

What does it take to build a social dimension strategy? A cross-country comparative analysis of Romania and Austria

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Abstract

Unlike other action lines of the Bologna Process, slow progress has been made towards making the social dimension an implementable policy. The social dimension had to overcome a significant start-up difficulty. It entered the Bologna Process with no clear definition, guidelines or projection of concrete policy measures. In 2015, with the adoption of the Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the EHEA to 2020, participating countries were asked to come up with concrete national plans to address participation of underrepresented groups in higher education.

This paper looks in depth at two country cases that attempted to create the necessary conditions for such strategies Austria and Romania, and asks what are the successful conditions for building a social dimension and lifelong learning strategy, in line with the Bologna requirements? The common point for these countries is that both of them attempted to build a social dimension and lifelong learning strategy however, one of the countries came up with a strategy, yet other national strategies and policies were in contradiction with what the strategy promoted, whereas in the second country no strategy was developed besides the involvement of the main stakeholders. The data for the analysis comes from interviews conducted in November 2017 with stakeholders involved in the formation of these strategies, ranging from student representatives to educational experts, and governmental representatives.

Keywords: social dimension, higher education strategy, underrepresented groups, access, EHEA, Austria, Romania

1. Context

Within the Bologna Process, every two or three years there are Ministerial Conferences organised in order to assess the progress made and to decide on the new steps to be taken. Based on ministers' deliberations, each meeting has produced a declaration or communiqué, which indicates the new higher education priorities. The various national representatives and organisational structures involved in the Bologna Process provide evidence about participating countries' political interest in the process, their stance of higher education policies, and the ways decisions are arrived at. Bergan and Deca (2018) point out that in the last 2-3 ministerial meetings there has been a declining political interest from the ministers' side, with a decreasing number of ministers participating in the ministerial conferences. The authors argue that this might be driven by the "lack of new politically appealing commitments that would make the Bologna Process more attractive within national debates" (Bergan and Deca 2018, 298). Other scholars like Vidarsdottir (2018) argue that the increasing lack of political interest in the Bologna Process, comes along with considerable implications for the lack of implementation at the national level.

Given the voluntary aspect of the Bologna Process, the current paper aims to shed light on the relationship between setting the Bologna Process social dimension agenda and participating countries' implementation responses. More specifically, it asks why there has been little attention

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given to the social dimension among Bologna participating countries, and why the attempts to build and implement a social dimension and life-long learning strategy or national plan have failed to become a reality at national level. First, it provides an overview on the social dimension agenda setting at the European and national level. Then, the paper proceeds with an overview of how Romania and Austria reacted to these policy proposals in terms of immediate steps to comply with such commitments. Last but not least, this paper identifies and analyses the key rationales for why countries have or have not developed specific strategies or plans.

2. Introduction: the state of art of the social dimension in the EHEA

The EHEA is not only about competitiveness and employability, but also about social aspects (Halford 2014; Yagci 2014). The Sorbonne Declaration referred to the fact that “students should be able to enter the academic world at any time in their professional life and from diverse backgrounds” (1998, p. 2). In her book *European Higher Education Policy and the Social Dimension: A Comparative Study of the Bologna Process*, Kooij (2015) provides an account of the development of the social dimension and contends that when it first appeared on the agenda it was an ambiguous item, which appeared under other action lines such as student mobility or lifelong learning. In 2001 the social dimension has been discussed in relation to mobility, and the need to expand it to students who were less likely to be mobile due to their socio-economic background. In 2003, there was an emphasis on strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities, and in the upcoming years participating countries were encouraged to make quality HE equally accessible to all, create appropriate conditions for students so that they can complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background.

A clearer conceptualisation of this action line is presented in the 2007² and 2009 Communiqués, where it is stated that it is about access, equity, equal opportunity to quality education and widening participation of underrepresented groups³:

We [the Ministers] share the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations. We reaffirm the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. We therefore continue our efforts to provide adequate student services, create more flexible learning pathways into and within higher education, and to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity (London Communiqué 2007).

