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State Responsibility vs. Individual Commitment in Adult Education Policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Portugal⁵

Abstract: This paper examines how the concepts of State responsibility and individual commitment are defined and operationalised in adult education policies in the three selected countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Portugal. Based on the comparison of current adult education policy documents from each country, key categories are analysed: political-educational guidelines, political priorities, organisational and administrative dimensions, educational and conceptual elements through which State responsibility and individual commitment are discursively constructed. The analysis is contextualised within the process of Europeanisation and EU integration. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia are both currently in the process of negotiating EU accession and share a common socialist past as part of the former Yugoslavia. Portugal serves as a comparative case of an EU Member State with a longer alignment with European frameworks. The theoretical framework is based on the three logics multidimensional model of analysis developed by Lima and Guimarães (2011, 2018, 2024) containing: (1) democratic-emancipatory and social transformation, (2) modernisation, State control and adaptation, and (3) human resource management personal optimisation logic. Categories and dimensions identified

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in the analysed documents will be positioned along the *continuum* according to the three logics to show how States assumes responsibility for adult education and how it requires (or constrains) individual commitment to engage in learning and education throughout life as a human right. Using thematic content analysis of official policy documents, the paper investigates if and how State interventions are combined with support for individual initiative, and how these dynamics are reflected in the structure and societal role of adult education in different European countries.

Keywords: adult education policy, state responsibility, individual commitment, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Portugal

Odgovornost države naspram individualne posvećenosti u politikama obrazovanja odraslih u Bosni i Hercegovini, Srbiji i Portugaliji⁶

Apstrakt: U ovom se radu ispituje kako su koncepti odgovornosti države i individualne posvećenosti definisani i operacionalizovani u politikama obrazovanja odraslih u tri odabrane zemlje: Bosni i Hercegovini, Srbiji i Portugaliji. Na osnovu poređenja aktuelnih dokumenata javnih politika u oblasti obrazovanja odraslih u svakoj od tih zemalja, analiziraju se ključne kategorije: političko-obrazovne smernice, politički prioriteti, organizacione i administrativne dimenzije, kao i obrazovni i konceptualni elementi putem kojih se diskurzivno konstituišu odgovornost države i individualna posvećenost. Analiza je kontekstualizovana u okviru procesa evropeizacije i integracije u Evropsku uniju. Bosna i Hercegovina i Srbija se trenutno nalaze u procesu pregovora o pristupanju EU i dele zajedničku socijalističku prošlost dok su se nalazile u sastavu bivše Jugoslavije. Portugalija služi kao komparativni primer države članice EU sa dužim periodom usklađivanja sa evropskim okvirima. Teorijski okvir se zasniva na trostrukom modelu analize zasnovanom na logikama, koji su razvili Lima i Guimarães (2011, 2018, 2024), a koji obuhvata: (1) demokratsko-emancipatorsku i društveno-transformativnu logiku, (2) logiku modernizacije, državne kontrole i prilagođavanja i (3) logiku upravljanja ljudskim resursima i lične optimizacije. Kategorije i dimenzije identifikovane u analiziranim dokumentima

⁶ Ovo istraživanje je finansiralo Ministarstvo nauke, tehnološkog razvoja i inovacija Republike Srbije (Ugovor br. 451-03-136/2025-03/200018). Osim toga, ovaj rad je podržan nacionalnim sredstvima posredstvom FCT – Portugalske fondacije za nauku i tehnologiju, I.P., u okviru Jedinice za istraživanje i razvoj obrazovanja i stručnog osposobljavanja (UIDEF – Unidade de Investigação e Desenvolvimento em Educação e Formação), UID/04107/2025, <https://doi.org/10.54499/UID/04107/2025>.

Rad je nastao kao rezultat učešća u Akademiji za obrazovanje odraslih (2025), koju je organizovao Univerzitet Julius-Maximilians u Würzburgu, na temu međunarodnih komparativnih studija u obrazovanju odraslih i celoživotnom učenju.

su pozicionirane duž kontinuuma u skladu sa ove tri logike, kako bi se pokazalo na koji način države preuzimaju odgovornost za obrazovanje odraslih i kako zahtevaju (ili ograničavaju) individualnu posvećenost uključivanju u učenje i obrazovanje tokom celog života kao ljudsko pravo. Korišćenjem tematske analize sadržaja zvaničnih dokumenata javnih politika, u radu se ispituje da li se i na koji način državne intervencije kombinuju sa podrškom individualnoj inicijativi, kao i kako se ove dinamike odražavaju na strukturu i društvenu ulogu obrazovanja odraslih u različitim evropskim zemljama.

Ključne reči: politika obrazovanja odraslih, odgovornost države, individualna posvećenost, Bosna i Hercegovina, Srbija, Portugalija

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the developments in the global and European political landscape have led to a reframing of adult education, which is treated less as a State-guaranteed right and more as an individual responsibility and obligation to engage in learning in order to enhance employability, fulfil civic duties and support social integration (Elfert, 2019; Hinzen, 2011). In parallel, although lifelong learning is frequently referenced, most documents and initiatives associated with the UN 2030 Agenda focus predominantly on children and young people within formal education contexts (UNESCO/UIIL, 2022). Furthermore, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) do not recognise adult education as a distinct priority, but rather subsume it under broader notions such as “education for all” or “learning opportunities for youth and adults” (Benavot, 2018; Grotlüschen et al., 2024; UN, 2015).

State responsibility, referred to as the obligations of governments to create enabling frameworks, allocate resources and ensure access to adult education opportunities (Lima & Guimarães, 2011), is even less visible in documents framing policy development at national levels (Hinzen, 2011). Popović (2021) elaborates this shift in light of emergence of lifelong learning as an umbrella term, which has sidelined all others, including adult education, as a term denoting a distinct sector with its own structures and resources. This (re)definition positions learning as an individual responsibility, often with minimal structural support, undermining the State’s role as a guarantor of educational access and equity.

The shift from adult education, as a right to individual own’s commitment (such as a duty), has redefined both the roles of the State and the individual. Now, the right to education, traditionally the State’s obligation, has been transformed into a duty to learn, closely tied to economic imperatives, such as employability in a volatile labour market (Biesta, 2021; Finger & Asún, 2001). This has contributed

to a growing disconnect between policy formulation and implementation, weakening State accountability and transparency while shifting the burden onto individuals to navigate and finance their own learning (Lima & Guimarães, 2011).

This paper examines how State responsibility and individual commitment are defined and operationalised in the adult education policies of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Portugal. These three countries provide a compelling comparative framework due to their distinct historical, political and socioeconomic contexts, as well as their varying stages of alignment with European Union (EU) frameworks. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, both emerging from a shared socialist past as former Yugoslav republics, are currently navigating the complexities of EU accession processes. Their adult education policies reflect efforts to align with European standards while addressing post-socialist and transitional challenges. Portugal, as a longer-standing EU Member State, offers a contrasting perspective, with its policies shaped by decades of integration within European frameworks and a focus on modernisation and especially human capital development (Magone, 2003).

The analysis is grounded in the three logics multidimensional model proposed by Lima and Guimarães (2011, 2018, 2024), which categorises adult education policies according to three distinct rationales: (1) *democratic-emancipatory and social transformation logic*, with emphasis on education as a human right and a tool for social inclusion and empowerment; (2) *modernisation, State control and adaptation logic*, focusing on State-driven initiatives to align education as adaptation with national development goals; and (3) *human resource management personal optimisation logic*, prioritising economic competitiveness and workforce skills. Applying this framework and building on previous comparative studies (Doutor & Guimarães, 2019; Košmerl et al., 2023), the paper explores how State responsibility and individual commitment are discursively constructed across key policy dimensions: educational guidelines, political priorities, organisational and administrative structures and educational and conceptual elements.

Adult education policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Portugal have not yet been comparatively analysed within a single, coherent analytical framework. By comparing these three cases, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on adult education policies within diverse European contexts. It seeks to answer the following questions:

- How do Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Portugal define and operationalise State responsibility and individual commitment in their adult education policies?
- How are these concepts reflected across political-educational guidelines, political priorities, organisational and administrative dimensions and educational and conceptual elements?

