

Civil Society Address to the EHEA Ministerial Conference of May 2018 in Paris

May 8, 2018

Dear Ministers,

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), as a key stakeholder representing the independent civil society perspective on the Belarus Roadmap for Higher Education Reform, urges you to make a strong commitment to revitalising and reaffirming Belarus' position in the European Higher Education Area, and to ensure that no action is taken that would scuttle hopes for the democratisation and modernisation of higher education in that country.

Whilst it is true that the Belarusian government has failed to fulfil its reform obligations and, in some cases, returned to systematic repression of independent student organizations, the EaP CSF believes that independent oversight and support to the implementation of the reform designed in the Roadmap and Draft Strategic Action Plan is needed more than ever. The Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) should not abandon the idea of specific mechanism for Belarus; **were this to happen it would effectively torpedo the reform effort for many years to come.**

The EaP CSF urges you to consider the long-term perspective as you make your decision. The Belarusian National Platform of the EaP CSF has noted several positive developments resulting from the Bologna Process, including the rapidly increasing mobility of students and teachers, and the European Parliament has emphasised that continuing the implementation of the Bologna Process would benefit young Belarusians and boost further exchanges and people-to-people contacts.¹ **The Bologna process is having a positive effect and continuation of the oversight mechanism along the BFUG AG2 mandate or another similar procedure would assure it stays on the government's agenda.**

The EaP CSF, therefore, sees no value in downgrading the implementation of Bologna process in Belarus at this point in time by providing support to its implementation only via the three envisaged support groups, as the issues that need to be addressed are much wider. The EaP CSF has drawn upon the expertise of its members on the ground to produce these recommendations, which would positively support and expand the reform process, as well as providing it the space needed for it to flourish.

We remind you of the European Parliament resolution of 19 April 2018, in which **the European Parliament publicly supported the position of the EaP CSF**, having called for Belarus to be kept on the EHEA agenda and for the **European Commission to provide adequate resources** to implement the roadmap, accepting the logic and the recommendations of civil society.²

¹ European Parliament, *European Parliament Resolution of 19 April on Belarus* (P8_TA-PROV(2018)0174).

² European Parliament, *European Parliament Resolution of 19 April on the Implementation of the Bologna Process – State of Play and Follow-up* (P8_TA-PROV(2018)0190).

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We appeal to you to ensure that the views of civil society, backed by the EU institutions, are appropriately considered and reflected as you consider the final decision on the Bologna roadmap for Belarus as well as Draft Strategic Action Plan, by adopting the following recommendations.

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum appeals to the ministers to take into account the following perspectives:

- **Belarus should remain on the EHEA agenda as a special case.** If the BFUG were to lose leverage over implementation, and concede defeat on the Roadmap after a short time, the entire Bologna Process would be damaged and weakened;
- The Belarusian Ministry of Education has recently developed a positive, forward-thinking **Draft Strategic Action Plan**; however, the implementation of this plan goes beyond the powers of the Ministry of Education and therefore **must be treated by the BFUG as a commitment of the Belarusian government** and given the corresponding status;
- **A full commitment should be made by the ministers to implementing the provisions of the Roadmap in Belarus;** including guarantees of academic freedom and institutional autonomy;
- **The BFUG AG2 Mandate should be extended until 2020 or another similar procedure introduced,** as access to this mandate has proven to be one of the only effective mechanisms for the inclusion of independent Belarusian civil society in the higher education modernisation process. Abandoning the mechanisms for the inclusion of independent CSOs in the process would hamstring the reform process, and see a widening of the gulf between Belarus and the EHEA leaders;
- The **Belarusian National Platform of the EaP CSF should be recognised as a stakeholder in the implementation of the Bologna process in Belarus,** to ensure the active and consistent input of expertise and guidance by independent civil society.

Yours Sincerely,

Members of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum