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“Bologna in a Global Setting”: An Analysis from the Perspective of Twenty Years Later

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Introduction

In June 2019, Europe will mark the 20th anniversary of the Bologna Process. A decade long political effort of the 28 European Union Member States and 20 other European countries led to the formal announcement of the *European Higher Education Area* (EHEA) in 2010. European higher education systems today are interconnected and operate in a completely different way than in the late 1990s. On the other hand, the Bologna Process has also had a profound impact on global higher education, in particular on international cooperation and/or competition in higher education. There are still polemical discussions about the real effects of the Process both in Europe and in the world. One of these debates concerns the so-called ‘Bologna External Dimension’ or the ‘EHEA Global Strategy’ (Bologna Process 2007b).

This paper attempts to analyze – in the light of the history of policy ideas – the emergence of the Global Strategy in the early years of the Bologna Process and the dilemmas and problems that have arisen in drafting it. In this, it relies on policy documents as well as on the literature review; last but not least, on the personal experience of involvement to the Process. Over the last ten to fifteen years, the EHEA Global Strategy has been frequently interpreted primarily as a European Commission’s attempt to win a proper share in global higher education trade. While this thesis cannot be completely denied, I will try to show that the issue is more complicated and more controversial and that it has specific consequences in dealing with today's challenges of European integration as well as global cooperation in higher education.

How did the “Global Strategy” enter the Bologna agenda?

The Bologna Declaration was signed in June 1999 (Bologna Process 1999), but at that time the issue of “external dimension” was not yet on its agenda. The issue was openly addressed for the first time at the second follow-up Conference in Berlin in 2003: in their Communiqué, the ministers decided to “encourage the co-operation with the regions in other parts of the world by opening Bologna seminars and conferences to representatives of these regions”. It is true that some of the previous documents mentioned the ‘attractiveness’ of European systems and their ‘openness’ to the world, but only in 2003, the discourse shifted beyond the rhetoric of attractiveness. Now, ministers not only welcomed “the interest shown by other regions of the world” but also “the presence of representatives from European countries not yet party to the Bologna Process as well as from the [...] Latin America and Caribbean (EULAC) Common Space for Higher Education” (Bologna Process 2003).

In Berlin, however, another important novelty has come to the fore: the ministers have accepted into their midst seven new non-EU members. The decision was indirectly related to the relationship of the ‘Bologna Club’ to the ‘outer world’; it was about the ‘external borders’ of the envisaged EHEA. A decision was taken that the membership shall be determined by the circle of the signatories to the *European Cultural Convention* (1954), which is a much wider circle than the initial (1999) Bologna circle of EU Member and then Associated Member States. Moreover, this policy document does not root in the traditions of the European Union, but in another European political body, the Council of Europe as the continent's leading human rights organization. With this decision, one dilemma on the ‘external dimension’ was resolved, but there were several.

In Bergen, two years later, the ‘Club’ agreed on the key EHEA structural elements – ‘A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area’ and Standards and ‘Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area’ (Bologna Process 2005b, 2005c) – and expanded with five more members from Eastern Europe, so to say up to the extreme limits allowed by the geopolitical criterion agreed in Berlin. In the communiqué’s section ‘Further challenges and priorities’ another far-reaching step was made:

We see the European Higher Education Area as a partner of higher education systems in other regions of the world, stimulating balanced student and staff exchange and cooperation between higher education institutions. We underline the importance of intercultural understanding and respect. We look forward to enhancing the understanding of the Bologna Process in other continents by sharing our experiences of reform processes with neighbouring regions. We stress the need for dialogue on issues of mutual interest. We see the need to identify partner regions and intensify the exchange of ideas and experiences with those regions. We ask the Follow-up Group¹ to elaborate and agree on a strategy for the external dimension. (Bologna Process 2005a)

¹ The Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) is the executive body between (earlier biannual, now triannual) ministerial conferences

It is noteworthy that the concept of *competitiveness* – during this period so typical of both the European Commission (EC) as well as the Bologna Process documents (Braband 2012) – was not used in this paragraph; it was otherwise used in three other paragraphs as ‘competitiveness of the EHEA/Europe’. Here, the ‘outward look’ is characterized by *cooperation* and – academic, European and cosmopolitan – *values*. At least in part, this can be linked to the European Cultural Convention (1954) as the ‘Bible’ to which Bologna Process members decided to swear – or at least to use it as a geopolitical definition.

