ABSTRACT

This paper deals with problems of the academic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is a country in transition where a complex interrelation between politics and the academic community negatively impacts functioning of the academic community. Inability to implement internationally recognized criteria in the process of acquisition of scientific and academic titles has been a crucial problem. This paper seeks to identify causes of the community’s perplexed state; its failure to carry out the quintessential reforms in higher education based on the implementation of internationally recognised criteria and the lack of responsibility among those who make political decisions, which are important for the development and advancement of the academic community.

Keywords: internationally recognized criteria, academic community, autonomy of university
Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country in transition currently facing a serious economic crisis whose origin is multifactorial and it certainly is not solely related to the war (1992-95). Quite some time has passed since the war ended, yet no significant progress has been made so far. Moreover, the prospects of things changing for the better are rather poor. We, the common people, do not make vital decisions in the Parliament, which are supposed to pave our future. However, this does not prevent us from writing about the phenomena that afflict us and depend on us Bosnians and Herzegovinians, and not on global or local politics.

Tracing back the history of human progress and achievements, the inevitable question arises how come the ancient civilizations such as Egypt, India and Greece are on a rather low economic level nowadays, unlike the developed West. The USA has a history of no more than 200 years and yet it rules the world. Switzerland produces some of the best chocolates and yet does not have a single cocoa tree! Perhaps some would say they are better organized, but the question is - why!? They are humans just like the rest of us!

People in B&H have had enough of being proud of the ability to laugh at their own expense with a ‘stupid Bosnian’ usually ending up as a butt of every joke. We have had enough of being branded by our national delicacy ‘ćevapčići’ (a type of grilled kebab) as our prime identifying feature. We have the capacity to offer much more sophisticated product to the world market than that. Our ‘product’ is Mr. Danis Tanovic, the Oscar-winning director, who claimed the prestigious award back in 2002 with the movie ‘No Man’s Land’, and the world acclaimed writer and Nobel Laureate Ivo Andric. It is obvious that we have the capacity to be competitive on today’s world market - those winners did not come from nowhere. They were able to learn how to read and write in Bosnia and Herzegovina, they attended Bosnian schools, receiving knowledge from their teachers, parents - Bosnian people, eventually reaching the stars. So, what is preventing us from having many more successful Bosnians and Herzegovinians? We are confident that it is not only nationalism and politics; there must be something within ourselves!

We are proud when we host our colleagues from abroad at various international scientific meetings taking place in our country, and they are fond of our Ćevapčići which we offer on those occasions, yet we do not have competitive presentations at the same meetings nor do we have papers that could qualify for a peer-reviewed journal.

Our academic community keeps pointing at the lack of investment in science and accentuates this as the main cause of its poor status. The authorities in our academic community gladly discuss the so-called “Bologna process” reform, the successes that have been achieved in this regard and the importance of our university autonomy (1,2). However, the problems faced with on this path are almost always classified as those of a lack of financial resources, a lack of space and equipment, understaffing etc. The root causes are almost never traced back to the lack of internationally recognized criteria in the acquisition of academic titles and choices in scientific and educational titles (1,3). At the same time, the number of master’s degrees, PhDs and academic titles does not reflect the reality of us being on the scientific periphery – on the contrary – according to these, we seem to be one of the world’s superpowers! Also, wider public opinion, as well as that of the academic community, is that we have quality professors and scholars, but lack funds for them to produce scientific achievements.

Thus, we find ourselves in an absurd situation where we are a country with an enormous number of scientists, in comparison with our miserable and almost non-existent scientific production. It is even more absurd that a large number of these “scientists” have somehow confirmed their scientific credibility. In order to reach the ‘title throne’ as quickly as possible we have abandoned the pursuit of the more demanding international scientific value standards and have applied our own ‘well known’ local measures (meters and kilograms) in order to evaluate our quasi-scientific accomplishments. All this has brought us to the paradoxical state of complete non-compatibility with the internationally recognized scientific value scale. When we say that our “scientists” have produced a hundred million kilograms of “science” no one in the world knows what it means according to the world’s scientific parameters: if it is a weight which requires sophisticated logistics and massive storage space or just small change that can fit into one’s pocket.

