Summary

1. **The Tirana Ministerial Communiqué**

2. **Main priorities and commitments**

3. **Focus on the BICG and specifically on TPG A**

4. **How to make our efforts more effective 2024-27 … discussion.**

1. The Tirana Communiqué

The Drafting Committee of the Tirana Communiqué determined that the 2024 Communiqué was not principally the place to adopt and describe new commitments.

Rather, it aimed to measure progress – or lack of it – with respect to the vision elaborated in the Rome Communiqué of 2020, and to create consensus on the steps needed to move forward.

The BFUG, and subsequently the Ministers, approved this approach.

This approach will presumably be continued in the 2027 Ministerial Communiqué, which should verify and showcase further progress (and possible adaptation) with respect to the vision agreed in Rome … as we come closer to the 2030 target date.

Rome to Tirana

There have been concrete steps forward, as evidenced by the great volume of work expressed by the working structures from 2020 to 2024, and by the 2024 edition of the Bologna Process Implementation Report, prepared by Eurydice.

There have also been many challenges, not all dependent on the BFUG and its structures.

These include the pandemic, and the highly problematic or even conflictual situations that have developed both within and among our countries, and nearby neighbors.

I speak of war, of refugees, of often increasing divisiveness within our countries … of course … and their impact on HE and HEIs, as well as the effects on the 'dream' of the Bologna Process and the EHEA.

Rome to Tirana

But …. there are also challenges in a positive sense, which can bring new opportunities: AI, progress in recognition worldwide, pressure to develop microcredentials and flexible learning paths, as foreseen and promoted in the Rome Communiqué.

The entry into force of the UNESCO Global Recognition Convention and the renewal of the regional conventions, not only the LRC, opens doors to other world regions and pressures us, as EHEA, to share and coordinate with other macro-regions, and to realise that we are not alone. We were pioneers in developing largescale regional cooperation, but, today, we can speak directly to other macroregions about common concerns.

These developing situations ask us to do more and better.

2. Main priorities and Committments
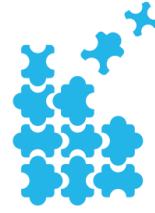
The Communiqué begins with a narrative, to explain how it positions itself, and then takes up, sector by sector, the activities as developed in the previous three and a half years of work. Each section includes what the Ministers 'confirm', 'endorse', 'agree' upon or 'commit' to.

At the end of the document the single commitments are listed: evidently to ensure that the EHEA Ministers really know and are aware of what they have promised.

The order of the points described is significant, and we will mention the most relevant.

Priorities and commitments: Fundamental values

The <u>first</u> priority point refers to the «Fundamental Values»: the Communiqué states that these «*are now even more threatened than they were a decade or even four years ago*», but Ministers «*reaffirm [their] commitment to protect, promote, and uphold <u>academic freedom</u> as defined in the Rome Communiqué*».

The other five are then briefly explained, and there are annexed «Statements» about how each is to be understood.

These are <u>academic integrity</u>, <u>institutional autonomy</u>, <u>participation of students and staff in higher education governance</u>, <u>public responsibility *for* higher education</u>, and <u>public responsibility *of* higher education</u>.

A monitoring framework is to be created, and a report presented in 2027.

Priorities and commitments: the KCs, 'closing the gap'

The <u>second</u> priority is the complete implementation of the Key Commitments: «closing the implementation gap».

As you know, the «Key Commitments» were indicated in 2018 in the Paris Ministerial Conference, which mandated the creation of the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group (the BICG), and gave it the task of overseeing the complete and compatible implemention of the KCs.

This led to the creation of the three Thematic Peer Groups, including the TPG A.

Priorities and commitments: the KCs

Why these?

The founding vision of what would become the Bologna Process – the Sorbonne declaration of 1998 – was a vision of semplicity and elegance, and for many countries would demand radical change.

It was hoped that wildly diverse HE systems then existing in Europe, by agreeing on a simple, but innovative, common structure --- the two (and later three) cycle structure and ECTS -- would be able to preserve and enhance their different systems, cultures and languages, making it possible for them to cooperate and communicate, and for students and citizens in general to be mobile, and to have their accomplishments and qualifications recognized in the other countries.

That was 26 years ago!

Priorities and commitments: the 'gap'

Has that vision been implemented?

Yes, to a great extent, but not as completely and as compatibly as hoped.

The gaps are documented by the BPIR, but more powerfully by our own experience and that of our students; by the difficulties – for example -- encountered in creating and running the European University Alliances, by the difficulties in realizing 'automatic recognition'.

# Commitments on the KCs in the TC

The Tirana Communiqué states that the 2024 BPIR :

«confirms and illustrates the still incomplete and uneven implementation of these key commitments, but also the important contribution of the Thematic Peer Groups under the guidance of the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group in improving the situation.

