



EASTERN PARTNERSHIP
Civil Society Forum

IMPLEMENTATION OF BELARUS ROADMAP FOR HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM

MONITORING REPORT (JUNE-DECEMBER 2015)

Prepared by the Ad Hoc Commission of EaP CSF Belarusian National Platform

Adopted by the Steering Committee of the EaP Civil Society Forum

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The Belarusian Ministry of Education has adopted a number of documents indicating their intention to implement some of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) principles into the higher education system. However, the problem with the implementation of academic values remains the most questionable part of the ministry's programme. There is no improvement in the level of transparency adopted by the Ministry or the universities. Indeed massive violations of academic freedom and students' rights to participate in higher education institutions' (HEI) governance continue.

The Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) and the EaP CSF Steering Committee propose to the Advisory Group "Support for the Belarus Roadmap" to create the conditions under which the Belarus higher education system will comply with the EHEA academic freedom and academic autonomy principles.

The EaP CSF Belarusian National Platform has established an Ad Hoc Commission to monitor and ensure the implementation of the Belarus Roadmap for Higher Education Reform.

The Ad Hoc Commission has prepared its first report on the incorporation of EHEA principles into the Belarus higher education system for the period from June 2015 till December 2015.

Ministry of Education Planning

On 30 July 2015 the Ministry of Education issued Order No. 628 "On adopting measures to incorporate EHEA principles and instruments into national education system in the period of 2015-2018" and on 15 September 2015 Guidance No. 08-17/2077 "On educational process organization in higher education institutions in 2015/2016 academic year".

The Ministry of Education Guidance No. 08-17/2077 states that in accordance with the [Belarus Roadmap for Higher Education Reform](#) Belarus must incorporate key EHEA principles into national educational system over the period of 2015-2018. In particular, it envisages continuing the development of the national qualification system and its implementation, creating conditions for establishing a multilevel higher education system (bachelor-master-doctorate/research), establishing independent quality assurance system, introducing a new more informative annex to the higher education diploma, developing student and faculty academic mobility, etc.

In 2016 the Ministry of Education set targets for fulfilling a number of obligations related to the Roadmap implementation including an analysis of regulatory framework and graduates placement proceedings, financial support for students, developing plans to legally address those measures in educational policy that directly relate to students and faculty rights to establish and register organizations, to participate in developing legal framework for ECTS use and other.

The implementation of these plans might well indicate an important milestone in the modernization of the higher education in Belarus and intentions to meet the requirements laid

out in the Roadmap. However, the terminology used in the ministerial order and guidance shows us that, out of all the EHEA principles, the Ministry of Education prefers to limit itself to organizational and instrumental implementation and wants to leave aside more sensitive issues relating to respect of fundamental academic values. Certainly, the right to establish and register students and faculty organizations could be considered as a step towards European academic values recognition, but it is hard to assess the impact of the Ministry of Education's work in these directions as we observe ongoing restrictions on academic freedom restrictions in reality.

Transparency

Unfortunately, the steps taken in implementing the EHEA principles do not come together with the process of increasing the openness and transparency of the Belarus higher education system. For example, the Belarusian Ministry of Education Order No. 628 "On adopting measures to incorporate EHEA principles and instruments into national education system in the period of 2015-2018" is not publicly available. The text of the Roadmap is still not available in either Russian or Belarusian as part of the official Ministry of Education resources for public access. The website of the [National Institute for Higher Education](#) (NIHE), to which the Ministry of Education guidance redirect users, does not have any texts (in translation) of key EHEA documents except the communiques of Minister of Education Summits. There is still no information available about the majority of HEI Councils, their Charters and other basic documents as well as about their budget and other information which should be public. Such secrecy leads to mistrust from the students' side towards the university management and results in conflicts. An example of this tension is the conflict between the management of the Belarusian State University (BSU) and its students at the end of 2015. More detailed information on this will be presented below.

Social Dimension of Higher Education

At the Summit of the European Ministers of Higher Education, held on 14-15 May 2015 in Yerevan, Armenia, and Belarus signed the Yerevan Communiqué assuming the obligations to support and protect students and teaching staff in exercising their academic freedom and to ensure their fully pledged partnership in autonomous management of the higher education institutions. However, the information at the disposal of the Belarusian National Platform proves otherwise.

Censorship has been imposed with new force. According to [media](#) reports, the Ministry of Information ordered the destruction of Vitalij Silitskij's book edition "Long Way from the Tyranny: the Post-communist Authoritarianism and Struggle for Democracy in Serbia and Belarus".

The practice of forcing students to vote before polling day in the Republic of Belarus Presidential elections, the [use of the student workforce](#) for farm and building work during official classes as well as participation in political campaigns and public events continues as before.

The existing practice of the obligatory assignment of graduates who study free of charge (so-called “budget places”), to their first job is also considered to be a form of forced labour. Also, the universities are expected to conduct an investigation to find students, who fail to show up at their assigned place of work and then to prosecute them.

