

Editorial

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The Ariadne's clue to the European Higher Education Area: The Balkan Countries Experience

In a globalized world educational ideas, trends, and practices frequently inspired and certainly supported and promoted by international organizations, swiftly cut across national borders to mingle with local traditions and circumstances. The outcome is not always the same. There are foreign influences that can be better tuned with national conditions, as there are those that can hardly match with the national context. Much depends in such cases on how in-coming trends are communicated by their instigators and on how they are interpreted by national recipients. The Bologna Process is in this sense exemplary.

In 1999, 29 European ministers of education convened symbolically in the city of Bologna, the seat of the first university, to map out the route for the university in 21st century Europe. Some of the signatory countries, mainly western European, were well ahead in the process of having their university system transformed; others were trying hard to overcome deeply rooted ideological convictions and the vested interests of the local academia; while others, newcomers to the competitive world of market economy, were eager to make their first steps in it and to learn from others' experience. It was obvious from the very beginning that the implementation of the Bologna Declaration was likely to proceed through a very diverse landscape of not only its cultural and national sites but also its socio-economic and political characteristics.

Twelve years of systematic effort and multilateral support have not managed thus far to bring the Bologna Process to successful completion. The conventional wisdom of comparative education warning against illusions about the unconditional applicability of general policies was once more proved right. The optimistic reassurances of the successive communiqués that “developments over the last two years have brought us a significant step closer to the realization of the European Higher Education Area” (London Communiqué, 2007) cannot certainly hide the difficulties the Process is faced with, especially in certain national contexts.

The present special issue of *European Education* focuses on a European region of peculiar interest: the Balkans, with all the turbulent history, cultural plurality, and socio-political upheavals that has characterized this region in late 20th

century. Each of the five countries examined here constitutes a peculiar case as concerns the realization of the Bologna Process. Three of them came out of the breakup of Yugoslavia, which was relatively peaceful and smooth only for Slovenia, benefiting from its traditional relations with mid-European countries. The other two were involved in a nationalistic confrontation and a destructive war, which at the end found Croatia a member of NATO (2009) and an EU candidate country and Serbia, under pressure to adjust with the demands of the international community, waiting at the antechamber of the two organizations. Romania, on its part, has made every effort to cut its political, socio-economic as well as educational institutions loose from its communist past and since 2007 has fully integrated into the community of European nation states. Greece, on the other hand, has been a member of NATO since 1952 and of the EU since 1980. Moreover, the country had been experiencing a long period of political stability and of seemingly successful socio-economic development until the international economic crisis revealed, so to speak, that “the king was naked.”

To the external observer with a macroscopic approach to the study of national contexts it would seem only natural that the Bologna Process would, under the circumstances, follow a substantially different course in all these countries. Yet, the analysis of the Bologna Process by the five contributors to this special issue reveals that apart from contextual differences and disparities in education policy making across these countries, there are also common forces and factors, mostly related to tradition and to institutional inertia, that should not be underestimated by comparative education analysts and of course by policy makers hammering out the future of European education.

To appreciate differences and similarities in the dynamics and the outcomes of educational policy making along the Bologna lines in the five countries it is helpful to start by considering some of the main characteristics of the Bologna project itself. In the first place, the project has clearly been political in its conception, approval, promotion, and support. It was the education ministers that signed the Declaration and that have since then been following it systematically in consecutive meetings. The academic community, the main recipient and stakeholder of the reform initiative, was initially simply informed and was only later called upon and encouraged to take part in it. At the international level, its formal representatives – the European University Association (EUA) for the academia and the European Students’ Union (ESU – formerly known as ESIB) for students – have gradually resumed a protagonistic role

in the dissemination and support of the Bologna ideal, as well as in the formation and continuous elaboration of the Bologna action plan, thus being recognized by the ministers as significant partners in its realization. The critical student of the Bologna Process should however be warned against accepting the simplistic dichotomy between politicians and the academia, both being considered as cohesive entities. Politicians always differ on ideological and political grounds, influenced by self- and other external interests, with their differences being further complicated by national, cultural, and economic conditions and circumstances. On the other hand, academics, as intellectuals enjoying institutional freedom of thought and action, constitute an even less cohesive body of policy actors, less prone to have their interests and points of view expressed by national – let alone international – corporate organizations. Thus, in analyzing the dynamics and outcomes of the Bologna process we have to look into the undertakings and statements of the actors involved not only at the international but also at the regional/national level and examine how and to what extent the two interact and influence the course of events.