«Therefore, we commit to ensuring that we have, or will devise, and publish appropriate action plans to address any remaining implementation gaps and to promoting knowledge-sharing activities* related to the EHEA» ...

*this appears to refer to the activities proposed by the Task Force on Enhancing Knowledge Sharing, rather than to the BICG/TPGs.

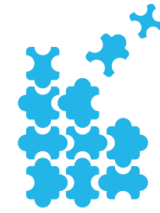# Further priorities and commitments: 'Inclusion'
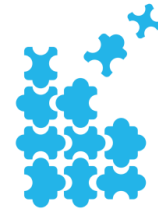
The Tirana Communiqué mentions the need to review the ECTS Users Guide and the ESG, and then passes to the third major section, on the «Social Dimension». This is included under the heading «<u>An Inclusive EHEA</u>».

With regard to the <u>Social Dimension</u>, the '*Principles and Guidelines*' were already approved in Rome; in the 2020-2024 work period, the WG on SD produced a further tool, the «*Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA*», which the Ministers 'endorse' in the Communiqué.

These address the many aspects of students' wellbeing, from economic to physical social and mental, as well as student services; the paragraph on the 'Social Dimension' concludes with the commitment to remove barriers to enrollment in HE by refugees, citing the EQPR and the relevant recommendations adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee.

Commitments: the 'Innovative', 'Interconnected' EHEA

The next sector is devoted to the «Innovative EHEA», and focusses on support for the development of microcredentials, the SDGs, flexibility learning paths, learner-centered 'and innovative' learning and teaching … support for teaching staff … and Artificial Intelligence «in particular with regard to the key commitments and the use of the Bologna Process tools.

The next of the three «Is» from the Rome Communiqué is the «Interconnected EHEA»: here mobility and the Global Policy Statement are mentioned, as is automatic recognition, as well as the 'knowledge sharing' issue, to «ensure a more effective linkage between the policy level and the higher education community», again referring to the needs highlighted by the TF on EKS.

Priorities and commitments

The final section of the TC is devoted to a list of the commitments briefly described.
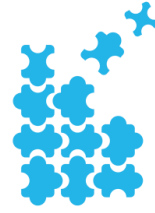
3. Focus on the BICG and specifically on TPG A

Let us take a closer look at the Key Commitments, and the issues raised:

Even since the Paris Ministerial Conference and Communiqué, 6 years have passed.

The TPGs have worked hard, supported --- as in the case of TPG A – by Commission funded projects.

At this point many – most – countries have made changes, major changes in their HE systems, but still there are numerous complexities, many gaps, and at times steps backward.

All this inhibits the smooth communication and connection that was envisaged in 1998.

Conclusions of monitoring (Eurydice):

- There have been positive developments on all Key Commitments …
  - **Degree structures and ECTS:** still room for improvement
  - **Recognition and DS:** significant positive change after 2020
  - **QA and ESG:** more change between 2018 and 2020

- The impact of TPGs difficult to assess (as TPGs are not the only factors in play) but **reasonable to assume a positive effect.**

For this reason, the BICG told the BFUG:

This is the BI(C)G question:

Do countries <u>want</u> to close the implementation gap?

The BICG's recommendations for the Tirana Communiqué

The Ministers register the progress made in implementing the Key Commitments. The work of the Thematic Peer Groups, under the guidance of the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group, contributes to identifying challenges and finding solutions. After two work periods (2018-2020; 2021-2024), we note, that an implementation gap of these basic, and other commitments persists. Since the **full and compatible implementation of the Key Commitments is essential** for the EHEA to reach its envisaged potential, we **all** commit to

- **participate in all Thematic Peer groups (TPGs) where we have an implementation gap, as well as in those in which we can offer support;**
- **ensure that our nominees to TPGs are experts in the field, well informed about the policy level and about our country's higher education system;**
- **fully support our nominees and require them to communicate, coordinate and collaborate closely among themselves, and with our BFUG representatives;**
- **verify that the relevant laws and norms in our country are up to date, operational, and well known to the stakeholders.**

To close the **implementation gap** of these basic and other commitments made, we agree that after each ministerial Communiqué our country will devise a concrete **publishable implementation plan**, around which to coordinate ministerial actions and those of the working groups.

4. How can we make our work more effective? Discussion ....

How can the BICG and the TPGs ... the TPG A ... really 'make a difference'?

> **How can more countries be induced to participate actively?**
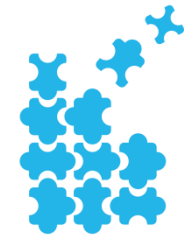
> **....particularly in TPG A?**

> **How can the work of the TPG gain more traction in national policy decisions?**

> **How will we be able to obtain meaningful 'publishable action plans' and what will they target?**

How can we strengthen the links of the TPGs in two directions: with the Ministries and the policy level and with the higher education community?

Thank you for your ideas!

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