

Academic freedom and higher education governance in the Western Balkans: The case of Kosovo

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Like other transitional countries, the Western Balkans face educational challenges due to the long transition period, respectively centralised educational activities associated with a dearth of scientific activities, and limited academic freedom. The previous centralised political and economic system in the Western Balkans created the academic community's dependence on the political system in some of these new countries. Kosovo is a point in the case. The purpose of this study is to address some aspects which have an impact on academic freedom within higher education institutions (HEIs) in Kosovo: (1) freedom to research and teach; (2) freedom of academic exchange and dissemination; (3) institutional autonomy; (4) campus integrity; and (5) freedom of academic and cultural expression. To analyse universities' challenges concerning academic freedom, we conducted a survey with academic staff at the largest public university in Kosovo, the University of Prishtina. This study is the first attempt to construct and analyse the academic freedom, providing a framework for analysis and debate of academic freedom in Kosovo. The results show that compared to previous decades (1981-1999), there is improved academic freedom in Kosovo. However, considering the latest developments and opportunities coming from the European Union (EU) programs and cooperation with EU universities, there is still a possibility of further advancing academic freedom within HEI, focusing on supporting academic integrity, institutional sustainability, and cooperation.

Introduction

Apart from academic development and research activities, nowadays, academic freedom is crucial for universities to support institutional promotion and social inclusion. During the last decade, the Western Balkans' main challenges were political disputes, financial crises, and a lack of research and innovation, which also influenced academic freedom. Academic freedom is crucial for the EU countries characterised by democratic institutions and a sufficient legal framework for academic freedom. According to Karran (2007), who studied academic freedom in 23 European countries, Finland and Germany ensure academic freedom through strong legislative protection, whereas Italy and the United Kingdom have low legislative protection.

Aarrevaara (2010) also analysed the influence of key actors in higher education in ten decision-making areas. To assess which actors were perceived as the most influential, the questionnaire considered the government or other external stakeholders, institutional managers, academic unit managers, faculty committees or boards, individual academic staff, and students. Compared to other European countries, only in Germany did the government or other external stakeholders have an influential role in selecting key administrators.

This study elaborates on Kosovo's development prospects; thus, it provides background to the country's situation, beginning by examining the major educational and institutional obstacles that existed before and during the 1999 Kosovo conflict. In Kosovo, under the existing legislative framework, organisational autonomy, i.e. university structures, and several decision-making bodies are elected by the Ministry of Education. As a result, there is an impact of government on higher education institutions governance. The paper aims to analyse academic freedom, although the paper's current limitation is the lack of sufficient data to calculate the *Academic Freedom Index* (AFI) for Kosovo, which is entirely missing in the literature. Apart from AFI, it's crucial to tackle academic freedom constraints, as academic freedom has been challenged by several obstacles and ongoing processes within higher education institutions. These include ethnic conflict, local corruption, financial resources, bureaucratic bottlenecks overloading academics with administrative duties, internal governance and other issues deemed inappropriate for academic freedom.

These constraints are even more challenging in transition countries due to fragile institutions and a lack of experience and democratic values. In addition, the inadequacies in the academic integrity of staff at HEIs lead to more extensive monitoring by university management, resulting in decreased academic freedom and more interference. According to Altbach (2001), weak traditions of academic freedom, university systems dependent on governments with only limited popularity or legitimacy, and decades of severe repression have made it difficult to establish a strong tradition of academic freedom quickly in many transition countries.

The study addressed the following research questions:

- (a). Is there sufficient academic freedom in HEIs in Kosovo, considering the Western Balkans' previous political challenges?
- (b). Did the European Union (EU) programs and EU instruments ensure a better educational environment in the Western Balkans, respectively, higher academic freedom at HEI-s in Kosovo?
- (c). Is there sufficient information on HEIs in Kosovo about academic freedom and the related institutional framework?

The paper is structured as follows: Following the introduction, there is a review of the literature, followed by the methods employed and a presentation of the results. The main findings are provided in detail. Conclusions outline the main open questions.

