What makes neoliberal ideology (and consequently EU neoliberal educational governance) influential is the absence of questioning, surrender to what is seen as the implacable and irreversible logic of social reality (Bauman, 1999: p. 127).

Europeanization Through the Lens of Discursive Institutionalism

In theorizing EU influence of national policy, new institutionalist theories play an important role. The new institutionalisms (older new institutionalism of rational choice, sociological institutionalism, historical institutionalism, and more recent new institutionalisms, such as discursive institutionalism and constructivist institutionalism) share the conviction that the social world and actors' decision-making cannot be properly explained without taking into account the role of institutions in constituting the conditions under which actors make their moves and how they expect others to behave (Alasuutari, 2015: p. 164). "The emphasis in the new institutionalism is on how people actively construct meaning within institutionalized settings through language and other symbolic representations" (Meyer and Rowan, 2006: p. 6 in Nordin, 2014: p. 111). Yet there are significant differences between different new institutionalism approaches as to how they define the relationship between institutions and behaviour, and how they explain the origins of, and changes within, institutions (Alasuutari, 2015). Schmidt (2008) argues that the original versions of the three older new-institutionalisms tend to provide analytical ground for explaining continuity, but are less useful when we need to explain change. Discursive institutionalism therefore presents an attempt to generate more complex understandings on how structural constraints (particularly norms, values, world views, but also historical path dependence) can interact with discursive and symbolic practices, ideational flow and the agents abilities to influence the institutions and the course of change (Schmidt, 2012: p. 708).⁷ Discourse as defined by Schmidt (2008), serves as a more generic term that encompasses not only the substantive content of ideas but also the interactive process by which ideas are conveyed to influence the action of policy actors.

7 E.g. Brine (2006) reports that an important argument in these documents is that the low-skilled population present high risk for knowledge-economy.

According to Schmidt (2008), ideas differ in levels of generality – whether specific to policy, encompassing a wider program, or constituting an underlying philosophy – and types – such as cognitive and normative ideas. Specific policies present particular policy solutions proposed by policy makers for adoption. General programmes underpin policy ideas and may be cast as paradigms that reflect the underlying assumptions or organising principles orienting policy. They define “the problems to be solved by policies, the issues to be considered, the goals to be achieved, the norms, methods and instruments to be applied, and the objectives and ideals which all in all frame the more immediate policy ideas proposed as solutions for any given problem” (Schmidt, 2008: p. 307). Public philosophies are background ideas, acting as underlying assumptions, which are rarely contested. The content of ideas and the pertaining ideational discursive activity is divided into cognitive and normative types (Schmidt, 2008). Cognitive ideas serve to justify policies and programmes by speaking to their interest-based logic and necessity. They provide recipes, guidelines and maps for political action and explain “what is and what to do”. Normative ideas attach values to political action and serve to legitimize the policies in a programme through reference to their appropriateness. They present how policies and programmes resonate with public philosophies and provide answers to “what one ought to do” (Schmidt, 2008).

As already introduced, discourse is a more overarching concept than ideas. It refers not just to what is said (ideas) but also to who said what to whom, where, when, how, and why (discursive interactions). The interactive process of discourse may exert a causal influence beyond what discourse does in representing ideas and serves not just to express one set of actors’ strategic interests (cognitive ideas) or values (normative ideas), but also to persuade others of the necessity and/or appropriateness of a given course of action (Schmidt, 2008). Discourse institutionalism distinguishes between two aspects of discursive interaction, coordinative and communicative. The coordinative interaction is related to formulating the content of ideas and sharing a set of cognitive and normative ideas of education in epistemic communities. The communicative interaction present the interactive processes through which these ideas are presented, deliberated and legitimated as necessary and appropriate to the general public (Schmidt, 2008: p. 310).

