

Ligia Deca

University of Luxembourg

ligia.deca@uni.lu

**The discursive uses of the Bologna Process in Romanian Higher
Education reform**

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The discursive uses of the Bologna Process in Romanian Higher Education reform

Ligia Deca
University of Luxembourg
ligia.deca@uni.lu

Abstract:

Since its inception in Sorbonne (2008), the Bologna Process or part of its action lines have been 'framed' in different ways in national contexts by various actors, in order to legitimize the change in higher education brought about with the pretext of the adherence to this voluntary intergovernmental initiative. The present paper seeks to contribute to better understanding the way in which the Bologna Process appears in the Romanian public discourse of various actors, across more than a decade since the first European Higher Education Area ministerial meeting (1999). Attention will be paid to when, why and by whom the Bologna Process and other international influences were used in the Romanian public discourse. The conclusions of the paper will analyse the level of discursive Europeanisation in Romanian higher education between 1999-2012, problematising the manner in which the 'external constraint' represented by the process is used (or opposed) as a strategic resource in the domestic arena.

Introduction

Higher education and the public discourse around it have perhaps experienced more transformations in the past couple of decades than in the past century. The link to the 'knowledge based-economy' as promoted by the EU's Lisbon Strategy, along with the constant framing as a pillar for economic and social progress by international organisations such as the World Bank, the OECD and UNESCO have pushed the debates in the public sphere on higher education to an unprecedented height. As with other sectors, globalization has transformed the debate at national level and national higher education systems were increasingly influenced by international processes.

The Bologna Process has been one of the most successful cases of voluntary intergovernmental cooperation that has used tools similar to those of the European Union's Open Method of Coordination (OMC) to push its current 47 members to making their higher

education systems readable enough to sustain the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), launched in 2010. Research on the Bologna Process has been generally undertaken by the higher education research community, but political science and European studies have been less involved in the topic, despite the political relevance of the subject (Harmsen, 2013). Some aspects have been nevertheless been looked at from a political science perspective, especially in recent years: the potential of the Bologna Process to be regarded as a 'new mode of governance' (Harmsen, 2012; 2013), the influence of the Bologna Process instruments as a way to consolidate a pan-European higher education policy arena (Ravinet 2008), as well as the increased 'convergence' (not harmonization) of the higher education systems in the EHEA (Dobbins and Knill 2009). At the same time, the mutual spillover between the EU policy on higher education and the Bologna Process has been heavily documented at both historical (Corbett 2005; 2011) and governance (Capano and Piatonni 2011) level. There are however several authors outlining significant differences between the way in which higher education systems changed despite the ministerial commitments made to common objectives in the EHEA, EU or other contexts (Pabian 2009, Musselin 2009).

This paper is a first step in a larger doctoral research project, which aims to look at discursive Europeanisation, since the way in which international policy processes were 'framed' at the national level influences the way in which they were transposed and used by actors to enact change in national higher education systems. The doctoral project will comparatively look at how in three countries (France, Romania and Spain) with distinctive historical and cultural backgrounds, the European discourse on higher education has been

strategically (ab)used by actors and whether generally accepted 'frames' in relation to higher education have changed in the European socialization process.

The article will try to uncover whether the policy image of the Bologna Process was framed differently over time and by each actor, depending on the interests of the day. The contribution will also look at the way in which the Bologna Process appears in the public discourse of various actors, across more than a decade since the first European Higher Education Area ministerial meeting (1999). Three moments have been chosen to analyse the discourse surrounding higher education: the timeframe before and immediately after the signing of the Bologna Declaration (2009); 2004-2005 as the time in which national legislation was passed in order to enact Bologna instruments implementation; and 2010-2011 as the moment at which the current Romanian Law on Education was passed, which corresponds with the moment at which Romania hosted the Bologna Process Secretariat and was preparing the 2012 EHEA Ministerial Conference. Attention will be focused on when, why and by whom the Bologna Process was used in the Romanian public discourse.

The paper concludes with a balance sheet summarising the successive policy frames present in the three key moments selected and how actors used the discourse as resource (with a focus on government actors, due to the relative lack of epistemic communities in higher education). The changes in the actors discourse and the formation of 'advocacy coalitions' in the process of policy change, in the sense of seeing whether groups of actors "who share a particular belief system – i.e. a particular set of values, causal assumptions, and problem perceptions – and who show a non-trivial degree of coordinated activity over time" (Sabatier

1988) were formed over the past two decades in relation to higher education reforms inspired by European developments.

Methodologically, both documentary desk research (minutes of parliamentary debates prior to major legal changes, newspaper articles and actors' policy positions, reports and seven semi-structured interviews with the actors' representatives (government representatives, academics, staff union representatives and student leaders). The paper will also draw on the author's experience as a student leader at the national and European level, as well as her experience as coordinator of the Romanian Bologna Secretariat.