With the adoption in 2015 of the “Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the EHEA to 2020”, participating countries were asked to create concrete national plans to address participation of underrepresented groups in higher education:

We [the Ministers] agree that all member countries in the EHEA will develop a coherent set of policy measures to address participation in higher education which identify underrepresented groups in higher education and outline specific, measurable actions to improve access, participation and completion for those groups, consistent with national approaches. An effective way of doing this is through national access plans or strategies, for which a set of European guidelines has been developed (Widening Participation for Equity and Growth 2015, 1).

² In the 2007 London Communiqué, participating countries were asked to report on and evaluate their national strategies, action plans and policies for the social dimension. As a result, only 27 countries filled in the social dimension section of the National Reports for the Bologna Process 2007–2009. Out of the 27, 22 countries filled in the section on the action plans; however, mostly with existing policies that have varying degrees of relevance to the social dimension.

³ For a historical development of the social dimension see Kaiser, F., Maoláin, A., O., and Vikmane, L. (2015). No Future for the Social Dimension? In: Curaj A., Matei L., Pricopie R., Salmi J., Scott P. (eds) *The European Higher Education Area: Between critical reflections and future policies*. Springer, Cham.

In the guidelines⁴, the following steps are recommended:

1. Set up a coherent and inclusive process.
2. Set general objectives.
3. Analyse the current position. A) student population B) existing measures
4. Identify data gaps and ways to overcome them.
5. Identify barriers to access, participation and completion in higher education.
6. Contrast existing measures with identified barriers.
7. Develop strategies to overcome these barriers.
8. Implement a follow-up process and set specific targets.

The accompanying guidelines - a “roadmap” for member countries in order to ensure that national plans or strategies are developed using a systematic approach - aimed to assist countries to meet the challenge of developing or enhancing national plans or strategies. The weakness of the guidelines at hand, stands in the fact that they do not focus so much on the content but rather on the process on how the stakeholders should reach a consensus.

Bologna implementation studies and reports have shown that participating countries move towards the same direction when it comes to implementing the agreed commitments, however they do so at varying degrees and paces (Heinze and Knill 2008). The 2015 Bologna Implementation Report reveals that overall, in the EHEA, “the goal of providing equal opportunities to quality higher education is far from being reached” (p. 19), with less than less than 20% of participating countries setting concrete quantitative objectives with a reference to under-represented groups. Similarly, little progress has been registered with regards to lifelong learning – a concept which is rarely well defined and operationalized in the participating countries. According to the European Student’s Union (hereinafter ESU) (2015), in 2015 access plans were successfully implemented in two countries, six were struggling with proper implementation of action plans, ten countries were debating implementation of an action plan and 13 countries did not debate it until that moment (Wulz, Gasteiger and Ruland 2018, p. 213). The 2018 Bologna Implementation Report states that “only few countries have introduced measures in recent years to improve the conditions for under-represented groups to access and complete higher education” (p. 15) and that “equal access to higher education for students of different backgrounds is far from being a reality (p. 167). It is worth noting that despite these developments, countries like Austria, the Czech Republic, France and the United Kingdom have set longer-term targets for different groups of students (i.e. students with ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds or from low socio-economic status, or at reducing the gap between male and female participation).

The uneven implementation of the social dimension might question national representatives’ pledge over turning words into deeds by endorsing the ministerial declarations or communiques, and their comprehensive understanding of the policies they will have to implement at the national level as a follow up of their signing. The next sections explore the relationship between setting the Bologna Process social dimension agenda and participating countries’ implementation responses.

3. Setting the social dimension agenda at the EHEA level

Setting the social dimension agenda at the Bologna Process level has been a topic of interest for scholars and practitioners alike. One of the most relevant works on the topic of agenda setting for the social dimension at the Bologna Process level is Yagci’s (2014) article, which aims to identify the major actors interested in the issue and their motivations for having it as a widespread European policy. For example, ESU has been among the first actors within the Bologna Process, to define access inequalities, insufficient studying and living conditions of students; and later became a policy entrepreneur advocating for having the social dimension as a Bologna action line within the Prague Communiqué (Klemenčič 2012). The European University Association (EUA) mentioned the

⁴ Report of the 2012-2015 BFUG Working Group on the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning to the BFUG 2015, 35.

importance of student satisfaction and free access (Yagci 2014). The EUA considered such inequalities problematic in relation to increasing the competitiveness and excellence of universities and institutional autonomy. Education International (EI) also supported free access to higher education, considering its focus on the commodification of higher education (Yagci 2014). Moreover, in order to ensure a sustainable supply of a highly qualified labour force for the overall European economy, and therefore enhance economic growth, the European Commission (EC) advocated for increasing and widening access to higher education (Yagci 2014; Keeling 2006).

