

The Bologna Process in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Strengthening, Re-Branding, or Undermining Higher Education?

Zoë Brennan-Krohn

English Language and Literature og Banja Luka BIH
University of Banja Luka, Bosnia-Herzegovina
zbrennankrohn@gmail.com

Abstract: Several years after Bosnia-Herzegovina formally agreed to partake in the Bologna Process of higher education reform, confusion, frustration, and misconceptions still abound among the country's students and educators about what Bologna actually means. This paper will analyze and discuss the process of integrating the Bologna process into college and university English language programs in BiH. The paper will use a number of sources in order to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the complexities surrounding Bologna implementation. Official guidelines, texts, and declarations published by the Council of Europe about the Bologna process will be a major source of research for this paper. The paper will also incorporate interviews with students, assistants, and professors from English departments of local universities to understand the perceived reality of these changes in college-level English programs. Drawing these sources together will be the case study of a year-long Council of Europe project devoted to curricular reform in BiH, one which included participation of both education experts and local English professors. By examining these sources together, this paper will contrast and analyze the fundamental tenets of the Bologna reforms, as well as the on-the-ground perceptions of the same process among English language teachers and learners. The paper will seek to pinpoint some sources of confusion between these positions, and to discuss the broader implications of these disconnects.

What is Bologna?

The reforms that became the Bologna Process were initiated in 1998 by some of the countries with the longest and most illustrious histories of higher education in Europe: Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Italy. In celebration of the Sorbonne's 750th anniversary, education ministers from these countries called for a post-nationalist view of education, a kind of education version of the then-forthcoming common currency.³⁵⁴

By the time the Bologna Declaration was signed by 29 founding member-countries the next year, the concept of the border-free education area in Europe had evolved considerably. No longer a declaration of support among the old-boys club of ancient Western European universities, the 1999 Bologna Declaration made specific mention of the importance of educational cooperation in "the development and strengthening of stable, peaceful and democratic societies" and made special note of the importance of this issue in South East Europe.³⁵⁵

The 1999 Bologna signatory countries included the usual suspects for cooperation in Europe at the time – all of the initial Euro countries were founding members of Bologna.³⁵⁶ The Western European countries which notably opted out of a common currency – the UK, Denmark, Switzerland, Sweden – did choose to join Bologna.

In addition, however, the founding Bologna declaration included nine countries that had emerged from behind the Iron Curtain only a decade before.³⁵⁷ All of these post-socialist countries were, at the time, far from being eligible to join the European Union or the Euro zone.

This approach of a remarkably inclusive zone of cooperation in education is worth noting. Despite its widespread perception today, Bologna — unlike the EU, the Euro Zone, or NATO — was never a highly exclusive club for only the richest or most developed countries.

The Bologna declaration of June 1999 specified several goals for the future of European higher education, which have been expanded upon but fundamentally consistent in the years since. The declaration called for a "Europe of Knowledge," a revitalization of the continent's intellectual and educational dominance from earlier centuries.³⁵⁸ It also mentioned the importance of maintaining Europe's international appeal and competitiveness into the new century, and of building the foundation of stability and democracy that strong and cooperative education can bring.

³⁵⁴ "The Official Bologna Process Website, 2010-2012, History." www.ehea.info

³⁵⁵ "The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999." www.ehea.info, 1.

³⁵⁶ European Navigator: A History of a United Europe on the Internet. www.ena.lu Accessed 15 April 2011.

³⁵⁷ "The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999."

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

In pursuit of these aims, the declaration committed to adopting a system of comparable and clear degrees across the region, establishing a credit system to improve student mobility, improving quality assurance mechanisms in universities, and increasing inter-institutional cooperation.³⁵⁹ One of the most remarkable elements of these goals is how fundamentally unobjectionable they are. For a document that has spawned such resentment, not to mention protests, it seems notably benign. Who would disagree, on principle, with allowing for students to travel or improving the quality of education? Only the most recalcitrant and entrenched members of universities would take issue with these concepts on principle, and such people are not the typical or critical disavowers of Bologna.

Biennially after the Bologna Declaration in 1999, ministers of education from member countries met for follow-up meetings, and the main points of these meetings were published in a series of “communiqués”. These communiqués added certain new elements to the goals of the Bologna Process, including formalizing the goal of a European Higher Education Area by 2010, emphasizing the importance of lifelong learning, and affirming the important role of students as active participants in reforming and strengthening higher education.³⁶⁰ The concept of a “Europe of Knowledge” and a subsequent focus on strengthening research and doctoral programs were added to the agenda in 2003.³⁶¹ Even looking at all of the goals laid out in the Bologna Declaration and five subsequent communiqués, there are relatively few points that seem clearly contentious, certainly not to that extent that protests and anger have suggested.

The 2009 Leuven Communiqué responded to the global financial crisis by emphasizing employability and noting universities’ responsibility to respond to labor market demands, and these elements could certainly be objectionable if one took the purest and most philosophical view of what education should be for and about. The backlash against the Bologna process began long before 2009, however, and so these elements of the Leuven Communiqué cannot be seen as the catalyst or the fundamental problem with the process. At most, this document may have strengthened opposition, although in reality most students, professors, and administrators, were probably not aware of the document at all.

How did Bologna come about in Bosnia-Herzegovina?

Bosnia-Herzegovina joined the Bologna process in 2003, along with Serbia and Montenegro and Macedonia. With the addition of these countries, the entire former Yugoslavia became part of the Bologna Process.³⁶² Although theoretically a voluntary commitment, international community pressure is widely believed to be the impetus for Bosnia’s 2003 entry into the Bologna Process.

Although higher education in Bosnia-Herzegovina suffered significantly during the 1992-1995 war, most universities continued to function during the war, albeit under highly strained circumstances. Most notably, the University of Sarajevo continued to hold courses throughout the nearly four-year siege, in spite of extreme danger and hardship for students and faculty. Additionally, the University of East Sarajevo (originally called the Serb University of Sarajevo), and separate Croat and Bosniak Universities of Mostar were actually *founded* during the war, in an effort to establish ethnically identified institutions to replace the formerly multiethnic universities in these cities.

During and after the war, primary and secondary schools in BiH were formally segregated by ethnicity, resulting in some instances of “two schools under one roof,” where one building and schoolyard were physically divided and transformed into separate schools, and students were sorted on the basis of ethnicity. Curricula, especially language and history, became ethnically based. These measures were very successful at solidifying and re-entrenching ethnic tensions throughout the country. At the level of higher education, universities in BiH are not formally segregated – there is no official ethnic identity of any university. The divisions from earlier years of school, however, as well as broader societal segregation, create *de facto* ethnic segregation at universities as well. While the University of Sarajevo maintains something of a multi-ethnic identity (although predominantly Bosniak), the country’s seven other public universities have an overwhelming predominance of one ethnicity.

Pervasive ethnic tensions and divisions are a major element of life in Bosnia-Herzegovina, education being no exception. The Bologna Process aims indirectly to facilitate a more integrated education system through student and faculty mobility and cooperation among universities. As a Europe-wide initiative, however, Bologna has no specific provisions for tackling the major and often traumatic repercussions and tensions that have grown out of war.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ “Towards the European Higher Education Area.” Prague, 19 May 2001. www.ehea.info

³⁶¹ “Realising the European Higher Education Area.” Berlin, 19 September 2003. www.ehea.info

³⁶² This is no longer true since Kosovo’s declaration of independence in 2008. Because of tensions regarding the recognition of an independent Kosovo, it is no longer a participant in the Bologna reforms. Montenegro, which became independent from Serbia in 2006, however, successfully joined Bologna as an independent state in 2007.

Into this ethnically identified conflict, Bologna's indirect attempts to integrate education in the country have not done nearly enough to actively heal the gaps left by the war and meaningfully recreate a single functioning system of education. The goals of Bologna in BiH in many ways parallel the broader goals of European Union integration for Bosnia-Herzegovina. Both seek to move beyond internal struggles by making them obsolete through Europeanizing the education system and the country as a whole. While an idealistic goal, post-conflict reconstruction rarely seems to be cured by simply skimming over the traumas and troubles remaining in the wake of the war.

What are students' perceptions of Bologna?