At a technical level, the key decision in 2005 was the creation of the External Dimension Working Group, coordinated by Norway and consisted of 12 national representatives, a representative of the European Commission and six representatives of organizations with an observer status in the BFUG. It met every two months since February 2006 and organised three larger consultation conferences (Vatican, Athens, Oslo) that highlighted various issues and dilemmas around which the skeletons of the strategy could be shaped. One of the constants in the discussions was the dilemma of how to connect the ‘attractiveness of the EHEA’ with ‘cooperation’ on one hand and ‘competition’ on the other (Zgaga 2006: 121-122). Finally, the group identified five core policy areas and agreed on a draft document with elements for possible future actions, which was adopted by the London Conference in May 2007 without amendments (Bologna Process 2007b).

Ministers confirmed the proposed “policy areas: [1] improving information on, and [2] promoting the attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA; [3] strengthening cooperation based on partnership; [4] intensifying policy dialogue; and [5] improving recognition”. In their communiqué, they added: “This work should be seen in relation to the OECD/UNESCO *Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education*” (see UNESCO/OECD 2005). Finally, they acknowledged, not without pride, “that efforts have been made in some countries in other parts of the world to bring their higher education systems more closely into line with the Bologna framework” (Bologna Process 2007a, pt. 2.20).

The Global Strategy was thus adopted and the activities shifted towards implementation. The ministers stressed that “all stakeholders have a role here in their respective spheres of responsibility” and that special consideration needs to be paid to the priorities [1] and [5]: “to improve the information available about the EHEA” and “to improve recognition” based on the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) (1997). From now on, we can follow the evaluation of the implementation efforts in this field on the agenda of the consecutive ministerial meetings. In addition, a new point has emerged on the agenda – the *Bologna Policy Forum* (the first one was organised in 2009) “which formalizes transnational communication and meetings of targeted governmental, regional and non-governmental actors” (Asderaki 2019: 48) from around the globe. It is not analysed systematically here due to limited space; instead, the focus is given to discussion, dilemmas and polemics that appeared in the drafting process for the Strategy.

“Behind the curtain”

The mentioning of *values* in the Bologna Process documents may at first appear part of the political correctness; it appeared quite often, e.g. “an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space” (Bologna Process 1999); “its democratic values, diversity of cultures and languages and the diversity of the higher education systems” (Bologna Process 2001). By incorporating the ‘social dimension’ in the Bologna Process, the mentioning of values got slightly different sound which strongly resonated in the Berlin Communiqué:

Ministers reaffirm the importance of the social dimension of the Bologna Process. The need to increase competitiveness must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the [EHEA], aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities both at national and at European level. In that context, Ministers reaffirm their position that higher education is a public good and a public responsibility. They emphasise that in international academic co-operation and exchanges, academic values should prevail. (Bologna Process 2003)

This was not a purely ‘intra-EHEA’ matter, but also had important ‘external’ implications. In the same document we read further:

Ministers agree that the attractiveness and openness of the European higher education should be reinforced. They confirm their readiness to further develop scholarship programmes for students from third countries. Ministers declare that transnational exchanges in higher education should be governed on the basis of academic quality and academic values, and agree to work in all appropriate fora to that end. In all appropriate circumstances such fora should include the social and economic partners. They encourage the co-operation with regions in other parts of the world by opening Bologna seminars and conferences to representatives of these regions. (Ibid.)

The earlier quotation from the Bergen Communiqué (2005) can be now understood more clear, but for the assertion that “transnational exchanges in higher education should be governed on the basis of academic quality and academic values” we need to recall some more details of the then spirit of time. One of them is hidden in the abbreviation *GATS*: The General Agreement on Trade in Services of the World Trade Organization, an instrument aiming at elimination of barriers to “higher education trade” (WTO 1994). To make a long story short, the intention to liberalise higher education trade was not new, but within the Bologna Process discussions of the early 2000s it became a hot issue and encountered a lot of opposition. Resistance was focused on the liberalization pressure placed on public services (not only higher education) which was in Europe traditionally one of the core tasks of democratic national state and closely related to generally accepted values (Fritz & Fuchs 2003). It was also about “advancing Europe defined as a cultural entity [...] rather than a price to be charged” for higher education (Neave 2003: 158). This were issues that concerned national levels and had impact on global relations.

Research has revealed the apparently contradictory nature of two aspects of higher education policy in relation to internationalization and globalisation. Karola Hahn (2003: 199), analysing

Germany, but her findings can be reasonably extended to Europe, said: “The more traditional policy of Europeanization, which is reaching its climax in the German commitment to the Bologna Process, is based on co-operation. However, a parallel policy, a response to globalization, is stimulating a highly competition-oriented role for German higher education and research along the lines of the GATS paradigm”. Among the many authors discussing this contradiction, it is worth mentioning also Andris Barblan, the then Secretary General of the European University Association:

The provision of higher education in the world is governed by two approaches represented by the UNESCO, on one side, by the WTO, on the other. The members of both organisations are the same governments but the two work on divergent assumptions as far as the development of a world system of higher education is concerned. At UNESCO, actors join a system of common references in order to set up a series of co-operative agreements and ventures – which can be reversible, as participants remain very much in control of their level of commitment to a wider global community. At WTO, on the contrary, actors merge their references by accepting an automatic development of internationalisation that becomes irreversible as the countries accept multilateral concessions from each other. [Barblan concluded:] as long as the actors on the educational stage do not show enough trust in each other or in each other’s services – as long as there is no confirmed will to reach a community of learning – the two cultures can be opposed. [Bottom up activities need to be devised,] as the Bologna process shows for Europe where the long term aim of a common academic area is proposed to be achieved by the creativity of all partners, as they engage in a shared enterprise. (Barblan 2002: 87, 92)

Similar discussions resonated also within the BFUG. They were summed up in the ministerial position, that transnational exchanges in higher education “should be governed on the basis of academic quality and academic values”. Yet it was also connected to another of the then central Bologna Process ‘action lines’: *quality assurance*. At the intra-European level, this was resolved by the adoption of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (Bologna Process 2005c) while at the ‘external’ level by the UNESCO/OECD (2005) Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education, which aimed to “provide an international framework to protect students and other stakeholders from low-quality provision and disreputable providers”. With this, the hottest part of the debate within the Bologna Process challenged by GATS gradually calmed down. Discussions that took place at that time within the ‘Bologna Club’ still need to be fully analysed and evaluated; here I only contribute an interesting anecdote.

During the 2003–2005 period, the Bologna Process’s official website had a password-protected menu link for the BFUG, which was named ‘behind the curtain’. Looking ‘behind the curtain’ was of interest to (privileged) logged-in readers at the time, and would be interesting for researchers today – if the website and/or documents were preserved. There were many records, minutes and draft documents, which were later either amended, published publicly or forgotten. Some of them are stored in my personal archives; among them there is one, which explains the context and some dilemmas quite well and I have already partly reported on it (Zgaga 2012b: 22-23).

In spring 2004, preparing for the Bergen conference, the BFUG Board discussed the criteria for the admission of new members to the Bologna Process following the task set in Berlin. As I briefly mentioned above, this issue was not linked only to the actual and potential Bologna Process members but also to the question of the future EHEA external relations. It was also linked to the issues of ‘European values’. In July, the Norwegian Bologna Process Secretariat prepared a working document, already revised after the BFUG Board meeting in June, in order to facilitate the discussion at the next meeting. Its first section stated the following Bologna Process ‘principles’ and stressed ‘their philosophy’:

While the 10 actions lines [of the Bologna Process] are the main focus of members, it is equally important to note the underlying principles of the Bologna Process. The realisation of the EHEA can only be achieved by incorporating their philosophy within the higher education system of each country. These principles, which all come from the Bologna Declaration and/or from the Prague and Berlin Communiqué, are elaborated below:

- International mobility of students and staff;
- Autonomous universities;
- Student participation in the governance of higher education;
- Public responsibility for higher education;
- The social dimension of the Bologna Process. (Bologna Process 2004a)

This document was discussed at the BFUG meeting in October. The discussion, which is here summarized from the minutes, started with searching for an appropriate criteria and procedure to assess new applications for the Bologna Process membership. There was an expectation that applicants should subscribe to the ‘principles’ that have been defined so far. At the same time, it was “pointed out that one potential applicant country was clearly in breach of the core principles of the Process, such as institutional autonomy and student participation. Belarus had recently been cautioned by the Dutch EU Presidency over the closure of the European Humanities University in Minsk, a move which had also been condemned by the Council of Europe and other organisations”. Finally, a conclusion was reached that applications to join the Bologna Process will be assessed by the BFUG Board “on the basis of the defined objectives and underlying principles” (Bologna Process 2004b). As the next step, the BFUG should make a recommendation to the Ministerial Conference on new admissions.

At least four of the five principles in the above-quoted document are clearly related to ‘European values’, and the Bologna Process members were expected to respect them. At the same time, it was sufficiently clear – at least in indirect terms – that some of these (social and cultural) values are in opposition to the principles of the liberalized higher education trade. In the run-up to the first drafting of the Bergen Communiqué, the intra-European success of the Bologna Process, confronted with the challenges of globalism, pressed the BFUG and later the ministers to decide about “realizing the vision” (Bologna Process 2005a).

The Bologna Process Secretariat prepared an internal document on ‘the vision’ to be discussed at the first meeting of the Communiqué Drafting Group (Bologna Process 2004c). It insisted on the importance of matching the national higher education systems with the Bologna Process ‘philosophy’ and ‘principles’, and ended with a proposal: “These principles are written into the draft Communiqué for Ministers to confirm. With the Ministers’ confirmation, the principles will

constitute an important element in the description of the EHEA”. However, when reading the Bergen or any later communiqué, this position cannot be found. The BFUG and ministers decided differently: fairly pragmatic and avoiding ‘philosophical’ dilemmas (Zgaga 2012b: 23-24).

In the middle of the 2000s, the Bologna Process was concerned with defining what the EHEA is supposed to mean at all (‘the vision’). Taking into account the principle of *omnis determinatio est negatio*, attempts to define the EHEA were at the same time also attempts to distinguish it from (potential) other ‘higher education areas’. Therefore, it was about ‘setting boundaries’. These can be set up in relation to the content, based on an original ‘philosophy’ and ‘principles’, or in a more formal way, e.g. geopolitically. The success of the first years of the Bologna Process attracted attention in Europe and globally; it attracted potential new members (and companions) far beyond the circle of countries invited to Bologna in June 1999. Thus, the issues of new members and of the relationship to the ‘outer world’ were related: with those who would not be admitted to the ‘Bologna Club’, relations should be established and governed in some other way.

Discussions from the first half of the 2000s encountered the contradiction between “co-operation” and “competition” (Hahn 2003), between the “UNESCO approach” and “WTO approach”, between “the two cultures” that “can be opposed” (Barblan 2002). And this contradiction had to be resolved, both inward and outward. The discussion on the ‘external dimension’ was mainly held in the terminological triangle *attractiveness – competitiveness – cooperation*. The overview of the ministerial documents (Bologna Process 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2015, 2018) proofs swinging between possible options: the link “attractiveness and competitiveness” appears in 2001, 2005, 2007 and 2010, while the link “attractiveness and openness/cooperation” in 2003, 2005 and 2009. Only in 2005 both notions appear in the same document. They do not appear before 2001, nor after 2010. At the declarative level, the compromise was reached at the end of the first Bologna decade: “Competition on a global scale will be complemented by enhanced policy dialogue and cooperation based on partnership with other regions of the world” (Bologna Process 2009).