The Bologna Process therefore cannot be reduced to the decisions of the Ministers of Education or country representatives participating in the ministerial meetings. There are several parties organized through different structures including a Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG), a Board, a Secretariat, different working groups and consultative bodies – all of which have a clearly defined role in supporting the background policy development. As far as the BFUG is concerned, it is the main follow-up structure in the Bologna Process; it can establish working groups which might deal with certain topics in details according to the priorities and tasks set within the Ministerial Communique, etc. The BFUG is made up of representatives of the participating countries, the European Commission, the Council of Europe, the European University Association, European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), ESU, UNESCO, Education International, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and BUSINESSEUROPE. The BFUG is responsible of the actual work and for the development of the overall process and it is supported by the Bologna Secretariat. While it is claimed that there is an uneven practice when it comes to the roles of the Secretariat (so far seven Secretariats), it mainly ensures the continuity of the Bologna reforms by supporting the BFUG and its spinoff bodies (e.g. for the social dimension several working groups have been developed during the last Bologna secretariats) by preparing draft agendas, notes or minutes, or even reports and policy recommendations (Torotcoi 2017), with the latter almost always laying within the working group members, especially the co-chairs.

One of the hidden actors (Kingdon 2003) within the Bologna Process is the European Commission (EC), which through different tools (mainly funding and expertise) succeeded to become a partner in the Bologna Process. Even though the Bologna Process goes beyond EU member states, the idea of associating the Bologna Process with the European Union becomes nowadays a fact which cannot be contested (c.f. Deca (2013) on the discursive use of the Bologna Process in the Romanian higher education system as an EU initiative; Keeling (2006) on the role of the EC in shaping the European higher education landscape). In the European Union, education policy was always under the responsibility of the Member States however, starting with the late 80s the EC expanded its soft competencies in the field. The Maastricht Treaty (1992), provided with a legal basis for the EC to contribute to the development of quality education cooperation between by fostering cooperation between Member States, and therefore developed different higher education programs which aimed at strengthening cooperation between universities and enterprises, promoting student mobility and exchange, encouraging teaching and research in the field of European integration, and even at promoting innovation and equal opportunities in all sectors of education. Currently, due to its expertise and capacities (funding, expertise, producing policy papers, and reports on the progress of the Bologna Process) the EC is recognized as indispensable (Klemenčič 2018). Moreover, Bologna participating countries and other stakeholders have embraced the Commission's deft combination of research and priorities, utilizing this common language for higher education to describe and contextualize their national reforms.

Many projects regarding the implementation of the Bologna Process have been funded through a special funding mechanism for EHEA reforms⁵. For example, Expanding Opportunities in European Higher Education through peer learning (ExpandO) is a project funded under the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission. ExpandO, a pilot project of peer learning on the

⁵ See Support to the Implementation of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) reforms: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/library/support-implementation-european-higher-education-area-ehea-reforms_en

social dimension, promoted the implementation of Lifelong Learning Strategies in the field of widening access through peer learning. It aimed to carry out a focused survey on 'widening access', to develop a series of national/regional action plans, and to formulate a series of practical guidelines and recommendations for the participating LLP countries and the whole European Higher Education Area. The Peer Learning Initiative for the Social Dimension (PL4SD) was a three-year project (2012- 2015) project funded by the European Commission through the Lifelong Learning Programme (Erasmus Multilateral projects) aimed to provide national and international policy makers, stakeholders and practitioners with resources to develop effective measures for ensuring the social dimension of the European Higher Education Area. Among others, the project aimed at ensuring transparency in current developments, stimulating international exchange and debate on policy measures and enabling peer learning and easing the implementation of policy measures by other countries.

