

MEMO

ON MAINTAINING BFUG SPECIAL PROCEDURE – TO MONITOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EHEA VALUES AND INSTRUMENTS AND SUPPORTING CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION BFUG MEETING (27 SEPTEMBER 2018)

Prepared by the Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee
and the Ad Hoc Committee of the Belarusian National Platform
of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

Belarus is still in need of special Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) assistance. It is the only country that joined the Bologna process in 2015, after European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was already well-established and functioning. Belarus' admission to the Bologna process was conditional: subsequently, *Belarus Roadmap for Higher Education Reform* was drafted and a special implementation monitoring procedure, *Advisory Group on Support for the Belarus Roadmap* (AG2) was launched. AG2 mandated that the roadmap is to be implemented – with progress report due in time for 2018 EHEA (European Higher Education Area) Ministerial Conference in Paris (24-25 May 2018). Its aim was to assist Belarus in modernising its higher education system.

The [AG2 final report](#) acknowledges that **the Belarusian government had achieved very limited progress in the implementation of the roadmap.** Faced with the objective assessment by AG2 experts, as well as unfavourable position of EHEA members, the Belarusian government had to agree to an extension of the roadmap. The result was the *Draft strategic action plan on implementation of the major objectives of the education system development in line with the EHEA principles and tool*, which outlines its further steps. The draft action plan is mentioned in the [final communiqué](#) of the EHEA Ministerial Conference.

At the same time, there is no final decision on whether to retain the special monitoring procedure for Belarus, similar to the AG2 mandate. **There is a strong need to maintain a special procedure in place. Based on previous experience, the Belarusian side is not able to assess its own progress in meeting set obligations. It is also not very effective in using the expertise, and experience, of other EHEA member states to resolve challenges pertinent to the Belarusian higher education system.** This lack of capacity was particularly evident in the information submitted by Belarus to [The European Education Area in 2018: Bologna Process Implementation Report](#), which proved to be incorrect. The erroneous information dealt with the implementation of Bologna instruments, and the process in which EHEA fundamental values are being incorporated into the Belarusian higher education system.

In our view, the **most significant omissions** in the information presented by the Belarusian officials in *The European Education Area in 2018: Bologna Process Implementation Report* **concern the following:**

1. Bologna architecture

In Belarus, the third cycle of higher education (doctoral programmes) **is not integrated into the national system.** Nevertheless, the country is included in EHEA statistics – related to the duration of third cycle programmes, as shown in the *Bologna Process Implementation Report*, Figure 3.12. In order to integrate its higher education system, and include all three cycles under the same umbrella, Belarus must make changes to current legislation, which would allow for this to happen. Only then, post-graduate, or doctoral, programmes could be incorporated in the higher education system.

2. ECTS Implementation

At present, Belarus does not use European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), (*Bologna Process Implementation Report*, Figure 2.3) in its higher education system. Regardless of

this fact, Figures 2.4 and 2.5 show Belarus in the group of countries, in which all institutions of higher education use ECTS – in both first and second cycle of high education.

3. Quality Assurance

Belarus exaggerated the level of openness in its quality assurance system to foreign quality assurance agencies (EQAR-registered agencies), in order to take part in the education programmes assessment and evaluation (*Bologna Process Implementation Report*, Figure 4.11 – Level of openness to cross border quality assurance of EQAR registered agencies, 2016/2017).

4. Recognition

The majority of EHEA countries leave the final decision on diploma or qualification recognition to its higher education institutions for academic purposes (*Bologna Process Implementation Report*, Figure 4.15). Belarus was also misleadingly included into this cohort. In accordance with the Code of Education, **the Belarusian Ministry of Education retains the right over the final decision on the recognition of foreign diplomas and qualifications**. The draft of the new Code of Education introduces several new competences to higher education institutions, in the area of diploma or qualification recognition. However, the ministry has not submitted the draft for Parliament's approval since it was finalised in 2016.

The *Bologna Process Implementation Report*, Figure 4.13 analyses the national implementation of five main principles of recognition stated in the [Lisbon Recognition Convention](#): 1) the applicant's right for fair assessment; 2) recognition, if no substantial differences can be proven; 3) legislation guidelines encouraging comparing learning outcomes, rather than the programmes' content; 4) in case of a negative decision in recognising the qualification, the national agency must demonstrate the evidence of significant differences between its own qualifications and the qualifications for which the recognition is sought; 5) the applicant's right to appeal the decision on qualification recognition. Belarus was included in the first group of the most successful countries in terms of qualification recognition procedure. However, **there are doubts about the implementation of the third principle because the National Information Centre (Belarus ENIC) is not able to assess learning outcomes, as such term does not exist in the Belarusian legislation on higher education**.

5. Employment

According to the report (*Bologna Process Implementation Report*, Figure 6.19), **Belarus is mentioned in the group of countries, in which higher education institutions have the obligation to assist graduates in transitioning from study to work. In reality, this translates into a mandatory work placement system for graduates**, stipulated in the Code of Education and other legislation.

The AG2 report highlights that **this system can be hardly compared to career development system existing in European universities** to assist graduates in their transition period. Furthermore, the AG2 report questions whether the mandatory work placement system for graduates conforms with EHEA fundamental values. What is more, there are doubts that the system is effective in reducing the deficit of qualified employees in some parts of the country. Human rights organisations have repeatedly stressed that the practice of mandatory work placements for

graduates could equal to a certain type of forced labour. This aside, the placements could be used as a discriminatory instrument, affecting students whose education was publically funded.

6. EHEA Fundamental Values

Belarusian side also presented **incorrect information on the implementation of institutional autonomy**, and on who makes the final decision to open new educational programmes (*Bologna Process Implementation Report*, Figure 1.16). According to the current legislation, the Ministry of Education is the ultimate decision-maker on new education programmes, meanwhile the report suggests this is the prerogative of the educational institutions and employers.

In addition, the **information on supporting gender equality, political and religious tolerance, and democratic and civic values across the board** (*Bologna Process Implementation Report*, Figure 1.17) **is also incorrect**. The claim that the policy to support tolerance and democratic values is enshrined in the legislation contradicts the fact the higher education has become a political instrument of the state, used to discriminate and eliminate the dissenting voices. This is also underlined in the AG2 report, which points out to the absence of any significant progress in implementation of EHEA academic values.

Conclusion

The distorted assessment of achievements in implementing fundamental EHEA instruments and values is not a useful contribution to the development of an effective strategy for reforming the Belarusian higher education system, in line with the Bologna standards.

It is difficult to assess whether it has been done on purpose or it is a result of incompetence. **The re-introduction of a special monitoring procedure**, assisting Belarus in fulfilling its obligations stemming from the roadmap and draft action plan, **would be a guarantee of successful integration of Belarus into the EHEA. The Belarusian civil society, and EaP CSF Belarusian National Platform in particular, has been continuously monitoring the implementation of the roadmap and should be actively involved in this procedure**. Furthermore, it is necessary to strengthen the expert support for modernisation of the higher education system in Belarus and to provide correct interpretation of the goals set in the draft action plan.

More Information

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) is a unique multi-layered regional civil society platform aimed at promoting European integration, facilitating reforms and democratic transformations in the six Eastern Partnership countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Serving as the civil society and people-to-people dimension of the Eastern Partnership, the EaP CSF strives to strengthen civil society in the region, boost pluralism in public discourse and policy making by promoting participatory democracy and fundamental freedoms. For more information, please visit the EaP CSF website at www.eap-csf.eu