So, going back to the important issue of the autonomy of universities, which is supposed to be the highest accomplishment of modern civilization, sadly, the Bosnian example favours mediocre beha-
viour, since the vast majority of opinion givers and decision makers have mediocre capacity. It is not in their interest to change anything - they simply rule! The Dayton Agreement of 1995 stipulates that higher education is the responsibility of the cantons and entities. This has led to very diverse regulations in higher education, with practically 13 different higher education systems. Some cantons have no legislation on higher education, despite having several universities. Most politicians are in favour of maintaining such a system in order to keep the power within their administrative units, and so remain almost completely independent of the other parts of the country. At the same time they forget that the bad situation in education in one part of the country has a direct and negative impact on the entire country, as diplomas obtained in one part the country do not have to be officially valorised in another.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina the academic community seems to interpret the term 'autonomy of universities' as the right to self-govern and lay down their own rules according to which they want to operate. This includes determining their own work quality standards, as well as the criteria defining teaching staff competency. Formally, no one on 'the outside' has the right to decide what level of quality needs to be achieved. In practice this means that a deal is made between politics and the university where politics informally influences the decisions of the latter by appointing 'its own people' as university staff, thus making the selection according to their pure political suitability rather than scientific criteria. Those appointed members of the university soon become people of power within the academic community, who then, by linking themselves to the more powerful people within the academic community, use their influence to impact political decisions. Therefore, university autonomy interpreted in this way becomes its own goal, completely neglecting the internationally recognized criteria in determining the quality of its performance.

It seems that the international community, in charge of implementing the reforms in higher education, has not understood the Bosnian situation entirely. Forcing the issue of university autonomy in the way it is being done in our case does not exclude the influence of politics. In fact, it creates space for those decision makers within the academic community to lower the criteria margin to the level they consider appropriate, without having to adhere to any internationally recognized criteria (1).

Therefore, graduate and post-graduate studies must improve in terms of teaching young people in B&H about the methodology of scientific research, which should be followed by a reform in the academic community. There should be someone appointed, such as a High Representative from the international community (similar to the situation in politics), in order to impose and implement the application of internationally recognized criteria for pursuing teaching careers. This approach would have a direct impact on the quality of Masters of Science and PhD degrees, making them internationally compatible according to European standards. This would eventually produce a higher level of general knowledge and build a good foundation for economic development. The *sine qua non* in achieving this is to promote a change in people’s minds. However, such a change should be encouraged as we do not have much more time to waste. Sometimes the change needs to be imposed via administrative decisions and that is what is badly needed nowadays in B&H. Without the introduction of internationally recognized scientific criteria in the evaluation of scientific research, and the coordination of academic progress in accordance with these criteria, even the current, pitiful investments in science are essentially useless spending of the poor taxpayer’s money. Statements claiming that even international criteria are not perfect and that they also have their flaws are just lame (4-6) excuses to retain the *status quo*. Indeed, no rule is ideal and may be subject to change. However, from where we now stand, we first need to draw closer to be able to enter the competition and clearly see the target board. Only then can we start to discuss the design of the ‘bow and arrow’.

This paper talks about the problems of the academic community in B&H and yet when I talk to my colleagues from the neighbouring countries, they seem to be complaining about similar problems (7,8). Perhaps all those countries in transition share the same problem: the interrelation between politics and the academic community having a negative impact on the latter? Perhaps we all share similar ingredients yet differ in the way we use them and choose them for our local delicacies?
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Problemi akademske zajednice zemalja u razvoju – bosanski primjer

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SAŽETAK

U članku se razmatraju problemi s kojima se suočava akademska zajednica u Bosni i Hercegovini. Riječ je o zemlji u periodu tranzicije, s kompleksnim vezama između politike i akademske zajednice, koje imaju snažan negativni utjecaj na njen rad. Nemogućnost implementacije međunarodno priznatih kriterija u procesu stjecanja akademskih i naučnih titula krucijalni su problem akademske zajednice. U članku se nastoje identificirati uzroci konfuznog stanja u akademskoj zajednici, zastoja u implementa-
ciji suštinskih reformi u visokom obrazovanju zasnovanih na međunarodno priznatih kriterija i nedostatku odgovornosti među onima koji donose političke odluke bitne za napredak i razvoj akademske zajednice.

Ključne riječi: međunarodno priznati kriteriji, akademska zajednica, autonomija univerziteta