Eighty-one students of in the English Language and Literature departments in Banja Luka and Tuzla were surveyed for this project. Respondents were second, third, and fourth year undergraduate students who were asked to reflect on their understanding and opinion of Bologna in their departments, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and in Europe.

One of the most striking elements of the survey results was the students' understanding of what the intended purpose of Bologna actually is. Only one of eighty-one students mentioned student or faculty mobility as part of the goal of Bologna, and only seven (9%) referred to standardizing and harmonizing education, either within BiH or across Europe. It is remarkable that less than 10% of respondents mentioned either of the two main facets and goals of Bologna, although it has been present in their education and influencing their lives for upwards of four years.

What *did* students think that Bologna was designed to do? There was a wide variety of theories presented by students. The two most common responses were the purposes of forcing students to study constantly, and making their studies easier, suggested by 40% and 35% of respondents, respectively. The former response was almost certainly informed by the establishment of grades based on a point system comprised of midterm test results, class participation, and homework, rather than the old system of final grades based entirely on written and oral final exams. Making programs easier to pass was a sentiment echoed by several teaching assistants and professors, as well.

The continuous study element of the reforms is not entirely unrelated to Bologna's goals, but nor is it the primary aim of the project. Increasing the transparency of grading policies *is* part of Bologna's mission, and creating standardized formulas based on a variety of criteria is a common way of working towards that goal. The specific outcome of making students study continuously, rather than cramming before exams is, while probably a positive change, not in any specific way connected to Bologna.

Asked about their overall opinions of Bologna in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the overwhelming majority of responses were either partly or entirely negative. Indeed, only a very small percentage of students described their opinion about Bologna in BiH in only positive terms, while many more described them as entirely negative.

A very common student observation was that the reforms in Bosnia-Herzegovina were either not "real" or not "complete" Bologna. 62% of students referred in some way to their belief that Bosnian Bologna was incomplete, misapplied, or lacking unified implementation. This is particularly unusual because there was no question directly related to this point in the survey. It is clear that this is an opinion that many students hold strongly and went out of their way to express in their surveys.³⁶³ The main causes suggested for this "fake" Bologna were lack of resources, organization, and professor support. One student wrote, "Bologna in BiH is impossible! They started some reforms which cannot be done in our country and they made it even harder for us students." Another commented that, "In BiH this system [is] a good idea but it's not really applicable. Our education system is too disorganized and messy." A third student mused, "I would personally like...to know what the real Bologna Process is like."

These spontaneous and adamant observations reflect the perception that professors, deans, rectors and politicians often cherry-pick elements of reforms to implement in their institutions, and that the changes they *do* implement are often primarily cosmetic. Yet the students' comments also suggest an erroneous belief that "Bologna" is a unified, cookie-cutter mandate that is either implemented or not. Commonly echoed among teaching staff and politicians, this view of the process is primarily counterproductive. It prevents education stakeholders from becoming actively involved in education reforms because they believe that the process is one of enacting a demand rather than adapting reforms based on individual goals, institutions, and realities.

For many in BiH, the role of being the passive site or recipient of projects, reforms, and systems has become a kind of default and assumed position. In the nearly two decades since the war, Bosnia-Herzegovina has frequently been the subject of mandates and intensive international interventions. Regardless of their opinions about these projects, the scenario of imposed reforms has become commonplace. In the case of Bologna, this assumption often precludes any meaningful engagement that might actually be possible.

What are faculty perceptions of Bologna?

Perceptions of the Bologna Process among teaching staff vary widely. As with students, faculty tended to focus on the elements of the changes that influenced them the most. Of twelve professors and teaching

³⁶³ Most instances of this sentiment were in response to the survey question "What is your opinion about Bologna in BiH?"

assistants interviewed, only two identified harmonization or mobility among the goals of Bologna as they understood them.

Students' comments that Bologna is different in different universities were clearly echoed through comments from Banja Luka and Tuzla. Many professors and students in Tuzla noted the change with Bologna that students can only attempt an exam three times before being required to re-take the course. In Banja Luka, this change is not yet regularly enforced or agreed upon, and so, not surprisingly, was infrequently mentioned as an element of Bologna.

