

Setting the new European agenda for adult learning 2021-2030: Political mobilisation and the influence of advocacy coalitions

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Abstract

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, international organisations and governments have issued mitigation policies, and (re)oriented broader policy strategies to respond to new problematisations about the future. In this context, the education ministers of the European Union (EU) adopted a Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021-2030. Drawing on the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), this paper examines the political mobilisation and agenda setting behind this Resolution through network ethnography and the analysis of belief systems. The findings point at an increased social dialogue, favoured by an 'uncommon' way – as by our informants – through which the Slovenian Ministry of Education pursued the agreed priority at EU level, while holding the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU. While visibility of adult learning rose under COVID-19, advocacy coalitions formed at national (Slovenian) and European level facilitated stronger alignment in agenda setting among different actors towards a holistic approach that calls for inter-sectorial and multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Keywords: adult learning, agenda setting, advocacy coalition framework, belief system, European Union



Introduction

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, an ‘exogenous shock’ (Sabatier & Weible, 2007) to both European and national political systems, the work of international organisations and their member states has been concerned with mitigating its detrimental effects. Suitably, policy agendas and strategies have been (re)oriented to respond to new problematisations about the future of education (Robertson, 2022; Zancajo et al., 2022). In this socio-political context, overcoming the uncertainty on whether a European agenda on adult learning would be continued, the EU education ministers adopted a *Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021-2030* (hereafter 2021 Agenda) (Council of the European Union [CEU], 2021), under the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU). The agenda underlines that ‘[a]dult learning needs a *holistic approach* including *inter-sectorial and multi-stakeholder collaboration*, and effective coordination at European, national, regional and local levels’ (CEU, 2021, p. 8, our emphasis). When compared to the previous Council’s agenda from 2011, important changes are to be noted. If a decade ago (targeted) adult learning was believed to potentially support economic and social progress, by 2021 the learning of adults is conceived as a lifelong endeavour for the whole population in support of resilient and sustainable communities, and digital and green transitions, thus the adoption of a “holistic approach” is now seen as the way forward. Accordingly, the mechanisms foreseen to implement a communitarian agenda on adult learning have developed to include a whole-of-government approach and higher emphasis on data, monitoring, and evidence-based policy (Milana & Mikulec, 2022).

While these changes reflect to some extent adaption to broader socio-political circumstances and new EU strategic priorities, they are also the results of the political mobilisation – political action undertaken to express oneself and achieve political aims – by a plurality of actors with an interest in adult learning, and their belief systems. In fact, notwithstanding a clear-cut separation of powers among EU institutions is hard to establish, the Council of the EU represents ‘a kind of bicameral parliament’ (Costa & Brack, 2019, p. 116) (with the European Parliament). Yet, EU institutions, like member states, are neither monolithic nor fully independent actors (Milana, 2023). So, resolutions by the Council of the EU are influenced by the policy priorities of the countries holding its rotating Presidency, and of many actors that mobilise under the auspices of EU institutions (Krick & Gornitzka, 2019; Milana, Klatt, & Tronca, 2020; Milana, Tronca & Klatt, 2020).

Against this background, this paper examines the political mobilisation of actors and their contributions (in terms of belief systems) to influence the 2021 Agenda setting.

In the next section we introduce the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), a theory of the policy process that centres attention on actors and how they form coalitions, based on their belief systems, to have better chances to influence policy-making. Next, we illustrate our methodology, which combines network ethnography (Hogan, 2016; Howard, 2002) with the analysis of actors’ belief systems (Sabatier & Weible, 2007). We then present our results. In brief they point at an increased social dialogue favoured by what our informants consider an ‘uncommon’ way through which the Slovenian Ministry of Education (MESS) pursued the priority agreed at EU level, while holding the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU. While visibility of adult learning rose under COVID-19, the formation of three advocacy coalitions – one at national (Slovenian) and two at European level – facilitated stronger alignments in agenda setting towards a holistic approach in adult learning that calls for inter-sectorial and multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Theoretical framework

ACF assumes that policymaking is complex, thus policy actors need to specialise in some areas to be influential, areas that, characterised by a substantive and a territorial dimension, form *policy subsystems* (Sabatier & Weible, 2007). Albeit policy subsystems might be difficult to delimit, for instance in areas of multiple level governance (local, national, international), participants to a policy subsystem have strong beliefs they want to translate into actual policy, thus they may distance themselves from others or form *advocacy coalitions* based on their beliefs. Beliefs, according to ACF, can be of three hierarchical types: *deep core beliefs* ‘involve very general normative and ontological assumptions’ (Sabatier & Weible, 2007, p. 194); *policy core beliefs* are priority of different policy-related values, etc. within a policy subsystem; and *secondary beliefs* are narrower in scope and easier to bring about agreement. Accordingly, in a policy subsystem actors have stronger chances to influence decision-making processes when they ally and work together with other actors with whom they share policy core beliefs.

ACF also contends that over time there might be long term changes in the belief system of specific coalition members (i.e., *policy-oriented learning*), as well as minor or major *policy changes* caused by exogenous and internal shocks (Weible & Nohrstedt, 2012). Different theories concur that shocks or perturbations to a political system, like changes in socioeconomic conditions or disasters, can bring about policy change (cf. Kingdon, 2014; Birkland, 2005); however, ACF distinguishes among an internal shock that occurs within a policy subsystem that ‘directly questions policy core beliefs of the dominant coalition’ (Sabatier & Weible, 2007, p. 205), and exogenous shocks of a general nature that can bring about a re-distribution of resources, of dominant political coalitions, and in policy core beliefs (Weible & Nohrstedt, 2012). As some studies recently showed the COVID-19 pandemic, an exogenous shock, and its crisis narrative, has the potential to transform education systems and bring policy change (e.g., Morris et al., 2022; Zancajo et al., 2022).

In the adult learning sector, as Milana and Klatt (2019) argue, political authority escalated from the European Commission (EC) to the Council of the EU when it approved its first ever Resolution on adult learning back in 2011 (CEU, 2011). So, adult learning assumed new contours as a policy subsystem at EU level, including different actors (officials and staff from governing and administrative bodies at EU and national levels, civil society organisations, etc.), each with strong beliefs on adult learning they want to translate into actual policy. Fittingly, for this study, the COVID-19 pandemic represents an exogenous shock to the EU adult learning subsystem, and we are interested in the actors involved in producing the 2021 Agenda, and the advocacy coalitions they formed to have better chances to influence the 2021 Agenda. For our scope, deep core beliefs are normative assumptions on adult learning (e.g., adult learning helps societal development); policy core beliefs deal with both policy scopes (e.g., people’s up-skilling) and problems (e.g., low adult participation in learning provision); and secondary beliefs relate to policy implementation (e.g., coordination of actions) and instruments (e.g., EU funds).

Methodology

Political mobilisation leading to the 2021 Agenda was initiated, under the coordination of MESS before the country’s Presidency of the Council of the EU (July-December 2021). To examine this process, we followed the policy (Ball, 2016; McCann & Ward, 2012), guided by four research questions:

RQ1: How did policy mobilisation evolve?

