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**Bologna Process Bucharest Ministerial Conference Takes Place
amid Political Crisis in Romania**

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Bologna Process Bucharest Ministerial Conference Takes Place amidst Political Crisis in Romania

By Beverly Barrett*

During the last week in April the Ministers responsible for higher education from 47 countries convened in Bucharest, Romania for the Ministerial Conference of the Bologna Process. On April 26 and 27, 2012 the venue for the meeting was the Palace of the Parliament, which was constructed by the dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1984 and completed the year before his death by execution on Christmas Day 1989. One of the largest civilian buildings in the world was location for the first ministerial conference to take place since the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) became effective in 2010. Originally the creation of the EHEA was envisaged by the Bologna Process Declaration in 1999 which had representatives from 29 countries as signatories. This essay will describe the proceedings of the Ministerial Conference, report on the negotiations among delegates in parallel sessions and plenary sessions, discuss the thematic sessions with emphasis on “Global academic mobility: Incentives and barriers, balances and imbalances” and review the adoption of the Bucharest Communiqué and the Bologna Policy Forum Statement.

The current members of the Bologna Process are the 47 participating countries, the European Commission, and the official consultative members representing various stakeholders. These eight consultative members are:

1. The Council of Europe
2. UNESCO-CEPES - United National Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization - Centre Européen pour l'Enseignement Supérieur (European Center for Higher Education)
3. EUA - European University Association
4. ESU - European Students Union
5. EURASHE - European Association of Institutions in Higher Education
6. ENQA - European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
7. Education International
8. Business Europe

Welcome from Host Country of Romania and Danish and Azeri Co-Chairs

President Traian Basescu opened the Plenary Session that Thursday morning. Following his warm welcome, he regretted to the audience that he would not be able to stay as he had to attend “unpleasant meetings with the International Monetary Fund.” Given austerity pressures and frustrations with rampant corruption, the Government of Romania would collapse the following day after a no-confidence vote from Parliament on the leadership of Prime Minister Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu. While the host country government was in political turmoil, the negotiations for the proceedings of the Ministerial Conference continued.

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The Romanian President acknowledged that the Bologna Process is essential to attaining the goals of the Europe 2020 agenda designed by the European Commission as the economic growth strategy. President Basescu described the Bologna Process to be the modernization of higher education, and a synergy of human resources and institutional policies. Three important points are the development of human resources, the emphasis on research and innovation, and the participation of authorities from multiple levels of governance.

Noting that universities respond to what is happening in society, the trends towards globalization are reflected in this agenda emphasizing *mobility* of students and *reciprocity* of recognition of university credits and degrees internationally within the EHEA. As a means for cultivating dynamic labor in a European space of competitiveness, the President described the Europe 2020 vehicle as a courageous research and development initiative. Referring to the Eurozone countries, the Romanian President described the fiscal compact as a solution for more integration and convergence, as these countries suffer from different fiscal policies. In support of European integration President Basescu urged continuity and consolidation of national processes. In closing he stated that the future is through education.

The Romanian Minister of Education, Research, Youth, and Sports, Cătălin Ovidiu Baba welcomed the 47 national delegations. Referring to the *Bologna Process Implementation Report* that was published simultaneous to the conference, Minister Ovidiu Baba hailed the Bologna Process as successful intergovernmental cooperation. By stating that there are no real alternatives to Bologna Process for economic sustainability, he supported this as the way forward towards increasing employment and creating jobs.

The priorities of higher education in Romania are the following:

1. differentiating the mission of universities to innovate capacity to meet the labor market needs
2. opportunity of access and completing studies with the overall objective of 40 percent graduation rate for the European Higher Education Area
3. increasing higher education for all, through the involvement of university staff and students

Challenges to reach these goals are the rate of absorption of graduates into the labor market, and balancing students among academic fields. The Bologna Process applies principles and strategies agreed to by all members across all participating countries. This objectivity is implemented with the intention to become effective in the global economy and in the cultural space of the EHEA.