- How does the process of Europeanisation influence the (im)balance between State and individual roles in fostering lifelong learning?

The paper is structured as follows. It begins with an outline of the theoretical framework guiding the analysis, followed by a discussion of the case selection, including the methods and underlying rationale and an analysis and interpretation of the findings. The final section addresses the research questions and highlights key issues identified in each of the countries analysed.

Theoretical framework

The analysis draws on a theoretical framework developed by Lima and Guimarães (2011, 2018, 2024), which identifies how each of the three logics can be recognised through four dimensions: political orientations, political priorities, administrative organisation and educational and conceptual elements.

The democratic-emancipatory and social transformation logic is based on principles of decentralisation and participation of diverse actors, prioritising education for active citizenship and democracy. The modernisation, State control and adaptation logic is characterised by government control and provision of elementary and vocational education serving the goals of the State, while the human resource management and personal optimisation logic positions the labour market in the centre and sees individuals as responsible for their own learning (Lima & Guimarães, 2024).

Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia are both former Yugoslav countries that are now candidates for EU membership. Therefore, we expect that the modernisation, State control and adaptation logic will appear as a legacy of earlier political orientations, while the human resource management and personal optimisation logic will have an increasing presence, impacted by the EU neoliberal policy and the countries' accession aspirations. Portugal has been an EU member since 1986, hence its wider alignment with the EU neoliberal agendas. However, historical and political differences also impact the way in which these policies are reflected on a national level.

Examining how these logics manifest across four dimensions will provide insight into the underlying orientations of the adult education policies in the three countries. The first dimension to be examined concerns the general political orientations, referring to "laws, rules and norms that enable a public policy to be adopted" (Lima & Guimarães, 2024, p. 29). Understanding the political context requires examining the broader conditions of policy development and how each analysed policy relates to other laws and State priorities within the

wider political landscape. The second dimension focuses on political priorities, defined as “the ends targeted by ALE, and the domains on which a public policy focuses, the relevant objectives and targets, the adult learners and educators” (Lima & Guimarães, 2024, p. 29). Since the documents analysed are general adult education policies, they should provide insight into the areas the State prioritises, the goals it sets for adult education and how it defines adult learners and educators. The third dimension is the organisational framework, which refers to “the implementation of the public policy, including centralised or decentralised structures, funding, the procedures and technical processes involved in conducting ALE activities, quality assurance, evaluation and accountability procedures” (Lima & Guimarães, 2024, p. 29). Here, it is necessary to examine both the implementation envisioned in the policy documents and the practical realities: how these policies are executed, which actors are involved, and how accountability and quality assurance are handled. The fourth dimension addresses the conceptual elements, described as “the theoretical references underlying the ends, methods and processes inherent to implementing a public policy (e.g. ALE conceptions, pedagogical models, forms of participation and assessment, etc.)” (Lima & Guimarães, 2024, p. 29). These didactical approaches indicate the presence of underlying adult education philosophies. The units of analysis and key terms are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Three adult education logics

	<i>Democratic-emancipatory and social transformation</i>	<i>Modernisation, State control and adaptation</i>	<i>Human resource management and personal optimisation</i>
<i>Political-educational guidelines</i>	Democracy, emancipation, decentralisation, bottom-up dynamics, State, civil society and social movements, participation	State as a central actor, social and economic modernisation, education and training for social control	Influence of international governmental organisations, ALE as a social policy, labour market needs
<i>Political priorities</i>	Equality, social and educational, transformation, solidarity	Access for all and equal opportunities, ALE as a basic social right, ALE as a compulsory program, adult learners as voters and workers	Adult learners as a central subject, employability, competitiveness, productivity, skills development
<i>Organisational and administrative dimensions</i>	CSOs, social movements, participatory decision-making and self-governing	Formalisation of education, State provision and State providers, effectiveness and efficacy of ALE	Managerial procedures, partnerships, profit-making, civil society and State
<i>Educational and conceptual elements</i>	Empowerment, critical thinking, dialogicity, knowledge linked to local-global concerns, ethical and political dimensions	Literacy, basic education and training, functional literacy, formal and non-formal education, transmission of knowledge	Skills and knowledge valued by the labour market, autonomy and free choice of adult learners, and commodification of ALE

Source: Adapted from Lima and Guimarães (2024, p. 30)

Another concept considered in this paper is Europeanisation. Following Saurugger and Radaelli (2008), Europeanisation includes:

“[p]rocesses of (a) construction, (b) diffusion and (c) institutionalisation of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things’ and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU decisions and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies” (2008, p. 213).

These processes have prompted extensive debate regarding their impact within the European Union, particularly in the context of the construction of the European Education Area. Many of the adopted policy goals, shaped through a predominantly top-down approach and with implications for democratic social life, reflect neoliberal modes of governance: (a) by promoting human capital and employability-oriented rationales, as well as processes of marketisation and commodification; and (b) by weakening State accountability and shifting responsibility onto individuals. By narrowing the broader purposes of education (Holford & Milana, 2022), EU adult education policy documents increasingly construct the learner as responsible, self-managing and accountable for their own upskilling (Fejes, 2008; Guimarães & Barros, 2025; Lima & Guimarães, 2011).

When referring to the influence of Europeanisation on the national adult education policies of EU Member States, such as Slovenia, Mikulec and Jelenc Krašovec (2016) argue that Europeanisation contributes to marketisation and commodification. In addition, Antunes (2025) describes a process of *dual Europeanisation* in Portugal’s adult education. On the one hand, rhetorical Europeanisation refers to the discursive adoption of EU goals, language and priorities. Governments invoke Europe—using EU terminology, benchmarks and narratives—mainly at the level of policy texts, speeches and strategic documents. On the other hand, practical Europeanisation concerns the actual implementation of EU-inspired reforms in national adult education systems. Antunes (2025) shows that this implementation is partial, selective and often inconsistent, with countries adopting some measures (e.g., skills agendas) but resisting or neglecting others (e.g., inclusive participation goals). Börzel (2002) further highlights that adaptation pressures may distort national democratic processes, particularly where there is a significant “misfit” between EU and domestic institutions.

Therefore, the influence of the European Union depends not only on the EU itself, but also on national policy dynamics, including processes of retrenchment or transformation, as well as on educational capacity and the national authorities’ political will to prioritise specific issues and governance instruments.

Methodology

Selection of country cases

Country cases include Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Portugal. The first two are neighbouring countries that share a common historical trajectory as former Yugoslav republics and a long-standing tradition of andragogy as an academic discipline. Education policy in the post-Yugoslav era mainly addressed goals related to modernising the system in order to facilitate structural adjustments in transitioning to market economy (Halász, 2015). The field of adult education has been associated with the concept of lifelong learning, as “a means of raising the competitiveness of the economy and boosting human capital” (Mikulec & Kump, 2018, p. 4). International organisations (such as DVV International, GIZ, ETF, World Bank, ILO, just to mention the most active ones) played an important role in supporting the establishment of the legal framework, curriculum modernisation or capacity building in adult education. In both countries, the EU integration process has introduced external pressures to align national policies with European standards, including lifelong learning, employability, validation of non-formal and informal learning and quality assurance frameworks. At the same time, these countries face significant political constraints that influence the pace and scope of policy implementation.

In contrast, Portugal demonstrates a long-standing tradition of EU-driven policy alignment. Since 2000, Portugal has implemented a comprehensive set of governance instruments, including the European and National Qualifications Frameworks, the National Catalogue of Qualifications and national lifelong learning benchmarks and indicators. Nevertheless, Portugal still faces challenges, particularly in promoting inclusivity and addressing regional disparities in access, participation and outcomes.