Another common observation from faculty at both universities was a change in the grading scale so that it became easier to pass classes but more difficult to get the highest grades of nine or ten. In some ways, this perception reflects one of Bologna's general goals to make a college degree more accessible continent-wide, such that simply passing classes is no longer the sometimes-monumental feat that it once was. Like students, many members of the teaching staff cited continuous studying as a key point in Bologna, and many also noted that there was not enough money in BiH to have "real" Bologna.

Surprisingly, several faculty members said that their teaching methods and content had changed little or not at all since Bologna, and that only assessment and administrative elements were changed. This helps to explain the sense of Bologna as a set of cosmetic reforms. Either out of confusion or choice, most professors do not see Bologna as an opportunity or a requirement to meaningfully assess and potentially modify their courses.

Where students often blamed professors for failing to give enough information about the process, professors often lay this blame with *their* superiors – deans and rectors.

In sum, faculty opinions, like those of students, represented a wide range of opinions about Bologna. While the majority of opinions were primarily negative, either in the theory or the execution of Bologna in BiH, some people felt that the changes had improved education. One teaching assistant, expressing this more optimistic perspective of the changes, noted, "I think – I don't think, I *see* – that students take it more seriously when they have fewer exams and they know they'll be checked, so they study continuously."

Students and teaching staff in Tuzla were, on the whole, more positive about the changes brought by Bologna, while people in Banja Luka were more likely to describe the process in very negative terms. Within the scope of this small survey, it is not possible to tell whether this difference represents variations between these two individual universities in their approach to the reforms, or whether it is indicative of broader, entity-based patterns through which universities in Republika Srpska would be predisposed to more negative attitudes toward international involvement than institutions in the Federation.

Analyzing Perceptions and Realities; Theory and Practice of Bologna in BiH

One of the most common observations among students and teaching staff was that Bosnia-Herzegovina does not have the money to adequately resource "real" Bologna. While there is no question that financial constraints pose serious limitations to education reforms, there does not seem to be significant awareness of the elements of Bologna which *could* be implemented without large amounts of money. There is no question that large classes, shortages of classrooms, poor libraries and limited internet access combine to hobble some educational reforms. Some reforms, though, can proceed irrespective of funding, such as encouraging externally-funded student and professor exchanges throughout Europe; extending the role and scope of student advising; and structuring courses with a greater focus on student needs and learning outcomes. While surely these changes would be progress more smoothly with large quantities of money, they are not dependent on it.

What seems like the possibility for true reform in spite of financial constraints is reduced to a theoretical possibility when the perceptions of the potential implementers of these reforms are taken into account. As there are so few professors or students who view the process in these – perhaps idealistic – terms, then the perceived limitations become a reinforced and entrenched reality.

The long history of international community involvement in Bosnia-Herzegovina also plays a major role in perceptions of, and openness to, the Bologna Reforms. Especially in Republika Srpska, where international interventions are generally seen in a particularly negative light, impositions or any project that resembles the perceived history of unjust impositions are treated with serious suspicion. The degree to which this dynamic was or was not present in reality as Bosnia joined Bologna is largely irrelevant because this is so universally believed to be the case.

As we have seen throughout this paper, there is widespread confusion and misunderstanding about the ultimate purpose of Bologna. This disconnect is pervasive at the level of students and teaching staff, and likely continues even up to the level of deans, rectors, and politicians. Without a clear conception of the ultimate purpose of Bologna, and with no clear efforts to mend this problem of public relations, it is hard to envision the kind of meaningful collaboration that Bologna requires among stakeholders at all levels.

Analyzing student and faculty interviews and surveys, it becomes clear that most people understand Bologna based on its functional implications for them. Bologna is whatever has happened to these people: a watering down of the curriculum from the perspective of professors who feel that the scope and content of their courses have been curtailed; a demand to study constantly from the perspective of students who must now

prepare for a myriad of partial examinations and projects; a sadistic bureaucratic nightmare from the point of view of teaching staff who are now required to accompany their work with many times the paperwork than was once demanded.