RQ2: Which actors were involved? And who was central?

RQ3: What has been the contribution (in terms of belief systems) of central actors to influence the 2021 Agenda setting?

RQ4: What advocacy coalitions were formed?

Methodologically, we first engaged with a soft version of network ethnography (Hogan, 2016; Howard, 2002). We made Internet searches, complemented by covert research (Milana, 2021) to gain information on documents and events that were not publicised, and on lists of participants to different events, which allowed a comprehensive reconstruction of what happened, when, and who was involved. Building on both public and sensitive data, we created a network view of the adult learning subsystem, by use of the Gephi software, encompassing collective actors partaking in consultation events (see next section), then restricted attention on eleven of them (Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of selected organisations

Organisation	Type of organisation	Acronym
Slovenian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport	Slovenian institution	MESS
Slovenian Institute for Adult Education	Slovenian institution	SIAE
European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training	European agency	CEDEFOP
European Training Foundation	European agency	ETF
Lifelong Learning Platform	EU-wide organization	LLL
European Association for the Education of Adults	EU-wide organization	EAEA
European Basic Skills Network	EU-wide organization	EBSN
European Trade Union Confederation	EU-wide organization	ETUC
Interest Group on Lifelong Learning	EU-wide interest group	IGLL
European Economic and Social Committee	EU advisory body	EESC
Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion	EU institution	DG-EMPL

Next we explored the belief systems and actors' relations of the above organisations through additional Internet searches; 35 official documents (30 manifestos, position papers, and agendas related to adult learning and/or skills, produced between 2020 and 2021, and 5 outcome documents of the process behind the 2021 Agenda), and 12 expert interviews from 8 organisations (Table 2). All interviews, conducted in May-June 2022, lasted approximately 1 hour, were held in English and transcribed. Unfortunately, in 3 cases (i.e., IGLL, ETUC, EESC) the identified experts were either unavailable or difficult to reach, so we relied on written documents only.

Table 2. Expert interviews

Corporate actor	Interview code
MESS	I-1
SIAE	I-2
CEDEFOP	I-3; I-4
ETF	I-5; I-6
LLLP	I-7
EAEA	I-8; I-9; I-10
EBSN	I-11
EC DG-EMPL	I-12

Finally, adapting the methodology applied by Markard et al. (2016), we performed a two-step qualitative content analysis through coding (Saldaña, 2009). First, for each organisation, we coded selected documents and interview transcripts based on a deductive coding scheme (Table 3); then, we returned on the coded material to refine our analysis within each code through an inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). First, we identified, for each organisation, its deep core, policy core and secondary beliefs, which were ranked based on the number of extracts assigned to each code; then we contrasted and compared the results across organisations to identify the formation of advocacy coalitions, based on shared beliefs.

Table 3. Deductive coding scheme (our adaptation from Markard et al., 2016)

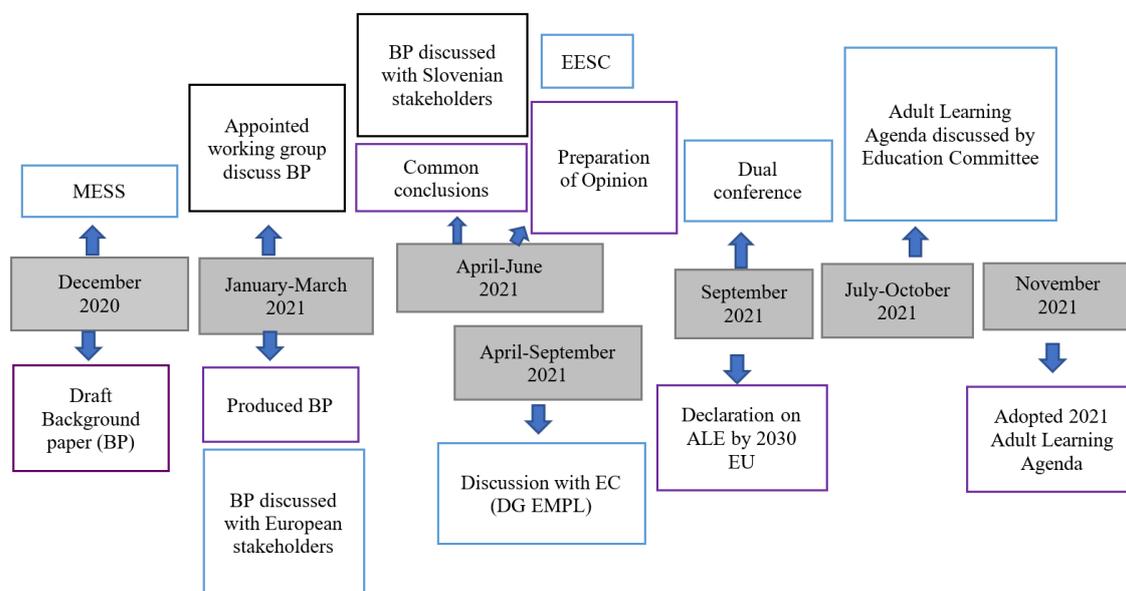
Code	Sub-code
Actor (A)	Specific actors (e.g., Council of the EU)
Actors' beliefs (AB)	1) Deep core 2) Policy core 3) Secondary aspects
Actors' relations (AR)	1) Actors 2) Situation (e.g., event) 3) Artefacts (e.g., document)

The following sections report the results of our analysis.

Political mobilisation and actors involved in producing the 2021 Agenda

Under the Slovenian Presidency of the EU, preparation of the 2021 Agenda was under the responsibility of MESS. Figure 1 summarises its evolution between December 2020 and November 2021.

Figure 1. The process behind the 2021 Adult Learning Agenda



Legend:

Black lines identify nationally-based events. Light blue lines identify organisations and events at EU level (MESS in this process was representing the EU Presidency). Purple lines identify the key policy document produced along the process.

MESS comprises, among others, the Sector for Adult Education, which mission is ‘to provide access to learning opportunities for as many adults as possible and to encourage their participation in educational and support activities’ (MESS, 2022, our translation). In December 2020 the Sector’s staff drafted a Background paper, then discussed in an online meeting (January 18-19, 2021) with an appointed working group comprising staff from two more MESS’ Sectors, SIAE, a national research and development institution (IRSVET), the national agency for EU education programs (CMEPIUS), and the Permanent Representation to the EU in Brussels, thus including the national representative (since 2010) in the ET 2020 Working Group on Adult Learning, who acted also as National Coordinator of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)’ Skills strategy in Slovenia (2015-2018), and as National Coordinator for the Implementation of the European Agenda for Adult Learning.

A first outcome document, the *European Agenda for Adult Learning - Background paper for discussion* (MIZŠ, 2021a), was produced, drawing extensively on previous work carried out at EU level to which several collective actors contributed, particularly the ET 2020 Working Group on Adult Learning (2018-2020), the Council of the EU, and the EC.