When it came to the question of how and where to ‘set boundaries’, the decision turned to a pragmatic, formal, less binding side. Defining ‘principles’ and ‘philosophy’ as a condition for the EHEA membership would not only affect potential new members, but also existing ones; it could cause conflicts within the ‘Club’. It would also have consequences for external relations. The definition of the ‘mission’ thus remained on the level of rhetoric which was acceptable for all; the focus was placed on the *structures* as distinctive characteristics of the emerging EHEA (e.g., framework of qualifications, quality assurance, recognition issues). The European Cultural Convention (1954) remained a criterion for membership, yet the emphasis was not on European *values*, but on the circle of countries that adopted it. The EHEA now extends from the Atlantic to the Caucasus Republics (entered 2005), Kazakhstan (2010) and Belarus (2015). Only Kosovo is still not a member, but the reason is that it is not fully internationally recognized.

In fact, reactions to the EHEA were considerably broader. Israel was a candidate for the EHEA accession in 2007-2008 (Zahavi 2019: 107). Australian minister was the initiator of the Brisbane Communiqué (2006), signed by 27 countries to respond to the challenge of the EHEA with a possible establishment of an Asia-Pacific HEA (Robertson & Keeling 2008: 230–232; Zmas

2015: 732). Turkey, the Bologna Process member since 2001, joined the Brisbane group (Zgaga 2006: 74). Some non-European countries attended the Bologna Process conference already in Berlin (2003), and more were attending the *Bologna Policy Fora*² later, although in the recent period less than initially (Asderaki 2019: 48). Finally, in the wider context of the EHEA, the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) should not be forgotten, also signed and ratified by some non-European countries, including Australia, Canada, Israel and New Zealand. At the time when the external interest in the Bologna Process in many regions of the world was at its peak, but not in the USA, Eva Hartmann (2008: 213) gave an interesting, although somewhat risky claim, that the USA's signature to the LRC in 1997 (ratification didn't follow) indicates their interest in the European process and that they "had a say from the very beginning" of the drafting of the Bologna Process framework. In short, global reactions to the Bologna Process formed a rather complex puzzle which has often been a target of various analyses.

Conclusion

In the early years of the Bologna Process, and especially after the adoption of the Global Strategy, various comments on the alleged creation of the 'Bologna Global Model' of higher education were heard: for example, that Europe is seeking to restore its former hegemonic position in higher education and to give effective response – both to other global 'centers' as well as to 'peripheries' – in the global competition for higher education markets. The EHEA should therefore be conceived also as a kind of 'prestigious export item'. However, monitoring of the implementation of the Global Strategy across all EHEA members does not confirm this thesis (e.g. Zgaga 2012a) and among the analyzes, many can be found (e.g. Chou and Ravinet 2017) that justify that the so-called 'export thesis', which should explain the background and emergence of the drive for the 'EHEA's attractiveness', is not a sufficient explanation.

In order to clarify this, a more complex approach is needed. It is not just about 'looking out'; it should also be about 'looking in' because the EHEA itself must be included in consideration. In the perspective of the four major European higher education systems (France, Germany, Italy and UK) that initiated the idea of a European Higher Education Area at the Sorbonne University in May 1998, the "attractive potential of our systems" (Bologna Process 1998) was something other than in the perspective of many smaller, 'less attractive' or even marginal European systems that joined the initiative in 1999 and later. Brain drain or brain gain processes not only take place between the global north and the global south, but also within them. The same applies to the relationship between centres and peripheries (as well as between centres themselves). Studies show that the Bologna Process has undoubtedly had strong impact on the European (and partly global) higher education landscape; however, results are sometimes paradoxical. A recent study demonstrated quite precisely that "while mobility to and within the EHEA is increasing, its share in global student flows is declining". And more: "mobility patterns are increasingly concentrated around dominant centres (e.g., the UK, Germany and Russia)"; "a strong divide remains between Eastern and Western Europe (and, to a lesser extent, Southern European states)" (Shields 2016: 13 and 19).

² See <http://www.ehea.info/pid34364/bologna-policy-forum.html>.