Theoretical framework

Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are crucial values of the European higher education sector. However, academic freedom and institutional autonomy are often challenged by political crises, during which these fundamental values are particularly challenged in countries with a lack of institutional autonomy of democratic societies (Anderson & Johnson, 1998). Furthermore, academic freedom and institutional autonomy

are nowadays vital features of democratic societies. The fundamental principles of the *Magna Charta Universitatum* (n.d.) underline the need for institutions to be independent of political authority and economic power. The preamble to the 2012 Council of Europe recommendation also states that "higher education is crucial to the development and maintenance of the democratic culture and is indispensable for democratic societies to become a reality as well as for the social cohesion of European societies" (Council of Europe, 2012).

The importance of academic freedom and autonomy is crucial also for European universities, which is reflected in the findings of the European University Association's *Trends 2010*, reporting that 43% of university respondents viewed autonomy reform as one of the most critical institutional developments of the past decade (Sursock & Smidt 2010, 18). The European University Association's *Lisbon Declaration* (EUA, 2007) sets out four basic dimensions of autonomy: (a) academic autonomy (deciding on degree supply, curriculum and methods of teaching, deciding on areas, scope, aims, and methods of research); (b) financial autonomy (acquiring and allocating funding, deciding on tuition fees, accumulating surplus); (c) organisational autonomy (setting university structures and statutes, making contracts, electing decision-making bodies and persons); and (d) staffing autonomy (responsibility for recruitment, salaries, and promotions).

Apart from other autonomy dimensions, financial autonomy is crucial for universities to achieve their strategic aims. Autonomy is connected with political interference, as in most Western Balkans countries HEIs receive their core public funding through block grants. According to Berdahl (2010), the concept of academic freedom emerged from Humboldt's Berlin University in about 1812, involving the terms *Lehrfreiheit* (freedom of the teacher) and *Lernfreiheit* (freedom of the student), in which sense, both of these freedoms are important.

Indeed, most academic freedom issues that have arisen in the US have pertained to individual scholars and their rights to teach and research freely. Berdahl (2010) concluded that, as a political scientist who has surveyed relations between universities and governments over many years, most of the contentious issues have related to autonomy issues and not academic freedom. Nevertheless, one recognises that governments, external donors, foundations, or business corporations awarding research grants might impose conditions on the recipient universities, potentially violating the institutions' academic freedom. According to Fındıklı (2022), academic freedom is a concept or even a universal principle and an eminent attribute of the academic enterprise, specifically universities. Furthermore, it is an inseparable part of the academic world. Bernasconi (2021) analysed the same topic, and according to him, academic freedom is synonymous with university autonomy.

Furthermore, university autonomy was traditionally seen as a precondition for academic freedom (Anderson & Johnson, 1998) and included the university's independence from the state in academic matters. In other words, many universities are pressured to act like businesses and enterprises (Anderson & Johnson, 1998; Ball, 2008; Becker, 2009) as they have to take care of their financial sustainability. Hence, university autonomy is no longer

perceived as a protecting factor for academic freedom, but even a danger to it by many academics (see Zgaga et al., 2015; Erkkilä & Piironen, 2014; Zgaga, 2012, Wright & Ørberg, 2011).

Hancock (2020) highlighted the issue of protecting academic freedom from foreign influence. According to him, the protection of academic freedom of speech in the context of national debates on foreign influence in higher education institutions should be an unbreakable principle for every academic. Especially when there is a situation where academic capacity in a country is weakened and academic freedom is greatly endangered by political influences. Karran and Mallinson (2019) claimed that academic freedom is weaker in universities founded after 1991, while stronger in Russell group universities. Also, Steinmetz (2018) has researched this topic in the context of social sciences. Martin-Sardesai et al. (2017) have investigated the relationship between research evaluation and academic freedom in Australian universities. Their results show that research assessments in Australia are undoing the academic freedom that is essential to successful academic research. However, there is little empirical evidence that can prove this finding more clearly.