The Danish and Azeri Ministers were the designated Co-Chairs of the Ministerial Conference, and their comments endorsed this positive evolution of the Bologna Process. Danish Minister for Science, Innovation and Higher Education, Morten Østergaard acknowledged the current difficult time for Europe characterized by high debts, low economic growth, and high unemployment. Despite the present circumstances, education benefits individuals through personal growth and society through enhanced community welfare. “Mobility for all” and cross-border knowledge is at the core of the Bologna Process. The opportunity to study abroad is important, and the “Mobility Strategy 2020 for the European Higher Education Area” is a new component to the Bologna Process. “A number of significant results have been achieved in more than one decade,” in “this inclusive project where flexibility is paramount,” said Østergaard.

Azeri Vice-Minister of Education, Gulu Novruzov emphasized mobility, cooperation, and transparency. Three important goals for the Bologna Process are: quality education for all, enhancement of employability, and mobility as a means for better learning. Novruzov designated that the task of the conference is to find consensus on reforming the higher education system for the region of Europe. Adopting the National Qualifications Frameworks is part of this task. Despite the contextual differences across countries, there is a convergence of ideas within the EHEA.

European Union Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou was ill unfortunately and unable to attend the Ministerial Conference. As Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, she was to address the delegations. Therefore, Deputy Director-General for Education and Culture, Xavier Prats-Monné spoke in her place. Recognizing that Europe is “living in these times of crisis,” and especially that the percentage of youth unemployment is twice as large as overall employment, Prats-Monné asserted that this is the time to share our conviction for higher education with national finance ministers. The Ministerial Conference is an opportunity to renew our collective commitments.

The Deputy Director-General, Prats-Monné stated that the Bologna Process is important for European policy priorities. The European Union 2014-2020 projected budget includes additional support for higher education and provisions for “Erasmus for All” to emphasize mobility. The heart of Europe 2020 is social sustainability, and the Bologna Process serves the wider continent by providing consensus on national reforms to participating states. “The recognition of diplomas needs to be strengthened,” said Prats-Monné. The phrase “automatic recognition of comparable degrees as a long-term goal of the EHEA” would be inserted into the final document of the Bucharest Communiqué (2012:4). The European Commission has committed itself to attain objectives for mobility and recognition of comparable degrees across countries. The Foreword to the *EHEA 2012 Bologna Process Implementation Report* provided by Commissioner Vassiliou states, “The road to follow laid down in the Bucharest Ministerial Communiqué needs to be followed throughout the European Higher Education Area. I can promise the full support of the European Commission on this journey” (Eurydice 2012).

The Negotiations: Parallel Sessions

The delegations were divided among four Parallel Sessions in order to provide smaller working groups for commenting on the draft of the Bucharest Communiqué. The draft of the Bucharest Communiqué had been prepared ahead of the conference by the Bologna Follow Up Group in coordination with the Secretariat. During the first morning, before the opening of the conference with a Plenary Session at noon, the Bologna Follow Up Group met to discuss potential revisions to the draft of the document and to provide amendments. The Parallel Sessions worked with the revised Bucharest Communiqué as the basis for negotiations. The Parallel Sessions were moderated by Ministers from Romania (2012 Ministerial Conference host and Secretariat), Denmark (Conference Co-Chair), Azerbaijan (Conference Co-Chair), and Armenia (2015 Ministerial Conference host country and Secretariat 2012-2015). The concerns represented by various delegations in the Parallel Session moderated by Romania are following.

Scotland wanted to ensure the participation of stakeholders beyond government in the reforms for the EHEA. These stakeholders may be students, faculty, university staff, and citizens. Scotland was represented by its own delegation, and the United Kingdom had representation for England, Northern Ireland, and Wales from the Department of Business, Innovation, and Skills. Scotland expressed concern with the place of the learner past the age of 16. To enhance employability it is critical that the National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) is intelligible to employers. The National Qualifications Frameworks is a tool for transparency, compatibility, and comparability. There is an emphasis on education combined with travel, and 2013 is designated as the year of mobility for students.

Ireland had reservations about the phrase “automatic recognition of comparable degrees as a long-term goal of the EHEA” as a proposed amendment. Belgium had two delegations, one from the Flemish community and one from the French community. The Belgian representative from the Flemish community raised the issues of equality of access to higher education, promoting employability, and complementing economic market needs. Support was articulated for the European Students Union to seek innovative solutions on their part in cooperation with joint solutions for the Bologna Process. These would be outlined in the Bucharest Communiqué as working goals until the next Ministerial Conference in 2015.