Analysing discourse in Romanian higher education

As with any other public policy process, higher education policy at the national level is linked to national objectives, which are defined starting from a representation (frame or image) of a problem, its consequences and foreseeable solutions. Policy framing is considered here a deliberate strategic activity destined to make the actors and the wider publics follow 'particular patterns of signification' (Hajer and Laws, 2006).

The narrative around higher education cannot be divorced from larger societal and economic realities. Actors in this context are mediators between such sectorial policies and the greater global 'référentiel'. The actor(s) that manages to impose or maintain a certain narrative can lead the policy debate (Muller, 2010). Discourse becomes one of the instruments employed by actors in dealing with change, which can act as either as an opportunity or as a constraint. The Bologna Process in particular and European policies on higher education in general were widely regarded as an opportunity for change by the national governments and thus studying

the discourse related to the Bologna Process can shed light on the transfer of ideas and strategic actor behaviour.

For the purpose of this paper, the author's understanding of discourse analysis draws on Schmidt and Radaelli's conclusions in relation to EU policy analysis, in which they underline that 'it is necessary not only to explore the ideational definition of discourse – that is the ideas and values that represent the cognitive and normative aspects of meaning creation – but also the interactive dimension – both the elite processes of policy formulation and the mass process of communication and deliberation with informed and general publics' (Schmidt and Radaelli, 2004, pp.183-310).

The quality of discourse is analysed through the lens of its capacity to induce policy change. In this sense, there is no 'true' or 'false' discourse. A specific discourse can be thus considered 'true' in one arena or context and 'false' in another, which prompts an understanding of discourse as means for one actor to convince the others of its own vision over the most appropriate policy solutions to perceived policy problems. (Radaelli and Schmidt, 2004). Discourse in this paper is understood as being selective in terms of facts and values brought to the fore, so as to support the argument made. Similarly, discourse should be understood in a complex reality in which there are different interpretations and readings of policy terms, due to different cognitive and normative lenses (such as for example 'student centred learning' or 'equity'). When analysing discourse in various contexts, it is relevant to keep in mind that often policy actors employ a 'double discourse' (e.g. the government discourse in European or national settings) or resort to discursive ambiguity in order to pursue their interests in different arenas. Limitations of discourse are also acknowledged, as the

chances for discursive success in influencing policy change needs to be problematized in relation to value systems, democratic cultures, institutions, diplomatic processes and socio-economic contexts.

In Romania policy is usually developed in the context of 'coordinative discourse' among political actors and is then presented to the wider public for legitimation through 'communicative discourse'. The need to look at the way in which actors used Bologna (or other international processes) discourse is also highly linked to the so-called emergence of a '*Bolognese*' ivory-tower outlining the usage of a mainly 'coordinative' discourse developed at the national level largely at the expense of any corresponding 'communicative' discourse (Schmidt 2006). The paper brings arguments against the theory advanced by Vivien Schmidt that countries with 'statist' policy making processes and majoritarian politics, where policy formulation is the purview of a restricted governmental elite – are most likely to have an elaborate 'communicative discourse' focused on persuading the general public of the necessity and appropriateness of policies developed with little inside input'. (Schmidt and Radaelli, 2010).

Romanian higher education in the 1990s and the first impact of the Bologna Process

Romanian higher education entered the 1989 post-revolutionary decade with a high level of state control over higher education institutions, similar to other Eastern bloc countries. In opposition to relative autonomy of faculties witnessed in former Yugoslav countries, higher education institutions were completely centralized and subjugated to the priorities set by the Communist party-state. Admission in Romanian universities was extremely selective, Romania

having one of the smallest numbers of students compared to overall population in Eastern Europe (Korka 2002) – 1483 students for 100.000 inhabitants in 1995 according to the 1998 UNESCO World Education Report (pp. 150-151). Imports of technology were very limited or completely banned and universities were demanded to locally come up with solutions for Romania's growing industrialization related research and labor force demand. Engineering became the elite specialization and thus social recognition of engineering graduates became a given in Romanian society. A relative opening of the system to the West came about in the years of rebellion of Dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu against the USSR (end of the 1960s and 1970s). This culminated with the set-up of UNESCO CEPES (European Centre for Higher Education) in Bucharest (1972), which acted as a capacity builder before and especially after the 1989 revolution.

The 1990s were characterized by a push to democratize and open up the previously closed system: former state colleges were given university status, private institutions were set-up benefitting from an old and rarely used "Law of foundations" (1924) (Damian, 2011), academics which fulfilled the existing promotion conditions were speedily promoted and the debate started for a new Education Law which was adopted in 1995 (Law 84/1995), following a three-year Parliamentary debate (Romanian Parliament, 1992-1995).

In these times several influences were obvious in the system. UNESCO-CEPES initiated a comprehensive study with financial support from Japan, which culminated with publishing *The White Book of Higher Education in Romania* (Vlăsceanu, Zamfir and Mihăilescu, 1994). This document laid the grounds for several avant-garde measures for Eastern European countries, such as the set up in 1993 of the National Council for Academic Evaluation and Accreditation

(CNEEA), which functioned under the authority of the Romanian Parliament. This was the first quality assurance agency/ body set up in a former communist state. It was mainly in charge with assuring institutional minimum standards (especially in the context of the spurring of private providers) and is considered to be the pre-cursor of the current Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS).