As a *political* process, in the sense that it constitutes a substantial reform agenda for European universities in the 21st century the Bologna process involves a change of values, principles, and institutional arrangements that are likely to upset the balance of power among stakeholders. Consequently, a new political vocabulary is expected to be introduced in public discourse in an attempt to propagate the new ideas and thus strengthen the position of assertive forces; a vocabulary that could at the same time, through its cautiously delicate expressions, be able to ease up the tensions and to overcome the reservations and reactions of those that would probably feel threatened by the reform. As a matter of fact, the Bologna signatories appeared to be well prepared to employ such an approach. They have made every effort not to use a provocative vocabulary. Instead, they have resorted to familiar references, such as the “extraordinary cultural and scientific traditions of Europe” and “the development and strengthening of stable, peaceful and democratic societies in the continent,” in an obvious attempt to play upon the Europeans’ heartstrings and fearsome past war experiences and to make promises to peoples that had only recently got rid of oppressive regimes. They were also very cautious in avoiding direct reference to the economy as the main driving force behind the Bologna Declaration; such a discourse could activate the political reflexes of some social actors – and of certain politicians – against the “evils” of neo-liberalism. They insisted that they respected academic

freedom and cultural diversity and declared that higher education would remain a public responsibility. Yet, the reform vocabulary had its own key words as well, among them being: quality assurance, accountability, employability, international attractiveness (of European universities), competencies (to face the challenges of the new millennium), and competitiveness (of Europe). Almost all of them were, however, clearly open to various interpretations. For sworn opponents they were merely the expressions of neo-liberal ideology and of the evaluative state. For those reading them dispassionately and in good faith they appeared to be of self-evident value in a contemporary society (after all who could be against quality?). And for those who have accepted globalization as an unavoidable process and international organizations as its leading and authoritative agents, they were simply expressions of the TINA (“There is no alternative”) sort of policies. Hence, the study of the Bologna Process has the crucial task of bringing forward all these different interpretations and their underlying assumptions, understandings that bear the stamp not only of the actors’ preferences but also of the prevailing contextual circumstances of which some are expected to be favorable and others adverse.

Finally, as a reform initiative, the Bologna process has had a specific agenda that by late 2000s seems to have been stabilized after consecutive enlargements. Its main items include: (1) the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) based on a three cycle degree system and the introduction of all necessary curricula reforms at every level allowing graduates to acquire qualifications better suited both to the needs of the labor market and to future study; (2) the introduction of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) based on learning outcomes and student workload, which, together with the Degree Supplement, would promote the comparability of degrees and student mobility[1]; (3) the development of national qualifications frameworks, certified against the overarching framework for qualifications of the EHEA, encouraging greater mobility of students and teachers and improving employability; (4) the establishment of Quality Assurance Agencies following the standards and guidelines for Quality Assurance proposed by ENQA, so as to allow all stakeholders and the wider public to have trustworthy information about the quality of higher education; and (5) the strengthening of the social dimension in terms of maximizing the personal development of students and their contribution to a sustainable and democratic knowledge based society.

Taken together the Bologna objectives and measures constitute – at least this was the intention – a coherent and cohesive action plan for the reform of higher education in 21st century Europe; a plan carefully prepared and systematically revised by experts in accordance with the data included in the national Bologna progress reports. A number of comments deserve our attention in this respect. In the first place there is an unjustifiable tendency to take for granted the validity of data provided by national authorities. Yet, legislating –for example, creating the Quality Assurance Agency for higher education– does not necessarily mean that the relevant criterion of the Bologna Process has been satisfied, as the implementation of the policy might remain pending for a long time, or as the policy itself may actually deviate from the Bologna specifications. After all, at the international level of cooperation, the practice of manipulated data is not so uncommon, especially when it arises that national authorities find it difficult – or perhaps they are not willing and prepared – to go ahead with a policy. Hence the mindful study should discriminate between policy adoption and policy implementation. Bologna case studies in the Balkans are in this respect quite illuminating.