The outcomes of such projects like PL4SD or ExpandO, including the socialization processes in between, the results from different Bologna implementation reports and other venues, made the members of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning Working Group 2012-2015 (SD&LLL WG) – which functioned as the PL4SD stakeholder forum - propose certain solutions (Kingdon 2003) – a strategy and a set of guidelines - to the Bologna Follow- up Group:

The BFUG is requested to consider the strategy [Widening Participation for Equity and Growth- A Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the EHEA to 2020] for adoption by Ministers at the Yerevan meeting. (Report of the 2012-2015 BFUG Working Group on the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning to the BFUG 2015, 18).

Most of the times, through a process of interaction, the WG makes proposals to the relevant stakeholders, including Ministers, about the relevant data, developments, challenges, best practices etc., and such, these groups of actors arrive at common views about the next steps (de Bruijn and ten Heuvelhof 2002). The findings and recommendations about which consensus is reached - more specifically, the negotiated knowledge which meets professional standards - "will be more directive for the decision to be made than those about which there is dissent" (de Bruijn and ten Heuvelhof 2002, 233). However, the dynamic of such processes is not so simplistic. Involving such a multiple stream of stakeholders from students, higher education institutions, national governments to private enterprises (e.g. Business Europe), implies that they have to negotiate with each other, and they do their best to gain support for problem definitions and aims, interests and to conclude favorable package deals. As such, each stakeholder will try to gain the maximum from the agenda setting process. However, as it has been mentioned before, "it is only after being stated in the ministerial communiqués and declarations do issues have a chance to be translated into national agendas" (Yagci 2014, 515).

3. Setting the social dimension agenda at the national level

While the topic of strategy formation and agenda setting has been largely discussed in relation to how issues come about at the Bologna Process level (Yagci 2014; Huisman and Van der Wende 2004; Keeling 2006), there is a literature gap with regards to strategy formation and stakeholders' involvement at the national level. The few existing studies point out that the development of national social dimension strategies differs country by country in terms of the stage of strategy development (as a process) and content. For example, Wulz, Gasteiger and Ruland (2018) - who are looking, among others, at the role of students' unions in the development and implementation of social dimension strategies – report that in Lithuania, no strategy on social dimension was in place before 2018, however a process involving students' union in specific working groups existed. In Spain, students have been involved in the consultation process, but they were not satisfied with the results. In Germany no national strategy is in place but students have been involved in different working groups. Unlike in Italy where students were involved as a consultant body and they were not satisfied with their involvement in the process, in Slovenia students were satisfied with the outcome of their involvement.

Most of the times, the Bologna Process has been understood by policy-makers, stakeholders and scholars as a top-down linear model in which policy-makers postulate policy objectives and goals

which are later put into practice at lower levels (i.e., at the HEIs level). The underlying assumption of the top-down strategy formation is that actors at the top (either at the Bologna Process level or country level) can control what should happen at lower levels of the implementation chain. The bottom-up scholars argue that in order to understand the reality and the process of strategy formation and implementation one should look at the main policy deliverers. The bottom-up literature theorizes that implementation outcomes are the results of interactive processes involving various levels of government including the street level bureaucrats who may distort or modify initial policy goals and objectives (Lipsky 1980; May and Winter 2009).

Within the Bologna, top-decision makers and politicians are responsible for participating in the Bologna Process decision making structures, and for adopting the commonly agreed commitments at the national level. As far as the first role is concerned, two aspects are worth mentioning. The first one refers to the participating countries' bargaining power (Peters 1993) in putting on the Bologna agenda issues they consider relevant for their national higher education context (policy upload). Their bargaining power in uploading policy preferences (Vukasovic, Jungblut and Elken 2017) would reflect national needs and interests but also strategic goals (i.e. enhancing competitiveness). It can be claimed therefore that the more similar policy-makers preferences with the Bologna Process commitments, the higher the speed with which policies will be adopted and implemented.

The process of drafting and negotiating a Bologna policy direction is important not only for understanding its contents but also for knowing if implementation problems might be related to the decision-making process. Besides, policy scholars argue that there is need for implementation actors and target groups to be incorporated into the supranational decision-making processes in order to avoid political decisions that are out of step with the reality on the ground (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Involving all relevant domestic actors in the preparation of the supranational policy-making processes can lead to smooth implementation otherwise they might resist during the downloading process.