Another major influence factor in the pre-Bologna Process times was the *Reform of Higher Education and University Research* comprehensive project, which started in 1994 and included three major pillars: the first pillar – “Universitas 2000” (PHARE 2000) aimed at the reform of management in higher education (funded through the PHARE programme RO9601), the second pillar looked at the reform of university study programmes and the third pillar which aimed to reform research in universities. This project was co-funded with a World Bank loan covering the 1996-2001 timeframe. This project was possible partly due to the basis set by the experience that universities had with the TEMPUS programme, for which Romania was eligible since 1991 (Grigorescu, 2001). Due to the major impacts of this project over higher education in Romania, it was deemed to be a sort of “Marshall Plan” for higher education in the 1990s (Damian, 2011).

A long standing higher education expert in Romania pointed out that *‘the 1990s were the decade of Euro-Atlantic influence in the Romanian higher education system. The influence of the Anglo-Saxon excellence models was predominant, especially in relation to reform of university research’* (Interview 4). The influence was coupled with the introduction of recognition instruments such as ECTS both by the TEMPUS programme (starting with 1998) and via a Ministerial Decree (only with a transfer function) (Interview 1) and with the UNESCO

CEPES push for alignment with international tools such as the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region (the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which Romania ratified in 1999, the same year it signed the Bologna Declaration).

In terms of preparation of the structural changes that Bologna will bring about in the next decade, one state official at the time remarked:

'the Romanian higher education system introduced the so-called 'in-depth studies' (studii aprofundate) in the academic year 1993/1994, following the French model, and the short form of university education for specialized technical fields, the so-called 'colleges' (with a duration of three, instead of five years), following the German model. The German professional short-cycle was preferred since Romania did not introduce a binary system of schools of applied science/ universities and there was a demand in the labour market for more professional oriented higher education)'. (Interview 1)

At the level of the government, the prevailing discourse seemed to be heavily influenced at the time by the World Bank (Interview 4), whose influence started to manifest itself around 1991/1992 (with an assessment of the Romanian Education System presented to the Parliament in a confidential report in December 1992) and lasted until 2000. The World Bank argued for more professional management of the higher education sector, for a restructuring of the financing system with a view of abolishing the idea of 'education free of charge' (Romanian Parliament, 1992) and for and for enhancing equity of the system by opening up the possibility of student loans (World Bank, 2008).

The OECD also undertook a *Review of National Policies for Education* for Romania (OECD, 2000), which became highly influential for the Romanian policy makers (Interview 1).

The focus of the World Bank with regard to higher education was on governance of the system, structural reforms (mainly linked with allowing private providers and a shift towards a managerial leadership system for higher education institutions), enhancing teacher training, as well as the links between universities and the demand of the labour market.

The Parliamentary debates around the first post-1989 revolution comprehensive Law on Education (Law 84/1995) reveal that members of the Committee on Education and Science were mainly resistant to the idea that Romanian higher education was 'not good enough'. In the 1992 discussions around the report presented by the World Bank representatives (Romanian Parliament, 1992), most members of the underlined the merits of the existing Romanian higher education system and did not see the need for change. The reasons brought forward mainly addressed the performance of high-school students in international prize-winning competitions (Olympiads) and the relative high level of success of Romanian PhD applicants abroad. Despite the view of the Romanian Members of the Parliament, on 23 October 1995 (approximately three months after the adoption of Law 84/ 1995) Romania saw the biggest wave of student protests (100.000 students protested in the streets) mainly caused by the high administrative taxes charged by universities and by a combination of lack of student support mechanisms and a said lack of quality of studies.

The signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 came as an international commitment that cemented the reforms of then Minister of Education Andrei Marga, who started an overhaul of the system looking at a reassessment of the curricula (also in line with the developments brought about by the ERASMUS programme), a push for more institutional autonomy combined with public accountability, ensuring equal opportunities, more

connectivity to international developments and an increase in the financing of the system. In a speech made on 10 June 1999 (9 days before the signing of the Bologna Declaration), Marga declared that:

'[...]educational reform must be carried out under any circumstances and at once. As many intellectuals have already understood, education must break the vicious circle of underdevelopment and inefficiency'¹

Judging by the above mentioned developments and placing the speech of Andrei Marga in his reform larger context, one could say Romania's membership in the Bologna Process was no accident at the time. However, many governmental and actor representatives at the time (Interview 1, 2, 4, 5 and 7) underline that even though joining the Bologna Processes seemed to concur with the ministerial statements of the time, nobody actually knew what this process would entail and saw it as another manifestation of the growing Europeanisation tendency. The signing of the Bologna Declaration (1999) was not preceded by any stakeholder consultation and its implications were only realized and analyzed at a later stage, when the following Ministerial Communiqués (Prague – 2001 and Berlin – 2003) drew a series of clear action lines that were straightforward enough to be taken on board in a legislative manner and that could be overseen from the European level through national stocktaking reports (Interview 2).

