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IMPLEMENTATION OF BELARUS ROADMAP FOR HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM

2ND MONITORING REPORT (JANUARY - MAY 2016)

Prepared by the Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee and
Ad Hoc Commission of EaP CSF Belarusian National Platform

Adopted by the Steering Committee of the EaP Civil Society Forum

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15 May 2016 marked one year since Belarus joined the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the start of Belarus Roadmap for Higher Education Reform implementation (the Roadmap).

The Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee (BIBC) and the Ad Hoc Commission of the Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (BNP of EaP CSF) prepared the second report on the Roadmap implementation for the period from January to June 2016.

As before, the main obstacle to the Roadmap implementation and inclusion of the key stakeholders in higher education reform process is the absence of a clear regulatory and legal framework that would serve as a basis for the fulfillment of Belarus' obligations with respect to the Roadmap implementation as well as a non-transparent process of creating such a framework.

The report by the Ministry of Education prepared for the first Advisory Group (AG2) meeting stated the legal basis for the Roadmap implementation:

- Ministry of Education Order No. 628 "On adopting measures to incorporate the EHEA principles and instruments into the national education system in 2015-2018 starting from 30 July 2015
- State Program on Education Development
- Education Code of the Republic of Belarus

Education Code

The amendments to the **Education Code** (the Code) are of a great interest to the public as they were supposed to be submitted for discussion to the National Assembly in December 2015. Due to bureaucracy in governmental bodies, it was not possible to obtain any information about the content of the amendments and the timeframe for their adoption until 1 April 2016. As it follows from the response No. 20 03/70 to our inquiry to the Permanent Committee on Education, Culture and Science in the House of Representatives at the National Assembly, on 11 March 2016 the Commission did not have any information on the content of the amendments to the Code or the timeframe for their adoption.

After the meeting with President Lukashenko on 1 April 2016, Mr Zhuravkov, the Minister of Education, made a [statement](#) implying that the amendments to the Code were sent back for revision.

According to unofficial information, an attempt to include a number of provisions related to the National Qualification Framework (NQF) into the Code was blocked because of inconsistencies with other legislation, in particular, the Labour Code, as well as incompatibility of the proposals by the Ministry of Education with other Ministries' policies.

Repeated statements about uselessness and danger of “copying western experience” in higher education reform have been made by President Lukashenko and representatives of his administration. Such comments are a cause for concern over the fate of the higher education reform. In his [address](#), President Lukashenko stated that Belarus should not blindly copy the Western system of education. A warning on this matter was given to the Deputy Prime Minister and the new Minister of Education. Referring to the existing system he stressed that it has both pros and cons, which need to be scrutinized within the Bologna reform process.

At this point, it is difficult to judge to what extent such statements could lead to the isolation of the Belarusian higher education policy similar to the period of 2004-2009. Nonetheless, it is clear that they could delay the reforms planned by the Ministry of Education and academic community.

State Program “Education and Youth Policy” 2016-2020

The **State Program “Education and Youth Policy” 2016-2020** (the State Program) approved by the government on 28 March 2016 is available online. However, the appendices of the State Program cannot be accessed. For this reason, the BIBC and the Ad Hoc Commission of the BNP of the EaP CSF cannot conduct a full analysis of the State Program.

The State Program analysis in the context of the Roadmap implementation demonstrates that it takes into account a number of requirements set by the Roadmap. For instance, in order to increase competitiveness of Belarusian higher education in the international market for education services, international and European approach would be implemented by:

- Establishing indicators of development for Belarusian higher education system related to similar indicators in higher education systems of other countries (including those that will strengthen the position of Belarusian higher education institutions (HEI) in world education ranking)
- Comparative analysis based on monitoring and publications on the state of Belarusian higher education
- Developing new higher education classification system based on the International Standard Classification of Education

- Increasing number of postgraduate students
- Strengthening student and faculty exchange at the international level
- Developing social dimension of higher education by increasing the number of state-funded students combined with an overall decrease in total number of students. As a result, the allocation of scholarships and faculty remuneration system would be improved.
- Broadening HEI autonomy, in particular, by abolishing the rigid state regulation of the educational process.
- Planting the seeds of democracy in higher education management by increasing the number of young students involved in youth self-governance (youth parliaments, students' and youth councils, young scientists councils, etc.)

Nonetheless, we clearly see that a number of the key EHEA principles outlined in Roadmap are not included in the State Program:

- There is no clear indication of any plans for NQF development as a part of structural reforms. The State Program has only one reference to it: "In order to reinforce the link between labour market and education system, the issue of NQF incorporation needs to be resolved based on international experience."
- The document does not contain any reference to NQF as an instrument to increase the quality of education, effectiveness of skills-oriented approach in preparation of specialists and strengthening relations with employer organizations. Moreover, traditional indicators that do not refer to professional standards or other NQF elements are set as benchmarks.

Thus, there is no reason to believe that NQF development and its use will be an important part of higher education structural reforms in Belarus in the next five years.

The State Program also does not commit to introducing the three-cycle system based on the Bologna model in the next five years. The third cycle falls outside the scope of the higher education as it remains limited to two cycles.

Work Placement

The State Program does not indicate any intention to implement the Roadmap's provision limiting the practice of mandatory work placement with respect to state-funded students.

The benchmark for "planning improvement and structure optimization for preparing specialists with higher education" is "the share of employed graduates in the total number of graduates assigned to work placement". Thus, the approach preserves the

existing practice in breach of the Roadmap requirements. At the same time, the discriminatory rules that exclude employment statistics of the majority of students, namely self-funded graduates, from the quality indicators remain in force. Taking into account that two-thirds of students in Belarusian HEI pay for their tuition, such quality assurance methodology cannot be viewed as relevant to labour market needs or as socially responsible.

Currently, work placement system is in a strong conflict with the situation in the labour market. However, President Lukashenko's [speeches](#) directly order to save the existing scheme at any cost.

The jobs deficit was followed by the shortage of qualified professionals, thus it is only possible to preserve the current work placement system by data falsification. Human Resource agencies confirm a sharp decline in demand for HEI graduates on the market. According to the news portal TUT.BY, there are 92 CVs for one vacancy while employers state that only 8 per cent of graduates meet their professional requirements. You can find more information on work placement system [here](#) (in Russian).

Under pressure from authorities, HEI Rectors and Deans are forced to compensate the lack of offers for entry-level positions by demanding state-funded students to submit bogus employer requests to ensure favourable statistics. Based on monitoring results in a number of HEI, state-funded students who did not submit a confirmation of employment upon graduation, were threatened by a court order requiring reimbursement of the cost of their education. For more information see the analytical report on the [graduate work placement in 2016](#) (in Russian).

Instead of developing a program to protect graduates from unemployment, applying European experience, Belarus tries to shift the responsibility for the failure of work placement system onto students' shoulders.

Belarus needs to develop a youth employment strategy and a comprehensive program to increase graduate employability based on strengthening the connection between education and labour market, encouraging establishment of work placements for graduates, training, internships, professional retraining, and mandatory quotas for entry-level positions etc.

Academic Mobility

The State Program "Education and Youth Policy" 2016-2020 states the intention of Belarus to develop student and faculty mobility to a certain extent: "training for academic staff and inviting foreign visiting lecturers well-known in their respective

fields create preconditions for improving the quality of teaching”. The scale of academic mobility (“number of HEI whose members participated in an exchange program abroad”) is regarded as one of the three criteria for improving the quality of higher education. In order “to enhance the competitiveness of higher education in the international arena”, it is envisaged to develop “cooperation between Belarusian HEI and HEI in other countries by launching educational programs” as well as “intensifying student and faculty exchange at national and international levels”. Nonetheless, the State Program does not provide information on how this will be implemented in practice. In particular, it does not contain any reference to Belarusian obligations on the academic mobility development in the context of the Roadmap implementation. There is no separate plan or legislative measures aimed at simplifying procedures for students and faculty members traveling abroad. Therefore, we are confident that the State Program “Education and Youth Policy” 2016-2020 is not focused on implementing the Belarus Roadmap for Higher Education Reform.