Although discursive institutionalism was already questioned from the viewpoint of its necessity to explain policy change [see Ball (2011; 2012) and Schmidt (2012) for the response], many authors exposed its advantages in studying Europeanization of (education) policies (e.g. Schmidt and Radaelli, 2004; Wahlström and Sundberg, 2018). Ideas are

not geographically bound but evolve in the communication between actors at different levels of EU governance. Discursive institutionalism enables the better understanding of the actual practices through which EU discourse is incorporated in national context by changing the beliefs and expectations of national actors, including the change of preferences and strategies (Alasuutari, 2015; Featherstone, 2003). Discursive institutionalism therefore importantly contributes to an understanding of the complex and interactive process of EU influence in the sensitive policy field, where member states formally maintain sovereignty over their educational systems. Due to a lack of EU legal power, normative discourses are central to govern the field of education in the EU. Discursive power is used to persuade EU member states to coordinate their national policies and voluntarily strive towards agreed performance (governance of goals and governance of comparisons) and providing particular problematizations and proposed solutions (governance of problems/crisis) (Lange and Alexiadou, 2010; Lawn, 2011; Nordin, 2014).

Alasuutari (2015) asks what the actual neoliberal discourses are and how they are implemented in practice. Alexiadou (2016), Nordin (2014) and Wahlström and Sundberg (2018) discussed concrete examples of ideas and discourses applied in EU neoliberal educational governance in the following way. The Lisbon Summit (European Council, 2000) made up of European educational actors formed a coordinative normative discourse of common interests and similar worldviews. The paradigmatic principle following on from these background ideas was mainly that EU member states need to cooperate more closely to cope with global competition. The underlying assumption was that rapid societal changes related to the continuous development of the knowledge-based economy highlighted the need for people to be able to respond quickly to structural changes in their working lives. Accordingly, each national education system must prepare its students to be competitive in a global knowledge economy. The cognitive policy solution to this problem became lifelong learning and the key competencies concept (Wahlström and Sundberg, 2018). Through the working programmes Education and Training 2010 and 2020 (Council of the EU, 2002; 2009), these cognitive foregrounds of programmatic discourses were shared with the member states through communicative discourse. In order to realize them at the EU level as a whole, the governance architecture was built on the idea of governing member states, organisations and individuals to act consistently in accordance with the common objectives (Nordin, 2014). Benchmarks and indicators (also based on data of international comparative studies) have been introduced for monitoring progress. The data from international comparative assessment studies

have become an important indicator of national political and economic power (Wiseman, 2010). The belief occurred that the competitiveness of the economy and its position in the global marketplace will be increasingly dependent on the level of employees' knowledge and skills, whereby it is assumed there is a connection between countries' future economic performance and the current achievements of their school population. The presented discourse facilitates a deepening of the European cooperation in the field of education towards what is preferred by the EU, while the member states have over the past few years – in the circumstances of the economic crisis – been following the EU more so than before, aiming to maintain their competitiveness within the knowledge-based economy (also see Tsarouhas, 2009).

According to Alexiadou (2016) and Schmidt (2008), both, coordinative discourse, which present a neoliberal (economic oriented) content of education (e.g. knowledge-economy, human capital, competences, competitiveness) and communicative discourse, which is based on neoliberal ideology on how to steer society (e.g. through goals, standards, transparency, accountability, evidence-based policy making), are equally important. The latter covers the normative discourse about an appropriate institutional framework that enables a goal or idea to be achieved and a causal belief regarding how governance works and affects the achievement of goals. In the next section, we attempt to explain its reception on the case study of Slovenia.

Insights from Slovenia

The educational system in present-day Slovenia is characterised by a long history.⁸ A turning point in its development occurred in the 1990s, following Slovenia's independence in 1991. Slovenia introduced new legislation that regulates the entire educational system, from pre-school to university education (1993–1996). Since then, legislation that regulates the management, organisation and financing of education has undergone many changes. These changes relate to specific issues and have been, at least to a limited extent, subject to conformity with the requirements of Slovenia's membership in the EU (Ministry of Education and Sport, 2007). The Slovenian White paper on education (1995) as well Slovenian researchers report that from Slovenia's independence onwards, Europe has been seen as a very important reference in reforming the Slovenian educational system (Štrajcn, 2004: pp. 51–54). Kodelja (2007: p. 40) claims that the reform of the Slovenian educational system took place in line with the

8 According to Štremfel and Lajh (2012), the educational policy of Slovenia can be divided in four phases: imperialistic, supervised, sovereign and globalised.

common European heritage of political, cultural and moral values. Pluško (2004: p. 62) adds that the entry of Slovenia in the EU helped the country clarify some conceptual questions about the educational system and articulate the direction of its future educational priorities. Barle Lakota (2005) finds that in these reform processes, the EU was presented almost with mythic expectations and without any critical views about it.