The following elements are significant regarding public discourse immediately following the moment of Romania signing the Bologna Declaration:

- The Romanian Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union and the European Commission organized on 18-20

¹ Andrei Marga – 'The Reform of Education and the Challenges of the Next Century' (New Europe College, 1999)

June 2000 the Fourth Conference of the European Ministers of Education under the heading '*Strengthening the Common European House of Education. Social Cohesion and Quality – a Challenge for Education*'. Viviane Reding, then European Commissioner for Education and Culture made no reference in her intervention about the newly launched Bologna Process, the Romanian Minister at the time, Andrei Marga spoke about reaching 'the EU standards' and the follow-up of the 2000 OECD report on Romania (OECD, 2000). The only reference to the Bologna Process and its role in building a future European Higher Education Area was made by Mihai Korca, the keynote speaker, who was also the chief Romanian expert in the negotiation process of Chapter 18 on Education, Training and Youth, aiming at future accession of Romania to the European Union (Fourth Conference of the European Ministers of Education booklet, 2000).

- Romanian rectors gathered in various Council of Rectors (CNR) meetings following the signing of the Bologna Declaration reacted in a rather hostile way to the image of the Bologna reforms, especially to the idea of the two cycles (the '3+2' Bachelor and Master cycles). The resistance came mainly from the engineering sector, since, as a Ministry official underlined '*it was deemed as unconceivable for a good engineering graduate to only go through three years of higher education*' (Interview 3). The resistance of the rectors was not manifested in an open way and the information about the Bologna Process was constrained to discussions at the ministerial level and at the level of the Rectors Council for several years, which prompted no real debate about the aims and methods of the Bologna Process in academic communities. There was a general sentiment of '*this too shall pass*' (Interview 4).

- A sense of obligation to sign the Bologna Declaration, generated by the post 1990 complex of 'not being an important European country', was also noticed by one of the experts representing Romania in the Bologna Follow-Up Group. He concisely remarked: *'We couldn't afford to take any other course of action. Perhaps other countries, like France, could have said no if they so wished, but this was not an option for Romania at the time'* (Interview 3)
- A Romanian trade-union representative noted that *'The academic staff, represented by the Alma Mater trade union did not seem to have any negative reaction to the signing of the Bologna Declaration, as was mainly seen to affect recognition of diplomas for students'* (Interview 5).

To conclude, the moment revolving around the signing of the Bologna Declaration overlapped with an already existing governmental call for reform and with several directions for proceeding further given by other policy processes (EU) or other international actors (OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank). As such, the Process was considered another instance for reform which only became easily distinguishable from other international/ European initiatives or projects at a later stage.

Interestingly, the issues which are now associated with the Bologna Process, namely the three cycles, ECTS, quality assurance were already in debate or in course of implementation at the time of the signing. Thus, the Bologna Process was at first widely ignored discourse-wise until later developments such as additional action lines, EU support and stocktaking were in place.

The Bologna Process as the center of public attention and structural reforms

As one of the experts interviewed underlined, 2004-2007 was the 'heyday' of the Bologna Process in Romania, both in legal and implementation terms, but also in terms of the public discourse (Interview 4).

At the start of the 2005-2006 academic year, the Minister of Education, Mircea Miclea, published a report regarding the status-quo of the Romanian higher education system. This report stated in no unclear terms that Romania should adhere to the principles and aims of the Bologna Process. In his own words, the Minister underlined that *'The Bologna Process in Romania is an opportunity for the higher education reform, which was a more conservative sector of the education sector.'* (Miclea 2005)

Law 288/ 2004 on reorganization of higher education studies made the three cycles come into force, with a 180-240 ECTS range for the first cycle, (60) 90-120 ECTS for the second cycle (but with a mandatory 300 ECTS to obtain a Masters' degree) and the doctoral cycle as an official third cycle of the Romanian higher education system. The implementation of this system started with the 2005-2006 academic year. For EU-regulated professions (medicine, architecture etc) an integrated one-tier Master degree was preferred, so as to not conflict with the EU Directive on Recognition of Professional Qualifications (Directive 2005/36/EC). The former three year college programmes have been integrated into the new first cycle. Although the ECTS interval approach seems at first sight to leave some room for maneuver to universities, the duration of study cycles, according to areas of specialization, is set by the Ministry of Education, following the proposals made by the National Rectors' Council. Officially, the three cycle structure was branded as 'Bologna' by the decision-makers and communicated

as a given, something that needed to be done in order to comply with the EU pre-accession negotiations (Damian 2011; Mureşan 2008). A Ministry official underlined that

'There was no other way to make sure the universities change the old structures. If a quick and decisive step would not have been taken, the universities would have boycotted any reform.' (Interview 2)

The moment of the three cycle structure implementation is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, 2004 was a university election year and most of the elected Rectors already had experience with the TEMPUS or PHARE programmes and were partly involved in the debates revolving around the three cycles, so there was less resistance to the new structural changes than one might have expected. It is said that the four year Bachelor degree for engineering was a result of the compromise caused by fierce opposition from the side of this discipline to the perceived 'Bologna 3+2+3 standards' (Interview 3). Other opinions say that the Law was a compromise which cut one year of study across all disciplines, in an attempt to offer an egalitarian solution to what was communicated as being *'imposed by Europe'* (Interview 6).