This paper addresses the question of how participating countries within the EHEA have taken on board the suggested guidelines for developing national action plans and strategies for the social dimension: how the strategy development process started, who were the actors involved, what was the main strategy formation mechanism and what was the outcome of such a process. Whereas more countries have a social dimension strategy or have started a process for developing such strategies – i.e., Croatia, Ireland – due to t looks in depth at two country cases that attempted to create the necessary conditions for such strategies that is Austria and Romania. These countries are different in many aspects, including traditions, type of higher education system, governance, policy-making, and most importantly different socio-political contexts (Wodak and Fairclough 2010). The common point however is that both of them have joined the Bologna Process in 1999 and attempted to build a social dimension and life-long learning strategy: Romania embarked on a bottom-up approach whereas Austria on a top-down approach.

3.1. Romania: an unsuccessful attempt to comply?

Despite the fact that Romania does not have a national strategy for the social dimension strategy, the social dimension aspect of higher education is rather developed. Starting with the early 1990s Romania developed a system of free higher education, and in the next decade it reached to have a ground student aid system (Alexe, Haj and Murgescu 2015) including of scholarships (i.e., for students from rural areas, with disabilities), loans, noon-cash support, social assistance and even reserved places in universities for the Roma minority. More recent developments are considered to be the result of the main actors interested in the issue such as the National Alliance of Student Organizations in Romania (ANOSR), the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI) and other actors. According to Wulz, Gasteiger and Ruland (2018), in Romania, the students' union (ANOSR) started to campaign more intensively for social dimension issues in 2016, demanding public funding and other goals for higher education development, i.e., basic funding for scholarships, investment funds in higher education, subsidy for

transport or canteens, student counselling etc. As a result, the student scholarship fund increased by 142% between January and March 2017 and the students benefited from free train transportation throughout the year.

A former president of ANOSR claimed during the interview that they have recently started to approach the social dimension from a financing perspective. They want at the national level to support the services for students, including the amount of scholarships. Another area on which they work is student accommodation and canteens, and here they succeeded to get a 12% state subsidy increase. Moreover, the representative added that they also focus on access to education and “we decided to focus on the post admission aspect - more specifically on the orientation and counselling offices. In Romania, in this respect, we have quite a basis because there is a network of this type of centres across the country and you're focusing on ensuring that they increase their visibility in different projects and programs” (Interviewee #1122017).

In Romania, building a social dimension strategy came up as a bottom-up approach tried by key policy actors – the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI) in particular - in bringing universities together and then work towards a potential national social dimension strategy. UEFISCDI engaged in a grassroots level approach which included a pilot exercise to measure the impact some national social dimension policies had in some selected universities. This experience has shown that social dimension as the topic was not developed enough (internalized by universities or by the Ministry).

One of the interviewees who has quite a rich experience with the Bologna Process both at the national and European level, mentioned that at the national level UEFISCDI had an important role in promoting a certain type of discourse with regards to Bologna⁶. UEFISCDI started its activity more intensely in 2010 when Romania started to host the Bologna Secretariat. UEFISCDI brought a team of young capable people and experts, and ever since, it started to develop projects and research in this area, bringing therefore the “know-how” to the country. Practically, it helped the Ministry of Education in the policy-making process:

Willingly or not, currently we, the agency, are the component which brings a bit of strategic intelligence to the Ministry [of Education] and to the higher education sector in general. If you have a look at the ministry indeed, you have some 50-60 people working there in the higher education unit, but none knows what they do. They always come to us because they do not have where else to go. We are the only ones who have proposed strategic things (Interviewee #2122017).

From a policy perspective the UEFISCDI has been permanently active in the policy making process by running a cluster of European structural projects regarding the future of Romanian higher education. One such project is “Internationalization, equity and university management for quality higher education” (IEMU) co-financed by the EC through the European Social Funds implemented by UEFISCDI at the end of 2015, which aim is to develop the social dimension of higher education in Romania and put forward the basis for a strategy:

This project was developed within a social program and obviously aimed to provide some guidance considering the lack of strategic approach in the field of equity and participation - in other words, the Romanian state had different policies but they are not connected by a logical thread. By developing a national strategy on equity through this project, we aimed to have an overall view of what is happening in the field. We have worked with a lot of experts and had various inputs from several institutions. (Interviewee #3122017).