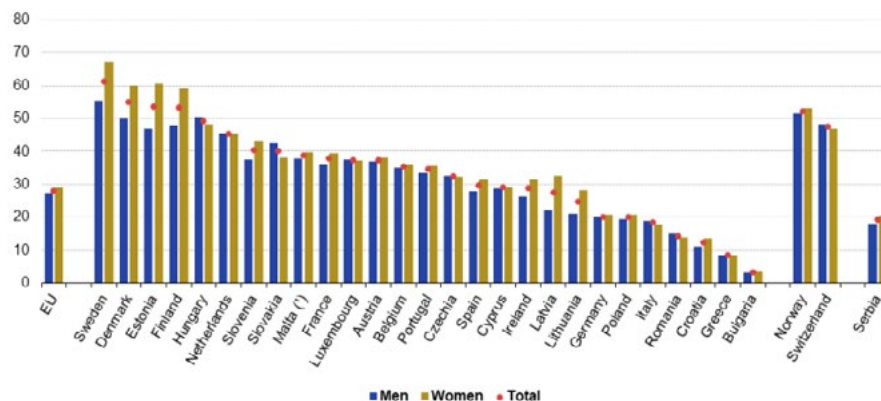
The below Figure illustrating ALE participation rates according to the 2024 Adult Education Survey (AES)⁷ (Eurostat, 2024) shows significant differences between the three countries. Portugal stands close to the EU average (46.8%) with participation rate of 44.2%, while Serbia is below the average with participation rate of 19.9%⁸ (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2022). The latest data available for Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2018 show that 8.7% of adults participated in formal or non-formal education (BHAS, 2018).

⁷ Eurostat (2024). Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Adult_learning_-_participants, accessed on 7 January 2026.

⁸ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. (2022). Available at: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-US/vesti/20231031-anketa-o-obrzovanju/?a=0&cs=2400> accessed in January 2026.

Participation rate in education and training (last 12 months) by sex, 2024

(% of people aged 25-64, EU-LFS)



Note: ranked on overall participation (men and women)

(*) Low reliability.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: trng_lfs_17)

eurostat

Figure 1. Participation rate in education and training

Source: Eurostat⁹ (2024)

The above data could be indicative of the systems' support to adult learning and education, especially with respect to funding, availability of programme offer and structural support in overcoming barriers to participation (such as educational leave).

Methods and selection of documents

Using a comparative approach, the study analyses official policy documents from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Portugal to explore how these countries balance State intervention with expectations of individual responsibility. This approach sheds light on the extent to which policies foster adult education as a public good versus a personal responsibility and how these dynamics are influenced by the process of Europeanisation (Mikulec, 2016).

The present study employs a comparative method as described by Egetenmeyer (2016, 2020) comprising of the three steps:

⁹ Eurostat. (2024). Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Adult_learning_-_participants

- (1) descriptive juxtaposition – selected comparable policy documents from the three countries were first described individually based on the categories derived from the theoretical framework. In this step, similarities and differences are identified;
- (2) analytical juxtaposition – identifies a leading logic in the each of the three policy documents and compares it to the others;
- (3) analytical interpretation – identifies the reasons for the similarities and differences.

Methodological challenges of international comparative research stem from the comparability of selected cases (Mikulec & Egetenmeyer, 2025, p. 4), the need for them to bear certain equivalence that enables drawing relevant conclusions related to the concepts, models and practices in different intellectual traditions, socio-cultural contexts or political models. This challenge was addressed in this research by choosing two countries with similar adult education traditions and current political priorities related to EU accession. This is referred to in literature (Steinmetz, 2021) as the strategy of *most similar systems design (MSSD)*. The two countries together stand as different systems compared to Portugal, which here serves as an example of a country that has developed its adult education policies in compliance with EU requirements.

The analysis drew on qualitative document analysis and thematic analysis based on predefined theoretical categories. It involved a concept-driven analysis (or deductive) approach, as opposed to a data-driven (inductive) approach, where categories are not derived from a theory but are empirically-based (Kuckartz, 2019). The analytic procedure entailed finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of) and synthesising data in documents (Bowen, 2009). The thematic content analysis involved identifying evidence within the selected policy documents, such as ideas and illustrative quotations, that reflect the logics guiding the study.

The following documents were analysed:¹⁰

- *Principles and Standards in the Field of Adult Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina*.¹¹ This document defines the basic principles, quality standards and institutional responsibilities governing adult education in the country. It emphasises that adult education is a part of the overall education system of the country marking it as “area of specific public interest and of high societal priority” (Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2014a, p. 112).

¹⁰ ChatGPT and Google translation were used to translate quotations from the selected programmes into English.

¹¹ Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina. (2014a). Available at: <http://www.sluzbenilist.ba/page/akt/Xohz4nh78h77yTszRxd6k=>

- *Strategic Platform for the Development of Adult Education in the Context of Lifelong Learning in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2014–2020)*, adopted by the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2014b).¹² The document represents the first State-wide strategy of adult education in the country. Although it has expired, the evaluation of its implementation concluded that its objectives had not been fully met and the decision was taken to proceed with its implementation after a revision and alignment with the EU accession requirements.
- *Strategy for the Development of Education and Upbringing in the Republic of Serbia until 2030* (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021). Although the focus of this paper is adult education, a more general education strategy was analysed, due to the fact that “there are no recent versions of Serbian Adult Education Law or the Strategy (which are a decade and nearly two decades old, respectively)” (Popović et al., 2024, p. 8). Therefore, we consider this policy to be the most influential and indicative when it comes to the practice of adult education in Serbia.
- The *Qualifica Programme*, implemented since 2016 and building on the earlier *New Opportunities Programme* (2005–2011) (International Labour Organization, 2013), focuses— in line with European Union guidelines and governance instruments—on raising qualification levels by expanding access to basic and upper-secondary education (up to the 12th grade), as well as to vocational qualifications and skills development, in order to meet labour market demands. The programme emphasises self-directed learning and individual accountability, expecting learners to actively engage with existing provisions, including the recognition of prior learning, adult education and training courses and short-duration programmes. Data on the programme were collected from a range of national and EU sources.

Results

The thematic analysis identified categories related to the three logics across the four documents in each country (see Table 2).

¹² Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2014b). Available at: <http://www.sluzbenilist.ba/page/akt/TgoI9GmxLiY=>

Table 2. Identification of categories in policy documents in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Portugal

CATEGORIES	COUNTRIES		
	<i>Bosnia and Herzegovina</i>	<i>Serbia</i>	<i>Portugal</i>
Political-educational guidelines	Flexible, democratic system compatible with EU standards Partnership and multi-sectoral approach Creation of favourable social environment and mechanisms for adult education Personal and professional development Employability Social inclusion Active and responsible living Sensibility towards social changes and labour market needs Enabling lifelong learning	Economy that is competitive on the European and global markets Centralised approach to strategy development Developing a culture of lifelong learning, critical thinking, media literacy, participation, inclusion Identify needs for certain profiles, aligned with the needs of employers and State's developmental needs Society that fosters solidarity, respect, inclusion in education enabling quality education for all	National Qualification Framework in line with the EQF National Qualification Catalogue including training relevant for labour market needs Strong articulation between education (school education certification) and training (professional qualification) Aims directed at economic development and competitiveness
Political priorities	Socio-economic revitalisation Employability and competitiveness in the knowledge market Mobility and professional flexibility of individuals Solution to key social and economic problems in the country Democratisation of social relations Improving legislation Establishing effective participation mechanisms Expanding programmatic and institutional capacity Ensuring and enhancing quality	Career guidance Qualifications and mobility on the labour market Higher education financed by the State and social responsibility of universities Accessibility and openness of education Encouraging interculturalism. Publicly acclaimed organisers of adult education activities corresponding to labour market needs Functional basic adult education	Raise school certification and professional qualification levels of the whole Portuguese population Individuals responsible for their employability, education and training path
Organisational and administrative dimensions	Polycentric governance model Laws regulating adult education in each part of the country Diverse providers: public and private educational institutions Employment offices Professional associations and trade unions NGOs Cultural and religious institutions	Limited decentralisation without shared governance Multi-level administrative structure Strong regulatory and control mechanisms Multiple providers, both State and private State funding and financial control Focus on labour market in annual plans	Centralised in a national agency Funding mostly from the ESF Local education centres are located in public, profit-making and NGOs but funded by the ESF Based on local adult education and training centres spread all over the countries

CATEGORIES	COUNTRIES		
	<i>Bosnia and Herzegovina</i>	<i>Serbia</i>	<i>Portugal</i>
Educational and conceptual elements	Lifelong learning	Adaptation to technological and labour market needs	Lifelong learning
	Participation in the labour market	Improvement of knowledge and skills	Quality of offer
	Flexibility of learning	Competence and entrepreneurship growth	Certification
	Quality of offer	Strategic control of education	Qualifications
	Shared responsibility of sectors		Competences

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Political-educational guidelines

The *Strategic Platform* (Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2014b) serves as a framework for developing a favourable social environment and foundational mechanisms for adult education in the context of lifelong learning. The mission of adult education is defined as to enable adult citizens to access education and learning throughout their lives and to contribute to their personal and professional development, employability, social inclusion and preparation for active and responsible living.