The document was then put up for discussion with European stakeholders (24 March 2021) and Slovenian stakeholders (15 April 2021). European stakeholders included five Europe-wide organizations (European Association of Regional and Local Authorities for Lifelong Learning, EBSN, EAEA, ETUC, LLLP), one interest group (IGLL), two European agencies (ETF, CEDEFOP), the Network of adult learning national coordinators (appointed by member states, and coordinated by the EC), and the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL). Slovenian stakeholders included the Government Office for European Cohesion Policy, the Expert Council for Adult Education, seven ministries, SIAE and three more public institutions, three university’s faculties of education, four adult education providers, and two civil society organisations.

The results of both stakeholder consultations led to a second outcome document: *Common conclusions: Meeting with stakeholders on future adult learning policies* (MIZŠ, 2021b).

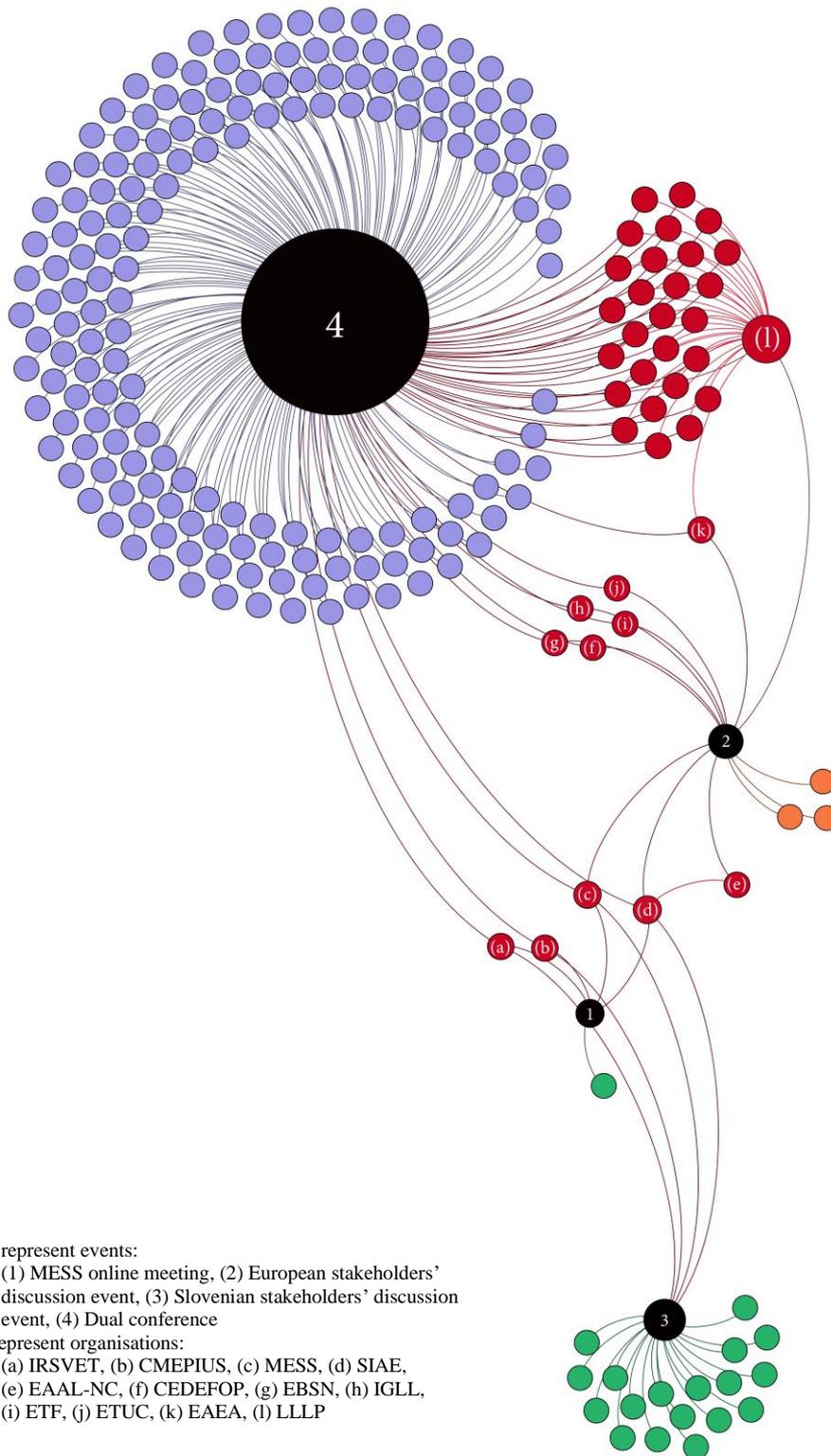
On this ground, MESS held several consultations at European level with the other two countries of its Presidency group (Germany and Portugal) (dates unknown), EAEA (periodically over January-October) (EAEA I-8; I-9), EC (periodically over April-September 2021) (DG-EMPL, I-12), and EESC (periodically over April-June 2021), whose formal opinion on adult learning, upon MESS' request, was adopted on 8 July 2021 (EESC, 2021), constituting a third outcome document – or ‘the voice of employers’ (MESS I-1).

Moreover, on 8-9 September 2021 MESS hosted an online dual conference: *Adult Learning and Education – The Resilient Response to Future Challenges*, co-organised with UIL as also part of the preparation to the VII International Conference on Adult Education ‘to identify forward-looking recommendations with a focus on ALE [adult learning and education] as *the resilient response to future challenges*’ (Valentini, 2021, para. 1, emphasis in original). Overall, 430 participants attended the conference, including high representatives from European and Slovenian institutions. The results of this conference led to a fourth outcome document, the *Declaration on Adult Learning and Education by 2030 in the European Union* (2021), a commitment and advocacy paper representing ‘the voice of professionals’ (MESS I-1).

Finally, over July-October a draft of the 2021 Agenda was discussed five times at meetings of the Education Committee, which prepares items for discussion by EU education ministers, and each time revised by the Slovenian appointed working group. This process was completed on 27 October, after which the EC Secretariat finalised the 2021 Agenda or ‘the voice of decision makers’ (MESS I-1) adopted by the Council of Ministers for Education on 29 November (MESS I-1; SIAE I-2).