This strategic framework was among the first initiatives aimed exclusively at improving equity. The project brought expertise and evidence-based research on the current situation of social dimension in Romania, with which the actors envisioned to transform the strategic framework into something more formal. Overall, the framework can be considered as an instrument aimed to increase

⁶ Similarly, research has shown the UEFISCDI contribution to the Romanian higher education and research – see Curaj, Deca and Hâj (2015).

the capacity of the central decision-making institutions to create more policies in this area and to promote certain aspects on the public agenda.

When asked about the intentions behind this policy process, one of the actors involved in this project contended that their decision was not to repeat “the top down approaches which have no bottom up content”, and therefore they decided to continuously invest in bottom up approaches at the institutional level (Interviewee #2122017). The idea was that by following such an approach they could identify the major actions that have to be consolidated in order to later justify a top down approach.

The actors in this project have also reflected on the parallel processes they have been involved in with regards to the development of an internationalization strategy. In this case, they have had field visits and have worked with around 24 universities so that each of them develops its own internationalization strategy. In a second stage, they came to the ministry with a strategic framework:

In the case of the social dimension we could not do that. It is interesting from a narrative point of view, but not attractive enough. We have tried to look and work with the universities to define their approach, their strategy related to access and equity. What happened... what these projects have shown is that universities have not been prepared to do a critical mass out of this topic. When it comes to access and equity, not even the language was as it should - this is sad... We almost needed a dictionary to make them understand what we meant. For this reason we decided that the social dimension is not a mature topic... (Interviewee #2122017).

What this project experience shows is that at the institutional level there are different structured and envisioned approaches. By thinking about equity and access only in terms of an equally distributed scholarship schemes, universities have a rather narrow understanding of the social dimension. Last but not least, there were no incentives for universities to be proactive regarding the social dimension of education, by developing an institutional strategy (Matei and Curaj 2014). Nowadays, as the number of potential students has declined dramatically, universities have a clear incentive to attract and include previously under-represented groups or non-traditional students in order to cover the available subsidized places and benefit the corresponding *per-student* funding (Santa 2018).

3.2. Austria: a case of creative compliance?

The Austrian Government Programme for 2013-2018, among others, aimed to promote non-traditional access and raise the balance and compatibility of studies with work and family life. One of the tools for doing so was the output-oriented budgeting, through which output-targets in the field of science and research have been set, such as raising the quota of students with parents without higher education entrance qualifications. The topic of social dimension of higher education was already touched upon in other governmental strategies: the 2016-2021 “Austrian National Development Plan for Public Universities” aims in its system goal 8, to “Support a cultural shift towards social inclusion, gender equality and diversity in universities”. The Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy (BWF) makes provision in its “Development and Funding Plan for Universities of Applied Sciences” through to 2017/2018 to address a number of aspects of the social dimension (National strategy on the social dimension of higher education. Towards more inclusive access and wider participation, 2018).

The Austrian approach is very much in line with the idea that “institutions structure incentives, instantiate norms, define roles, prescribe or proscribe behavior or procedurally channel politics” (Jupille and Caporaso 1999, 432), in order to influence political outcomes. In such cases, preferences are endogenous, meaning that actors’ goals cannot exist separately of institutions (p. 432); actors’ preferences thus, are conditioned by such institutions which also define what constitutes appropriate behavior. Both the more structural/technical (such as the above guidelines for building national action plans or strategies) and the socializing instruments (conferences, seminars, peer learning activities) create a space for dialogue between the different stakeholders and more importantly create a common understanding of what is expected from them. An indicator of whether these socialization

practices matter is given by whether actors, participants and representatives refer to them when justifying or legitimizing decisions at the national and institutional level.

In line with the Bologna promoted social dimension guidelines and policies, starting with 2016 and based on the recommendations of two Austrian Higher Education Conferences (2013; 2015), the Austrian Ministry of Education started a one-year strategic process which involved the relevant stakeholders (800 participants) in varying discussions (9 workshops) on the possible content of such a strategy. The result: a “National Strategy on the Social Dimension of Higher Education. Towards More Inclusive Access and Wider Participation” which aims to increase the number of educationally disadvantaged students in higher education, to widen inclusive access and participation (e.g. students with migrant background, regional balance across Austria), promote gender balance, etc.