France stated support for projects of innovation. The representative suggested the language of “full recognition” rather than “automatic recognition” of diplomas regarding the amendment proposed on page 4 of the Bucharest Communiqué. As well France articulated support for the “pathfinder” group of countries statement that had been drafted that morning by the Bologna Follow Up Group for the Bucharest Communiqué under the following section, “At the European level, in preparation of the Ministerial Conference in 2015, and together with relevant stakeholders, we will:” That additional text to be included states, “Support the work of a *pathfinder* group of countries exploring ways to achieve the automatic recognition of comparable degrees.” Croatia shared that the country had set up the first two cycles of bachelors and masters degrees, and that the European qualifications are important to discuss.

Switzerland did not want to stress “public funding,” and neither did Scotland. An amendment to the Bucharest Communiqué that the Bologna Follow Up Group had proposed that morning inserted the word “public” before the word “funding” to make the following phrase, “we commit to securing the highest possible level of public funding for higher education.” Access to the employment market and professional development are important. The Swiss representative raised the question on what “value-added” the process of “recognition” brings.

Sweden, along with Ireland and Flemish Belgium, also raised concern about the phrase “automatic recognition” within the proposed amendment line, “automatic recognition of comparable degrees as a long-term goal of the EHEA.” Furthermore, the Swedish representative stated that the mobility of students, coinciding with the freedom of movement in the European Union needs to be respected. Bulgaria interjected that it is also concerned with the phrase “automatic recognition.” Furthermore, Bulgaria commended systems that came into place with the Lisbon Process (2000-2009). Among these systems was the Open Method of Coordination.

The European Students Union representative stated concern about stalling on commitments to the Bologna Process. Specifically pointed out was the Leuven Communiqué from the 2009 Ministerial Conference that stated national targets for disadvantaged social groups. The ESU requested to create targets and to have evidence. This is the first Ministerial Conference where the ESU has had a representative as a consultative member. Since the founding of the Bologna Process the ESU has lobbied on behalf of more than ten million university students in the region of Europe. The ESU view is that students are partners in this trust-building exercise between students and the higher education system.

Following the Parallel Sessions, the four country chairs consulted with each other. They presented summaries to the Plenary Session that convened that afternoon. The Armenian representative reported that the session which he chaired had supported the amendment to create the phrase “public funding.” Social changes and the social crisis are issues of concern. The major challenge to mobility of students is financing. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on political obstacles that need to be overcome. The Danish representative reported from the session that he chaired that “automatic recognition” of educational degrees is not considered the same things as “automatic admission” to universities.

The Negotiations: Plenary Sessions

The Keynote Address by the General Rapporteur for the Future of Higher Education – Bologna Process Researchers’ Conference (FOHE-BPRC) was presented by Sir Peter Scott from the Institute of Education at the University of London. Sir Scott reported that between October 17 to 19, 2011 the BPRC convened around the following themes: EHEA principles, mobility, quality assurance, teaching and learning, funding, governance, institutional differentiation, and foresight. The EHEA principles include:

1. “Open space” for debate rather than rigid priorities of the Bologna Process
2. Shared values and common behavior
3. Distinctive qualities of European higher education

There is an increase in the mobility of students, though countries are not balanced as destinations for higher education. Countries such as the UK, Germany, France, and Italy receive the greatest number of foreign students. There is discussion regarding comparing the terms “Europeanization” and “Internationalization.” Quality Assurance is a key instrument for the purposes of 21st century higher education that promotes modernization. “Quality culture” is a purpose of 21st century higher education. Governance and funding are national responsibilities traditionally. The social dimension regards education as a public good. Higher education systems in other world regions provide examples of variations of higher education.

The following are comments from representatives of the delegations at the Plenary Session. Germany is concerned that the Bucharest Communiqué has become too bureaucratic. France commented that it is funding universities with 22 billion euros in two years to promote competitiveness. Italy articulated the significance of the “political commitment” undertaken in the Bucharest Communiqué. Kazakhstan, as the only Asian country among the 47 members, provided the update that it is incorporating the National Qualifications Frameworks. The current economic context presents challenges of budget pressures and austerity. Nevertheless, there is continued support by 47 countries for the Bologna Process.