Two-hundreds-and-twenty-nine organisations participated in events during the above-described process (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Organisations involved in consultation events



Legend:

Number represent events:

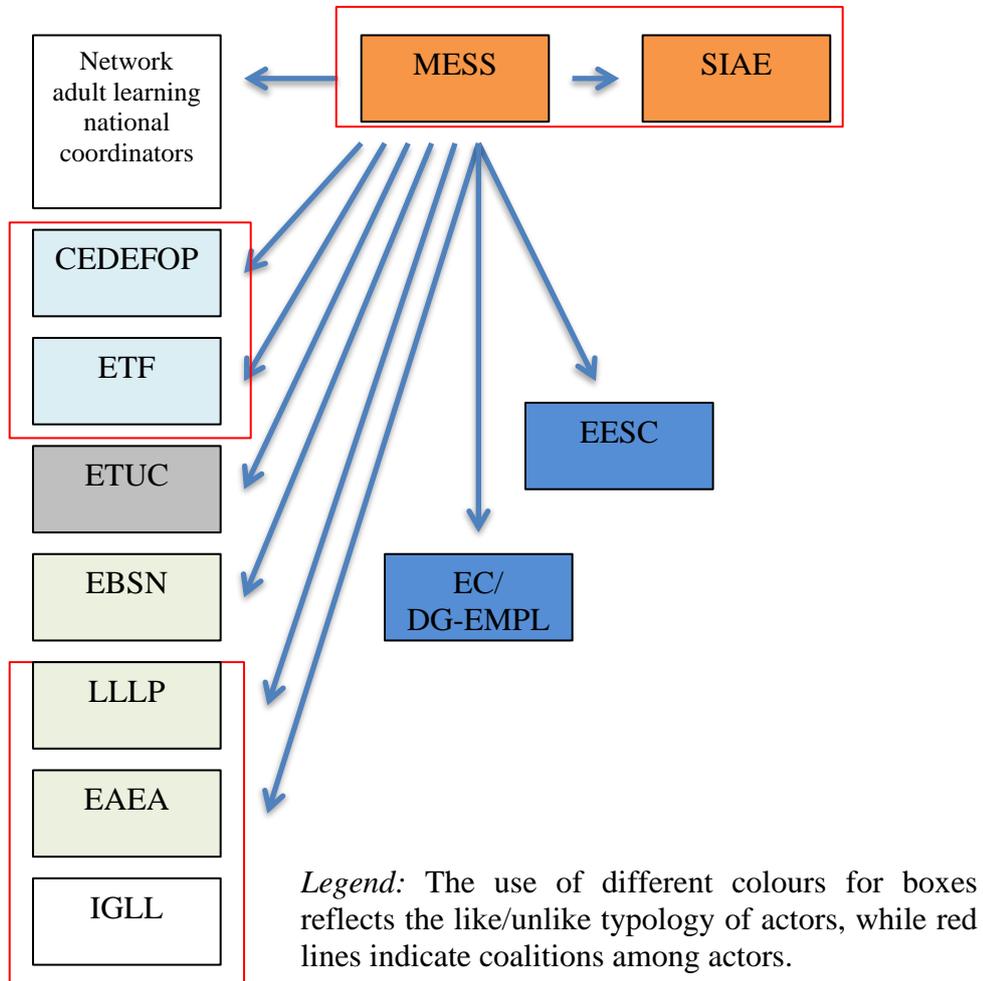
- (1) MESS online meeting, (2) European stakeholders' discussion event, (3) Slovenian stakeholders' discussion event, (4) Dual conference

Letters represent organisations:

- (a) IRSVET, (b) CMEPIUS, (c) MESS, (d) SIAE, (e) EAAL-NC, (f) CEDEFOP, (g) EBSN, (h) IGLL, (i) ETF, (j) ETUC, (k) EAEA, (l) LLLP

Among the actors shown in Figure 2, only twelve participated in two or more consultative events (Figure 3)¹: two Slovenian institutions, the Network of adult learning national coordinators, an EU advisory group, an EC department, two European agencies, four EU-wide organizations and one interest group.

Figure 3. Actors' relations and coalitions



In the following sections we consider ten of them, the advocacy coalitions they formed, and their contribution in terms of belief systems. The Network of adult learning national coordinators is not considered because a Commission Expert Group does not speak with one voice, whereas DG-EMPL is not considered for insufficient data.

Slovenian institutions and advocacy coalition #1

Based on their shared beliefs, as by our analysis, a first coalition was found at national level among the two institutions that hold formal responsibility for adult learning as part of the Slovenian education system: MESS and SIAE. MESS is responsible for all levels of national education and devoted to a basic principle of lifelong learning and learning for all in the public interest. Overseeing the overall process, it played a central role in the development of the 2021 Agenda. SIAE is the central public institute and umbrella institution for adult education in Slovenia. Since 2012 it acts as the national coordinator of the European Agenda for Adult Learning, and it is thus a member of the Network of

adult learning national coordinators. Moreover, it holds close international collaboration, among others, with EAEA (I-9) and EBSN (I-11).

The two institutions are closely interrelated. While MESS is responsible for the drafting, evaluation, analysis, and implementation of regulations for all levels of education, SIAE is one of its research and development institutions providing expertise for adult education. Although some differences exist in their belief system - as highlighted in the text below, Table 4 shows their shared beliefs.

Table 4. Beliefs of coalition #1 (Slovenian institutions)

MESS and SIAE	
Deep core	(1) Helping economic and social development (2) Benefitting all (people and societies) (3) A lifelong endeavour
Policy core	(1) Increase quality, flexibility, and accessibility (2) Need for holistic approach (multi-governance, multi-stakeholder, multi-level and multi-purposes) (3) Need for improved outreach and guidance
Secondary aspects	(1) Development of flexible pathways (2) Enhance professionalisation (3) Enhance work-based learning (4) Development of quality assurance system (5) Emphasis on funding (6) Enhance digitalisation

As seen from Table 4, MESS and SIAE' *deep-core beliefs* are that adult learning is helping economic and social development (e.g., productivity, green and digital transitions, social inclusion), is a key force in making lifelong learning and mobility a reality, a lifelong endeavour, a norm that adults need to update their knowledge to meet labour market needs and societal challenges (MIZŠ, 2021a). Their *policy core beliefs* points at the challenges of better quality in provision and professionalisation of adult educators, more flexibility of learning pathways, and higher recognition of prior learning (RPL). Due to the fragmentation of adult learning, two aspects are emphasised: 1) the need for an holistic approach that encompasses multi-governance approach, multi-stakeholders and multi-level (from central to local authorities) cooperation, and 2) a multi-purpose approach based on 'skills for life' (MESS I-1, SIAE I-2) to 'balance adult learning for training and education for work [...] [and] adult learning for personal growth, and coexistence in communities, including democratic citizenship' (SIAE I-2). Interview data also point at some differences between the two organisations, as 'sustainable and constant financing' (MESS I-1) is recognised as a greater challenge by MESS, while taking 'into account [of] the economic, but also humanist point of view' of adult learning is a central concern for SIAE. In the domain of *secondary beliefs*, implementation measures and instruments to be used include flexible pathways based on individual learner autonomy and responsibility, a learning outcome-based approach, individual learning accounts, competence-based teaching and learning approaches (to enhance the professionalisation of adult educators), work-based learning (to stimulate lower qualified employees to join up-skilling and reskilling programmes), a quality assurance system based on mobility for learners, teachers and staff, a mix of European funds and costs sharing between the individual, the employer and the state, and the use of digital tools.

Both institutions share that COVID-19 pandemic caused ‘initial shock’ (SIAE I-2) to adult learning providers, as many non-formal programmes and activities stopped or heavily decreased, and to adult learners, especially the most vulnerable, ‘because they didn’t have any kind of chances to be involved in any kind of learning activities’ (MESS I-1). Despite this, they also stressed the quick adaptability of adult learning providers in finding new solutions, becoming ‘very inventive’ (SIEA I-2) in engaging adults in learning activities through different digital tools and platforms, and ‘that we all made a huge leap as far as digital skills are concerned [...] nowadays, many, many people know how to use certain tools, which would not have been the case if there wasn’t COVID-19’ (SIAE I-2).

In short, coalition #1 advocates for adult learning being a lifelong endeavour benefitting individuals and society, thus for the need of a holistic approach that is multi-governance, multi-stakeholder, multi-level and multi-purposes.

European agencies and advocacy coalition #2

A second coalition was found at European level among the two agencies that hold responsibility for vocational education and training: CEDEFOP and ETF.

CEDEFOP promotes and supports the development and implementation of EU’ vocational education and training (VET) policies, together with skills and qualifications policies, in close cooperation with the EC, member states and social partners. In recent years green skills, digitalisation, artificial intelligence, and skills forecasting ‘gradually have become key strands of the Agency’s work’ (CEDEFOP, 2022). By contrast ETF supports education, training, and labour market reforms in transition and developing countries, and ‘help[s] them to improve social cohesion and achieve more sustainable economic growth, which in turn benefits Member States and their citizens by improving economic relations’ (ETF, 2022). ETF supports growing awareness on lifelong learning, work-based learning and lifelong career guidance and, after COVID-19, digital skills. Like CEDEFOP, ETF supports the EC and collaborates closely with Eurofound and CEDEFOP (ETF I-5).

As shown in Table 5 (next page), CEDFOP’s *deep-core belief* is that VET has a key role in economic and social recovery and to green and digital transitions (CEDEFOP, 2020a, 2020b). In the domain of *policy core beliefs*, adult learning and continuing VET are seen to support personal and professional development (e.g., reduce unemployment, increase income), while there are clear needs for: 1) establishing well-functioning continuing VET systems accessible to all, as ‘you can see that real systems of continuing and adult learning are not in place, basically, in almost every country, you don’t have a real system’ (CEDEFOP I-3); 2) strengthening high-quality guidance policies to reach out groups at risk; 3) establishing skills intelligence for responsive VET and green and digital transformation; 4) promoting a multi-stakeholder approach; 5) investing in digital basic skills, as the lack of digital skills is particularly high among adults while these skills ‘become a precondition for most of the people to be able to remain active in the labour market’ (CEDEFOP I-3; CEDEFOP, 2020a, 2020c, 2021). In the domain of *secondary beliefs*, implementation measures and instruments to be used include effective continuing VET systems based on institutional and governance arrangements, work-based learning and online learning arrangements, flexible guidance approaches based on qualification frameworks and validation arrangements, EU instruments and frameworks (e.g. individual learning accounts, micro-credentials), multi-stakeholder cooperation, and policy coordination to ensure a ‘coordinated, coherent, integrated approach’ (CEDEFOP I-4; CEDEFOP, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

Table 5. Beliefs of coalition #2 (EU-agencies)

	CEDEFOP	ETF
Deep core	(1) Helping economic, social recovery and transition	(1) Enabling green and digital transition (2) Career guidance benefits individuals, societies and economies
Policy core	(1) Need to establish well-functioning continuing VET systems (2) Need to strengthen high-quality guidance policies (3) Need for skills intelligence for green and digital transformation (4) Poor participation and need for up-skilling and reskilling (5) Need to promote a multi-stakeholder approach (6) Need to invest in digital basic skills	(1) Need to establish effective lifelong learning systems (2) Guidance enables reskilling, up-skilling and mobility (3) Poor participation in lifelong learning and flexibility of education and training systems (4) Need to promote a multi-stakeholder approach
Secondary aspects	(1) Development of effective continuing VET systems (2) Development of flexible guidance approaches (3) Emphasis on funding (4) Emphasis on EU instruments and frameworks (5) Emphasis on work-related learning (6) Greater multi-stakeholder's cooperation and policy coordination	(1) Development of lifelong learning systems (2) Development of career guidance systems (3) Greater international cooperation and partnership

ETF's *deep-core beliefs* are that learning and skills enable green and digital transition, while career guidance benefits individuals (to reach their potential), societies (to become fairer) and economies (to increase their efficiency) (ETF, 2021; ETF et al., 2021). Due to the poor participation of adults in lifelong learning and poor flexibility of education and training systems to meet learning needs, in the domain of *policy core beliefs*, ETF sees a need to establish effective lifelong learning systems (with flexible and individualised pathways, learning in different settings, and RPL) and promote a multi-stakeholder approach based on 'a shared vision, a shared policy, [a] shared culture, [and a] shared understanding' (ETF I-5). In the domain of *secondary beliefs*, implementation measures to be used are related to the development of lifelong learning systems (e.g., a learner-centred approach, visibility of people's skills and learning outcomes) and career guidance systems (e.g., qualified practitioners, quality tools, timely labour market information, clear standards) as well as greater international cooperation and partnership through data sharing, peer learning activities and global networking.

As mentioned, CEDEFOP and ETF closely collaborate with each other. At the dual conference, the CEDEFOP Executive Director raised attention on a join discussion paper,

The importance of being vocational (CEDEFOP & ETF, 2020), which *deep-core belief* is that in time of economic crisis, continuing VET is crucial for transition to a green and digital society. Thus, the *policy core beliefs* deal with the need to establishing a well-functioning continuing VET system, which ‘remains the missing piece of integrated lifelong learning systems’ (p. 12), while *secondary beliefs* focus on flexible and efficient participation pathways, multi-stakeholder cooperation and policy coordination.

CEDEFOP and ETF share that COVID-19 pandemic has affected all areas of society and economy, learning and work being no exception, and that the pandemic will ‘accelerate societal and economic changes’ (CEDEFOP & ETF, 2020, p. 8) and ‘bring in its wake a deep, global recession’ (p. 5). But, while ETF interviewees noted that in many countries ‘training programs were simply suspended’ and the pandemic caused ‘huge education losses’ (ETF I-6), CEDEFOP’s interviewees emphasised ‘a huge increase in the demand of learning by people’ following the pandemic, although labour market restructuring had no real impact ‘on the way adult learning and continuous training is organised’ (CEDEFOP I-3).

In summary, coalition #2 advocates for adult learning enabling societal transitions, for more effective and well-functioning lifelong learning systems, yet with an emphasis on vocational skills, and for a multi-stakeholder approach.

European civil society organisations, interest groups and advocacy coalition #3

Still at European level, a third coalition is found among two civil society organisations and an interest group concerned with adult education and lifelong learning: EAEA, LLLP, and IGLL.

EAEA is an umbrella organisation of non-formal adult education institutions that lobby and do advocacy work to promote ‘adult learning and access to and participation in non-formal adult education for all’ (EAEA, 2022). It cooperates with EU institutions, national and regional governments, non-governmental organisations, and international organisations like UIL. Since 2016 it has been a member of the ET 2020 Working Groups on Adult Learning, and on Citizenship Education (now Working Group on Equality and Values in Education and Training). By contrast, LLLP is a platform of European organisations in the field of education, training and youth promoting the dialogue between civil society and public authorities. It claims a ‘holistic vision of lifelong learning’ and that ‘the objectives of education and training should not only be described in terms of employability or economic growth but also as a framework for personal development’ (LLL, 2022). It has working groups on relevant policy areas and topics (e.g., digital learning). Finally, IGLL brings together civil society organisations with twelve members of the European Parliament to discuss key issues connected to lifelong learning. It promotes participation in adult learning and education, and inclusion through lifelong learning, with a view to the headline targets and objectives of the European Education Area.