In the same recommendations for the program for the implementation of the EHEA principles it is stated that university rectors are obliged to identify those graduates who didn’t arrive to their assigned place of work or those who didn’t fulfil their full stated work assignment. Rectors are personally responsible for collecting funds spent on these graduates’ education. The assignment system not only violates the rights of those students who study without charge to freely look for work after finishing their education but is also ineffective in conditions of a growing unemployment. In accordance with an [on-line survey conducted by Gemius company](#), only 10 per cent of respondents consider that the system of assigning work places is effective and guarantees employment to young specialists.

Fundamental Values

In November-December 2015, the students’ campaign against introducing fees for re-sitting exams became especially acute. This campaign was started by the Belarusian State University students on November 3, 2015 and spread to the other Belarusian HEI. Students collected thousands of signatures against the newly introduced fee and looked for a dialogue with the universities’ administrations on their demands. However, their position was ignored by HEI administrations, in complete disregard of Belarus’ obligations to increase students’ participation in HEI management as envisaged by members of the EHEA.

In response to the appeal of the independent student organizations against the introduction of such additional fees at universities, the [European Students’ Union \(ESU\) stands in solidarity with the Belarusian students](#). The ESU strongly condemns violations of academic freedom, and urges the universities to stop all forms of repressions against students.

At the 7th EaP CSF Annual Assembly, Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee and other EaP CSF members [expressed their support to students and condemned academic freedom violations in Belarusian universities](#). However, no positive changes occurred.

On 2 December 2015, students held peaceful demonstration “Love and Solidarity” aiming not only at demanding the abolition of complementary fees but also for free and fair elections to student self-government bodies. The protesters consider that official student organizations, student representatives in university councils and official student self-government bodies remain indifferent to both students’ demands and to the fate of activists and campaign participants. In this conflict, the official students’ structures demonstrated their subservience to university management. This assessment is confirmed by an [on-line survey](#) of student opinion where the majority either couldn’t identify the official student organizations and students’ self-government

bodies' position or thought that they just comply with management instructions (75 per cent).

Although there was no open violence from the side of the authorities, human rights organizations noted a [number of rights violations](#) at this peaceful march. Three participants of the march were [prosecuted in court and fined](#), for instance.

The university's response to the march was to increase pressure, intimidation and repressions against its participants. The repressions against the participants intensified especially after the Minister of Education Mikhail Zhuravkov's statement that called for more aggressive reaction to the student demands. He claimed that "Students Against" movement is not a student movement at all. Student monitoring organized by independent student organizations, recorded 113 cases of harassment of students.

Two active members of the movement have already been [expelled from the Belarusian State University](#). Based on the monitoring results, some of the students protest leaders could also be shortly expelled from the university. According to the victims, faculty members are under pressure from the university's management to prevent them from sitting exams and then use this fact to claim that they don't meet academic requirements and to expel these students from the university.

There are reports about the threat of using Article 193.1 of the Belarus Criminal Code against independent students' organizations that appealed to the ESU for support. These organizations are not registered by the state as such registration was denied to them in the past. The leaders of these organizations may face imprisonment for up to 2 years according to Article 193.1 for appeal on behalf of unregistered organization. There are reasons to believe that currently, prosecutor's office is looking into these organizations appeal to ESU. A statement by Mr Ablameiko, the BSU rector, released in response to the BELAPAN informational agency, accused unregistered organizations of spreading false information about students' harassment in Belarusian HEI, and indirectly suggests there is a possibility to use this instrument (application of Article 193.1 of Belarus Criminal Code) to persecute opponents.

In reality, unregistered students' organizations, in particular "Students Against" movement, are well known to Belarusian students. Five per cent of respondents consider this movement destructive. [Significant number of respondents](#) are afraid to participate in it. Only 27 per cent of respondents heard about the pressure on students by university authorities or have encountered it themselves while 90 per cent of respondents hold the view that the movement's activists are in real danger of being prosecuted for their demands and actions.

Conclusions

Although the Ministry of Education undertook steps to begin the Roadmap implementation on paper, in reality, a climate of intimidation persists in Belarusian universities and there is little progress in the implementation of EHEA fundamental academic values.

Recommendations

We recommend the following to the Advisory Group on the “Support for the Belarus Roadmap”:

Academic Freedom of Students and Faculty

- closely monitor academic freedom violations in Belarusian HEI and to undertake the necessary action to reinstate student and faculty rights
- to take much needed steps leading to the abolition of Article 193.1 of the Belarus Criminal Code as a prerequisite for legislation and the modernization of educational policy aimed at students and faculty rights to establish and register organizations.

Institutional Autonomy

- to assist the Ministry of Education in widening real autonomy of Belarusian HEI through such changes in legislation and educational policy that will lead to the implementation of the transparency of activities by HEI Rectors and their accountability to academic community, in particular, to reintroduce free and independent elections of university rectors.
- to contribute and to assist the Belarusian Ministry of Education in opening access to all information about the Ministry of Education and HEI activities for HE stakeholders where these do not constitute state or military secrets.