Austria commented on the need to reconcile mobility, being the free and open movement of students, with national university academic policy. Learning outcomes are important beyond the new structures in place as a result of the Bologna Process. The UK representative commented that the UK coalition government is committed to the Bologna Process and finds value in the initiative. Student mobility is valuable for the opportunity that it presents to learn a foreign language, noted the UK even though their official language of English is broadly spoken throughout the world. The question was raised on how to pursue short-term periods of study abroad.

Regarding the amended word “public” that was inserted to the Bucharest Communiqué before the word “funding,” the UK seeks to avoid that use of language. A mixture of arrangements for funding from public and private sources is best, advocated the UK. Scotland stated that “the ability to learn not the ability to pay” is what is most important in higher education. The importance is to ensure that the process is learner-centered.

Germany remarked on the need to improve the use of instruments and tools available to enhance quality. There is a need for the National Qualifications Frameworks to ensure functional quality systems. The Flemish community from Belgium’s representative raised the concern that there are too many intentions and too few concrete actions. Commenting that the Bucharest Communiqué is similar to the Leuven Communiqué, he said that qualitative and quantitative indicators are important. The statement that “the commitment to higher education is at the heart of the commitment to the public good” was supportive of a thought given shared esteem among representatives.

Spain mentioned the importance of evaluative tools to be used in times of crisis. While supportive of the Bucharest Communiqué objectives to be in place until the Ministerial Conference in Armenia in 2015, Spain prefers more general and less technical goals. Norway described the Bucharest Communiqué as a “framework to move forward.” Norway is supportive of the term “public” proposed as an amendment to describe the highest level of funding. There is a commitment to viewing education as a public good. A caution was raised about law suits regarding the portability of financing loans, given some proceedings in The Netherlands.

The European Commission, represented by Deputy Director-General, Xavier Prats-Monné sought a high degree of consensus on the text of the Bucharest Communiqué. The preparatory work on the Bucharest Communiqué over the past six months has presented a clear, strategic vision. Prats-Monné stated that, “This text is perfect. It is the best possible balance.” The European Students Union raised concerns on

access and social conventions in higher education, employability, and student mobility. As well the ESU strongly supported the amended text of the Bucharest Communiqué.

As Co-Chair, the Danish Minister attempted to draw conclusions to the Plenary Session. Whether to insert the word “public” in the phrase “to secure the highest amount of public funding” remained divisive. This was indicative of the stresses on public budgets given periods current of austerity. He assured the delegates that this is not about changing financial funding, though it is about articulating a commitment. Whether or not to use the word “public” in paragraph 4 page 1 was the most difficult issue to negotiate, followed by the acceptance of the term “automatic recognition” on page 4. Noting that this is a compromise that hopefully all will endorse, he sought to bring about consensus.

The representative from the Belgian Flemish community noted that the source of funding is not most important and suggested wording such as, “funding, public and other sources.” The UK and Spain supported this new proposal. The European Commission Deputy Director-General, Xavier Prats-Monné commended the logic of the originally amended text provided that morning by the Bologna Follow Up Group. A compromise was reached for the sentence under discussion to read, “We commit to securing the highest possible level of public funding for higher education and drawing on other appropriate sources, as an investment in our future.” After all the European Commission was pleased that the Bucharest Communiqué had been adopted. In particular, “automatic recognition” included as a long-term goal of the Bologna Process is the very essence of the intergovernmental initiative.

As the Plenary Session concluded the following morning, interventions and statements were made by Palestine, the United Arab Emirates, and Russia among other countries. Russia is a member of the Bologna Process, and the diversity of countries represented beyond the 47 participants in the Bologna Process demonstrates the interest from the rest of the world in this higher education initiative. Russia commented on academic mobility, automatic recognition of diplomas, efficient mechanisms, and its willingness to work with other countries. The time spent, with interventions by the delegates, on the source of funding to be explicitly written in the Bucharest Communiqué may be seen as indicative of the stresses on public budgets. Even though, during less stressful financial times funding often remains a concern.