The second comment refers to the distinction that should always be made between the professed and the real essence of a policy; between what is declared to be the case and what the implicit assumptions of the policy reveal. For some of the adherents of the Bologna process – not least for some politicians and technocrats – its proposals are of a more or less technical character. They merely aim at improving the comparability of degrees, thus facilitating workforce mobility in a unified Europe, improving employability and bringing the continent in line with developments in a globalized knowledge society, while leaving practically intact the fundamental European university traditions and institutions. In this sense, the recognition of non-formal and informal learning as part of the university curricula or the emphasis that should be given by the academia to rendering qualifications that are better suited to the needs of the labor market are seen as options that are compatible –which is not certainly the case– with the long standing epistemological traditions of European (and non-European) institutions; traditions which consider knowledge as a coherent and cohesive body of theory, laws, method, and established practice, and as a highly demanding, in terms of time and effort, enterprise that bears no *ab initio* practical aim. Thus, to appreciate the reaction of many in the academia against the Bologna process,

one should look critically into not only the institutional and political dimensions, but also the prevailing epistemological and ideological traditions of university education.

Last but not least, the Bologna Process could also be seen as a pressure exerting – if not coercive – force, in line with the legacy and conception that the European “periphery” can only benefit from following the unfailing steps of the progressive developments taking place in its center. This has traditionally been a convincing argument for regional reformers and a means to legitimize their education policies. After all, the Bologna process itself started in western Europe on the initiative of four major countries (i.e. the Sorbonne Declaration), perhaps on the incitement and under the blessings of international organizations, to become only next year a policy priority even for those European countries that although unprepared – and on several occasions reluctant – hurried to claim a position in the admirable European core. Over the next years several other countries would soon follow.

The important question therefore is to what extent and with what measure of success the Bologna principles have initiated or have been used to legitimize national policies in higher education in a region like the Balkans, where European political influence has been over the last decades significant and admiration for European culture in its various manifestations has been traditionally profound. The study of the five national cases reveals that all of them had their own national reform agenda prior to the Bologna Declaration. In Slovenia, education reforms were already well in progress in the 1980s and 1990s. As the authors in this issue, Pavel Zgaga and Klemen Miklavič, contend, initial education reforms came as the reaction of the maturing civil society against the oppressive Milošević regime. Only after independence, was education meant to be adjusted to the “deeply changed constitutional system” of the country. In this sense education reform was not something imported from the outside. It was only after the Berlin ministerial summit in 2003 – when some politically urgent matters had been settled – that the impact of the Bologna Process was first felt on national higher education by mobilizing stakeholders around policies related to the Bologna objectives. In this sense the latter became the framework for public debate among actors holding different interpretations of policies rather than the means to legitimize specific measures, although the incoming influence of neoliberal discourse and the admiration of “western practice” cannot be overlooked.

Croatian higher education too had by early 2000s its own national reform agenda, dictated, among other things, by the difficult transition of its institutions to the world of global competition and cooperation and by the substantial discrepancies between its system of higher education and the European. In this sense, as authors Pero Lučin and Snježana Prijić-Samaržija explain in this issue, “changes in the Croatian higher education system ... have been mostly inspired by the main avenues of the Bologna Process;” at the same time, the Process “offered an almost perfect instrument for some of these essential reforms” to take place. After all, faced with the urgent task to prepare the ground for the country’s accession to the European Union, national authorities were given a unique opportunity to go ahead with the national reform agenda and, at the same time, to present adaptation of the national higher education system to the Bologna requirements as yet another step towards the country’s integration to the European Union.

The idea of European integration has been tempting for Serbia too, especially after years of isolation from the international community, the hangover of the civil war, and the turmoil of Milošević era. In this issue, Mimir Despotović discusses that the long due and widely recognized “need for profound reform of the inefficient Serbian system of higher education,” testified “beyond any doubt” by statistical evidence, found in the Bologna process a most favorable climate for its satisfaction. As Despotović explains, “Consequently and perhaps inevitably the Bologna Declaration became the framework for the reform.”

Romania too had its own very urgent national agenda for higher education reform. In his article in this special issue, Radu Mircea Damian details how the country was emerging from an excessively authoritarian regime where the higher education system as a whole and the structure of universities were exclusively under direct state control, with the Communist Party exercising ideological control over them and where “university autonomy was neither declared nor had existed *de facto*.” A number of substantial reforms should and in practice had taken place to restore the democratic order: “between 1990 and 1999 Romania was already going through a many-fold reforming process.” Policies, including educational policies, were dictated by the needs of “transition from centralized, state controlled economy to an incipient and sometimes ‘wild’ market economy.” They included, on the recommendation of international organizations, measures like the establishment of a quality assurance agency much before this became one of the main objectives of the Bologna

Declaration. Consequently, the Bologna Process would smoothly become the framework for higher education reform, especially as the country was preparing for accession to the European Union.