The vision of adult education is a flexible, democratic system aligned with EU standards; sensitive to diverse social changes and labour market needs for various educational profiles; oriented toward meeting the needs and interests of both the learners and employers; attracting individuals and enabling their lifelong learning.

Political-educational guidelines stated in the *Strategic Platform* encompass:

- ensure universal access to adult education, regardless of socio-economic status, age, region, language, ethnicity, religion or physical/intellectual ability;
- establish high standards for educational conditions, programmes, processes and learning outcomes;
- implement an accreditation system in line with international best practices;
- promote international cooperation in quality monitoring and evaluation;
- position adult education as a key driver of individual and societal development;

- align learning outcomes with labour market demands, contributing to economic growth and improved quality of life;
- increase the efficiency of educational processes by improving learning outcomes and optimising resource use;
- offer diverse formal and non-formal programmes tailored to individual needs, supported by diversified and rational funding models. Emphasise lifelong learning as a profitable, long-term investment by individuals, the State and employers;
- fully implement systems for validating competencies gained through non-formal and informal learning, aligned with the BiH Qualifications Framework and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF);
- provide structured support systems for career development and lifelong counselling to promote employability, social inclusion and informed decision-making by adult learners.

In terms of political-educational guidelines, the *Strategic Platform* demonstrates a human resource management and personal optimisation orientation, particularly given its focus on employability, labour-market relevance, economic growth and efficiency. The modernisation and State control logic is observed in the establishment of standards, accreditation systems and quality assurance mechanisms. The State is positioned as the central coordinating actor responsible for regulation, monitoring and harmonisation with European policies.

Political priorities

The national documents state that adult education in the context of lifelong learning contributes to socio-economic revitalisation, increased employability and competitiveness in the knowledge market, as well as mobility and professional flexibility of individuals. To this end, the State needs to set a systematic intersectoral approach to the development of adult education based on the principles of openness and accessibility. *The Strategic Platform* should serve as “an instrument for initiating the resolution of key social and economic issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina” (Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2014b, p. 21). Therefore, it places special emphasis on vocational adult education. This was further reinforced in a document titled *Enhancing Quality and Relevance of Vocational Education and Training in Bosnia and Herzegovina – based on Riga Conclusions (2021–2030)* (Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2021)¹³.

¹³ Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina. (2021). Available at: <http://sluzbenilist.ba/page/akt/LYW-clz1EQ28=>

Aligned with the declared need for accelerated economic development and increased employability, social cohesion and the democratisation of social relations, the fundamental strategic goals include (Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2014b):

1. Improvement of legislation on adult education in the context of lifelong learning and its harmonisation with the EU reference framework;
2. Establishment of effective mechanisms for the participation of relevant (representative) and other social partners in the adult education process in the lifelong learning framework;
3. Development of programmatic and institutional capacities and enhancement of accessibility of adult education in the context of lifelong learning;
4. Ensuring and raising the quality of adult education within the lifelong learning framework.

Adult education is primarily framed as an instrument for addressing labour market needs and accelerating economic growth, corresponding closely to the human resource management and optimisation logics outlined in Table 1. Within this perspective, lifelong learning is positioned as a means of enhancing individual employability and overall competitiveness, rather than as a social right or an emancipatory project. The emphasis on legislative reform, alignment with EU frameworks, the establishment of quality assurance mechanisms and the development of institutional and programmatic capacities reflects a modernisation-oriented approach centred on State control and adaptation. In this context, the State assumes a coordinating and regulatory role, using adult education policy as a tool for alignment with European standards.

Organisational and administrative dimensions

Education governance in Bosnia and Herzegovina is carried out according to a polycentric and asymmetric model (centralised in the Republika Srpska (RS) and decentralised in the BiH Federation, where cantons have effective control over education). The RS, the ten BiH Federation cantons and the Brčko District (BD BiH) have full and undivided jurisdiction over education. Each of these constitutional units has established its own institutions and bodies for organising and managing education.

Adult education and training, whether as a regular activity or as a complement to regular education, is provided by public and private educational institutions, other specialised institutions (workers' universities, vocational training and education centres, driving schools, foreign language schools, computer schools, etc.), employment offices, professional associations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), penal institutions, religious institutions, trade unions, et al.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, State responsibility for adult education is primarily exercised through the establishment of legal frameworks, standards and principles that tightly regulate the organisation of the sector. Financial support is channelled through public employment services, primarily to support the upskilling and reskilling of unemployed individuals and those with low levels of qualification. Policy in this area focuses on legislative development, employability and the validation of non-formal and informal learning. At the same time, lifelong learning is recognised as an overarching policy framework, implying an expectation of individual commitment to continuous learning.

The polycentric and asymmetric governance structure in Bosnia and Herzegovina, combined with the fact that lower education authorities exercise full jurisdiction over education, point to modernisation, State control and adaptation logics. The education authorities' responsibility is primarily realised through the establishment of laws, standards and organising principles, indicating a clear emphasis on regulation and control rather than participatory self-governing.

Educational and conceptual elements

The centrality of lifelong learning is framed less as a right and more as a continuous process of upskilling in response to evolving labour-market conditions, implying individual responsibility for maintaining employability. Under the *Principles and Standards* (Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2014a), "[L]ifelong learning is the best response to the shift from the concept of a lifetime job to the concept of lifelong required knowledge, skills and competencies." This explicit reference to the participation in the labour market positions adult education as a means to enhance productivity, competitiveness and adaptability.

The notion of shared responsibility of sectors, involving the State, employers, education providers and individuals, suggests a governance model based on partnerships and managerial coordination, characteristic of human resource management approaches influenced by labour-market policies.

Educational and conceptual elements identified in adult education policy documents in Bosnia and Herzegovina point to a predominantly instrumental

understanding of adult education, in which learning is valued primarily for its contribution to employability and economic participation. Within this dominant economic rationale, concepts such as social cohesion – defined as “societal support for the personal development of individuals who democratically pursue shared goals, through the reduction of poverty and social exclusion and the achievement of equity and intergenerational solidarity” (Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2014a) – tend to remain overly generic and serve a largely declarative rather than a substantive policy function.

The analysed documents indicate that the guiding principles of adult education policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina are framed as instruments for achieving “the harmonisation of educational and other sectoral policies on adult education with international and European policies in this field and faster integration into the European lifelong learning area” (Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2014a). These principles include stronger linkages between education and the economy, as well as the development of a national qualifications framework. Such an orientation delineates areas of State responsibility while positioning lifelong learning primarily as a matter of individual commitment, without adequately addressing the funding of educational programmes or the expansion of access to learning opportunities. The analysed documents also fall short of recognising the role of adult education in social transformation, civic empowerment and democratisation. In practice, this is reflected in the educational authorities’ focus on regulatory frameworks, quality assurance and alignment with European policies, while adult learners are expected to engage in learning largely on their own initiative and according to their financial means. This approach risks reinforcing existing inequalities and limits the potential of adult education to function as a vehicle for broader social inclusion and democratic participation.

Serbia

Political-educational guidelines

The Strategy (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021) defines the actors involved in its creation – such as the Ministry of Education and Science and Technological Development, the Education Improvement Institute, the Education Quality Assessment Institute and the Qualifications Agency and the Vojvodina Education Secretariat – indicating a centralised approach to the development of the strategy, as all of the institutions are connected to the government and there is no mention of other non-State actors.

