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Short document about the idea of the Action "Advocacy for Inclusive Growth", or why it is important for civil society, the wider public and institutions to commit to consistent application of the Bologna Process

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1. The principles of the Bologna Process, and why it is important for the wider public, especially civil society to understand them

The Bologna process begins with the famous Lisbon Convention (1997), whose general idea is to promote greater mobility in the education sector, or to facilitate greater academic mobility and openness between the countries that, based on the convention, constituted the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) as we will refer to it here. Numerous innovations and updates to that convention, primarily in the form of communiques at ministerial meetings and tasks for "BFUG" (Bologna Follow-up Groups, which are divided in three subtopics, among which recognition of qualifications.)

Although in the past decades, especially through the "Erasmus+ Program" instrument the implementation of Bologna Process entailed several aspects such as restructuring from a 4+1 to a 3+2 study format, defining credits according to the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) etc. However, its core principles revolve around mobility, fluidity, easy compatibility and the nearly automatic procedure of recognition of qualifications and credits among member countries of the Process. Of course, the so-called "automatic recognition" goal has been a decades-long process, and the automation in the full sense as we see it today also depends on technological advancements. The latest communique of the Council of Ministers (Rome, 2020) mandates the implementation of "block chain" digital technology and full automation of the recognition process by 2025.

Why is mobility and openness in the recognition of qualifications (diplomas) important in the higher education area of Europe? Firstly, they are essential for the economic growth of the Union, and the continent as a whole, as an increasingly united economic area relies on it. In other words, Cluster 3 of the new methodology of reforms for EU accession needs merely

represents the culmination of an idea, embedded in the fundamental document of the Bologna Process. This also demonstrates the EU's new concept, which emphasizes technological development, a knowledge-based economy, and Europe's "geopolitical sedge" of Europe (as stated by Ursula von der Leyen)^{1 2} highlighting the significance of Europe's scientific advantage, and consequently, the importance of the higher education sector and science. North Macedonia, appears to be neglecting higher education in favor of VET (vocational education and training). Also, it seems like there is no awareness that current EU policies expect all EHEA countries so-called "upskilling" of secondary education with "VET teaching tools" provided by higher education and scientific institutions (in the case of Western countries, these are mainly "research universities").

Due to joining the European unified digital market (which is the main economic scene, and represents and includes in itself the scene of manual production and industries), the Bologna process should be consistently applied, and higher education, especially that which concentrates on research as part of the teaching process, must be at the center of the state's reform efforts. Cluster 3 means economic development, closely linked to education, science, culture, digitalization, media and communication – this Cluster guarantees the country's prosperity. Therefore, the Bologna process is not a narrow specialist issue but a topic relevant to the wider public. Therefore, instead of the facade and simulation not implementation, we will focus on two key topics: how much the recognition policies inscribed in the laws and by-laws enable mobility, and how much the education sector builds its policies intersectorally, i.e. in communication with the economy, finances as well as ecology and communications. The last two are mentioned because the new methodology and the new concept of economic growth through scientific innovation implies that all these processes should be digitalized and focused on fight against climate changes, whereby digitalization is considered one of the key tools of green policies.

¹ Speech: State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen (Brussels: 13 September, 2023), available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_4426, accessed on 15 February 2024.

² Press Release: EU competitiveness beyond 2030: looking ahead at the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Single Market] (Brussels: 16 march, 2023), available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_1668 , accessed on: 15 february 2024.

2. The intersectoral dimension in public administration in the relevant sectors, especially education, science and economy: opening the issue of capacities for policy analysis and planning, and thus that application of Cluster 3

Intesectoral linking of education/science/economy as required by the Cluster 3 itself – this is linked with Europe’s geopolitical goal of global competitiveness in economy, based on innovation. Here we insist to consider the ERA 2030 to be taken into account, to make it clear that vocational education is no longer reduced to bare manual work, but to an innovation-driven economy, which requires the transformation and internationalization of higher education (with a strong promotion of higher professional schools and development of research centers that are competitive.) It is very important to remember that today the innovation without re-thinking the social processes, without terms of digital democracy, and therefore interdisciplinarity, and a deep one, between social-humanistic sciences and STEM sciences is urgently needed. Urgent recognition of the link between *education* and *economic development* is crucial. We require interlocked reforms across sectors, encompassing changes in higher education, science, laws relevant for economic development, entrepreneurship, and digitalization - a map for policy reforms must be delineated, subsequently integrated into legislation, establishing logical mechanisms to connect them effectively.