Academic freedom is currently one of the main critical issues under analysis, especially in countries dominated by long-term political, ethnic, and other institutional challenges, such as Western Balkan countries. As a young country, Kosovo faced different institutional challenges, including the educational system. As the country aspires towards European integration, it is very important to fulfill EU standards in education, including academic freedom. Advancing, promoting, and protecting the academic freedom is crucial for the higher education system in Kosovo, as apart from the University of Prishtina most of the public and private universities in Kosovo are newly established. Therefore, they need to promote the academic freedom to increase their performance, but also because this promotion will increase the prospects for cooperation with EU universities in different EU projects and programs.

With regard to modernisation and adapting the European system, although Kosovo is not yet a signatory country of the Bologna Declaration (EHEA, 1999), almost all HEIs have introduced a three-tier structure and European credit transfer system. Changes in the higher education system according to Bologna Declaration started in 2000 (EACEA, 2012). Furthermore, the *Kosovo Accreditation Agency* was established in 2004 as an independent agency which will guarantee the quality of education and research, and the criteria of the Agency are in accordance with the European Network of the Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA, 2021).

The additional positive effort of the higher education system in Kosovo is the attempt by universities to participate in EU programs such as *Tempus* and *Erasmus*, which support Kosovo in capacity building and also from the cultural perspective, teamwork, and cooperation by promoting national identity, supported by the best European values. Finally, the lack of implementation of European standards and academic freedom in Kosovo within the higher education system could have negative spill over effects not only

on the educational system but also on economic development, including labour market prospects and improved perspectives for younger generations.

Academic freedom as a complex issue has been analysed by many authors considering that universities are unique institutions in democratic societies. In this paper we seek to explain the core dimensions of the Academic Freedom Index regarding the Kosovo education system, and furthermore, at the end of the paper, these dimensions will be explained, supported by statistical outcomes for Kosovo's higher education system.

- (i). The first dimension explains to what extent scholars are free to develop and pursue their own research and teaching agendas without interference? Furthermore, the idea is to determine the research agenda of scholars or teaching curricula, if scholars are subject to interference or incentivised to self-censor in Kosovo's higher education system.
- (ii). Second, to what extent are scholars free to exchange and communicate research ideas and findings? Whether, academic exchange and dissemination is subject to censorship, self-censorship, or other restrictions in Kosovo's higher education system.
- (iii). Third, to what extent do universities exercise institutional autonomy in practice? If, universities exercise complete institutional autonomy from nonacademic actors in Kosovo's higher education system.
- (iv). Fourth, to what extent are campuses free from politically motivated surveillance or security infringements? If campus integrity is comprehensively respected; if there are cases of surveillance or intimidation from external actors.
- (v). Fifth, is there academic freedom and freedom of cultural expression related to political issues? If universities are respected by public authorities, are there restrictions on academic freedom or cultural expression?
- (vi). Finally, it is crucial to know if constitutional provisions for the protection of academic freedom exist in a new country such as Kosovo. Another important issue is to analyse whether the institutions are implementing constitutional provisions, considering that many rules and provisions are in place but there is a lack of implementation.

In addition, this paper takes into account the Western Balkans, specifically Kosovo's educational circumstances of lacking information with regard to educational issues and specifically academic freedom. According to Zgaga et al. (2013), due to the complex circumstances, the first wave of legislation was delayed by about a decade in some countries compared to other former Yugoslavian countries, e.g., Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Montenegro. In contrast, only Slovenia – which remained outside the armed conflicts after 1991 – developed a specific reform. Another very specific – and contradictory – situation occurred in Serbia, where Milošević's government imposed a legal amendment in 1998, which strongly interfered with universities' traditional autonomy and provoked students' and teachers' mass protest movement. At the University of Prishtina, which was seen as a centre of Kosovo Albanian cultural identity, education in the Albanian language was abolished, and Albanian professors were also

dismissed *en masse* 1991 until 1999. In response, Kosovo Albanians boycotted state schools and set up a parallel Albanian-language education system (Clark, 2000).