Secondly, ECTS was introduced via a new Ministerial Order (no. 3617/ 2005) as a mandatory transfer and accumulation system which created significant pressure for universities to use the system for all higher education programmes, *'without being necessarily ready'* (Interview 1). At the same time, *'the number of contact hours per week was reduced, which was probably due to the need to financial restrains'* (Interview 3).

Thirdly, following the 2005 EHEA Ministerial Conference in Bergen, Romania adopted a Government Ordinance setting-up the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). The quality assurance developments were initially communicated as part of

the larger Bologna Process agenda, but with time this association has been lost in the public discourse (Interview 4). There is perhaps one peculiar element in relation to ARACIS – a legal pre-condition to its lawful existence is its listing in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) dating from the Law 97/2006 on Quality Assurance (art. 23 (2)). However, at the time the law was passed, EQAR was not yet in operation. This rush to include a European reference point (EQAR) in national legislation to act as legitimation for the new national quality assurance agency (ARACIS) seems to have been crucial in building trust within the system.

The public debate on the Bologna Process was rather centered on a negative legitimization factor – the Ministry officials pointed out to the negative consequences of not engaging in what was communicated as the Bologna Process aim to solve a ‘major problem’ of the Romanian system, namely the mismatch between higher education results and the needs of the labour market (Romania’s national report to the Bergen Ministerial meeting, 2005) (Wodak and Fairclough, 2010). Little reference was made in the public debate about other aims of the Bologna Process or indeed other action lines, such as mobility, European dimension of higher education or the social dimension (except perhaps in making the argument for the introduction of study loans as means for enhancing equity, but this was rather linked to the World Bank reports and the OECD reviews).

University rectors continued to criticize the degree reform, while adopting wherever possible a ‘foot dragging’ resistance, especially in areas such as ECTS implementation, where the number of ECTS was usually not allotted according to student workload and learning outcomes. A subject would be distributed a certain number of ECTS more according to the

perceived importance of the academic staff member teaching a specific discipline or according to a formula made 'not to upset members of the academic staff' by dividing the overall number of credits in a semester (30) to the number of subjects to be thought than according to the criteria specified in the ECTS Users' Guide. In the absence of an active community of Bologna experts, as it was the case in Poland (Dakovska forthcoming), and taking into account the Rectors skepticism of the Process, knowledge regarding the Bologna Process within academic communities remained limited by the narrow public discourse.

Interestingly, those who tried to fill the gap were the students. One national students' federation – the National Alliance of Students' Organisations in Romania (ANOSR) had initiated a campaign 'Bologna Weeks in Universities'² in order to bring information in an accessible way about the Bologna Process at the level of academic communities. Benefiting from access to information directly from the European Students' Union (ESU), which was involved in the debates of the Bologna Follow-Up Group at the EHEA level and could facilitate exchanges of good practice with other student organisations in Europe, ANOSR went on to publish several informative and easy to read papers, such as *The Bologna Guide*³ (2006) that broke down Bologna concepts in reader-friendly explanations and the *Bologna Black Book*⁴ (2006), which outlined what were considered to be bad examples of Bologna Process implementation, stemming from the way in which curricular reform was conducted, to ECTS implementation and reaching to quality assurance and student participation. Students were not involved in the consultations surrounding the shift to the three cycle structure, but they were perceived as the

² <http://www.bologna.ro/index.php?i=11&a=saptamana-bologna-in-universitati>

³ <http://www.anosr.ro/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/2006-Ghid-Bologna.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.anosr.ro/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/2006-Cartea-Neagra-Bologna-editial.pdf>

most supportive actors to Bologna reforms and as powerful critics of the way in which the Bologna Process was communicated top-down and implemented at institutional level (Interview 1,2,3,4,5). One of the student leaders interviewed underlined that:

'The reasons behind this support can be traced to the ESU discourse on the Bologna Process and to the projects developed by ANOSR at the time, as well as to the opportunity provided by the Bologna Process to bring into the public spotlight subject like student participation, mobility, quality assurance, student support and student centered learning' (Interview 6).

Student representatives at the Senate and University Council levels became more active in consultations and decision-making (Interview 7). Thus, it can be said that the Bologna Process reinforced the position of students in the actor constellation at both national and institutional level.