The Strategy's vision involves "development of a society and economy based on knowledge, a society that fosters solidarity, respect, inclusion in education enabling quality education for all and economy that is competitive at the European and world economy marketS" (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021, p. 27). Although the vision mentions solidarity and inclusion, the prominence of the human resource management logic is evident, as competitiveness, economy and labour market needs are prioritised and positioned as central.

With regard to political guidelines, the strategic vision aligns closely with a human resource management logic, emphasising the primacy of labour market needs. At the same time, in terms of policy formulation, a State-modernisation logic is evident, reflected in the centralised approach to strategy development.

Political priorities

Three categories related to adult education are prioritised in the Strategy: career guidance and counselling, higher education and adult education. The fact that career guidance, of all adult education areas, is recognised as a separate and crucial category, points to the presence of the human resource management logic.

The following two key domains of adult education are addressed in the document: Functional Basic Adult Education (FBAE) and Publicly Recognised Organisers of Activities. Within the first domain, FBAE, the identified challenges relate to "the organisation and quality of formal adult education, particularly in light of high dropout rates from education programmes" (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021, p. 21). This emphasis on participation barriers within formal education points to the presence of modernisation and State control logic. The second domain is partially framed through a human resource management logic, with the primary concern being that programmes offered by Publicly Recognised Organisers of Activities "do not fully align with labour market needs" (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021, p. 21). At the same time, since the status of these organisers is granted by the Ministry, a centralised approach—characteristic of State control and modernisation logic—is also evident. It is important to note that non-formal education is mentioned only 18 times in the document and almost exclusively in relation to employability and qualifications. This narrowing is particularly evident in the discussion of Publicly Recognised Organisers of Activities, where the stated objective is "to improve the knowledge and education of the working-age population in line with labour market needs, including through the promotion of accreditation of Publicly Recognised Organisers of Activities and non-formal education" (Government of

the Republic of Serbia, 2021, p. 22). A similar orientation is reflected in one of the Strategy's objectives, defined as "improving the methodological framework for the development of non-formal education based on qualification standards" (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021, p. 32). Non-formal education is referenced outside accreditation and qualification processes only marginally, for example in relation to the improvement of language competences, where it is recognised as an important component. Overall, this suggests a process of the 'formalisation' of non-formal education through an emphasis on accreditation, reinforcing State control, alongside its neoliberalisation through a focus on qualifications and labour market alignment, reflecting the presence of a human resource management logic.

Organisational and administrative dimensions

With regard to funding, the Strategy acknowledges that "in the future it is necessary to increase funding for education and that a reduction in State funding should not be supported, given the strategic importance of education for economic and social development" (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021, p. 24). However, although not explicitly addressed in the Strategy, ongoing national discussions in the field of higher education have considered the introduction of a voucher system, which would allow students to choose between private and public universities. This development points to a potential shift towards a more market-oriented approach. Thus, while the strategy itself reflects a dominant State control and modernisation logic, policy developments in practice suggest an increasing influence of human resource management logic.

With regards to implementation, the Strategy explicitly defines the bodies involved in implementation, including the Ministry of Education and Science and Technological Development, the Vojvodina Education Secretariat, the Education Improvement Institute, the Education Quality Assessment Institute and the Qualifications Agency, the Vojvodina Pedagogical Institute, education institutions at different levels, as well as other ministries, national and local authorities, when intersectoral cooperation is needed (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021, p. 58). Although there is visible decentralisation, through inclusion of local level bodies, the implementation is in the hands of national institutions and there is no anticipated involvement of other actors, such as civil society or academia, which points to the presence of State control and modernisation logic. An analysis of the implementation of the Strategy, needs to include an analysis of its Annual Plans, as Popović et al. indicate that democracy, interculturality

and tolerance are excluded from these plans and that the focus is on labour market needs (2024), pointing to the presence of the human resource management logic. Thus, in organisational terms, funding and implementation in the strategy are aligned with a modernisation and State control logic, while developments in practice indicate a gradual shift towards a human resource management logic.

Conceptual elements

The Strategy describes adult education as “improving knowledge and skills of the working-age population in line with the labour market” (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021, p. 21), while non-formal education is described as a “flexible way of adapting education to technological changes and labour market needs” (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021, p. 22). The reduction of adult and non-formal education to instruments for adapting to labour market demands and technological change points to the presence of a human resource management logic.

Portugal

Political-educational guidelines

Political guidelines point at the human resources and personal optimisation logic, allowing a clear link between economic development and education and training; they are defined in a set of legal documents, such as the one referring to the national qualification framework that “defines the structure and levels of qualification of the education and training system” (Direção Geral do Emprego e das Relações de Trabalho, n.d.). Additionally, this framework “defines eight levels of qualification, by adopting the levels of knowledge, skills and attitudes and learning outcomes of the European Qualification Framework, in order to allow comparison of the national qualification and education and training framework with the ones of other Member-States” (Direção Geral do Emprego e das Relações de Trabalho, n.d.¹⁴). In parallel, the national catalogue of qualification¹⁵ (ANQEP, 2025) includes 373 qualifications, to be developed by 6,902 competence units¹⁶

¹⁴ Direção Geral do Emprego e das Relações de Trabalho. (n.d.). Available at: <https://www.dgert.gov.pt/quadro-nacional-de-qualificacoes>

¹⁵ ANQEP. (2025). Available at: <https://catalogo.anqep.gov.pt>

¹⁶ Competences denote specialised technical knowledge within professional and economic sectors overseen by sectoral qualification councils (ANQEP, 2025).

and 5,961 short-term training modules. These instruments were built by 18 sectoral councils for qualifications¹⁷.

Political priorities

The human resource management and personal optimisation logic is once again central to the Qualifica programme in relation to its political priorities. This orientation is illustrated by the programme's dissemination strategy, which relies on mass media campaigns, including short promotional videos (typically under one minute) featuring testimonials from adult learners participating in existing provision. These narratives emphasise messages such as "take charge of yourself and invest in your future" and "more qualifications, better job opportunities"¹⁸ (Qualifica, n.d.).

In addition, the programme's stated objectives explicitly prioritise increasing qualification levels and improving workforce employability by equipping individuals with skills aligned with labour market needs, as well as adapting the training offer and institutional network accordingly¹⁹ (Eurydice, 2025a).

Organisational and administrative dimensions

The Qualifica programme is structured around the national agency responsible for the overall coordination of provision.²⁰ Its implementation is supported by a network of 313 local adult education centres distributed across the country²¹

¹⁷ These sectoral councils include, among others, "organisations that regulate access to and exercise of professions and professional activities; trade union confederations and associations, employers institutions directed at commerce and industry development, [as well] as clusters of competitiveness" (ANQEP, 2025). These sectors cover a variety of economic areas such as agrifood, handicrafts and goldsmithing, commerce and marketing, civil construction and urbanism, cultural heritage and content production, defence and security, maritime economy, energy and environment, chemical industries, ceramics, glass and others, information technology, electronics and telecommunications, wood, furniture and cork, metallurgy and metalworking, fashion, health and community services, business services, personal services, transport and logistics, tourism and leisure.

¹⁸ Qualifica. (n.d.). Available at: <https://www.qualifica.gov.pt/#/>

¹⁹ Eurydice. (2025b). Available at: <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/pt-pt/eurypedia/portugal/educacao-e-formacao-de-adultos>

²⁰ ANQEP – the National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education and Training – was the relevant national body until August 2025. However, a broader reorganisation of the education system initiated in September 2025 resulted in the dissolution of ANQEP (Decree-Law No. 104/2025, 11 September). Adult education and training provision under the Qualifica programme is now coordinated by the Institute for Education, Quality and Evaluation (EduQA) (Decree-Law No. 105/2025, 12 September) (Eurydice, 2025c). See more at: <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/pt-pt/eurypedia/portugal/distribuicao-das-responsabilidades>

²¹ Qualifica. (n.d.). Available at: <https://www.qualifica.gov.pt/#/pesquisaCentros>
Eurydice. (2025b). Available at: <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/pt-pt/eurypedia/portugal/instituicoes-que-ministram-educacao-e-formacao-de-adultos>

(Eurydice, 2025b; Qualifica, n.d.), which operate in accordance with guidelines issued by the national body overseeing the development of educational provision.