According to Kingdon (2003) actors and stakeholders - political and elected actors, interest groups and researchers, ministers and civil servants - are considered the main drivers of agenda setting. Governmental actors most of the times have exclusive formal authority of decision making processes. Those actors which are more visible are also more influential in bringing issues on the agenda, whereas the hidden actors are more influential in the generation of solution alternatives and preparation of detailed policy proposals (Kingdon 2003, 69–70). As Yagci (2014) puts it, “if an issue is pushed into the agenda by visible actors, it has a higher chance to rise in the agenda and if visible actors do not pay attention to an issue, its chance to rise deteriorates” (p. 512).

Interviewed about their role in the strategy formation process, one of the representatives of the Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance (AQA) claims that indeed, the building of the social dimension strategy has been fostered by the Ministry, however it is not a purely top down process; all the stakeholders were involved, including universities and different sectors of the education system: “you can't really do it any other way in Austria” (Interviewee #2112017).

Another stakeholder involved in the development of the national strategy is the Austrian Students' Union. When asked whether there was such a need for a strategy the students have diverse opinions. On the one hand, they think it was something the government thought “is nice to have”, on the other hand, they were advocates for such a strategy. Reflecting on the strategy formation process, the students appreciate the thorough process behind and, as they put it “it was really nice to be involved there because we had a lot of working groups and workshops, and make policy with other people and other stakeholders on an equal level which was really cool” (Interviewee #3112017). The disappointment was that “the piece of paper that came out of this process did not really reflect what was made in the working groups - which is frustrating...”

Reflecting on the big picture of the policy-making process and the politics behind, the students considered that the strategy does not have the envisioned impact and current educational policies are in contradiction with what the strategy is promoting (e.g. the student fees, restricted access). The issue therefore was that because of a similar strategy formation process running in parallel within the same ministry - the Future of Austrian Higher Education “huge project in which they [decision-makers] tried more or less to tackle the whole education system” (Interviewee #3112017) - there was no communication among themselves, or better said they have kept these processes independent: “I think that in the Future of Higher Education in Austria, they did not take in consideration all the system but details of it. They tried to tackle the issues with certain fields of study for example, one working group was about IT informatics and they tried to work on that problem, and they did not actually go to the root of the problem, as we have problems with synergies and with the four different systems. They tried to tackle more the symptoms, which – if you have such a big, broad process - does not really give you a lot of results” (Interviewee #3112017).

As a conclusion of the overall process, the social dimension expert claims that Austria took the lead in creating a national social dimension strategy mainly because Bologna was pushing for it. The expert referred to the fact that there are a number of policy interpreters and entrepreneurs – “they are middle level bureaucrats, civil servants” - who have been following the development of the social dimension at the Bologna process level for about 10 years, and who:

saw an opening, saw a possibility and they wanted to look good in front of the international community - they have decided... So, you often have that, especially in these kind of forums like Bologna. Sometimes you will get the minister who says - I want to look better than the other guys around the table and I think they said: "social dimension agenda - I think this is something we need". Maybe it had more symbolic power or symbolic importance... If you talk to the students now, they will tell you it has not been used yet. One thing is setting up the framework and the other is not just the commitment but acting, action... (Interviewee #1112017).

Austria is one of the few countries, if not the only one, who has, since 1999, a national Bologna Follow-up Group consisting of representatives of the responsible ministries and authorities, as well as representatives of the higher education sector. This group was responsible - among others - for the preparation of the Austrian contribution to the European follow-up process and for the elaboration of the Austrian position for the Ministers' conferences, but also to ensure the flow of information within Austria with regards to Bologna developments.

Being part of the Bologna Follow-up Group at the European level, the members of the national group, act in a similar way with the policy analysts setting the social dimension agenda at the Bologna Process level. In other words, the national BFUG makes proposals to the Ministry, about the relevant data, developments, challenges, best practices etc., and such, they arrive at common views about the next steps. The findings and recommendations about which consensus is reached will be more directive for the decision to be made however without anticipating the effects such initiatives might have and how they are interconnected with other issues at the national level.