Despite their different objectives a strong tie exists among EAEA, LLLP and IGLL. EAEA is a member of LLLP, currently represented in its Steering Committee, while EAEA Secretary-General (since 2007) held a mandate (2018-2019) as LLLP President. EAEA gained inspiration from LLLP to set up working groups, and in the use of policy statements and dissemination through the websites (EAEA I-10), which have come to resemble each other. Occasionally, on topics of common concern (e.g., digitalisation), each organisation’s policy statement recalls that of the other, like in the 2020 LLLP Statement on COVID-19 pandemic, stressing the need to up-skill teachers, educators, and

trainers, and invest massively on education and training and in digital skills. IGLL started off in 2015 upon the initiative of LLLP, EAEA and several members of the European Parliament.

Table 6. Beliefs of coalition #3 (EU-civil society organisations and interest group)

	EAEA	LLL	IGLL
Deep core	(1) Making people active, responsible and engaged citizens (2) Helping people's personal development and social inclusion	(1) Has a transformative capacity (personal, social and economic) (2) Making people active and engage citizens	(1) Being comprehensive and trans-sectorial
Policy core	(1) Poor recognition of non-formal and community learning (2) Poor recognition of adult learning's multiple positive effects and benefits (3) Need for a holistic approach (inter-sectorial, multi-stakeholder, multi-level) (4) Need for more and more stable funding (5) Need to leave no one behind (guarantee access to all)	(1) Need for a holistic approach (inter-sectorial, multi-stakeholder, multi-level) (2) Need for a rights-based approach (3) Poor recognition of non-formal and informal education and community learning (4) Poor participation	(1) Lack of access to quality education for adults and seniors (2) Need for a holistic approach (inter-sectorial, multi-stakeholder, multi-level) (3) Poor attention to non-formal and informal learning (4) More flexible learning pathways (5) Need for a rights-based approach
Secondary aspects	(1) Greater recognition of adult education as a sector of its own (2) Development of adequate funding schemes (3) Emphasis on outreach programmes (4) Greater advocacy work (national, international)	(1) Emphasis on (EU, national) funding (2) Greater policy coherence and alignment (3) Enhance professional development (teachers and educators) (4) Development of RPL arrangements	(1) Greater dialogue with civil society and social partners (2) Emphasis on fundings (national, European)

EAEA's *deep core belief*, as seen in Table 6, is that adult learning provides people with the multiple abilities they need to work, socialise, stay healthy, and contribute to their well-being and that of others, and society at large (EAEA, 2019; EAEA I-8). So, especially at times of crisis and in transition periods, it can bring important benefits to individuals and society (EAEA I-9). In the domain of *policy core beliefs*, however, EAEA sees persistent problems. One is a narrow focus on adult learning for work and basic skills

that dismisses other benefits, especially of non-formal and community learning (e.g., skills for life) (EAEA, 2020a, 2020b; EAEA I-8). Another is that adult learning does not receive adequate and stable public funding (EAEA, 2020a, 2021a): ‘What we witnessed is something like what I call the projectisation of ALE [adult learning and education], a parallel with the decline in long term funding of organisations and structures’ (EAEA I-9). This does not guarantee access to all, especially marginalised groups, and senior citizens, so that no ‘one is left behind’ (EAEA I-9). Accordingly, ‘a holistic approach as well as inter-ministerial and inter-sectoral cooperation’ is needed (EAEA, 2021b). In the domain of *secondary beliefs* adult learning should gain formal recognition as one sector of national education systems, with dedicated policies, including the continuation of a committed European agenda (EAEA, 2020a, 2021b). But project-based funding shall be replaced by more stable funding schemes, and outreach programmes be diversified (so to increase participation). So greater advocacy work at all levels is needed (EAEA I-8).

LLL’s *core belief* (Table 6) is that lifelong learning has a transformative capacity in reaching goals at individual level (personal fulfilment, well-being), social level (active citizenship, social inclusion, democracy), and economic level (green, digital, post-COVID-19 transitions in the labour market) and builds citizens’ capacity to be active agents of change in societal transitions (e.g., digital and sustainable transitions) (LLL, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a). Due to the prevailing ‘economic orientated discourse’ (LLL, 2021a, p. 2) in education and because ‘adult education is more important than just [learning] for employability’ (LLL I-7), in the domain of *policy core beliefs* (LLL, 2020a, 2021a, 2021c) the need for a more balanced and a ‘holistic view from cradle to grave on lifelong learning’ (LLL I-7) are emphasised, encompassing multi-governance, multi-stakeholders (including civil society organisations) and multi-level (from European to local level) approaches, and a multi-purpose approach based on life skills (beyond retirement age). Due to the low participation rates of adults in lifelong learning and poor recognition of non-formal and informal education and community learning at the grass root level ‘we believe that individuals should have the full ownership of their educational rights’ (LLL I-7). In the domain of *secondary beliefs*, the use of EU funds (to improve systems and provisions in all sectors of education - formal, non-formal and informal), and the financing of civil society organisations are underlined, as well as investment in adult learning as part of national education systems. Beside developing RPL arrangements that consider all types of learning, and enhancing constant professional development of teachers and educators, LLL believes in greater policy coherence between different EU policies (e.g., RPL and micro-credentials), and alignment with international agendas (e.g., UN sustainable development goals, International Labour Organization’s recognition of a universal entitlement to lifelong learning) (LLL, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

IGLL’s *deep core belief* is that lifelong learning is comprehensive and trans-sectorial (see Table 6). In the domain of *policy core beliefs*, adults, and especially senior citizens, often lack access to quality education (IGLL, 2021), which should be rights-based (e.g., more age-inclusive), give more attention and recognition to non-formal and informal learning, encompass a multi-governance, multi-stakeholders, and multi-level approach (IGLL, 2020), and better facilitate inter-generational learning (IGLL, 2021). Fittingly, in the domain of *secondary beliefs*, besides pointing at a greater social dialogue between policy makers (at EU and national level), and civil society, IGLL also brings to the fore more dedicated fundings at all levels (IGLL, 2020, 2021).

COVID-19 has been both a challenge and an opportunity for EAEA. On the one hand, moving teaching online has stressed both adult learning professionals and learners, while outreach and access have become more difficult (EAEA, 2020a). On the other hand, learning providers and professionals have delivered quick responses, demonstrating a

capacity for innovating, and adjusting to new situations, which calls for new abilities to be learned (EAEA, 2020b), and more investments in hardware and software (EAEA I-9). Traditional participation barriers (e.g., lack of time, funding, or interest) have been exacerbated by the pandemic (EAEA, 2020b), and ‘people without strong digital skills were left out, basically’ (EAEA I-8) (i.e., digital exclusion). So, while digitalisation was boosted by COVID-19, it represents a challenge as much as an opportunity for the adult learning sector. Moreover, ‘COVID had a big impact on the advocacy work in Brussels, because the advocacy work in Brussels... a lot is informal meetings, and this couldn’t happen in the COVID time’ (EAEA I-9).

For LLLP COVID-19 has been mostly a challenge. The pandemic has caused a shift to the ‘virtual world’, disrupted education and training systems across the continent, and raised the need for digital skills (LLLP, 2021b). Moreover, it put inequalities into the spotlight (LLLP, 2021c) showing

a gap, a huge gap between those who are more digital capacitated, and those with less digital capacity [...] [and between] those who had money and resources to find the place where they could learn, and those who didn’t have the chance or lost their job in between this situation. (LLLP I-7)

For IGLL, because existing polarisation among age groups were made visible (IGLL, 2021), ‘in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, the value of lifelong learning and intergenerational learning has received a renewed significance’ (IGLL, 2021, p. 3).

In brief, coalition #3 advocates for adult learning being comprehensive as it makes all people active and engaged citizens, thus for a need of a holistic approach, which is inter-sectorial, multi-stakeholder, and multi-level.

Other European bodies

Besides the above advocacy coalitions three more EU-wide bodies mobilised and influenced to some extent, with their belief systems, the agenda setting: EBSN, ETUC and EESC.

EBSN is an association of stakeholders engaged in basic skills training for adults at policy level, targeting mostly policymakers in the adult learning sector at local, regional, national, and European level ‘to make sure that all inhabitants of Europe have the level of basic skills they need to have access to lifelong learning, ensure their employability and be active citizens’ (EBSN, 2022, para. 1). It supports implementation of the Upskilling Pathways and contributes content on capacity building and online courses in support of policymakers to the European Platform of Adult learning and Education (EPALE). Like EAEA and LLLP, EBSN cooperates closely with the EC, but counts UIL among its members. It has several memorandums of understanding with other organisations (e.g., EAEA), and is an associated member of the UNESCO Global Alliance for Literacy within the framework of lifelong learning (GAL).

Table 7. EBSN's beliefs

Deep core	(1) Helping all advancing in life
Policy core	(1) Need to promote whole-of-government approach (2) Poor recognition of basic skills' centrality (3) Need for national basic skills programs (4) Foster learner-centred delivery (5) Foster and finance basic skills' research (6) Lack of professional recognition (7) Enhance digital skills (teachers, learners)
Secondary aspects	(1) Development of Open Educational Resources (2) Development of national policies (coherent, cohesive, funded) (3) Emphasis on networking

As seen in Table 7, EBSN's *deep-core belief* is that basic skills make people to advance in life, as workers, active citizens, and lifelong learners. In the domain of *policy core beliefs* this leads to a need for a whole-of-government approach, thus making diverse ministries, public administrations and public agencies recognise the centrality of basic skills (EBSN I-11; EBSN, 2020, 2021). This means that project-based solutions should be abandoned in favour of nation-wide basic skills programmes and learner-centred delivery modalities should better respond to the real needs of people. Additional policy core beliefs encompass, on the one hand, the need to foster and finance research on basic skills and, on the other hand, to give recognition to and empower adult education professionals to also 'combine presential and online learning' (EBSN, 2021). In the domain of *secondary beliefs*, the development of Open Educational Resources (OER) is central (to support the planning and delivery of basic skills) (EBSN I-11; EBSN, 2020, 2021).

While 'in many countries, in many fields, there was nothing about the digital' (EBSN I-11), the outbreak of COVID-19 has 'dramatically increased the relevance of training in digital literacy' (EBSN, 2020) and brought attention to 'new systems of delivery of learning' (EBSN I-11). Consequently, EBSN's policy core beliefs on the whole-of-government and digital skills of both professionals and learners have been reinforced by the pandemic (EBSN I-11; EBSN, 2021), which has also impacted on the organisation's mode of working: now more EBSN meetings and conferences are held online instead of in physical presence.

ETUC represents the voice of European workers from more than 90 trade union organisations and advocates for Social Europe, fundamental social values, and wellbeing of workers. It fights for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, quality jobs and social protection, action to combat climate change. It pursues as well 'quality education for all, together with vocational training and lifelong learning, regardless of age or gender' and advocates for learning that supports labour market, as well as 'personal development and welfare' (ETUC, 2022, para. 1).

As shown in Table 8 (see next page) ETUC's *deep core belief* is that adult learning leads all workers to an adequate and fair job, but this cannot be achieved unless sufficient and fair jobs are also created and secured by EU institutions and national governments (ETUC, 2020).

Table 8. ETUC's beliefs

Deep core	(1) Guaranteeing all workers (fair) jobs
Policy core	(1) Poor inclusive and quality vocational training for all workers (2) Need for recognition of multiple skills (digital, green, social, transversal) (3) Foster a holistic approach to skills development (4) Lack of right and guarantee to skills development for all
Secondary aspects	(1) Emphasis on social dialogue (trade unions) (2) Emphasis on share responsibility (employers, employees) (3) Development of efficient governance (vocational training)

In the domain of *policy core beliefs*, it is a problem that much available VET is of poor quality, and only available to certain types of workers (predominantly male in big companies, with secured contracts). ETUC believes not only that a holistic approach to skills development is needed, but also that a plurality of skills should be recognised as relevant for the labour market (e.g., social and transversal skills, digital and green skills). In the domain of *secondary beliefs*, ETUC emphasises more social dialogue with trade unions (to secure that those EU initiatives in support of adult skilling and re-skilling meet the needs of the individuals) and adult skilling as a shared responsibility (to avoid putting 'the responsibility of up-skilling and reskilling to the individuals' (ETUC, 2020, p. 2).

ETUC is concerned that the COVID-19 pandemic will affect the budgets that companies allocate to the training of their employees (ETUC, 2020, p. 8), and for 'the millions of workers who lost their jobs as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, which entails the risk that some of them will remain long-term unemployed and eventually lose their skills' (ETUC, 2020, p. 3).

Finally, EESC is an independent EU advisory body made of representatives of workers, employers, and civil society organisations, which gives advice on EU policies and legislation on a wide range of matters, by issuing opinions addressed to the EC, the Council of the EU, and the European Parliament. It has six specialised sections ranging from social to economic affairs. Not a specialised section, in education and training EESC has expressed its opinion on issues concerned with the quality of education, apprenticeships and traineeships, and a fair and inclusive labour market (EESC, 2022). The member of EESC that acted as Rapporteur of the Opinion on adult learning (EESC, 2021), is a member of the Lithuanian Education and Science Trade Union, and ETUC, which she represented at the consultation between MESS and European stakeholders.