Additionally, Zgaga et al. (2014) analysed that the specific history of the Western Balkans is also reflected in the perception of the role of higher education institutions, showing that in the countries where the recent conflict was most serious (i.e. Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina), higher education institutions are expected to contribute to the reconstruction of society more than supporting economic growth. This article includes some historical background of education in Kosovo to help understand and analyse academic freedom issues. The Kosovo-Albanian population during the 500-year rule of the Ottoman Empire had almost no education of their own in their mother tongue. The first document in the Albanian language dates from 1462. During this period, only religious schools were active, controlled by the Ottoman Empire. Despite Albanian representatives' requests to allow Albanian schools, this did not find support from the Ottoman Empire, though there were schools organised by the Albanians of that time (Kostovicova, 2005). There was no organised institutional system of education in Kosovo between the two world wars, a situation that contributed to the illiteracy of Albanians. This situation lasted until the end of World War II (Kastrati, 2016), when Yugoslavia was established, in which Kosovo became a part.

Due to the new reality, some reforms were made in Kosovo after 1946 by Yugoslavia. Despite the achievements in eradicating illiteracy, education by 1968 was highly politicised. So, Albanian education had many difficulties because Kosovo did not have many rights under the new Yugoslavia. Serbian leaders did not allow Kosovo Albanians an emancipation, by treating them as an ethnic minority, though Kosovo had almost a similar political status to other former Yugoslav republics. In 1968, with the ousting of Serbian nationalists from power, efforts for constitutional change began. Albanian became the official language in Kosovo. As a result of these developments in Kosovo, in 1970, the University of Prishtina was established as the first university institution (Kosova Education Center, 2000). Despite the fact that it arrived in Kosovo as part of the former Yugoslavia at the end of World War II, the education system in Kosovo has been influenced by the didaktik education tradition, according to Tahirsylaj (2021).

Due to changes to the 1963 Yugoslavian constitution and the subsequent adoption of a new constitution in 1974, Kosovo was moving closer to becoming a specific political entity. This constitution gave Kosovo and Vojvodina the status of "autonomous provinces". Kosovo's political structures could establish direct links with Yugoslavia's federal authorities and bypass the Serbian Republican authorities. The federal constitution of 1974 gave Kosovo *de facto* republican status, but not *de jure* status. Without strengthening the constitutional element of 1974, the education of the population in Kosovo has made considerable progress. Kosovar Albanians already had a university education in their language. During the period 1974-1981, the Albanians in Yugoslavia experienced rapid development in culture, education and general social emancipation (Ingrao & Emmert, 2012).

In 1977-1978, the University of Prishtina had 40,820 students in 8 faculties, an academy of arts and 9 schools of higher education with 5,414 university professors. After Tito's death in 1981, Albanian students at the University of Pristina demanded political and constitutional progress for the Albanian population in Yugoslavia. On 11 and 26 March, and 1 and 2 April, 1981, Albanian students protested in many cities in Kosovo (Kabashi, 2016). These protests served as a pretext for Serbian nationalism's revival, which eagerly threatened the Albanians in Yugoslavia to interrupt their educational and socio-economic development.

After the 1981 protests, many Kosovo Albanian students were accused of hostile activities against Yugoslavia. Albanians were deprived of university education on the grounds that this university was considered to be the cradle of Albanian nationalism in Yugoslavia. Many of them were imprisoned under the pretext of being organisers of the 1981 demonstrations of Albanian students, which created an extraordinary pressure from the Belgrade authorities on the University of Prishtina. It is essential to note that although it was still Yugoslavia, there were growing contradictions between different republics. Serbia became dominating in the Yugoslav Federation, with its nationalistic and ethnocentric approach toward Kosovo and other parts such as Croatia and Bosnia (Mrak et al., 2004). In 1989, Slobodan Milosevic forcibly seized Kosovo's autonomy. The conflict reached a new stage of intensity, and within a short time Albanian academics, professors, and assistants were fired, denied education in their language, and exposed to massive abuse of their human rights and civil liberties.