A former Ministry official underlined that:

'At the national level, a coalition of government and student representatives can be identified at the time in relation to the support for Bologna Process motivated reforms, which was in opposition with the National Rectors' Council and part of the professoriate.' (Interview 2)

Surprisingly, not even in this moment of high level of interest for the Bologna reforms was there any real public debate on what Romania aims to achieve in the frame of the Bologna Process. The debates seemed to revolve around 'how' instead of 'whether' or 'why' Romanian universities should implement international commitments such as those within the Bologna Process (Interview 4).

Employers (especially large companies such as Siemens) were mentioned as being interested in not having overly specialized graduates in the first cycle, preferring rather to develop in-house training programmes or professional Master programmes in cooperation with universities. (Interview 2) However there was little interest from the side of employers to get involved in the higher education reform and even less interest from the decision-makers to involve them, although the official line for Bologna Process implementation was that it will bring the academia closer to the labour market, in addition to bringing Romania back into the European family in the educational sphere. (Interview 5)

If at the national level the Bologna inspired reforms did not bring about significant changes in the strategic positioning of the actors (apart from students), at the institutional level the three cycles and associated curricular reform seem to have generated internal power struggles between academics which held most influence before the restructuring of the degrees and those who managed to impose themselves in the new structure and curricula of Ba and Ma degrees. One can say there were winners and losers in this process, but even if there were academics which benefited from the reform, the 'expected' discourse was to be overly-critical of the Bologna Process, since it was felt this ensures a high level of popularity among the rest of the staff and since it allowed for blaming issues related to quality of the delivery and problems of 'massification' of higher education on European developments (Interview 4).

Interestingly, there was an ongoing debate between students and academic staff about the positive or negative effect of the Bologna Process (especially at institutional level), but there was little opposition to the general Ministry line regarding the purpose of Bologna implementation.

Also, it seems that the national reports on Bologna Process implementation submitted prior to Ministerial Conferences had virtually no contribution from other actors apart from the Ministry of Education. This lack of consultation was heavily criticized by students and staff representatives, but virtually not observed by the National Rectors' Council.

The 2004-2007 timeframe was thus characterized by top-down measures with little real opposition from national actors (due to the 'mandatory European measures' misconception) and by a discursive emphasis on the role of the new Bologna structures to bring the academia closer to the needs of the labour market, which was and still is the predominant frame of discourse in Romanian society.

The launch of the European Higher Education Area and the policy influences over the most recent legislative reform in Romania (post-structural change discourse)

Education became after 2007-2008 a heavily politicized subject in Romania, partially due to the electoral campaign. The Romanian President set-up a Presidential Commission for analysis and policy making in education and research⁵, which authored in 2007 a report called *the Diagnosis of the Educational System in Romania*⁶. The *National Pact for Education*⁷ was concluded in 2008 between all major stakeholders. It was based on this *Diagnosis* and set several objectives for 2015: to increase quality and relevance of education, while generally enhancing access to higher education, with a focus on vulnerable groups and adult education; to update student evaluation norms and procedures; to accelerate decentralization of financial

⁵ <http://edu.presidency.ro/?pag=12>

⁶ http://edu.presidency.ro/upload/raport_edu.pdf

⁷ http://www.presidency.ro/static/ordine/Pactul_National_pentru_Educatie.pdf

and human resources, and of administration and curricula; and to develop a comprehensive program to enhance the performance of the teaching staff and institutional management. In university education, proposed measures included external evaluation of public and private institutions and study programs, full autonomy of universities in managing human resources, improved access and quality of student services and students' voice in decisions, introduction of student loans, etc. Finally, continuous learning should be promoted through the adoption of appropriate legislation, government financial support, and information and communication campaigns.

Inspired by the provisions of the *Diagnosis and National Pact for Education* and following several years of debate, the most recent Romania Law on Education (Law 1/2011) was adopted through a special procedure in which the Government of the time assumed political responsibility for the version the Ministry of Education put forward, while a revised version was still debated in Parliamentary procedure in the upper chamber of the Romanian Parliament. The motivation put forward by the Prime Minister at the time (Emil Boc) was that it was not possible to pass a Law in accordance with the objectives of the National Pact for Education, if the Law proposal would have followed its Parliamentary parcours.

Tellingly, in the Government official motivation for the Law, the Bologna Process is not referenced at all, even though 2010 was the year of the launch of the EHEA and Romania was at the time of the adoption of the Law the Vice-Chairing country of the Bologna Follow-Up Group, the host the Bologna Process Secretariat and the Chair of the Bologna Follow-Up Group on international openness of the EHEA. The Government referenced in the motivation for the Law proposal the poor performances against the EU benchmarks in higher education, research and

innovation, the PISA and Shanghai results and the OECD recommendations as basis for the Law, but did not include the Bologna Process in the list of international processes which call for reform of the higher education system. It can be said that, according to the Romania Government at the time, '*Bologna was a done deal*'. (Interview 3 and 4).

