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THE BOLOGNA PROCESS: IDEA, IMPLEMENTATION, NEW CHALLENGES

At the end of the 1990 s, the year 2010 was made an important milestone in European higher education. Therefore, it should not be taken as a surprise that during this year we spent quite a lot of energy in reflecting and reconsidering developments of the past decade as well as in looking into the glass ball for the future. There were several conferences, seminars and round tables on these issues in 2010. From today's point of view (two years later), it is another opportunity to look back from the milestone achieved in spring at the Ministerial Conference in Budapest and Vienna, but also to the future of the *European Higher Education Area* (EHEA).

First, my memories go back to June 1999. At the end of the Bologna Conference, an expectation that the signed Declaration marked the beginning of a tremendous shift towards a new quality would be taken as exaggeration. Eleven years later it was not exaggeration: 'Bologna' has become a European success story and, at the same time, a matter of ongoing disputes. Eleven years later we were confronted with two main questions: „How did it come?” and „What does it mean?” What could it mean for future?

'Bologna' was not a straight-forward implementation of a strategic plan prepared in advance with all necessary details. On the contrary, it was rather an 'idea' or perhaps a 'movement' which met a surprisingly strong interest not only among Ministries responsible for higher education but also among higher education stakeholders. It was developed into a set of 'action lines' only during next five years. Therefore, we can't

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approach the two main questions without referring to the *Zeitgeist*: it is important to remind particular circumstances of the 1990 s and to compare them with quite different circumstances of today.

Indeed, in the 1990 s, something was 'in the air'. All national systems were deeply challenged by massification of higher education and by new expectations regarding higher learning. There were also other challenges: the fastened Europeanisation process (e. g. *Maastricht Treaty* 1992), the turbulent political changes and opening of the Central and Eastern Europe, last but not least, the victorious march of globalisation with an increasing global competition and/or cooperation in higher education. Already at the end of the 1980 s, European academia responded first waves of these challenges by „looking forward to far-reaching co-operation between all European nations” in the *Magna Charta Universitatum*, also signed in Bologna (1988).

Yet, there were 'systemic barriers' to be removed first. European national education systems have been traditionally different – so much different that these differences grew a problem both within an enlarging European Union as well as within reunifying Europe at large. Mutual co-operation between countries and their institutions needed a mutual approach to solving these growing problems. The 'idea' and/or the 'principles' were rather clear and they required developing appropriate 'tools' to overcome these systemic barriers.

The *Lisbon Recognition Convention*, initiated in the early 1990 s and adopted at a diplomatic conference of 1997, solved the problem from the angle of higher education qualifications and their eventual „substantial differences”. The problem needed to be addressed also from other angles, e. g. different, sometimes even incompatible national frameworks. They were based on different legislation and on sometimes substantially different trends in policy developments and reforms.

The *Sorbonne Declaration* of 1998 was the first attempt to overcome this situation. It called for „harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system” – and got quite some immediate angry responses. 'System' or 'systems'? 'Harmonisation' was a highly disputed term in these responses as it seemed to be in contradiction to *subsidiarity principle*, i. e. to the (legal) fact that within EU nation states remain responsible for their educational systems. However, the polemic didn't block the initiative; on the contrary. The *Bologna Declaration* of 1999 diplomatically avoided the term 'harmonisation' at all and the dis-

pute was soon forgotten. This was perhaps a stepping stone for a *depth of the later success*.

The 29 Bologna signatories agreed to support „the general principles laid down in the Sorbonne declaration” and promised to engage „in coordinating our policies to reach in the short term, and in any case within the first decade of the first millennium,” a number of objectives later developed and today well known as „the ten Bologna action lines”. Not a uniformed and/or centralised ‘European system’ but a development of „easy readable”, „comparable” and „compatible” national systems was recognized as the key feature of the *European of Higher Education Area* (EHEA) to be reached by means of convergent national reforms. As a cohesive system, the ‘Bologna-European system’ has not been only a European answer to specific European problems but also a strategy to become attractive worldwide and to enhance international co-operation and academic competition.

A particular issue which had to be solved within this period was: *which Europe* is (or should be) covered by the EHEA? An overwhelming majority of the genuine Bologna signatories came from the ‘old EU’ and EU-associated (since 2004 already ‘new EU’) countries. The signal sent from Bologna in 1999 reached a surprisingly broad echo: until 2005 the ‘Club’ expanded to 45 members and its ‘geographic eligibility’ was shifted to signatories to the European Cultural Convention – the ‘large’ Europe. Thus, it proved – perhaps in a bit paradoxical way – what the *Sorbonne Declaration* worded in a statement „that Europe is not only that of the Euro” (or – we could add – a political union): „it must be a Europe of knowledge as well.” It must be universal and opened; tied to its prominent academic and cultural traditions. A decision from the Berlin conference (2003) on the ‘enlargement’ of the Bologna Process beyond the initial limits was a stepping stone for a *breadth of the success*.