Inward student mobility (in Belarusian official terminology – “educational services export”) has traditionally been the priority for higher education development in Belarus. Indeed, the Belarusian political elite sees economic value in internationalization of the higher education in the country. Rectors are required to increase the number of foreign students while Belarusian youth is faced with numerous barriers to leave the county, which are created by the agencies unrelated to education system. For instance, advertising of foreign HEI educational programs is regulated by the **Law on Human Trafficking (7 January 2012)** prepared by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Moreover, the Ministry of Education has no right to interpret provisions of this law. Pursuant to Article 16.5, advertising of a foreign HEI educational program that is not authorized by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Internal Affairs is to be prosecuted. There is no exception even for the Russian HEI. For instance, there is a well-known case when an employee from a Belarusian secondary school received an administrative penalty for allowing Russian state HEI representative to meet his students without prior permission from the institution’s leadership.

Another example is the provision requiring all students and faculty members going abroad for more than 10 days to obtain a permission from the Minister of Education. This rule was approved by the **Council of Ministers Decision (No. 254, 23 March 2012)**. The procedure described in this document is mandatory not only for educational institutions but also for all state institutions. The Council of Ministers decision was adopted to execute the respective **Presidential Decree (27 December 2011)**. It is evident that in this case, the Ministry of Education has no possibility to amend the law and, accordingly, to implement the Roadmap provision on streamlining and simplifying procedures for students and faculty going abroad.

Academic Values

The State Program foresees some academic autonomy but it does not provide universities with an increased independence in organizational, financial and human resources areas. As a result, the State Program breaches **Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)7** that the Ministry of Education is obliged to implement.

An increase in the number of students involved in student self-governance, as stipulated in the State Program, will not lead to a real increase of their participation in university management unless administrative arbitrariness is limited and diversification of powers in favour of collegial management bodies is introduced. However, this approach contained in Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)7 is not included in the State Program.

The State Program does not indicate the readiness of the state authorities to move from imposition of their decisions towards a dialogue and equal partnership with HEI. There is no evidence that any provision of Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)7 were or are intended to be incorporated into Belarusian legislation. The need for urgent implementation of Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)7 is tied to continuing academic freedom violations and significant limitations of institutional autonomy.

Furthermore, an increase in censorship poses a threat to academic freedom. On 2 March 2016, the official information agency BELTA [reported](#) that the Ministry of Information issued a written warning to the owner of a popular website [Nasha Niva](#) for publishing an article by the European Research Association (Lithuania) expert, Sergey Lebedskiy: “Belarus is at the red level of demographic danger: a regional center ‘dies’ each year”. The reason for the warning was that, according to the Ministry of Information, article’s conclusions contradict the data of the National Statistics Committee. As in the case of Dr Silitskij's book ban at the end of 2015, repressions against publishers are due to the fact that the authors have worked or are working in research centres established in neighbouring countries in response to academic repressions in Belarus. Currently, the most popular and competent Belarusian independent research centers are registered in Lithuania or Poland, thus Belarusian authorities direct their repressions against Belarusian media outlets that publish articles by independent researchers who cannot themselves be directly punished by Belarusian authorities.

There is atmosphere of fear of punishment for participation in independent student organizations within Belarusian HEI. Such atmosphere encouraged a [campaign](#) to discredit independent student organizations as illicit and anti-government.

In particular, Victor Seryj, Deputy Chairman for information and ideology of the Student Self-government Coordinating Council at the Belarusian State Medical

University [published](#) on his Vkontakte page the information about undesirability of students participation in the activities “unauthorized youth organizations”. This information was also distributed in other HEI. Although officially no one claimed responsibility for this information, none of the officials have distanced themselves from it. 90 per cent of students who participated in an on-line [survey](#) do not doubt the gravity of the threat of punishment for participating in the activities of independent student organizations.

The presence of fear in Belarusian universities indicates that Belarusian authorities blatantly ignore the State's duty to ensure freedom from fear for punishment for actions that are guaranteed by the fundamental academic freedoms (p.5, Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)7).