As outlined by Eurydice, adult education in Portugal comprises a range of qualification pathways enabling adults to obtain basic education certification (4th, 6th or 9th grade), upper secondary certification (12th grade) and/or professional qualifications. These pathways include the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RVCC) process, Adult Education and Training Courses (EFA), Certified Modular Training (FMC), Secondary Education Completion Pathways (Decree-Law No. 357/2007 of 29 October) and Technological Specialisation Courses²² (Eurydice, 2026).

Educational and conceptual elements

The Qualifica programme is based on a set of ideas in line with EU guidelines that refer to human resources management and personal optimisation logic. The ones most referred to include: lifelong learning, adult education and training, certifications, qualifications, competences, validation of non-formal and informal learning, learning outcomes²³ (Eurydice, 2026).

In parallel, there is a strong emphasis on data, including indicators such as the number of registrations, participation in guidance and counselling processes and the number of enrolled and certified adult learners²⁴ (Eurydice, 2025a). This reliance on statistical monitoring of programme implementation highlights the importance of performance benchmarks and indicators, largely shaped by EU frameworks, which the Portuguese network of local adult education centres is expected to meet. Such data also enable cross-national comparisons with adult education provision in other EU countries, reflecting broader trends of “governance by numbers” within the European Education Area. Processes of uniformisation, standardisation and Europeanisation are further reinforced through the use of comparative data sources, such as EUROSTAT statistics and Eurydice databases. These developments point to the emergence of new modes of governance (Alexiadou, 2014; Radaelli, 2008). At the same time, the growing emphasis on technical dimensions of adult education—such as quality assurance, monitoring and adaptation—signals a shift away from

²² Eurydice. (2026). Available at: <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/pt-pt/euryperia/portugal/principais-tipos-de-oferta-formativa>

²³ Eurydice. (2026). Available at: <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/pt-pt/euryperia/portugal/principais-tipos-de-oferta-formativa>

²⁴ Eurydice. (2025a). Available at: <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/pt-pt/euryperia/portugal/educacao-e-formacao-de-adultos>

approaches centred on social transformation, which are characteristic of democratic-emancipatory logics (Desjardins, 2013).

Data interpretation

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Like other former Yugoslav republics, Bosnia and Herzegovina did not develop a coherent adult education policy before it gained independence (Jelenc, 2018; Žiljak, 2018). The development of modern adult education in the country has been shaped by the prevailing political, social and economic contexts, which have formed four distinct periods (Isanović Hadžiomerović, 2018):

- (1) post-World War II reconstruction until the 1970s;
- (2) secondary education reform and education crisis from the 1970s to 1990;
- (3) the 1992–1995 war and post-war reconstruction;
- (4) policy development in adult education in 2000s.

Each period had specific objectives, organisation models and key actors involved in adult education. In the post-World War II socialist period, adult education in Bosnia and Herzegovina was deeply embedded in the State-driven ideological, economic and social development goals (Isanović Hadžiomerović, 2018). Though no adult education policy was developed during the Yugoslav era, adult education was used as a tool for State-led modernisation, with emphasis on literacy campaigns, worker training and ideological education. It was shaped by collectivist principles and implemented through public institutions such as workers' and people's universities, which aimed to train the workforce for the emerging industry. Presumably due to the proliferation of educational opportunities and the enthusiastic inclusion of the popular masses in various social and educational activities and in the memory of people participating in it, this period is cherished as the "golden age of andragogical work in Bosnia and Herzegovina" (Mavrak, 2004, p. 65). Officially, the first Andragogy course was introduced in the 1970s within the Department of Pedagogy and Psychology of the Sarajevo University Faculty of Philosophy (Mavrak, 2004).

By the 1970s, adult education was perceived as continuation of formal schooling. It was still deliberately utilised as an instrument for driving societal transformation and economic modernisation. Vocational secondary schools and companies – which were all State-owned – started to take an important role as

adult education providers offering retraining and upskilling opportunities in a wider range of specialisations. As a result, general education was sidelined in favour of narrowly focused, highly practice-oriented and vocational training. This trend, while supporting immediate labour needs, ultimately suspended the system's ability to promote lifelong learning, retraining and adaptability (Halász, 2015). However, reforms in secondary vocational education and the integration of adult education into formal systems led to the declining prominence and gradual closure of workers' and people's universities.

The outbreak of the 1992–1995 war brought destruction of educational and overall social infrastructure, which also coincided with the collapse of the Yugoslav socialist regime and transition of the country towards democracy. This turbulent period witnessed near-erasure of adult education from national priorities and the idea of adult education from the Yugoslav period was no longer welcome in the new vision of society and its democratic values. Adult education was relegated to the margins by the education authorities who were more concerned with rebuilding the formal education system. Nonetheless, this was the time when the first NGOs – both international and local – started to emerge and provide adult education. The offered programmes focused on personal development, foreign language training and basic digital skills and were often organised in informal settings as community-based learning.

The early 2000s marked the beginning of a new phase, driven by international assistance and efforts to align with the EU standards. For the first time, concrete steps were taken towards building a legal framework for adult education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which resulted in the development of strategies, laws and education standards (Isanović Hadžiomerović et al., 2022). This period was marked by decentralisation, privatisation and diversification of providers. Adult education providers included NGOs, private training centres, industry actors and public schools. International donors (GIZ, USAID, ILO, SIDA...) became increasingly active in the sector through various types of projects, most of them being employment-related. However, no institution similar to previous workers' and people's universities was established in this period. Adult education became increasingly commodified, focusing on training for the labour market. Despite greater programme variety, development was often *ad hoc*, donor-driven and lacking long-term strategy and quality assurance. Yet, these market-oriented pathways often failed to address broader social needs – civic and environmental education, personal wellbeing or inclusive community education.

Given the country's asymmetric and polycentric education governance, the development of adult education policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina spanned a full decade, from 2009 to 2019. It was backed by DVV International's Office

in Sarajevo, through its advocacy and expert support not only related to policy making, but also to the professionalisation of adult education. The first adult education law in Bosnia and Herzegovina was adopted in Republika Srpska in 2009 and the last in Posavina Canton in 2019. Today, all 13 education authorities have their own legislation on adult education, in addition to the State-level *Strategy for the Development of Adult Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Framework of Lifelong Learning for the Period 2014–2020* and the *Standards and Norms in Adult Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina*.

Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate status for European Union membership in March 2024. All policy efforts in various fields over the past decade have been driven by the aspiration to align the measures with the EU regulation. In adult education specifically, this is highlighted in the first strategic objective stating: “Improvement of legislation for adult education in the context of lifelong learning and alignment with the European Union reference framework” (Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2014b). A specific measure referring to alignment with the EU framework includes “creating conditions for the recognition of non-formal education and informal learning” (Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2014a).