Faced with these challenges, Kosovar Albanians engaged in a non-violent campaign to gain their right to self-determination. On 2 July 1990, Albanian members of the Kosovo Parliament, who had previously voted under duress to end Kosovo's autonomy, cast their ballots to establish Kosovo as a Republic on equal terms with the other six Yugoslavian Republics. On 7 September 1990, Kosovar deputies, meeting in the town of Kaçanik, voted for a constitution for their republic. At this point, independence was not on the agenda because, although the war had begun, Yugoslavia still existed (Demjaha, 2017). From 1991 to 1999, the education system in Kosovo operated in a parallel system. The University of Prishtina operated outside the teaching and research infrastructure. The academics, students and staff of this university were removed from its premises because they did not obey the Serbian authorities, who had discriminatory policies towards Albanian education in Kosovo.

Teaching processes continued in private homes, financed mainly by the Kosovar diaspora, though in the period 1989-1996, the number of Albanian students almost halved. By 1995, there were about 12,200 Albanian students at the University of Prishtina. In this challenging period, the main objective of the university was survival. Academic life, research, and curriculum development, meanwhile, were marginalised. After the liberation of Kosovo, the University of Prishtina reopened in 1999/2000, and Kosovo Albanian students and academic staff returned to their teaching facilities immediately after the end of the war in 1999. At the time, infrastructure reconstruction was necessary because of the damage caused during the war (Baliqi, 2010).

As can be understood, since 1991, the education system of Kosovo has been organised within a specific parallel system. After 1999, Kosovo's education system recognised the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) authority and covered education for Albanian, Turkish, and Bosniak ethnic groups. In addition to Kosovo's education system, there is a Serbian education system in Northern Mitrovica that recognises Serbia's authority and covers Serbian education. Since 2000, the University in Mitrovica located in the northern part of this city and entirely controlled by Serbs has been an educational and cultural centre for the Serb minority in Kosovo (Vukoičić & Milinčić, 2020). This university operates under the curricula of universities in Serbia. There are no Albanian students, but there are students from the Bosniak, Gorani, and Roma communities in Kosovo. The United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) helped establish and develop the University in Mitrovica during the first years after the war.

The University in Mitrovica is functioning under challenging processes as the local population in the north lives in specific circumstances, as the region is not integrated but is divided and managed by Belgrade institutions (Tahir Sylaj, 2008). It should be noted that there have been significant improvements in the integration of Serbs within the unique Kosovo education system. However, it remains a highly politicised and sensitive issue that should be analysed within a broader political context (Popovci, 2002). According to Nikoçeviq-Kurti and Saqipi (2022) the quality of education in Kosovo has suffered significantly as a result of political developments before and after the 1999 war. Besides the University of Prishtina, Kosovo's government decided to establish new public universities in Kosovo. From 2008 until 2015, many public universities in Kosovo were established, such as the Universities of Prizreni, Peja, Gjakova, Mitrovica, Gjilani and the University of Applied Sciences in Ferizaj (Table 1 below).

Some of these public universities, such as University of Peja and University of Prizren, offer teaching for Bosniak, Gorani, and Turkish student minorities. Also, international actors have established institutions that compete with public institutions to provide higher education. Thus, the American University of Kosovo (AUK) was established in a partnership with the US-based Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), offering economics, media politics, and other programs (Lagiewski & Lagiewski, 2006). According to Bicaj and Buza (2020) the roles and responsibilities of teachers and students in Kosovo as well as throughout the globe have changed in accordance with technological, social, scientific, and economic changes. During these changes, teachers have a great impact on the education system of this country.

The legal framework with regard to academic freedom in Kosovo is based on the law on higher education and determined by the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo (SPHERE, 2018). According to Article 11 all licensed higher education institutions in the Republic of Kosovo must ensure:

- a. Academic freedom of staff and students, which must be guaranteed in the HEI's statutes;
- b. Freedom of association and cooperation with other institutions, at the institutional level and at the level of their main groups, such as students, teachers, and other categories.

Although rules and regulations in place are the typical characteristics of a transition country like Kosovo, implementing these procedures in ensuring academic freedom is challenging. In general, it is essential to point out that public universities are flexible in determining content and teaching methods by their management and academic staff, according to the *Draft Law on Higher Education in the Republic of Kosovo* (2011, Article 8).