Analyses show that ‘echoes’ of the Bologna Process have essentially two backgrounds: simply put, (1) for ‘peripheries’, maintaining a ‘cooperative’ contact with a ‘centre’ is less risky than losing it; (2) ‘centres’ maintain contact with other ‘centres’ and thereby control their ‘competitiveness’. It should not be forgotten that policies do not travel intact across the globe; among other things, they may be an ‘external’ reason for pushing unpopular reforms at the domestic level (which in results often importantly modify the alleged ‘imported model’). These analyses, at the same time, confirm the thesis on the emergence of “higher education regionalisms” (Robertson 2008, Knight 2013, Chou and Ravinet 2017, etc.), with the key factor not being academic cosmopolitanism, but the knowledge economy and the related ‘war of empires’, market competition. In this perspective, I agree with Zmas (2015: 740) that “it is possible that the Bologna Process will reinforce relevant regionalisms or nationalisms in other parts of the world rather than leading to convergence of national higher education policies”. It should be added that his observation is not only reflected in the global perspective, but also in the intra-European one.

The process of *Europeanisation* (in general and in higher education terms) is a version of regionalisation, derived from a specific context that distinguishes it from the rest of the world. “It implies the experience that the academic relationships in Europe differ from those between Europe and many other regions of the world in terms of less culture contrast and opportunities for horizontal communication, cooperation, and community as well as of potentials of integration and joint action to shape the system” (Teichler 2004: 22). In the 1980s and 1990s, the integration process gradually created the need for ‘technical unification’, which would ‘remove obstacles’ and enable comparability, compatibility and enhanced cooperation of culturally and systemically so diverse entities. ‘Technical unification’ in higher education (e.g. quality assurance, qualification framework, recognition issues, etc.) was not only for the benefit of Europe: these ‘tools’ have become simply necessary in global relations, in promoting free mobility and the ‘competitiveness’ within higher education systems. The success achieved by the Bologna Process in this regard is unquestionable, but in particular in Europe it was not possible to overshadow the old dichotomy of the ‘means’ and ‘objectives’.

In order for a higher education model to actually work, it must be based on a certain philosophy. It is difficult, if not impossible, to claim that the Bologna Process has developed it; it would be more justifiable to argue that the Bologna Process has set up a *forum* in which diverse ‘philosophies’ can confront (Zgaga 2012b); maybe, to some extent they can even be gradually unified, though at a very general level. In the extremely complicated context of the 2000s, defined on the one hand by the EU enlargement (15 + 10 member states in 2004), on the other by the EHEA extension (from 29 to 48 today), on the third, by the specific national higher education contexts that have faced the neo-liberal spirit of time, the dichotomy of the ‘means’ and ‘ends’ (objectives, purposes) has been resolved in favour of the ‘means’. In his excellent analysis from the early 2000s, Guy Neave (2003: 150) interpreted this shift as “the triumph of the utilitarian, of higher education operating less as a cultural than as an economic institution within a ‘market mode’”.

The traditions of European higher education have been traditionally connected to (national) culture and at the same time – on some restricted horizons – characterized by openness and cosmopolitanism. The contemporary promotion of mobility and cooperation between

universities, first within the EU (e.g., Erasmus) and then wider in the world, led to “the impression that their fate was now determined to a lesser extent than in the past by their national or regional government”; however, “[t]his does not mean that national and cultural contexts more or less lose their importance” (Teichler 2004: 20–21). Teichler further noted that the strategic options which institutions or individuals can choose are strongly shaped not only by the academic reputation but also by the economic strength of the country, its size, the national (tuition) language, etc. In a diverse Europe all this can be very important.

It seems that the process of Europeanization is facing today the greatest challenge in its history so far. In today's Europe, the aforementioned national factors seem to strengthen, and in combination with local variants of the ‘triumph of the utilitarian’ they can get quite staggering forms when compared with the spirit of time two or three decades ago. News point to the fact that HE institutions are coming back to the impression that their fate is fundamentally *dependent* on the national government: either in the case of the Brexit's impact on higher education (on both sides of the Channel),³ or in the case of a ban on the operation of an autonomous university in one EHEA member state and its relocation to another one (the Central European University in Budapest),⁴ or in a third one. These issues that we face today will not only affect the intra-European higher education landscape, but also its relations with the world. The EHEA Global Strategy needs to be re-examined thoroughly.

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³ See <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/brexit> and <https://eua.eu/issues/11:brexit.html>.

⁴ See <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/12/04/central-european-university-forced-out-hungary-moving-vienna>.

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