



EASTERN PARTNERSHIP
Civil Society Forum

REPORT ON THE MONITORING OF BELARUS ROADMAP FOR HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM IMPLEMENTATION

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

Approved by the Steering Committee of the EaP Civil Society Forum

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Belarusian Ministry of Education 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 the academic values remains the most vulnerable part of the ministry's programme. There is no improvement in the Ministry and universities' transparency. Massive violations of academic freedom and students' rights to participate in higher education institutions' (HEI) governance continue.

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 conditions under which the Belarus higher education system will comply with the EHEA academic freedom and academic autonomy principles.

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

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

Ministry of Education plan

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 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 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 may 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 gives us

evidence that, out of all the EHEA principles, the Ministry of Education prefers to limit itself to organizational and instrumental implementation leaving aside the more sensitive issues of fundamental academic values implementation. 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 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 available for public access. The Roadmap text is still not available in either Russian or Belarusian languages 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 Ministers of Education Summits communiqués. There is still no information available about the majority of HEI Councils, their Charters and other establishing documents as well as about their budget and other information that is supposed to be public. Such secrecy leads to mistrust from the students' side towards the university management that 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.

The social dimension of higher education

At the Summit of the European Ministers of Higher Education held in May 14-15, 2015 in Yerevan, Armenia, 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.

The censorship has been enhanced with new force. According to the [media](#), the Ministry of Information ordered to destroy 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 earlier in the Republic of Belarus Presidential elections, the [use of the student workforce](#) at [agricultural and construction works](#) during official classes as well as participation in political campaigns and public events still continues at the same pace.

The existing practice of graduates studying free of charge (so-called “budget places”), obligatory assigned placement for their first job is also considered as a form of forced labor. Wherein, the universities are entrusted with detective tasks to find students, who didn’t show at their assigned place of work and then prosecuting them.

In the same guidance where the program for the implementation of the EHEA principles is stated, university Rectors are obliged to identify those graduates who didn’t arrive to their assigned place of work or those who didn’t meet the duration of their 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 for free to freely look for work after finishing their education but is also ineffective in conditions of a growing deficit of working places. In accordance with the [on-line survey conducted by Gemius company](#), only 10% 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 failed exams became especially poignant. 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 expected a dialogue with the universities’ administrations as well as that their views on the situation would be heard and taken into consideration by the decision makers. However, their position was ignored by HEI administrations, which constitutes complete disregard of Belarus’ obligations to increase students’ participation in HEI management, established by joining EHEA.

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

On 2 December 2015, students held peaceful demonstration “Love and Solidarity” aiming not only on demanding the abolishment of complementary fees but also to hold free and fair election to the student self-government. Such demands are tied to the fact that from protesters’ point of view, the official student organization, students’ representatives in universities Councils and official student self-government bodies remain indifferent to both students’ initiative and to the activists and campaign’s participants’ fate. In this conflict, these official students’ structures demonstrated its dependence and accountability to university’s

management. Such assessment matches the [on-line students' survey](#) respondents' opinion where majority either couldn't describe the official student organizations and students' self-government bodies position or regarded that they just comply with management orders (75%).

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 [brought to 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 on students' demands and which claimed that "Students Against" movement is not a students' movement at all. Student monitoring organized by independent student organizations, recorded [113 cases of pressure on students and their harassment](#).

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 based on the fact that they didn't meet academic requirements, 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 ESU for support. These organizations may not have state registration because it 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. BSU Rector's, [Mr. Ablameiko, statement, released in response to informational agency BELAPAN publication](#), accused unregistered organizations of spreading false information about students' harassment in Belarusian HEI, and indirectly points out that 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. 5% of respondents consider this movement destructive. A [significant part of the respondents](#) is afraid to participate in it. Only 27% of respondents heard about the pressure on students by university management or have encountered it themselves while 90% of respondents are positive that movement's activists are in real danger of being prosecuted for their demands and actions.

Conclusion

Although the Ministry of Education undertook steps to begin the Roadmap implementation on paper, in reality, the climate of fear reigning in Belarusian universities shows no positive changes in implementing the EHEA fundamental academic values.

Recommendations

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

Students and Faculty academic freedom

- closely monitor the situation with academic freedom rights violations in Belarusian HEI and to undertake necessary actions to reinstating students 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 educational policy modernization aimed at students and faculty rights use 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 HEI Rectors’ activities transparency and their accountability to academic community, in particular, to reinstall free and independent Rector’s elections.
- 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 it doesn’t constitute state or military secrets.