In spite of this lack of public discourse on the Bologna Process, ANOSR published in 2009 a report on the students' view regarding the implementation of the Bologna Process in Romanian universities⁸ and launched a web portal⁹ aimed at improving the level of public information on the Bologna Process. It is also noteworthy that student and staff representatives referenced the Bologna Process in their proposals for amendments to the draft Law, prior to its adoption, especially in areas of student and staff participation and student centered learning (Interviews 5 and 6). The push from both student and staff national organisations to preserve the collegial governance model instead of the government proposed managerial one was argued using the principle of stakeholder participation from the Bologna Process. (Interviews 5 and 7). One can conclude that in this case the Bologna Process was used as an argument to resist change towards a more neo-liberal understanding of higher education.

The National Rectors Council (CNR) made only one reference to the Bologna Process in its reaction to the Law proposal, addressing the issue of the third cycle in connection with university governance arrangements. In this case we can also say that the Bologna Process was used as an instance of resistance to change. The rest of the CNR arguments linked with international processes were based on the EU2020 strategy. Also telling in regard to the lack of

⁸ <http://www.anosr.ro/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/2009-Raport-Implementare-Proc-Bologna-in-Romania-Perspectiva-Studentilor-1.pdf>

⁹ www.bologna.ro

interest from the Romanian Rectors with respect to the Bologna Process is the fact that the Romanian Rectors' Council did not respond to the EUA Trends 2010 questionnaire, largely viewed as one of the main sources of information for the level of Bologna Process implementation in the EHEA. The leader of the National Rectors' Council was blamed for this status-quo (which coincides with a former minister of education), as the structure did not formally meet with a set agenda and conclusions made public in several years. (Interview 2, 4)

It can be argued that since the Bologna Process was framed as mainly consisting of the three-cycle reform, ECTS implementation and sometimes (and more recently) qualifications frameworks, the Government and the larger academic community considered it as a done deal by the time the political debates for the new Law on Education began. The Romanian press also mainly promoted the competitiveness discourse, by slamming the low positioning of Romanian Universities in well-known international rankings or by sounding the alarm when the EU published the benchmarking results. In the words of an expert highly involved in the drafting of Law 1/ 2011:

'We can identify three main stages of international influences: the Euro-Atlantic influence, present mainly in the first decade after the 1989 revolution, in which the World Bank, UNESCO, the OECD and the EU were the main influence factors; the Europeanisation phase, mainly manifesting itself through a mix of Bologna and EU inspired and supported structural reforms, which made the Romanian system comparable in an international arena and the 2010+ phase characterized through increased attention to international competition (rankings, benchmarks, positioning in

the higher education market) and to issues outside of the Bologna Process remit such as higher education governance and funding.” (Interview 4)

From this point of view, one can say that the new reforms were built on the existing reforms, as for example the highly debated classification of universities exercise introduced by Law 1/ 2011 was seen as complementing the quality assurance framework and had implications touching the right of universities to organize one, two or all three of the Bologna cycles. On the other hand, if one looks at the domestic motivation for moving forward with Bologna implementation in the first place (namely to tick the box of Europeanisation, to enforce the link of the academia with the labour market and to make its system more internationally comparable and attractive), it seems that there is a certain coherence in the motivation for pursuing these agendas while leaving behind the ‘blame Bologna’ strategy.

Despite this lack of interest in the national debate, Romania was heavily involved in the policy negotiations prior to the adoption of the April 2012 EHEA Bucharest Communiqué, as the Vice-chair of the BFUG and the host of the Bologna Secretariat. Romania supported, inter alia, the set-up of a voluntary peer learning and review system across the EHEA that would provide an impetus for more exchange of good practice and experience between EHEA countries, but also between higher education institutions. It also argued for including in the Bucharest Communiqué areas such as governance, transparency, mission diversification and financing in the remit of the Bologna Process dialogue and supported EUA in the push for more links between the EHEA and the European Research Area. It seems that in a paradoxical way,

Romania (or at least government representatives) was starting to play the game of policy uploading in the Bologna Process, while making little to no use of it in national debates.

Due to the partial overlap with the debates prior and post adoption of the new Law on National Education, the Romanian academic community never became involved in organizing the Bucharest Ministerial Conference, nor contributed much to the debates around it. (Interview 4) As an interesting precedent, the Ministerial Conference was preceded by the Bologna Process Researchers' Conference¹⁰, an event which gathered many scholars looking at recent higher education policy reforms in general and the Bologna Process in particular. The results of this conference fed into the proceedings of the ministerial debates and materialized into a two volumes of outcome of proceedings, creating a link between researchers and policy makers in the same arena.