Table 1 provides summary information on enrolments in Kosovo's public and private universities for the 2021-22 academic year.

Table 1: Numbers of students in Kosovo's universities (2021-2022)
Source: Statistics Agency of Kosovo (2022)

Sector	University	Bachelor	Master	PhD
Public	University of Prishtina	24,551	5,899	328
	University of Prizren	3,354	303	-
	University of Peja	6,825	1544	-
	University of Gjakova	1,447	30	-
	University of Gjilan	1,874	209	-
	University of Mitrovica	1,714	192	-
	University of Ferizaj	1,231	249	-
	Faculty of Islamic Studies	252	15	-
	Kosovo Academy for Public Safety	171	-	-
	Total	41,419	8,441	328
Private college	AAB College	10,320	1008	-
	American University of Kosovo (AUK-RIT)	561	15	-
	Business College	253	134	-
	IBMC	241	69	-
	QEAP Heimerer	853	192	-
	Rezonanca	1,352	99	-
	Riininvest College	754	129	-
	Tempulli College	84	50	-
	UBT College	10,642	1,299	-
	Evolution Academy	500	40	-
	Dardania College	370	40	-
	ESLG	30	88	-
	Universum College	2,776	273	-
	Pjeter Budi College	29	-	-
	Total	28,765	3,436	-

Method

Population and sample

The targeted population was academic staff, such as senior professors and young teaching assistants, considered representative of the educated Kosovo population since they came from all regions of Kosovo. Table 2 gives an overview of academic staff numbers in Kosovo. The sample with only 100 respondents was designed to achieve a high response rate and ensure response quality, considering that academic freedom is a specific issue with few people having enough information to debate about it in Kosovo.

Table 2: Numbers of academic staff in Kosovo's universities
Source: Statistics Agency of Kosovo (2022)

Sector	University	No. academic staff
Public	University of Prishtina	1323
	University of Prizren	215
	University of Peja	142
	University of Gjakova	109
	University of Gjilan	119
	University of Mitrovica	138
	University of Ferizaj	48
	Faculty of Islamic Studies	26
	Kosovo Academy for Public Safety	34
	Total	2154
Private college	AAB College	868
	American University of Kosovo (AUK-RIT)	64
	Business College	69
	IBMC	43
	QEAP Heimerer	103
	Rezonanca	360
	Riinvest College	84
	Tempulli College	17
	UBT College	1021
	Evolution Academy	46
	Dardania College	35
	ESLG	50
	Universum College	182
	Pjeter Budi College	18
Total	2960	

Data collection: Survey

The survey was administered online mainly to academic staff at the University of Prishtina in Kosovo during December 2021. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the research and their anonymity was maintained. The profile of our sample matched the

profile of the population quite well and the survey remained open until the desired number (N=100) was attained. The design was based on Kinzelbach et al. (2000; see Table 1 in Kinzelbach et al., 2021), from which the Academic Freedom Index was derived. The survey included six questions, namely: (1) freedom to research and teach; (2) freedom of academic exchange and dissemination; (3) institutional autonomy; (4) campus integrity; and (5) freedom of academic and cultural expression; (6) existence of constitutional provisions for the protection of academic freedom. Each question had five response options (Appendix 1).

Data analysis

Only descriptive statistics with results in the form of percentages are presented. The data does not enable directly comparing the academic freedom index with other countries, some comparisons are made between Kosovo and other countries by using the report by Kinzelbach et al. (2021).

Results and discussion

Table 3 presents the responses to the six questions advanced in the earlier section on theoretical framework.

Table 3: Academic freedom in Kosovo (N=100) (Source: Authors' survey, 2021)

Question	Response	Percent
i. To what extent are scholars free to develop and pursue their own research and teaching agendas without interference?	Moderately restricted	6%
	Mostly free	67%
	Fully free	27%
ii. To what extent are scholars free to exchange and communicate research ideas and findings?	Moderately restricted	4%
	Mostly free	70%
	Fully free	26%
iii. To what extent do universities exercise institutional autonomy in practice?	Moderate autonomy	24%
	Substantial autonomy	72%
	Complete autonomy	4%
iv. To what extent are campuses free from politically motivated surveillance or security infringements?	Severely restricted	3%
	Moderately restricted	68%
	Mostly free	29%
v. Is there academic freedom and freedom of cultural expression related to political issues?	Weakly respected by public authorities	8%
	Somewhat respected by public authorities	13%
	Mostly respected by public authorities	79%
vi. Do constitutional provisions for the protections of academic freedom exist?	Yes	77%
	Other or undetermined	10%
	Missing	13%

Based on these results, it can be stated that there is a fair degree of academic freedom in research and teaching activities in Kosovo universities, considering the country's long transition. With few exceptions the majority of scholars are free to develop and pursue

their research and teaching agendas without interference, and there is a positive perception of academic freedom. The survey responses help to identify some main conditions suggested for the promotion of academic freedom in Kosovo:

- Financial autonomy and sustainability of the universities from the government, which could be achieved by increasing participation of HEIs in EU projects and funds;
- Implementation of the constitutional provisions for the protection of academic freedom and more information about this legal framework;
- Increase the academic integrity of the academic staff thereby minimising opportunities for management interference and monitoring on the educational process;
- Orientation of graduates towards the private sector, and less interest in employment at universities, which will cause less interference from politics in the higher education system.

Comparisons between Western Balkan countries

According to Kinzelbach et al., (2021), for a global comparison of AFI scores (scaled 0–1), it is used to group countries, assigning "A" status to all countries with an AFI score of between 1.0 and 0.8; "B" status between 0.8 and 0.6; "C" status between 0.6 and 0.4; "D" status between 0.4 and 0.2; and "E" status between 0.2 and 0.0. Comparing the Western Balkans, including Croatia as an EU member state, the results are as follows: Albania is part of Group "A" with an AFI index of 0.840, followed by Croatia with an AFI index of 0.881, while Kosovo has status "B" with 0.783, followed by Serbia with 0.726 and Bosnia and Herzegovina with 0.686. In the worst position for the Western Balkans, in "C" Status (0.4–0.6) is Montenegro with an AFI Index of 0.508. North Macedonia is not yet included in AFI due to insufficient coder numbers.

Although the data obtained in this study does not directly compare the academic freedom index with other countries, some comparisons can be made between Kosovo and other countries by using the study performed by Kinzelbach et al., (2021). Based on the findings, Kosovo scores very high in terms of academic freedom compared to the Western Balkans and some EU universities, especially if we consider the political and institutional challenges faced by the University of Prishtina. The present study's findings show that 94% of respondents stated that they are 'mostly free' or 'fully free' to develop and pursue their own research and teaching agendas without interference.

The Zgaga et al. (2013) study of Western Balkans countries suggested that in Serbia, for example, the idea of academic autonomy is connected to the tradition of self-governance under former Yugoslavia (which Kosovo was part of), which has resulted in a significant autonomy for individuals and their irresponsible behaviour, to the detriment of institutional quality. Additional factors accounting for promoting academic freedom in Kosovo are openness and cooperation with EU universities in various exchange programs (*Tempus, Erasmus*) and a favourable attitude to the Bologna Process. The positive attitude of Kosovo's academic staff towards Bologna is confirmed by a recent study suggesting that only Kosovo scored positive (+0.48), while the mean score for the Balkans region is negative: -0.45, and it is particularly negative in Croatia (-1.05) and Bosnia and

Herzegovina (-1.02).¹ Taken together, the internationalisation of higher education may have contributed to academic freedom.

Conclusions and recommendations

The findings reported that despite the political and institutional challenges, Kosovo made progress in the academic and research framework during the current decade. The period of political and economic transition has influenced freedom of expression, enabling younger generations to express different thoughts and ideas more easily. The freedom to exchange and communicate research ideas and findings has progressed, with a significant percentage of academics speaking out in favour of the freedom to exchange and communicate research ideas and findings. Regarding the extent to which universities exercise institutional autonomy in practice, the university has substantial autonomy to exercise its activity, detecting fewer interferences of various natures in academic institutions' activities. However, due to the long transition process, politics in Kosovo has aimed to extend political authority in public universities' management; therefore this influence is one of the challenges facing Kosovo's public universities.

An additional critical issue addressed in this paper is not the lack of constitutional provisions to protect academic freedom, as the main current problem lies in its implementation instead. Respondents' information is limited regarding this issue, though Kosovo institutions must introduce and implement academic freedom as a legal category, effectively and actually. However, despite these figures, HEIs in Kosovo still need to promote and disseminate research findings related to academic work, as the exchange and communication of research ideas from academic staff will have an impact on student competencies and their ability to adapt to labour market demands. The other crucial issue which supports academic freedom in Kosovo is internationalisation as HEIs and other local institutions in Kosovo benefited from international presences such as the UN, EU, IMF, WB, and other organisations. Qorraj (2016) noted that the Western Balkan countries in partnership with EU universities within EU educational programs such as *Erasmus*, *Horizon 2020*, and other relevant projects, ensured sustainable reforms. The main lesson to be learned from the University of Prishtina in Kosovo as a young country is that, despite the long time political pressure from 1981 and long transition from 2000, the EU framework of education that Kosovo is adopting, including the Bologna Process partnership and exchange, is facilitating Kosovo higher educational institutions towards EU best practices. The main recommendations for further development of academic freedom in Kosovo are:

¹ The Zgaga et al. (2013) study used questionnaire with respondents – academic staff ranging from professors to assistants – being asked if the Bologna Process has contributed importantly to the quality of their institutions. The study searched for 'fans' and 'opponents'; for this reason, the answers are evaluated on a scale from +2 (strongly agree) to -2 (strongly disagree), while neutral answers (i.e., those who responded "neither agree nor disagree" or "no opinion") were eliminated from the calculations.

- (i). Increase and promote the role of academic freedom among the scholars in the HE system by informing them about the existence of constitutional provisions regarding academic freedom and the importance of their implementation;
- (ii). Set up the monitoring mechanism by international organisations or governments in order to protect academic freedom;
- (iii). Discuss and debate about academic freedom with civil society and other relevant stakeholders;
- (iv). Continuously meet the requirements of ENQA (European Network of the Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) and other organizations that promote educational quality, including academic freedom.
- (v). Continue with the implementation of the European model of schooling, including open science and exchange programs, in order to ensure a climate for institutional change and cooperation towards an increase in academic freedom in the country.

Limitations and future research

The paper's main limitation is the limited sample size, which is insufficient to measure Kosovo's Academic Freedom Index, that could ensure the country's data and information concerning academic freedom. Nevertheless, this is the first attempt in this paper to describe the Kosovar higher education system with regard to academic freedom.

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Appendix: Survey - Academic Freedom Index

1. To what extent are scholars free to develop and pursue their own research and teaching agendas without interference?

- (a) Completely restricted
- (b) Severely restricted
- (c) Moderately restricted
- (d) Mostly free
- (e) Fully free

2. To what extent are scholars free to exchange and communicate research ideas and findings?

- (a) Completely restricted
- (b) Severely restricted
- (c) Moderately restricted
- (d) Mostly free
- (e) Fully free

3. To what extent do universities exercise institutional autonomy in practice?

- (a) No autonomy at all
- (b) Minimal autonomy
- (c) Moderate autonomy
- (d) Substantial autonomy
- (e) Complete autonomy

4. To what extent are campuses free from politically motivated surveillance?

- (a) Completely restricted
- (b) Severely restricted
- (c) Moderately restricted
- (d) Mostly free
- (e) Fully free

5. Is there academic freedom and freedom of cultural expression related to political issues?

- (a) Not respected by public authorities
- (b) Weakly respected by public authorities
- (c) Somewhat respected by public authorities
- (d) Mostly respected by public authorities
- (e) Fully respected by public authorities

6. Do constitutional provisions for the protection of academic freedom exist?

- (a) No
- (b) Yes
- (c) Constitution suspended
- (d) Other or undetermined
- (e) Missing

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