Although all of these realities are connected in some ways to the big-picture goals of the Bologna reforms, it is troubling that nearly all of the students and teaching staff contacted for this paper understood Bologna entirely based on how it had already affected them, and not based on how it could impact their future or how they themselves could be active members of it. A combination of disinterest, assumptions specific to the Bosnian context and history, and poor information dissemination has created a country of educators and students who see Bologna as something happening to them. In this context, those who should be the active reformers and participants in meaningful reform become entirely passivized. This passivity ensures that reforms will continue to be decided not by those with the most direct and practical understanding of what needs to be changed, but by tangential stakeholders with much less information and experience, thus ensuring that Bologna will continue to have a disconnect between theory and practice.

Can Bologna in Bosnia-Herzegovina Survive?

It is clear from this research that there are serious problems and challenges facing Bologna's implementation and sustainability in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Looking to the future, many questions and doubts linger.

One approach to these problems is simply pushing through them. The joint European Union/Council of Europe project "Strengthening Higher Education in Bosnia-Herzegovina" is an example of this approach. In the third part of this multi-year project, teaching staff from universities across BiH were brought together to learn about the Bologna approach to education and tasked with developing a pilot curriculum based on learning outcomes, flexibility and mobility, and student-centered approaches. Over the course of more than a year, these working groups met monthly and ostensibly succeeded in creating Bologna-friendly pilot courses, curricula, and degree programs.

Yet in spite of this seeming success, most of the participants in this program from the English language and literature departments do not hesitate to express their belief that the whole project was mainly an exercise in futility. Although the EU/CoE organizers have said that the project participants should now be viewed as on-the-ground experts in the field of adapting programs into this European framework, informal conversations suggest that this has not been the case, and that participants themselves would not be eager to take on this role. Without rejecting the possibility that in some subtle ways this project may have been important and may still be a vehicle for success indirectly, it is widely believed by participants that the project was largely useless.

Assessing the successes and challenges of the Bologna Process across Europe, a report noted that smaller countries have generally seen greater success in implementing reforms than larger countries like Germany and France, which have diverse and autonomous regions and universities. Although Bosnia-Herzegovina is certainly small in terms of population and land area, it has many of the divisions and intense local autonomy more commonly found in large, decentralized countries. The geographic proximity between Sarajevo and Pale, for example, does not mitigate the deep tensions that remain for many people in both cities, and this is true for their universities as well. The almost crippling autonomy granted to each entity in the Dayton Peace Accords is proving a major hindrance to harmonizing education country-wide, and within this dynamic Bosnia has perhaps more in common with large, decentralized European countries than with places that are more similar in population and physical size.

In many ways the problems of Bologna in BiH reflect larger problems of the country as a whole. On paper, Bologna could be construed as a successful project in BiH: if one chooses not to look too deep or find out too much, the superficial and partial changes that Bologna *has* created could be perceived as evidence of a broadly successful process. Likewise, the Dayton Peace Accords have superficially "solved" the problems of the war while leaving crucial issues festering. Bologna *seems* to be working in Bosnia, if that is the answer one hopes to find; in the same way that Dayton *seems* to have been a success. In both cases, serious problems are left unaddressed or solved in a primarily cosmetic way.

In the case of both Bologna and Dayton, the unsolved issues that remain are by their nature the stickiest, most vague, and most contentious. Meaningfully addressing these problems will require an in-depth, country-specific plan that brings key players on board and persuades them of the possibility of substantive reform.

In the case of Bologna, this will mean that stakeholders will need to genuinely believe that changes are possible, that their opinions will be taken into account, and that reforms will not represent a threat to their work.

Is this possible in the case of either Bologna or post-Dayton Bosnia as a whole? Optimism seems hard to come by, especially as an outsider in a place where enthusiastic and often ill-informed outsiders have bungled so many projects. The universal European nature of Bologna means that formally opting out of the process could further isolate students, professors, and higher education institutions in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Yet stumbling through the process with haphazard and erratic cosmetic reforms without seriously making changes or discussing potential challenges seems to be undermining every element of pride and confidence that exists among educators and students. It is not without precedent in history that "fake it until you make it" can be a successful philosophy

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even on an international geopolitical scale. Yet in Bosnia there are politicians and others working very hard against this, and that is a troubling reality.