Serbia

Adult education in Serbia is shaped by its long and complex history, rooted in societal changes during the 19th century, when first legal steps were taken to structure and create an education system (Miljković, 2014, 2019). That milestone was marked with the introduction of Serbia’s first educational law in 1833 (Miljković, 2019, p. 94). Throughout the 19th century, Serbia was a country liberating itself from the Ottoman empire, just beginning to constitute its statehood and administrative apparatus. Miljković notes that, during this phase, many intellectuals were sent abroad to learn at more advanced international institutions and apply what they had learned abroad to the Serbian context. More specifically, he notes that “the practice of financing best students to study abroad enabled Serbia to, without investing in its own institutions, obtain professionals and get to know progressive European scientific and political ideas and gain experience based on which its own institutions could be created” (Miljković, 2019, p. 107). We can note that international influences throughout history were utilised to support the State that was undergoing development, relying on already established institutions in other countries, but adapting the knowledge to the needs of the Serbian context. Introduction of the first education law, perception of education as a tool

for building the administrative apparatus and modernising the country through international exchanges, points to the domination of modernisation and State control logic in this period. Alongside the top-down modernisation approach, the acts of dissent on the margins indicated the presence of the democratic-emanipatory approach, which persisted throughout the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century. Medić and Ceković Popović (1996), as well as Miljković (2019), identify two trajectories of adult education: a) as a subversive activity within the workers' movement (as a result of the industrialisation and formation of the working class), and b) within the civic movement (influenced by ideas of enlightenment, nationalism and romanticism). The socialist thought developed within the worker movement "was against the ruling regime and therefore the andragogical activity was subversive (from the ruling regime's point of view) and was being developed in spite of it" (Miljković, 2019, p. 136). This showcases that participatory, emancipatory education was developed within social movements and civil society. Later on, throughout the 20th century, adult education evolved through formats such as Sunday, domestic and extended schools (Kulić & Despotović, 2010). Modernisation and State control were still the most prominent approach to adult education after second Yugoslavia was established as a communist country (1945). Samolovčev describes massive literacy campaigns that were being conducted by the State, with 2,324,158 newly literate people, but he notes that this was done only at the elementary level, without extending deeper professional and general knowledge needed for economic and social activities (Samolovčev, 1963, according to Miljković, 2014). According to Miljković, adult education had a strong ideological component in the subsequent periods of Yugoslavia, although still satisfying various educational needs of the population, contributing to holistic personal development (Miljković, 2014). The establishment of Department of Andragogy at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade in 1979 was a significant event for the further constitution of adult education in Serbia.

The system of adult education started to collapse during the 1990s and the wars that followed. Medić et al. note that "according to 1990 data, Yugoslavia had 200 worker, public and open universities. Today, their number has decreased by at least a half, or even two-thirds" (Medić et al., 2009, p. 18). The situation is similar when it comes to the basic education of adults, where the number of schools for basic adult education has decreased from several dozens to 14 schools in Serbia (Miljković, 2014). Medić et al. conclude that the "lack of societal care and interest for this area led to the reduction, complete overhaul or closure of adult education institutions and forms" (Medić et al., 2009, p. 18). That said, subversive, bottom-up activities still existed but were not dominant: the presence

of the democratic emancipatory approach existed on the margins. Popović et al. point out that Serbia has a significant tradition in organising civil society movements in the “90s (against war, against regime)” and that its civic protest played the most important role in overthrowing the authoritarian regime (Popović et al., 2020, p. 86).

The development of adult education in Serbia underwent a significant shift after 2000, when democratic reforms opened the country towards European integration. On the one hand, this period was marked by State-led modernisation and the reconstruction of the education system, including the adoption of the Law on Adult Education and the development of three adult education strategies. On the other hand, it was also characterised by processes of privatisation and neoliberal reform, accompanied by the increasing prominence of the human resource management logic. Reflecting on the period from 2000 to 2012 and the development of these strategies, Despotović and Popović (2014) identify notable conceptual differences, which they attribute to the varying contexts in which the strategies were formulated. They see the first strategy (2001) as conceptually aligned with UNESCO’s humanistic, enlightenment-emancipatory discourse, although it was never fully adopted. In contrast, they see the subsequent strategies (2007 and 2012) as incorporating a more economic-utilitarian approach and the rhetoric of the European Union. The authors link this shift to Serbia’s EU candidacy and the fact that these later strategies were developed with EU support, thereby reflecting its economic and neoliberal priorities, discourse and vocabulary. (Despotović & Popović, 2014).

They conclude that adult education policies during this period were largely oriented towards the adoption of EU guidelines and that Serbia lacked an authentic and autonomous policy on adult education (Despotović & Popović, 2014).

Conditions have deteriorated markedly since 2012, when a change in the political regime led to the consolidation of an increasingly authoritarian form of governance. At the declarative level, the government aligns itself with EU democratic values. In practice, however, Serbia is characterised as a “hybrid” regime, marked by the centralisation of power and the presence of “empty” democratic institutions that exist formally but allow only limited public participation (Popović & Maksimović, 2024, p. 287). In the field of adult education policymaking, this shift is reflected in the diminished role of academic and research communities, which exercised greater influence before 2012 but are now largely confined to predefined topics with limited scope for input (Popović & Maksimović, 2024). While broader stakeholder participation once had a more meaningful impact, it is now often instrumentalised to legitimise pre-

determined government decisions (Popović & Maksimović, 2024). This centralisation of power is accompanied by a strengthened neoliberal orientation in adult education policymaking. Although neoliberal discourses had already gained traction between 2000 and 2012, progressively intensifying across successive adult education strategies (Despotović & Popović, 2014), the emergence of a hybrid regime has further reinforced this trajectory. It is evident in the declining influence of non-governmental actors and researchers, the growing prominence of employers and international corporations in policymaking and the adoption of key legislative measures, such as the National Qualifications Framework Act and Dual Education Act, both aligned with EU policy priorities (Popović & Maksimović, 2024).

These developments are also reflected in the national 2025 Annual Adult Education Plan, which prioritises upskilling and reskilling as central responses to social and economic change. This focus mirrors the objectives promoted through the European Skills Agenda and related Council Recommendations on upskilling pathways and individual learning accounts, as explicitly noted in the plan (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2025, p. 4).

Portugal

Portugal does not have a long-standing tradition of adult education policy. The most significant developments began in the 1970s, particularly following the democratic revolution of 25 April 1974. This period was marked by widespread civic engagement, which fostered a vision of adult education grounded in democratic and emancipatory principles (Lima, 2008; Lima & Guimarães, 2018). Adult education was strongly influenced by popular education traditions, emphasising participatory methods and socio-educational activism. Civil society organisations played a central role, developing a wide range of local initiatives characterised by independence and creativity (Melo & Benavente, 1978).

In 1986, Portugal adopted the Education System Act (still in force today) (Assembly of the Republic, 2023) and joined the European Economic Community. At the time, the country faced the challenge of modernising its economy and infrastructure, improving efficiency in both the public and private sectors and enhancing productivity and competitiveness. Despite these priorities, adult education was not treated as a strategic policy area (Lima, 2008). The Education System Act focused primarily on second-chance education and vocational training, largely modelled on the formal school system. Although vocational training was included, it was not formally recognised as a branch of adult education.

This development marked a shift towards policies emphasising modernisation and State control (Lima & Guimarães, 2011, 2018).

Between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, second-chance education and vocational training became central components of adult education policy. Typically delivered through evening classes in mainstream schools, second-chance education primarily targeted young people who had dropped out of formal schooling. While this model made use of the existing national school network, it also revealed significant challenges, including high dropout rates and weak coordination with community-based and popular education initiatives. Over time, the formal school system came to dominate, marginalising more decentralised approaches and imposing rigid certification and progression requirements (Lima & Guimarães, 2011). During the same period, vocational training emerged as a distinct yet parallel pathway. Heavily supported by EU funding, it frequently operated independently of – and at times in tension with – popular and basic education models, thereby exposing underlying structural, political and educational incompatibilities (Lima, 2008).

Up to the late 1990s, adult education policy continued to prioritise formal second-chance education, driven by the belief that adults needed to complete compulsory schooling (nine years at the time) as a foundation for democratic participation and social equality. Although various initiatives contributed to reducing dropout rates and raising overall educational attainment, they were insufficient to close the gap between Portugal and other European countries (Portugal, 2025).

From the late 1990s onwards, adult education policy became increasingly aligned with the EU's lifelong learning strategy, placing greater emphasis on human resource development. The link between education/training and economic growth became more pronounced. Two main certified pathways were introduced: (1) adult education and training courses, which combined general education with vocational training, sometimes incorporating work-based learning; and (2) recognition of prior learning, which validated competences acquired through life experience, thereby enhancing their social and economic value (Guimarães, 2011).

Between 2005 and 2011, the *New Opportunities Programme* (Portugal, 2025) encompassed both these pathways. During this period, adult learner participation increased significantly, especially in recognition of prior learning. Over one million adults engaged with the program, resulting in 600,000 learners obtaining educational diplomas, one-third of whom also acquired professional qualifications. Funded primarily by the European Social Fund (75%), the programme operated through a nationwide network of local adult education centres employing over 10,000 educators (EAEA, 2011). Additionally in 2009, the 12th

grade was established as the standard level of compulsory education, alongside pathways enabling adult learners to obtain upper secondary qualifications.