Finally, Greece too had its own national specific reform agenda, as I explore in my own article inside this issue's pages. The 1990s had prescribed basic items that bore little resemblance to those included in other Balkan countries' agendas. After all, Greece was already a member of the EU, it enjoyed political stability and an illusory feeling of economic prosperity that allowed its irresolute and temporizing politicians to dally over fostering issues like the trading of student power in the election of university authorities, the misuse of university asylum, the large expansion and the unreasonable geographical dispersion of universities, etc. Consequently the Bologna Declaration had little influence and was short-lived as a reform initiative. Politicians as well as the wider public, despite their differences – preoccupied as they were with the national agenda – practically paid no attention to it, only to be dragged gradually and grudgingly into the enactment of several measures that would simply improve the country's success record in the Bologna road map but that would actually find limited implementation.

Taken together, the Balkan experience seems to indicate that all the countries considered here have had their own nationally specific agendas and that the Bologna initiative has been taken more or less as a frame of reference for educational policy making. The influence of the "imported" agenda was greater the stronger the national motive was – as in the case of the ex-socialist countries – to eradicate the illiberal institutions of the past and to access the European Union. Politicians, with the possible exception of Greece, were then prepared – not always unanimously and successfully – to take a short cut to the realization of the Bologna provisions even at the expense of the true essence of reforms. This brings into play a second conclusion from the Balkan experience.

Pressed to go ahead and to show results that would honor their commitment to the Bologna objectives, politicians in the face of difficulties (political or economic), resorted to a superficial and on occasions hasty enactment of reforms that could hardly be seen as being in line with the Bologna spirit. This is exactly true in the case of Serbia. As testified by Despotović, "the Serbian version of the application of the Bologna Process is completely hollow: merely a form without content and real effect." This is also true for Greece, where the ECTS, the Degree Supplement or the

Quality Assurance Agency, that were finally reported as a successful adjustment to the Bologna provisions remain largely a dead letter. This is also reflected in the presence of a variety of “co-existing Bolognas” in Croatia – despite the legal adoption of the Bologna principles – or in Romania where the “top-down hasty measures, bringing [...] a good score and green colors in the overall “Bologna Reports,” [came] at the expense of content and sustainability” (Damian, this issue). Consequently, the experience of the Balkan countries suggests that the conclusion drawn in the Croatian case stands true for the rest as well: “According to the Bologna experts,” so Lučin and Prijić-Samaržija’s argument goes, “the Bologna [Process] is a European success story. Obviously what is really meant is that some significant reforms have been made within the Bologna context.”

Why then has the Bologna agenda had limited success, at least in the Balkan countries? The case studies that follow provide a number of answers, some of more general validity, others more nationally specific. There is a general agreement that the Bologna process was a top-down initiative. European politicians triggered the process and established a central mechanism of experts to follow-up, support, and supervise it. Gradually at the national level they found themselves bound by their signature to show progress in higher education along the Bologna lines, which at least for the ex-socialist countries, was also an indication that they were on the proper road to their integration in the European Community. Left with a major reform project in their hands, they tried, at least at the beginning, to make the best use of the intentionally loose and rather equivocal wording of the Declaration and resort to the legitimization provided by central representative bodies of academia and students. The case of Greece exemplifies the whole process and its effectiveness. However, this strategy led the Bologna project to obscurity and confusion. As Zgaga and Miklavič maintain in the Slovenian case, the Bologna Process was initially only marginally considered in the country as whole; it was perceived “mainly as an issue for the Ministry and those academics and students who were active in internationalizing higher education.” Similarly, in Romania “at the beginning ... many in the academic community ... did not understand the essence of Bologna. Information was rather scarce and confusion was widespread...” (Damian, this issue). After a short-lived campaign on the Bologna Process in Greece, and in order to temper reactions from certain academic circles, Bologna withdrew from public discourse amidst general indifference, with the wider public absorbed with the burning issues of the national agenda.