Around 2005 the concept of the emerging EHEA and most of its devil details were fixed and the process was redirected from a track of *conceptualising* to a track of *implementation*. Everyone who has at least some experience with shifting from policy development to implementation knows how complex and complicated this task can be. The *Trends Report 4* already warned that the experience of introducing new cycles to national systems has demonstrated that it leaves „ample room for different and at times conflicting interpretations regarding the duration and orientation of programmes” (Reichert and Tauch 2005). There

is ‘Bologna’ – but there are ‘bolognas’ as well. We still have to test their eventual balance. Implementation never really follows genuine policy ideas *in full* but this should not be interpreted simplistically as a ‘move away from origins’ or even as a ‘betray’. The processes of *conceptualisation* and *implementation* depend on different logics and they are rooted on different grounds – but they also need each another as a mutual ‘corrective force’. However, if they fall too far one from another there could be a problem.

Discussing possible ways into the future, *Trends 1* (Haug et al. 1999) proposed „four main avenues for *combined* action”:

- (a) a generalised European credit system;
- (b) a common, but flexible frame of qualifications;
- (c) an enhanced European dimension in quality assurance and evaluation;
- (d) empowering Europeans to use the new learning opportunities in Europe.

To my view, this agenda has been fulfilled and this is what mainly constitutes today’s ‘Bologna as a European *success* story’. Indeed, this is what Europe can be proud of. But a success is usually a knife with a double blade. It is inebriating but it is also binding.

To my understanding, the main ‘Bologna’ *weakness* lies precisely in the uneasy status of its success – i. e. its hegemonic position within on-going discussions on the future of higher education and higher education policy. Today, the ‘Bologna label’ is attributed to everything what could ‘smell’ a bit like a ‘higher education issue’. If decision makers like to push a specific decision through consultation and approval process they argue: „Bologna requires it!” On the other hand, if critical groups like to send a strong signal against a specific distortion at institutional or national level they argue: „Look, this damage is caused by the Bologna Process”. The *Bologna omnipresence* or perhaps the *pan-bolognasation* (Zgaga 2012) in higher education discourses of today seems to me to be strange and counterproductive. ‘Bologna’ (‘Europe’) alone can never assume the whole national and institutional responsibility for higher education.

What I find as the main *threat* to the EHEA in its first years of life, it is a trend towards growing *instrumentalisation of higher education*, its nature, its role in a society and its purposes. Within the Bologna Process, implementation tasks (understood as a ‘technology’) has been

dominating over conceptualisation, critical reflection and reconsideration during the last few years: *tools* have been in the front, not *ideas*. It seems that question „How?“ overruled question „Why?“. However, „diverse and even conflicting interpretations“ (if I may use the language of the above quoted *Trends 4*) undermine the supposed consensus on ‘Bologna tools’ – and their efficient use in practice. And we should ask – *why?* At this point, perhaps there is an *opportunity*.

On the other hand, instrumentalisation of higher education shouldn’t be reduced only to this aspect. Actually, this is a minor aspect. The major issue is logic which subordinates higher education and research to the machinery of economy ignoring the fact that higher education can’t be and shouldn’t be reduced to one purpose only. In my country we have a saying that misfortune never comes alone; indeed, the trend toward instrumentalisation of higher education is today accompanied by economic crisis. It makes the challenge bigger. In my eyes, one of the key questions for future could be: How to strengthen the development and innovation capacity of higher education in modern societies and how to preserve and enhance its various – also humanistic – purposes?

Almost precisely eight years back, the Commissioner Viviane Reding spoke at the Forum on cultural rights and education in an enlarged Europe. We should quote some of her words at this occasion: „Our challenge is to build a Europe reaching beyond the sphere of economy to promote sustainable development as a means to meet citizen’s expectations concerning quality of life and cultural and social diversity.“ And more: it „is the role of culture in the development of European identity without which the Union would be doomed to be nothing more than a vast free trade area.“ (Reding 2002)

To be frank, I feel certain uneasiness while reading these sentences again today. However, this is an uneasiness which simply comes with the hard tasks we have to respond in next years.

At the end, perhaps a word of consolation is needed: the tasks of 1998 and 1999 were hard as well.

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