Table 9. EESC's beliefs

Deep core	(1) Helping active citizenship (2) Facilitating digital and green transitions
Policy core	(1) Need to support access and competence validation (2) Need to strengthen effective policies and strategies (3) Need for democratic governance, concerted action, and collective agreements
Secondary aspects	(1) Greater social dialogue (2) Emphasis on appropriate, public/private, sustainable financing (3) Greater inter-sectorial linkages at EU and national levels (4) Emphasis on EU recommendations and targets (5) Greater targeted policy measures and industrial strategies (6) Development of EU-wide exchange platforms (7) Development of public services and national financial mechanisms (8) Enhance research, data collection and monitoring

As seen in Table 9, EESC's *deep-core belief* is that adult learning supports the formation of active citizens, which can facilitate both digital and green transitions. In the domain of *policy core beliefs*, EESC points to the need to support both access to adult learning and RPL, which calls for more effective policies and strategies, thus 'democratic governance' shall be pursued in the field of adult learning at both European and national level (EESC, 2021, p. 5). Fittingly, in the domain of *secondary beliefs*, EESC calls for greater social dialogue, and 'for a platform to be set up for national AL [adult learning] coordinators, social partners and stakeholders, separate from EPAL, and for these various players to meet regularly as a network' (EESC, 2021, p. 6). At the same time, companies' need for adult learning should be appropriately financed, with remits from governments as much as companies, to complement available EU funds (EESC, 2021, p. 6). Adequate funds should support also national financial mechanisms and services to facilitate adults' access to learning opportunities, and industrial strategies for the training of workers and other targeted measures. All this is needed to meet both recommendations and targets agreed at EU level. At the same time, the EU and member states should establish a continuous monitoring system for adult learning participation, while research on skills, skills intelligence, and skills forecasts should be enhanced (EESC, 2021, p. 4).

To summaries, EBSN advocates for adult learning to help everybody to advance in life thus for the need to promote a whole-of-government approach. By contrast ETUC advocates for adult learning to guaranteeing fair jobs for all workers, thus for the need to foster a holistic approach to skills development. Finally, EESC advocates for lifelong learning helping active citizenship and facilitating digital and green transitions, thus for a greater social dialogue and greater inter-sectorial linkages to be made at EU and national levels.

Discussion

This contribution examined the political mobilisation of actors and their contributions (in terms of belief systems) to influence the 2021 Agenda setting, following the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, our results point to an increased social dialogue in the adult learning subsystem to mobilise actors, thanks to what several interviewees called an ‘unusual way’ MESS, a national governmental institution, pursued an agreed objective at EU level (i.e., renewing a European agenda on adult learning), while the country held the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU. It consisted in engaging in several one-to-one and collective consultations with numerous policy actors that had their strong beliefs on adult learning, and an interest in translating them into a Communitarian agenda (Weible & Nohrstedt, 2012). At EU level such actors include institutions holding responsibility for adult learning (DG-EMPL, CEDEFOP, ETF) or having official consulting roles also in this policy domain (EESC), and civil society organisations advocating and lobbying for adult and lifelong learning (EAEA, LLLP, IGLL). At national level, they comprise public institutions with responsibilities in adult learning (MESS, SIAE).

Second, our results brought to light that several actors formed advocacy coalitions (Sabatier & Weible, 2007) at both national (Slovenian) and European level and worked together to increase their chances to influence Communitarian policies on adult learning. At national (Slovenian) level MESS and SIAE are institutionally bound to work together, yet their belief systems are much alike. They share a more balanced view on adult learning for work, personal growth and coexistence in communities that requires a holistic approach encompassing multi-governance, multi-stakeholders, and multi-level (from central to local authorities) cooperation. At European level, the twin agencies specialising on VET in member states (CEDEFOP) and in transition and developing countries (ETF), despite their different missions, strongly cooperate with one another, and share the view that well-functioning continuing VET systems shall be an integral part of lifelong learning systems, thus also call for multi-stakeholder cooperation and policy coordination. Still at European level, two civil society organisations (EAEA, LLLP) have strengthened the links with one another (e.g., sitting in each other board, recalling each other position’s papers) and with members of the European Parliament (IGLL). Their belief systems align striving for greater recognition of non-formal and informal (community) learning and a more adequate public funding of adult learning. They also call for a holistic approach as well as a multi stakeholders and multi-level cooperation; something on which all three coalitions have come to align over time, perhaps also in response of many criticisms towards a primarily economic, instrumental, and vocational perspective on adult learning (cf. Mikulec, 2018).

Lastly, our results seem to confirm the potential of COVID-19, an exogenous shock of a general nature, to bring about policy change in education (e.g., Morris et al., 2022; Zancajo et al., 2022). In the adult learning subsystem, it facilitated policy-oriented learning (Weible & Nohrstedt, 2012) among the actors involved in the above-mentioned coalitions. In fact, under COVID-19 the visibility of adult learning rose at European level (DG-EMPL I-12), the EC proposed a dedicated target (i.e., achieving 60% of adults in learning in the last 12 months by 2030), welcomed by European leaders (at the 2021 Porto Summit) and the European Council (June 2021). This brings to the fore not only the complexity of the EU political system, in areas of supporting competences like adult learning, but also that despite policy change occurs over a relatively long period of time, exogenous shocks can accelerate policy convergence among actors (cf. Bussi & Milana, forthcoming).

Conclusion

EU policy making is a complex matter. The Slovenian’s long tradition in adult learning, combined with a higher visibility adult learning has gained at EU level under COVID-19,

helped to confirm the mandate to its Rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU to conclude with a new Council's resolution on adult learning. A goal achieved through the mobilisation of many actors working, advocating, and lobbying for adult learning at both Slovenia and European level. This confirms that neither EU institutions (e.g., the Council of the EU) or member states (e.g., Slovenia) are completely independent actors, nor are they monolithic actors. But they need internal specialisation (e.g., dedicated configurations with the Council of the EU or ministerial departments at country level) to be able to influence a substantive area (Sabatier & Weible, 2007) of Communitarian policy. However, EU institutions and member states that lead them *pro tempore* can operate according to different logics to steer the policy process and setting of Communitarian agendas. The Slovenia Presidency opted for an increased social dialogue to give 'voice' to professionals, employers, and policy makers. Although, the study restricted attention to a limited number of actors over a relatively short period of time (approximately 1 year), the existence of common interests among various actors has led to a renewed European agenda on adult learning that has gained substantial consensus, because of shared policy core beliefs – the fundamental 'glue' of coalitions, within and across the three advocacy coalitions we identified. This is reflected, as noted in the Introduction, in that the 2021 Agenda now recognises that '[a]dult learning needs a *holistic approach* including *inter-sectoral and multi-stakeholder collaboration*' (CEU, 2021, p. 8, our emphasis).

More research is needed to increase knowledge on political mobilisation in the adult learning subsystem, and its contribution to setting Communitarian agendas in this substantial field. Future research may consider, among other aspects, extending the period under consideration and assume exogenous shocks as dependent variables; increase the number and types of actors involved in the adult learning subsystem that are made the object of investigation; and differently research how coalitions advocating and lobbying for adult learning at EU level work in practice.

Notes

- ¹ Please note that we consider LLLP (one organisation), rather than its individual member organisations.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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