This situation also leads to an information asymmetry between the principal and the agent (Akerlof 1970) between the national BFUG – the agent, and the Ministry – the principal, in which the principal chooses a scheme (in this case to have a social dimension strategy) about which it does not have complete information. The principal in this case, would entrust the agent - considering the expertise and information it has - to act on its behalf and comply with the international commitments it adhered. This leads in other words, to a type of compliance "which pretends to align its behavior with the prescribed rule or changes its behavior in superficial ways that leave the addressee's original objective intact" (Batory 2016, 689).

4. Conclusions

In the case of the Bologna Process, member states and higher education institutions do not adopt the Bologna Process practices – such as the 2015 adopted social dimension strategy and guidelines - only because of the means-ends efficiency, but due to the social legitimacy these new practices (widely valued within a broader cultural environment) bring for the participating countries, higher education institutions but also for Europe at large. These common institutional practices are emerging from an interactive process of socialization and exchange among the actors, which gives them the opportunity to share their problems, possible solutions, etc., processes that are taking place in a variety forms and shapes, and based on which actors are developing a sense of appropriate institutional practices. Projects like ExpandO and PL4SD are a clear illustration that the Bologna Process actors and stakeholders provide plenty of opportunities for the participating countries to learn from each other and exchange practices and ideas with the aim of encouraging implementation and shared practices. Such socialization practices have as main aim norm internalization which contribute to a great extent to "the development of a widening pool of common sense understandings, roughly coherent lines of argument and self-evident statements about higher education in Europe" (Keeling 2006, p. 209).

Higher education policy stands completely in the hands of the participating countries; however, the Bologna Process provides many opportunities for peer learning, trainings, seminars, forums and other such tools which create the possibility to bring upfront best experiences, obstacles and challenges in implementation but also to create a space for dialogue between the different stakeholders. While both at the European and national level there are key policy actors, decision-

makers, implementers or targets, under condition of voluntary compliance, these types of actors synchronize their moves with regards to the social dimension through a “coincidence of interests” in order to achieve the higher governance goals. If at the Bologna Process level the actors are rather coordinated in their actions, at the national level representatives in the BFUG and relevant working groups together with other actors have a crucial role in making decision makers and universities understand the need for further action with regards to the social dimension.

This scenario is very much in line with a newly developed concept called orchestration, which implies that due to their lack of sufficient capabilities for hard, direct governance, international organizations (such as the ones mentioned above) engage intermediary actors on a voluntary basis (analysts, experts, etc. who have complementary capabilities and mutually correlated goals), by providing them with ideational and material support (through different socialization instruments and funds), to address target actors (national governments and higher education institutions) in pursuit of [an actor's] governance goals (social justice, qualified labour force, etc.) (Abbott et al. 2015, 3).

This paper has shown that the countries explored have included the relevant stakeholders in the consultation process, however they had different approaches and outcomes: Austria came up with a strategy, yet other national strategies and policies were in contradiction with what the strategy promoted, whereas in Romania no strategy was developed despite the involvement of the main stakeholders (n.b. the Rectors' Council, or teachers' association were not involved in the process due to political changes of the time). In Romania, a bottom up approach has been tried by bringing universities together and then working with each of them individually in order to define their social dimension strategy. The experience showed that universities have not been prepared to become a critical mass in this regard (unlike in the case of building an internationalization strategy).

In Austria the strategy formation was done top-down: the Ministry in charge legitimize the strategy by using the Bologna and the country commitment to implementing it. This would reflect what Falkner et al. (2005) would call the “law observance” case, that is compliance overrides domestic concerns. Because it ranks high despite the conflicting national policy styles, interests or ideologies, the implementation is done in time and in line with the proposed guidelines. However, because of this, within the same ministry there was another parallel process around regarding the future of higher education at the national level which promoted policies which were at odds with the ones promoted by the social dimension strategy.

This paper analysed the social dimension of the Bologna Process at the national level. For each of the country cases the context of strategy formation has been analysed from the perspective of the involved stakeholders. The conclusions show that the ideas about the Bologna Process and its promoted policies reach the decision-makers agenda through different ways including different interest groups, policy experts and policy entrepreneurs.

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