Blokker (2005: p. 504) confirms the assumptions that in post-socialist countries, the West has been unproblematically presented as the embodiment of progress, providing ‘the normative affirmation of the Western modernity project’. The openness towards EU (neoliberal) governance mechanisms in these states thus can be explained by a desire to leave its eastern post-socialist past and become closer to the EU western values. Being left was not politically acceptable, presented with discourse of crisis and threat to international legitimacy. By focusing on the global, post-socialist states have constructed ways of reasoning that undermine divergent visions for education reforms and limit possibilities of imaging any alternative trajectories of post-socialist transformations (Silova, 2009; Chankseliani and Silova, 2018). “Although the emergence of Western neoliberal imaginaries is clearly visible in education policy narratives in many post socialist contexts, there are also multiple tensions, complexities and contradictions associated with the ongoing reconfigurations of education purposes and values, as well as with their subsequent translations into education policy and practice” (Chankseliani and Silova, 2018: p. 19).

In the following sections, we illustrate the reception of EU neoliberal educational governance in the Slovenian educational space. In line with the orientation of the article we focus on communicative discourse (the ways of steering national actors towards realizing EU (neoliberal) ideas).

Governance of Goals

In the study (Štremfel, 2013) 90% of policy makers and 88% of experts agree with the statement that short-, medium- and long-term EU goals and indicators measuring them are taken into consideration and thus play an important role in the development of Slovenian education policies and practices. It is even more interesting that only 45% of the stakeholders said they were aware of long-, medium- and short-term EU goals, but 79% of them agreed with the statement ‘I feel accountable for attaining these goals.’⁹ These findings correspond to the importance of individual accountability as an important mechanism of attaining commonly agreed goals in neoliberal governance. They also confirms that EU neoliberal

9 91% of participating stakeholders agreed with the statement: “I feel responsible for results of Slovenia in international comparative assessment studies”.

educational governance operates at a distance and with its latent pressures, directs actors towards achieving common EU goals, often without consciously knowing about it (e.g. Haahr, 2004).

Governance of Comparisons

The importance of international comparability of the Slovenian educational system is evident from the White Paper (2011: p. 25), indicating the following strategic goal: “At the state level, we have to clearly set and pave the way to the goal, that according to the quality of the presented knowledge, Slovenian students rank in at least the top third of the achievements of the students of the developed countries.”

According to the observations of the participating actors (Štremfel, 2013), experts in communicating the results of international comparative assessment studies in Slovenia mainly point out Slovenia’s ranking on international comparative achievement scales and focus on the explanations of good or poor performance of the participating countries (by means of the findings of scientific and expert research conducted in the field of education). The emphasis on international comparability in the Slovenian educational space can be explained by a post-socialist state desire to be aligned with EU western values (Silova, 2009) as well as competitiveness of the states in global knowledge economy (Wiseman, 2010).

Governance of Problems/Crisis

Actors participating in the survey (Štremfel, 2013) completely agreed with the statement that response to the results of international comparative assessment studies is more intensive, when Slovenia performs below the EU and OECD average. This is confirmed by the data that among seven identified EU strategic goals,¹⁰ a huge majority of participating actors (75% of policy makers, 46% of experts, 51% stakeholders) agreed that the most attention in Slovenia is paid to improving reading literacy of students. As the main reason for paying such attention to this, they highlight the below average results of Slovenia in PISA survey and consequently not attaining the particular EU goal.¹¹ These findings confirm that any deviation from the Western norms is recognized as a crisis, a danger and a

¹⁰ Improving reading literacy of students, improving mathematical literacy of students, improving science literacy of students, increasing participation of adults in lifelong learning, increasing the share of young population with completed upper-secondary education, reducing early school leaving, increasing the number of graduates in math and science.