Information about the Roadmap Implementation on HEI Websites

Despite the fact that the Roadmap does not explicitly refer to the need to develop relevant online resources, the Ministry of Education is committed to launching a website dedicated to the transposition of the EHEA instruments into the national higher education system. Moreover, in September 2015 the Ministry instructed HEI to create a section dedicated to their participation in the transposition of the EHEA instruments on their websites.

Unlike in case of the non-transparent process of the higher education legislation reform, it is possible to obtain information from public sources on how the ministerial order was fully implemented. BIBC conducted the [monitoring](#) of the Belarusian HEI websites to assess quantity and quality of the provided information about HEI participation in the implementation of EHEA instruments.

At the time of monitoring (until 1 May 2016), the information about the Roadmap implementation was not available even on website of the National Institute for Higher Education (NIHE) [Belarus & European Higher Education Area](#), which is considered to be the main source of information on the incorporation of the EHEA instruments in Belarusian education system.

The webpage contains only general information on the Bologna process and a description of the EHEA, its goals and objectives, key EHEA principles, members list, principle declarations and communiqués, and a number of guidelines for the EHEA instruments. However, it is hard to say whether this website could be considered a suitable substitute for an online resource containing information on how the incorporation of the EHEA instruments into the higher education is organized. The navigation from the NIHE home page to the EHEA webpage is quite inconvenient - it is impossible to access it from the main menu while the EHEA logo is not available on

the main page. The Roadmap is neither published nor referred to on the EHEA website. The section “Regulatory framework” contains two documents from 2009 and 2010. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education decrees and guidelines are not available on the website. It also contains few reports, news, research and discussion papers, and NIHE own publications. The section “Bologna process and EHEA for students” is announced but no information is displayed there.

It seems that a very simple task of providing information on HEI work with respect to incorporating the EHEA instruments in their processes or background information about the EHEA and the Bologna process on institutions’ websites is also not done in a satisfactory manner: 44 out of 54 HEI that participated in the monitoring have not completed this task a year after Belarusian accession to the EHEA. Out of 10 HEI who attempted to implement the Ministry of Education instructions, 7 HEI approached this task as a formality - merely texts copied from the NIHE site that are lacking background information and are difficult to navigate were published on the respective websites. The majority of HEI that created the required section and some of those that have not, have already uploaded the information on their websites that corresponds to the Ministry’s order. However, the information is published in different sections in non-systematized manner and, as a result, is often difficult to access

Conclusions

The Ministry of Education is not able to ensure an effective legislative reform implementing the key Roadmap provisions since the amendments to the Code have not received the political approval from the country’s leadership, and are inconsistent with legal norms developed by other Ministries.

The Ministry of Education and other government agencies proceed with legislative amendments with respect to the Roadmap implementation, its preparation and lobbying in an non-transparent manner thus excluding the major higher education stakeholders from the process.

The authorities do not seek experts’ assistance in the Roadmap implementation with respect to improving graduate employability and taking into account the new situation on labour market.

Academic repressions continue; violations of social rights of students and graduates persist; there are also no visible changes in terms of strengthening institutional autonomy.

Recommendations

We believe that AG2 members could step up their role as expert and consultative body and should:

1. Recommend the Ministry of Education to develop and agree with relevant government bodies and higher education stakeholders on proposals concerning reform of the inconsistent laws in order to implement the Roadmap. The aforementioned proposals should be discussed publicly.
2. Assist the Ministry of Education in developing a system to improve graduate employability perspectives and to replace the anachronistic mandatory work placement system and, based on European experience, tackle youth unemployment. To achieve this goal, a possibility of approaching the European Commission with a suggestion to include higher education into its program *Employment, professional education and education in Belarus* (Registered in General information system for external relations (CRIS)-No.2014/030-979) should be considered.
3. Assist the Ministry of Education in preparing proposals on incorporating Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)7 into the law, which would provide for the organizational, financial, human resources and academic autonomy of the Belarusian HEI, as well as protection of academic freedom.
4. Discuss with Belarusian officials measures, which could protect leaders of independent student organizations from repressions until the amendments to the Education Code transposing Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)7 come into force.