After 2011, Portugal entered a severe economic and social crisis, partly driven by the global financial downturn and austerity measures imposed by the EU, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These pressures were compounded by high unemployment, deteriorating living conditions, low public morale and a breakdown in social and political consensus (Mateus, 2010). The adult education policy was effectively suspended from 2012 to mid-2016. The *New Opportunities Programme* was discontinued, adult education centres were closed, educators were dismissed and funding was slashed. As a result, participation in adult education – particularly at basic and secondary levels – declined sharply.

The Portuguese economy began a gradual recovery in 2014, driven by sectors such as tourism and various industries (e.g. transport, electronics, pharmaceuticals and extractive industries). In August 2016, the government introduced the *Qualifica Programme* (Portugal, 2025), which renewed the focus on adult education and training courses, as well as the recognition of prior learning. This marked a new phase in adult education policy, emphasising principles aligned with human resource management and employability (Lima & Guimarães, 2018). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, these provisions were maintained and the alignment between Portuguese adult education policy and European Union lifelong learning frameworks became more pronounced. The number of adult learners enrolled slowly arose (Guimarães, 2024).

Conclusions

The comparative analysis of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Portugal reveals a persistent tension between humanistic and utilitarian (technical-economic) orientations in adult education policy across Europe. Although all three countries formally align with the European Union's strategic framework for lifelong learning, their policy approaches differ in the extent to which they uphold adult education as a structured societal responsibility grounded in human rights.

The emphasis on socio-economic revitalisation, employability, competitiveness in the knowledge market, mobility, flexibility and vocational adult education positions adult learners as economic actors whose skills and productivity are central to national development.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, adult education continues to be shaped by a fragmented institutional framework and limited State coordination, reflect-

ing the country's broader political and administrative complexity. While policies recognise lifelong learning as a guiding principle, their implementation is often constrained by the absence of shared public responsibility and sustainable funding mechanisms. Consequently, adult education tends to operate through locally driven or donor-supported initiatives rather than as a coherent, State-led system for personal, professional and civic development. Although elements of State control and modernisation logics are present in BiH's policy documents, the State's role is undermined by the lack of effective State-led mechanisms and reliance on donor funding. Moreover, this strategy opens the space for human resource management logics with its emphasis on employability and projects resulting in measurable indicators, but without interest in the true emancipatory and humanistic value of education.

With reference to the three research questions, it can be concluded that effective State responsibility is less visible in Bosnia and Herzegovina, primarily due to the absence of a dedicated budget line for adult education and the lack of publicly funded adult education institutions or centres. There is a growing reliance on private providers and civil society organisations, often delivering donor-funded adult education programmes. Although widening the provision of adult education and increasing participation are identified as policy priorities (Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2014a), in practice no single authority holds a clear legal obligation to ensure funding, even though basic adult education is, in some cases, provided free of charge. In such a context, adult education is highly dependent on private provision and individual initiative, reflecting the influence of human resource management and personal optimisation logics. Within ongoing processes of Europeanisation, policy priorities increasingly emphasise innovation, digital and green skills, and stronger links between education and the labour market (European Commission, 2025a). Bosnia and Herzegovina has also joined the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) as an associated participant in projects funded under the Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) strand²⁵ (European Commission, 2025b). These developments further reinforce a trajectory towards human resource management and optimisation logics. At the same time, low participation rates in formal and non-formal adult learning (BHAS, 2018) underscore the need for more effective funding mechanisms and stronger efforts to widen access and participation. In the current context, an imbalance between State responsibility and individual commitment continues to limit the expansion of participation and learning opportunities.

²⁵ European Commission. (2025b). Available at: <https://european-social-fund-plus.ec.europa.eu/en/news/esf-welcomes-bosnia-and-herzegovina-new-participating-country> (accessed on 18 December 2025).

Serbia presents a more centralised and strategically defined approach to adult education policy. Its policy framework reflects an apparent balance between economic objectives, such as enhancing labour market mobility and professional qualifications and the broader social purposes of education. Nevertheless, despite formal commitments to inclusion, accessibility and interculturalism, adult education in Serbia remains shaped by strong State regulation and a predominantly instrumental orientation, with limited attention to its civic and emancipatory dimensions. In terms of Europeanisation, both earlier studies (Despotović & Popović, 2014; Popović & Maksimović, 2024; Popović et al., 2024) and the strategy analysed in this paper indicate a growing shift towards a human resource management logic. This shift can be partly attributed to increased alignment with EU policy frameworks and their associated neoliberal discourse. However, it is important to note that, while education reforms follow these EU-oriented narratives, they simultaneously tend to neglect the non-economic objectives articulated within EU policies, as evidenced in the analysis of annual plans (Popović et al., 2024).

In Serbia, there is a coexistence of human resource management and State control logics. Policy formulation (i.e. the development of strategies), the political system (particularly funding and implementation) and the structure of the adult education system (as reflected in functional literacy programmes and Publicly Recognised Organisers of Activities) are predominantly aligned with the modernisation and State control logic. In contrast, societal aims, policy priorities and educational objectives are more closely aligned with the human resource management logic. This duality can be explained by the fact that political system and adult education system are not so easily changed, grounded in historical roots of a system that is traditionally guided by modernisation and State control logic. By contrast, societal aims and policy objectives tend to reflect forward-looking aspirations and the country's strategic orientation, increasingly shaped by alignment with the EU's neoliberal policy framework. The coexistence of these paradigms is also linked to the broader political context in Serbia. As previous research has shown, the participation of civil society and academia in education policymaking is limited, and when non-State actors are included, their involvement is often symbolic or tokenistic, with little substantive influence on decision-making processes (Popović et al., 2024). This results in a configuration characterised by a tension between, on the one hand, centralised State control with marginal participation of non-State actors, and, on the other hand, the growing influence of a human resource management logic associated with Europeanisation – largely driven by alignment with neoliberal EU policies, often at the expense of other policy dimensions.

Portugal represents a model of alignment between national policy and European frameworks, underpinned by a strong institutional foundation and substantial investment through the European Social Fund. However, despite notable achievements in expanding qualifications and access, Portugal's adult education system remains largely instrumental, focusing predominantly on employability, professional training and economic competitiveness. At the same time, as noted by Antunes (2017, 2019, 2025), there are significant discrepancies between the rhetorical framing of adult education and training policy and its fragile implementation in practice.

Taken together, the three cases point to a broader European dilemma: lifelong learning policies prioritise economic objectives, such as upskilling, reskilling and labour market mobility, at the expense of the transformative, emancipatory and democratic purposes of adult education. The humanistic ideal of lifelong learning as a right and a public good is progressively overshadowed by its economic instrumentalisation.

Lifelong learning does not provide guidance on the selection of priority areas and it has evidently slipped from its initial humanistic orientation to a utilitarian mode, where policy attention and funding are concentrated on education areas related to employment, training, professional development, upskilling and reskilling. Thus, if adults are even recognised within the concept of lifelong learning, they are reduced to users of pragmatic skill-oriented programmes, intended for “‘workforce,’ ‘employees,’ ‘employable,’ ‘human resources’ – and other objects of professional training, in the service of economic development” (Popović, 2014, p. 170).

In addressing the research questions guiding this paper, it can be argued that Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia face the dual challenge of EU accession and alignment with lifelong learning frameworks shaped by human resource management and personal optimisation logics. Portugal, an EU member for four decades, has already internalised these frameworks, clearly reflecting the influence of management and human resources, as well as the personal optimisation trend. Within this context, State responsibility has given way to individual commitment, with adult education framed more as a duty linked to labour market requirements. As a result, adult education appears to have lost much of its emancipatory and democratic orientation, as policy frameworks rely on a multiple actors rather than the State as the primary guarantor of the right to education. This raises an important question for future research: will Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, in the context of potential EU membership, replicate the dual trajectory of Europeanisation observed in Portugal, or will adult education policy (following several logics) emerge as a more coherent and central component of the policy agenda?

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