“Global academic mobility: Incentives and barriers, balances and imbalances”

A session of the Ministerial Conference was dedicated to the theme of global academic mobility on the second day of the conference. Prior to this thematic session that he co-chaired with the Danish Minister, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Postsecondary Education, Eduardo Ochoa provided a keynote speech. Secretary Ochoa explained that here is a shorter time period for product introduction on the market in contemporary society, given that innovation advances faster than time period for products to become commodities on the market. New innovations and rising productivity shrink the number of people employed in the manufacturing sector. There exists a need to create new lines of industry to serve new needs. This requires innovation and creativity, described as “content” by the founder of Microsoft, Bill Gates. Taken together, a technological education and a liberal arts education have unique value. A liberal arts education is valuable, given that creativity may be a scarce resource in the current economy. The ability to think creatively to provide solutions and to create opportunities is important. This is especially true when answers are not clearly evident and circumstances are challenging. Secretary Ochoa concluded by saying that that education contributes to the civic health of societies and to the knowledge of heritage, both essential for a brave new world. Responding to questions, Secretary Ochoa presented the U.S. goal of making the workforce and economy globally competitive through education. There is a focus on global competencies, and a current goal by this administration to increase university graduation to 60 percent of the population.

The conclusions of the thematic session on “global academic mobility” were that mobility bridges cultures and that countries develop their own patterns of mobility. Recognition of diplomas from participating countries is important for mobility. Rankings of university institutions have an impact on mobility. This leads to there being imbalances among mobility, since some institutions receive a greater demand from foreign students than others. Research networks pave the way for student mobility, and internationalization of teaching staff is important for mobility. Mobility remains a goal simultaneously alongside the goal of widening participation in higher education for the EHEA.

The thematic session on “the contribution of higher education reforms to enhancing graduate employability” concluded that research paves the way for mobility and that policy coherence is essential. There are financial mechanisms and motives that influence mobility. There are joint degree and dual degree incentives, and joint programs have been easier to establish than joint degrees. There is an effort to enhance transparency and availability of information for various approaches to rankings. Some conclusions from the thematic session on “global and regional approaches to quality enhancement of higher education” were supportive of networking and cooperative approaches for higher education. The recognition of credit transfers, through the ECTS (European Credit and Transfer System) is essential. The fourth thematic session on “public responsibility for and of higher education within national and regional context” concluded that the focus of public authorities is to relate individual institutions to the higher education system being constructed. Universities and the higher education system both need autonomy and to be accountable to society.

Adopting the Bucharest Communiqué and the Bologna Policy Forum Statement

The concluding and ceremonial part of the Ministerial Conference was to adopt the Bucharest Communiqué and the Bologna Policy Forum Statement. The Romania Minister of Education asked the delegates to adopt the document by acclamation. “If you agree, please endorse the Bucharest Communiqué by acclamation,” said Minister Ovidiu Baba. Responding with applause, the delegates adopted the new agenda for the next three years until the Ministerial Conference in Yerevan, Armenia in 2015. The Armenian Minister of Education, Armen Ashotyan welcomed the delegations to Armenia. As the first Commonwealth of Independent States country to host a Bologna Process conference, and as an Eastern Neighborhood participant with the European Union, Armenia was pleased to have this cooperation with the EU. The video film that presented an introduction to Armenia and its higher education system said that the German scholar Alexander von Humboldt had called Armenia “the center of gravity of the ancient world.” This emphasis on history and written manuscripts reveals the commitment to science, education, and culture by the three million people in Armenia, which joined the Bologna Process in 2005.

Next, the Statement on the Bologna Policy Forum was adopted entitled “Beyond the Bologna Process: Creating and connecting regional and global higher education areas.” The representative from Business Europe commented on the need for more data regarding employability. There is a triangle vision for stakeholders, which is among Higher Education – Government – Business. The input from employers is important for the Bologna Process, and lifelong learning strategies are relevant for employment. The representative from France commended the quality of the debates over the two days of meetings. The representative from Flemish community of Belgium proposed meeting in the Spring 2013 for a conference among governments and higher education institutions. This would be a trust building exercise focused on trust, recognition, and quality assurance. This was noted to be especially relevant since trust is a precondition to the long-term goal of “automatic recognition” of diplomas, which was added to the Bucharest Communiqué as an amendment. Spain expressed support for the Bologna Policy statement, indicating the importance of employment, which for this country is among the highest in Europe approaching 25 percent (Landon 2012). The UNESCO representative remarked that there would be a statement by UNESCO on the Bologna Process made in June 2012. There is high value placed on

international cooperation in higher education. There is an overall interest by the participants to overcome barriers to cooperation.

At the Press Conference following the adoption of the Bucharest Communiqué, the Deputy Director-General of the European Commission, Xavier Prats-Monné explained that the meeting had taken stock of the successes of the last two years since the meetings in Budapest-Vienna 2010 and had set the agenda for the next three years until meeting in Yerevan Armenia in 2015. A most important element of the new agreements was the “automatic recognition” as a long-term goal that is essential for the Bologna Process. That is new and essential for ongoing cooperation. A “pathfinder” group of countries will pave the way for all countries to attain the objectives of the EHEA. Furthermore, the Deputy Director-General stated the significance of the Bologna Process that large world powers, including China and the United States, had sent official representatives to participate in the Ministerial Conference. As well he mentioned the presence of Colombia, Japan, and Arab nations, and the interest of Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East demonstrated the involvement of the world regions. The advance work done ahead of time was commended in order that the best use had been made of the delegates’ time together in the meeting rooms.

Speaking to the press, the Danish Minister, Morten Østergaard said that “education is a way out of the economic crisis and should be prioritized.” The Armenian Education Minister, Armen Ashotyan that the Bologna Process is “a unique, historical, and civilizational phenomenon that is endless in my opinion.” The decision for Armenia chosen as the next Ministerial Conference location shows the EHEA commitment to all 47 countries, given that Armenia is not a member of the European Union. The Armenian Minister commented the European Union Eastern Neighborhood program for economic development continues very well. The European Student Union representative Mr. Allan Päll noted that the Bucharest Communiqué covers important issues such as: access to higher education, the social dimension, high youth unemployment, and broadening mobility for students. “Though implementation has been slowing down, we hope that this Communiqué will intensify cooperation once more,” said Päll, an Estonian citizen. Päll continued by saying that student fees and rising debt are growing concerns, and that it is good that ministers have committed to public funding. The EAIHE (European Association of Institutions in Higher Education) stated support for the Communiqué, especially given that employability and research were well represented for further commitments.

The Fall of the Romanian Government

As the Bologna Process ministerial conference concluded, the Romanian Government fell given a no-confidence vote from Parliament on Friday, April 27, 2012. Though it was a successful meeting of the Bologna Process, the fall of the host country government is a sign of political instability for countries in Europe. That same day the Government of the Czech Republic narrowly survived a no confidence vote, and the Dutch Prime Minister had submitted his resignation that previous Monday. The following days in early May, voters in France and Greece would decide whether to maintain the parties in power or to elect new political leadership. That the host country Government of Romania fell during the day of the Bologna Process conclusions makes a juxtaposed political context. As countries had committed themselves to further integration in the EHEA, the host government decided to move in a new direction politically as a protest to austerity and to corruption (Bilefsky 2012).

The Minister of Education, Research, Youth, and Sports who presided over the conference drew the proceedings to a successful conclusion as, across town, the collapse of the government in which he served was imminent. Protesting austerity and corruption, the vote was against Prime Minister Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu representing the Democratic Liberal Party. Opposition leader Victor Ponta of the Social Democrat Party had complained of abusive systems of politics. The country is described by citizens as rampant with corruption, even though it has been a member of the European Union for five years. Late in the afternoon on Friday, Ponta was appointed Prime Minister by President Traian Basescu, and the new

PM will submit his government recommendations to Parliament. The week that had commenced with Romania's negotiations IMF funds and continued with the negotiations of the Bologna Process Ministerial Conference had ended with the Government's collapse. The positive resolution of the meetings amidst the domestic political crisis is a sign the commitment to higher education reform may continue despite the ever-changing political landscape in Europe.

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