On (Im)Morality of the Bologna Process
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In his recent obituary to late historian Tony Judt, Timothy Garton Ash writes:

> As an essayist and political commentator, he continued the great tradition of the spectateur engagé, the politically engaged but independent and critical intellectual. [1]

And later:

> In what he said and wrote, there was always that moral edge.[2]

Thinking about the life and work of Tony Judt and perhaps other European intellectuals of moral standing raises some immediate questions regarding recent developments in European higher education – (i) To which extent are reforms like the Bologna Process supporting or perhaps inhibiting the emerging of public intellectuals from European universities? (ii) What is the level of moral integrity these reforms themselves represent?

It seems to be quite clear that reforms such as the Bologna Process have put a significant pressure on the intellectual mission of the European universities, although the principle of academic freedom requires that the reforms concern only structural features of higher education. The extent to which content can be effectively separated from the structures remains, however, highly problematic.

We know for example that introducing a particular structural feature in many of the countries – a short (3-4 years) bachelor degree has caused a significant confusion. While the official policy level is concerned about the formal recognition of the new degrees by the labour market, the impact of such reforms on the content of education and meaning goes often unnoticed. Those behind the reforms seem to be thinking that as long as we ignore the issue of the impact on the content, no such impact exists. This view we find naïve.

The ongoing reforms in European higher education tend to have a significant impact on the content of higher education studies, whereby under the pressure of economic rationality certain elements disappear from to curricula of a significant share of European students. One may think that the elements to go first are the ones that are the least justifiable on the grounds of economic utility. This is likely to squeeze the space available to critical intellectual mission.

Bologna Process, as it has been promoted by the key driving forces behind it, follows the model "One size fits all", assuming that all 47 countries have the same reform needs. One still remembers the dictum by Vivienne Reding, a European Commissioner, back in 2003:

> Bologna cannot be implemented à la carte, it has to be done across the board and wholeheartedly.[3]

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[1] Timothy Garton Ash, "Tony Judt (1948-2010)", *The New York Review of Books*, September 30 – October 13, 2010, pp. 6-8.
[2] *Ibid.*

It takes a degree of intellectual courage or for perhaps foregoing the "intellectual" entirely, to be able to suggest that the UK and Kazakhstan's higher education systems have the same reform needs captured in the action lines of the Bologna Process.

Back in 2003 Kazakhstan's reform needs was not an issue for the Bologna Process, as Kazakhstan joined the Process only in 2010, but Russia was already a part of it with its more than thousand higher education institutions constituting a massively underfunded and corrupt system, and more than six million students. In that sense Kazakhstan's joining the European Higher education Area did perhaps not increase significantly the level of diversity in this emerging system of higher education.

What is even more interesting, however, is that despite what Commissar Reding said, the Bologna Declaration initially actually suggested an *à la carte* model. Bologna Declaration as a follow-op to the Sorbonne Declaration seems to be differentiazing between different countries' needs. While the action line "adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees" takes care for the particularly French problem of having a system of unreadable an incomparable short degrees, "adoption of a system based on two cycles" addresses the desire of Germany and other countries wishing to reduce significantly the time and money spent on educating a significant part of the student population by introducing short (bachelor) degrees. However, as the European higher education project extended from the initial four members to forty-seven a dozen years later, no mechanism has been found to incorporate the increasing variety of reform needs the countries represent.

Thinking about the reasons why countries have resorted to various interesting practices gaining access to the Bologna process, the desire to reform the higher education systems does not seem to be holding a prominent position among them. In many cases the motivation is political, based on an assumption that joining one of the European "clubs" paves the way to the full membership in the European Union. In many instances becoming a part of the European higher education brand was also seen as marketing tool. It is being believed that EHEA membership enables countries recruiting fee-paying students from the countries such as China, India and others. Many of the countries that have recently joined the Bologna Process are facing difficulties to fund their universities that effectively do not allow initiating reforms. The only perceived way out is to take a free ride on the European brand of higher education. Meanwhile, however, the European brand has fallen apart under demands for increasing competitiveness of European universities and the latest fad of World Class Universities.

This has created a situation that the Bologna Process is failing to fulfil the expectations of the participating countries for increased international competitiveness, while the 47 strong membership of widely different countries and universities leaves little hope for any coordinated and meaningful reforms.

While more than decade has been spent on the implementation, or perhaps to a significant part the lack of it, the changing list of the action lines of the Bologna Process, the most significant features of the emerging European higher education have been radically changed without any discussion or debate. The early vision of the Bologna Process was that of the "brand Europe", suggesting a system of largely similar level of higher education provided across the EHEA and unrestricted mutual recognition of study credits. Somewhere after 2005 that vision changed radically and the European Commission started funding studies into launching a system of rankings European Universities, suggesting a very different, vertically diversified European system of higher education. Why one system has been considered

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[3] Vivienne Reding, Address to the Berlin Meeting of Ministers for Higher Education, 17-19 September, Berlin.

superior to another remains unknown, and no democratic deliberation regarding the architecture of the EHEA has never taken place. That perhaps reminds something Tony Judt wrote back in 1996:

> The Soviet Union once attracted many western intellectuals as a promising combination of philosophical ambition and administrative power, and 'Europe' has some of the same seductive appeal. For its admirers, as for many politicians and businessmen in the advanced regions of western and central Europe, the 'Union' is the latest heir to enlightened despotism of the last great reforming era before the coming of national states. For what is 'Brussels,' after all if not renewed attempt to achieve that ideal of efficient, universal administration, shorn of particularisms and driven by rational calculation and the rule of law, which the great monarchs-Catherine, Frederick, Maria Theresa and Joseph II-strove to institute in their ramshackle lands?[4]

The conclusion of this speaker is a straightforward one – the Bologna Process threatens the intellectual integrity of European higher education in two ways: first, by reducing higher education to structures based on economic utility of higher education; and second, doing the first by undemocratic and corrupt means that serve often equally corrupt ends.

[4] Tony Judt *A Grand Illusion?: An Essay on Europe*, New York: Hill and Wang Publishers 1996, p. 115.