Obscurity and confusion were not, however, the only difficulties the Bologna Process was faced with. As already suggested, the Bologna Process constituted a political reform project involving both major, not yet already clear, changes of traditional university values and a considerable reshuffling of power at the level of higher education. Moreover, the whole of this process was to take place in the context of a transitory environment which, at least in the case of ex-socialist Balkan countries, combined the global as well as the political element. For the Bologna critics, it constituted a departure above all from certain fundamental principles of the Humboldtian tradition deeply internalized in the European academia; the intrinsic value of research irrespective of the practical application of its findings and the sound, cohesive, and unbreakable essence of scientific knowledge were perhaps among the principles that the critics considered as being attacked by the Bologna idea. This was made plainly clear in the Greek case, as well as in the Serbian context, wherein Despotović writes that the “Bologna process is certainly not an authentic university idea” and that it constitutes a deviation from the “[Humboldtian] understanding of universities.” Similarly, skepticism was expressed in Slovenia against the “novelties from Europe,” while the persistence of “different institutional cultures, the cultures of different academic disciplines, and also individual attitudes and opinions concerning higher education reforms” bears witness to the presence of academic reservations against the Bologna in Croatia, too (Lučin & Prijić-Samaržija, this issue).

Yet, reaction against the Bologna project from the academic community had other, more down to earth incentives as well. Restructuring higher education, the establishment of national qualification frameworks or of Quality Assurance Agencies had implications for the professorial establishment. In certain cases, as in Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia alike, it meant the transfer of power and of legal and financial responsibility away from faculties and to the integrated university. In other cases it meant the strengthening of the power of the lower ranks of the teaching staff to the detriment of the privileges of full professors as in Slovenia. Finally, it further revealed the smoldering power rivalry between professors of different disciplines as is seen in the Serbian context. Quite clearly the professorate did not appear to be like-minded *vis-a-vis* the Bologna process.

Students on their part, despite the much advertised consensus of the European Students’ Union (ESU) at the international level, had their own reservations. For some (among them Serbian and Slovenian students more prominently), the three tier

structure meant that the market value of the pre-Bologna bachelor degrees was undermined by the new master's degree. For others (for example, the Greek students), the Bologna process as a whole signified the marginalization of their role as active social agents, while some others (for example, the Serbian students) were not happy with the intensification of their studies resulting from the introduction of the ECTS curricula.

As illustrated above, the academic community has in none of the Balkan cases considered here been united *vis-a-vis* the Bologna reforms. Thus, it is perhaps more accurate to suggest that from the stage of initial confusion and/or indifference that the top-down political character of the Bologna reforms had created, the academic community passed on to a stage of awareness and concern for their implications, consequently leading to consecutive negotiations with national political authorities. To a large extent, the different outcomes of these negotiations and hence the policies followed are revealing of the limitations of the political systems to cope with the difficulties presented by the Bologna Process. Such limitations include but are not limited to the absence of unanimous understanding and acceptance of the Bologna principles on the part of politicians, the lack of political will to overcome the resistance of pressure groups, the inability to plan strategically ahead in a clearly transitional context, and certainly, the limited availability of fiscal resources, especially so since the onset of the international financial crisis. Thus, the variety of compromises achieved in different contexts resulted in nationally specific institutional interpretations of the Bologna initiative –to the “variety of existing Bolognas,” both across and within the Balkan countries. This has certainly resulted to retrogressive politics, to the tactics of “trial and error” or to the implementation of “one step forward, two steps backward” policies that have further aggravated the prospects of the Bologna reform.

Strangely enough for a reform initiative that allegedly aimed at improving employability, competitiveness, and economic sustainability, the Bologna process has only marginally attracted the interest of the labor market in the Balkans. It is therefore open to discussion as to what extent politicians have actually taken into account the real needs of the economy or whether the Bologna process is yet another of those educational panaceas witnessed in the past that are likely to have only limited prospects of success.

In a sense, the limited success was perhaps unavoidable. It was not only that the Bologna initiative was a top-down reform prepared in western Europe, in countries with a developed and rather stable economy, in a period characterized by surging confidence in market forces and by the irresistible tides of globalization. It was also because the Bologna Process is a reform imported in societies and political systems trying eagerly to come to terms with the new realities of national life. Perhaps more than anything else, the lesson drawn from the Bologna Process in the Balkan countries is the renewed recognition of the significance of the national context in policy making.

Notes

1. It is important to notice here that in the context of promoting lifelong learning in universities, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are considered to be essential components of the EHEA, both internally and in the global context.

References

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