Conclusions

The dynamics of the higher education reform in Romania can point to many influences from the international remit. When it comes to the timeline of the Bologna Process influence, one can speak of pre-Bologna reforms, transformations according to the perceived Bologna model and post-Bologna reforms. Initially considered as a natural continuation of the already existing internationalization and especially Europeanisation efforts, the Bologna Process became an instrument of change, being framed as the reason why structural reforms had to be implemented without delay or much debate in 2005/ 2006. Post 2007/2008, the Bologna Process related discourse was mainly used by students and academic staff to resist higher

¹⁰ <http://fohe-bprc.forhe.ro/>

education governance and financing changes related mainly to the EU and OECD agendas for education

Despite the fact that Romania has a rather state-central governance arrangement and it would normally require an elaborate 'communicative discourse' from the government, the evidence provided in the case of communicating the influence of European agendas on national reforms proves that the 'communicative discourse' is almost non-existent, decision-makers being rather caught-up in 'coordinative discourse'. This is perhaps also the case due to the relative lack of an 'epistemic community' on the topic of higher education and to the limits of the post-1989 development of a democratic culture (Radaelli and Schmidt, 2004). The relative lack of a pluralistic culture of policy making is also supported by the difficulty to identify competing "advocacy coalitions" (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), since the governmental actors' discourse seems to have been relatively uncontested when claiming a policy solution is 'mandatory' due to international commitments. The process of policy learning also seems to be rather limited, as the discursive arguments used to favour principles such as merit-based access or the need to international competitiveness seem to have changed very little since the 1990s, even though for example Romania has committed to expanding and diversifying access to higher education both in the EHEA and in the European Union framework.

It also seems that since the Bologna Process was assimilated mainly with structural reforms (three cycles, ECTS, the set-up of a quality assurance system and – to a lesser extent - of a national qualifications framework) and due to the lack of communicative discourse, when the structural changes were formally in place, the public debate moved on to other European and international discourses more focused on the 'hot topics of the day' – how to better fare in

the global competition, university mission differentiation, rankings, financing, governance etc. The idea that the Bologna Process changed its nature to a more binding arrangement through its instruments (Ravinet 2008), seems to have some grounds for a short period of time in Romania (2004-2007), especially when coupled with a focusing event such as the pre-accession timeframe, but it does not seem to hold over a longer time interval, especially when the perceived conditionality is no longer there (i.e. EU membership). Even with the Ministry of Education firmly involved in the run-up to the 2012 Bucharest Ministerial Conference, the Bologna influence was almost non-existent in the adoption of the last piece of Legislation on Education in Romania (Law 1/2011).

Traces of cognitive Europeanisation can be identified in the Romanian context, probably caused by exposure of higher education actors to a certain 'European discourse' on higher education in various settings (European umbrella organisations – European Students' Union, European University Association, Education International and EU structures). Actors in the Romanian higher education policy field seem to increasingly use European/ Bologna concepts to justify their positioning - for example, the teachers trade union used the concept of student centered learning, defined by a European project led by Education International and the European Students' Union¹¹ - as a way to push for more supportive working conditions and collegial university governance structures in the negotiations for Law 1/2011 (Interview 5).

Also, there seems to be little effect of the Bologna Process, or any other international policy agenda for that matter, on how prominent actors were positioned in national debates. There is one exception to this rule, namely one of the national student federations (ANOSR),

¹¹ <http://www.esu-online.org/projects/archive/scl/>

which gained visibility and credibility in national policy debates due to an increased expertise in the Bologna Process. The student federation established itself as an authoritative voice with regard to the Bologna Process mainly through information campaigns, the development of the only national website with dedicated information on the Bologna Process¹² and by drafting various reports on the students' view regarding Bologna Process implementation¹³. The exposure to the discourse of the European Students' Union within European-wide capacity building projects on this issue¹⁴, together with ANOSR delegates being elected in various ESU executive positions at the European level between 2006-2012 were powerful drivers in increasing the knowledge and policy networking of the student federation at the European level, which influenced its perception as a key stakeholder in policy negotiations at the national level (Interviews 4, 6 and 7). ANOSR can also be considered as a game-changer, in the sense of using a positive discourse campaign on the Bologna Process in order to promote student interests, in opposition to the negative legitimization strategy used mainly by government actors in the first phases of Bologna Process structural reforms (2005-2006).

Despite the potential of new modes of governance to democratise debates on higher education, the 'discursive space' created at the European level did not seem to be mirrored in the Romanian national context. Since the Bologna Process debate has been scarce and extremely technical, it mainly reinforced the position of governmental actors (ANOSR being the exception) with access to (European) knowledge and expertise. Romania seems thus to be a case of the selective usage of Bologna norms in order to effect 'discourse closure', since they

¹² <http://www.bologna.ro/>

¹³ <http://www.anosr.ro/parteneri/publicatii/>

¹⁴ <http://www.esu-online.org/projects/archive/escbi/>

were mainly invoked to put national opposition to rest for unpopular national reform agendas (Harmsen, 2013).

As underlined in the course of this paper, the Bologna Process was discursively used by Romanian actors in higher education in order to support or oppose policy change. The narratives were mainly imposed by governmental actors and the European influences seem to have done little to modify values and perceptions underpinning Romanian higher education debates. Future work in the frame of the broader doctoral project on this topic will focus on problematizing the influence of discourse in relation to other factors, across a comparative sample of countries representative for the Bologna setting.