Further, the alleged “realism” that some policy makers - the institutions but also experts and civil society organizations that participate in the processes - apply to vocational education is reduced to training for manual work, in an era when even the most physical work is no longer just physical. Also, the Ministry on Education and Science and the Government focus and fixate on understanding the vocational education they promote, understood for the needs of the 20th century: not even the “ordinary masters” cannot work without mastery of technologies, while on the other hand, VET education should be upgraded on a level, where elements from the higher education can and should be embedded into it. Those are the so-called micro-certificates, incorporated mobilities etc. which are proposed by the Communiqué from Rome from the ministerial meeting, dedicated to the progress of the Bologna process.

We should have in mind that the European Union wants us to catch up with a new type of geopolitically motivated vision of the economy, one based on technological competition.

Beside the need of manual workers (with upgraded skills), according to numerous relevant studies (for example, by the World Bank), new “factory workers” in the most massive sense, in today’s European context are/will be “the program developers” (in a sense of coders, not program innovators.) Our market recognizes this, so the IT sector grows on its own, and people are acquiring knowledge at “academies” (one-year courses) like Brainster (which has since grown into a HE institution), without the Ministry of Education and Science and the Government having a vision and insight for this process and how to connect it with policy planning for Cluster 3 and higher education and science in particular; for this we can have higher professional schools, that provide greater readiness and enable an innovative edge in this part of the work force. On a “Chatam House” type of a meeting, in June 2023, organized by the Berggruen Institute-Europe in Venice, we talked with one of the Ursula von der Leyen’s advisors on this subject, and we learned that this is not only a theory but also a practice and a subject of concrete policy planning according to which manufacturing - that is the new “manual worker” - of chips as well as mass coding (computer programming) is the new “cheap labor.” During the same discussion, it was noted that production is shifting from the Global South/Asia back to Europe, including the new member states and candidate countries. At the same occasion it was told that this production is moving

In other words, even vocational education below the level of vocational school needs redefinition. It is essential to establish a connection between higher education and science, aligning them with a vision of economic growth driven by innovation. Once again, a policy vision with cross-sector analysis is needed here – the law, cross-sectorally, would only follow that vision.

3. Higher Education as a Driver of the Processes Related to Cluster 3

The higher education in the country is constantly neglected and its key role is not recognized in terms of issues of economic development and the overall Cluster 3 of reforms, where advanced education, innovation and economy are linked in a natural whole. Even the VET education must make connection with higher education and by means of modules that link secondary and higher education even the “less qualified” workforce should be prepared for the so-called a unified European digital market. We believe that the law, the regulations,

the policies in the country do not recognize this moment in the European redefinition of innovation and the economy as a “geopolitical” weapon, nor do they recognize and read, understand the fact that such a “realignment” is also expected from the Western Balkans - if it wants not to remain economically isolated. Our goal is to include in this process the representatives of the institutions who are experienced, with a progressive view and with whom we share values - with which we will create a Forum of Cooperation, where the monitored (institutions) are also monitors of the changes, but also vice versa - where CSOs and the academic scene are testing their visions for policy changes.

Cluster 3 is entitled “Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth” and is composed of these areas (and chapters that are legislation, and policies are not designed according to chapters, in isolation, but intersectoral): education, culture, innovations and science, economy, information society and media, monetary policies (and even customs policies) because they are undermined by one key value – mobility and flexibility, as an aspect of mobility, and the basis of growth. The question is why is this all a whole, and we have answered this question in some way above. We can contribute to reforms that will make our higher education and its internationally competitive innovation capacities more open to Europe and the world, more mobile both physically and digitally. This simultaneously means creating conditions for a freer and more open economy, especially an enabling climate for small and medium-sized enterprises and attracting both physical and digital entrepreneurial initiatives from the West (in Europe primarily) here. The advanced innovation is now the driving force of any development, and it is based on complete interdisciplinarity according to the New European Research Area (or New ERA), so that one (higher education and science) and the other (economic growth) form a whole.

4. Monitoring of Institutions as Their Self-monitoring: Cooperation to Raise the Capacity of Institutions to Create Policy Vision (instead of constantly changing laws)

Institutions should be familiar with the intersectoral dimension of the new methodology and received their pathways already last year. The challenge is to enable the public administration to think intersectorally and in terms of building policies and not just

writing and revising laws, not just using laws as the only basis for creating a policy of good governance (instead of creating decrees, guidelines, etc.). The SIGMA report for North Macedonia from 2022 confirms this – our public administration has the lowest capacity in the Western Balkans to think in terms of policies (while the adaptation to the Acquis is solid), and this is a kind of management (or even management) ability. Here is the biggest challenge. In this project, we create forum of advanced policy creators from among the high-ranking public administration, like-minded people from the media and economic spheres, and we believe that with this we will achieve the raising of public awareness, and we will help the public administration to plan intersectorally - we monitoring we understand it as a process of cooperation with the institutions and not a sensationalist attack.

5. Where is Republic of North Macedonia with the Implementation of the Bologna Process

We believe that the situation inherited from 2014 has not been significantly changed by the 2018 law, which only further controls parts that fall under academic autonomy or directly threatens the value – mobility. Also, ministerial oversight, regular re-accreditation of each program, and re-licensing by program is a degree of “centralization” of the sector (or ministerial control) that is in direct contradiction to the 2018 Paris Communiqué as well as the Bologna Implementation Report from 2018.

We have a law in force that contradicts the EGS (European Guidelines and Standards), which are a tool of Bologna together with the Erasmus handbook for the recognition of credits and qualifications, and it not only contradicts but violates all the acts of the Bologna process to whom we have an obligation as a state. The 2018 implementation report shows that only North Macedonia and Albania have such a degree of centralization of the recognition of qualifications that, together with some post-Soviet republics, they are under the umbrella of ministries/central government. The 2020 report does not have any data for North Macedonia: nobody reported anything, the country data templates were entered and left empty, nobody filled them in. It is obvious that the current minister is incapable of leading this sector (on top of all the “brain drain”, he is now introducing policies that contradict Bologna and will only further reduce the number of students in our universities). Not that the others were much more capable, but the situation was still more tolerable. And the entire Government fails because in their Strategy for Education 2021-2025 they neither coincide with the Erasmus

period 2021-2027, nor do they mention Erasmus. The European Educational Area - the sector where Bologna is implemented - has the Erasmus+ programs as its main tool, simply Bologna without Erasmus - there is none, and our government has decided that it is not important, at least that is how it seems (probably it is a matter of ignorance and that they do not even recognize it as a tool for implementation but as a grant scheme).

6. How to Reach the General Public and How to Make This Initiative Understandable to the Common People ?

The action sets itself the task of mobilizing parts of the informed public, in order to constantly expand the discussion by reaching out to the Forum that we are establishing, we will gradually build a network of like-minded people and even inaugurate an informal alliance/network of policy makers, media allies, student organizations, business community and civil and academic sector. It will aim to exert a constant influence on public discourse as well as direct advocacy, regardless of party affiliation – any ally at the level of a shared policy-making vision is welcome. In this way, we also contribute to the reduction of social polarization caused by inter-party tensions. And the public needs to get to know what an intersectional policy is, and support our advocacy for it in the Inclusive Growth Cluster (or Cluster 3). Namely, every ordinary person feels the inefficiency of the system when there is no cooperation and joint planning between the sectors. That is why we need to realize that this is something ordinary, common sense, and that there is nothing “academic” about advocating cross-sectoral policy planning. We can do that more clearly by explaining to the public and asking them to join us in advocating the policies already explained above.

Currently the unemployment is just under 13%. The job market, even at its most physical, nowadays requires skills that are not just manual – the idea that we're going to train painters instead of coders is wrong. This mistake is even naturally corrected by itself: a large number of young people have decided to enroll in informal programming schools that bring them a great job at a distance, abroad (from here, but still online employees somewhere out there). There is capacity and need for higher education because the brain drain - students abroad - is increasing like never before. Making access to our universities more difficult will only accelerate the exodus to the universities of the European Higher Education Area, primarily in Slovenia, and nobody will be forced to become a manual worker (if that is the vision of the Ministry of Education and Science with their so-called academic - admission - exam).

In an era of research-oriented universities in Europe, with which our closest neighbors are catching up, we are sinking in all the ranking lists, and “innovation” is not even remotely something that can compete in the world (primarily European) market. The Fund for Innovation and Technology Development (FITD), after all, was open-ended, *funding everything but innovation* that could compete in the international market. The Ministry of Education and Science and its funds for science, which should grow significantly, should be available to all institutes and research organizations, regardless of whether they are state or private - as long as their work serves the public good and their contribution is judged to be useful for society, institutional funding for these facilities must exist. For example, the Vienna Economic Institute or the Institute for Humanistic Research - Vienna are private non-profit institutions, but their funds are mostly provided by the Austrian state because they are assessed to contribute significantly to science and the quality vision of policies of institutions and companies, as well as to civil society sector in Austrian society. This is just one example, from one country.

We would like to emphasize that according to the “New ERA” (New European Research Area), this rule applies to all member countries of the European Research Area, of which North Macedonia is also a part. Such financing should also be made possible for joint entrepreneurial initiatives of HEIs (higher education institutions), institutes, research organizations, the Academy of Sciences and Arts, and startups and other innovative entrepreneurial companies. Instead of interpreting newspaper printing with Gutenberg-era machines as an innovation, both MES and FITD should become financial support for innovative business that contributes to the tightening of the so-called competitive market edge of Europe, as the President of the European Union calls it.

Conclusions with Embedded Recommendations

- The institutions in North Macedonia do not apply the intersectoral approach, and therefore that higher education is not planned in terms of Cluster 3 by establishing inherent links between the economy (as an innovation, from agricultural to information- technological) and science, which is a prerequisite for such competitiveness.
- Institutions fail to recognize the connection between vocational education and higher education, especially in the context of the Western Balkans aligning with the European

agenda of techno-economic development, often referred to as a “geopolitical edge” (as stated by Ursula von der Leyen).

- It is necessary for the institutions to understand that the connection with the economy is for the needs of creating competitive products, and not producing a physical workforce for the analogue era (even the most basic manual work in Europe demands upskilling, which is obtained through micro- certificates linking higher and secondary education, and as a matter of fact the coders are the new “factory workers.”)
- In North Macedonia there are numerous “remote workers”, whose work is online and they are employed by foreign companies. In light of this, the state should consider connecting the growing technological industry with higher education. This connection can serve as a platform for a competitive start up industry.
- Mobility lies at the core of ECTS, the European Higher Education Area, and the Bologna Process, which are supra-national frameworks binding the country to consistent implementation. Mobility is not only a central value of Cluster 1 (promoting institutional democratization), but also forms the essence of Cluster 3. Our analysis reveals that the 2018 Law on Higher Education, mandating the re-accreditation of each program ex nihilo every five years, contradicts the normative test period observed in most EHEA areas, 1) Prevents long-term and strategic planning and inherently prevents mobility (such as joint accreditations), and centralizes (puts decisions under the direct authority of the Minister) in the area of qualification recognition; 2) Restricts higher education institutions and violates every Bologna Act signed by the state, preventing institutions from independently recognizing qualifications, a practice commonplace across Europe (except our country and a few Kafkaesque republics, according to the 2018 Bologna Process Implementation Report); 3) Legally obligates the state to facilitate higher education institutions in qualification recognition for further education purposes, progressively automating this process as mandated by the 2020 Report on the Implementation of the Bologna Process and the Ministerial Communiqué from Rome; 4) Warrants halting and reconsidering the initiative for the automatic recognition of qualifications in the Western Balkans (WB), for two reasons: automatic recognition is a requirement for the entire EHEA and extending it to the WB implies unnecessary favoritism, particularly given the region’s prevalence of corruption in illegal diploma issuance and falsification. According to this reasoning, the

WB should be the last, not the first, region in Europe to automate recognition; 5) Underscores the need for digitized/digitally verifiable recognition as much as possible to avoid corrupt practices and widespread forgeries for which we are already collecting field evidence (this need is evidenced by an ongoing empirical research process, intended for comprehensive policy analysis aimed at potential amendments to the existing Law on Higher Education).