¹¹ The study was performed in 2012, a year and a half after the launch of the PISA 2009 survey results, which for the first time since Slovenia’s participation in international comparative assessment studies revealed that the performance of Slovenian students is below the EU and OECD average.

decline in post-socialist member states (Silova, 2012) and that the arguments for the crisis gain momentum through the use of ‘soft governance’ practices built on comparative data (Grek and Lawn, 2009).

Slovenian actors (policy makers and experts), according to the study (Štremfel, 2013), believe that results of international comparative assessment studies allow the identification of national policy problems when it comes to Slovenia’s below-average results. However, Slovenian actors are not aware of the existence and influence of EU policy solutions to the identified national policy problems. The arguments about apparent neutrality of the neoliberal technologies, which turn into technical solutions to policy problems and are thus in lesser need of critical assessment (Cort, 2010) could explain such situation.

Governance of Knowledge

Slovenian actors (policy makers, experts, headmasters) trust the objectivity and neutrality of experts and expert knowledge operated at the EU level. For example, 100% of policy makers, 96% of experts and 84% of stakeholders participating in the study (Štremfel, 2013) responded that they trust in the expertise and objectivity of researchers and other experts involved in the design and implementation of international comparative assessment studies at the EU level. The Slovenian actors as well trust in appropriate scientific background and methodological framework of these studies. The same is true for national experts, who are perceived as the most important actors in the transfer of EU agendas to the national educational space. For example, 88% of policy makers, 91% of experts and 96% of stakeholders participating in the study agreed that researchers and other experts are the most important actors in these processes. In this context, Porter (1995: p. 45) believes in considering whether ‘the numbers are accepted as valid’. The author also maintains that here, “technologies of trust” operate because of the role of experts in the construction of statistical indicators; the measures succeed by giving direction to the very activities that are being measured.

Regarding evidence-based education as an integral part of the global order, which is supported by the neoliberal agenda (Shahjahan, 2011: p. 193) and EU educational governance (Cort, 2010), Slovenian actors agree that international (including EU) cooperation triggered the introduction and development of the concept in Slovenia. The White paper on education (2011) states that one of Slovenia’s most important goals in the field of education today is the establishment of a culture of quality and assessment, which is based on the concept of evidence-based policy, where the participation in international comparative assessment studies plays an

important role. However, 88% of policy makers and 96% of experts in the study (Štremfel, 2013) agreed that evidence-based education policymaking is not well developed in Slovenian educational space (meaning that Slovenian education policies and practices are not based on expert data). Additionally, 63% of policy makers, 81% of experts and 84% of stakeholders participating in the study agreed with the statement 'International comparative assessment studies in Slovenia are often used for as an argument for politically motivated changes in the field of education'. In order to overcome such shortcomings in the development and use of the evidence-based policy making in Slovenia, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (2017) has been establishing new comprehensive model for identifying and ensuring quality in the field of education. The new model, among other aims, plans to more systematically use the results of national research and international comparative assessment studies results in the development of Slovenian educational policies and practices. These endeavours could be understood as a desire to enhance national trustworthiness of the system and the strengthening of its international legitimacy (Chankseliani and Silova, 2018).

Conclusions

This article has attempted to demonstrate the role the EU (neoliberal) discourse plays in the Europeanization of the (post-socialist) national educational space. From that purpose, the logic behind EU neoliberal educational governance has been introduced. The way it influences national educational spaces has been theoreticized by using a discursive institutionalism approach. The reception of neoliberal discourse in Slovenia as a post-socialist EU member state has been explained by providing empirical examples and their theoretical underpinnings.

Analysed data reveals the relative openness of Slovenia towards the EU (neoliberal) educational discourse. This have been explained by interrelation of various factors, including a) the design of EU neoliberal educational governance as governance of goals, comparisons, problems/crisis; b) strong communicative and persuasive discourse (e.g. accountability, inevitability) used by European Commission for steering member states towards commonly agreed goals (coordinative discourse); c) the desire of Slovenia as new post-socialist state to comply with Western norms and d) national institutional context and specific institutional settings (as external factors which created a receptive environment for new neoliberal ideas). As such, this article contributes a small but, in light of the lack of empirical studies in the field, important understanding of the role neoliberal

discourse has in the deepening and widening of the European educational space in last two decades.

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