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IMPLEMENTATION OF BELARUS ROADMAP FOR HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM

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The process of the implementation of Belarus Roadmap for Higher Education Reform enters its critical phase. In 2017 all the Bologna commitments for higher education reform must be incorporated into the national legislation.

The modernisation of higher education in Belarus constantly faces serious resistance from conservative forces, both within the government and society. This slows down and often dilutes the significance of innovations. Currently, the Roadmap implementation is in serious danger due to the changes within the Ministry of Education leadership. On 15 December 2016 President Lukashenko unexpectedly appointed Igor Karpenko, the Chairman of the Communist Party of Belarus, as the new Minister of Education. Mr Karpenko replaced professor Mikhail Zhuravkov who was considered in political and academic circles as a moderate reformer, while the newly appointed minister is known for his extreme conservatism and support for the Soviet ideological model. This change was received as a signal for rolling back the Bologna reforms.

These changes within the Ministry of Education leadership are very alarming as they can interrupt the tendency for more openness and a more constructive approach towards the Roadmap implementation by the government, which could be observed in the government actions at the end of 2016. The round table [EHEA instruments incorporation into the national education system](#) held on 12 October 2016 was an evidence of positive changes in the government position towards the Bologna reforms process.

The new Minister Mr Karpenko has not publicly commented yet on the Roadmap implementation but he already pointed out that the submission date for the new Education Code to the Parliament has been pushed forward to the mid-2017 and it will not be presented earlier than 1 July 2017 instead of initially provided in the Roadmap as a deadline end of 2016. The Ministry proposals on the Education Code are not available for public access. At the same time, a preliminary assessment of the prospects for the Roadmap provisions' incorporation into the Belarusian legislation can be made based on the published legislation and statements made by the representatives of the Ministry of Education and National Institute for Higher Education (NIHE).

Structural reforms

National Qualification Framework

The importance of developing and securing National Qualification Framework (NGF) provisions in the legislation is acknowledged but, unfortunately, there is no progress in moving forward with this matter in Belarus.

A number of documents issued by the National Council of Higher Education Institutions' (HEIs) Rectors (Decision #1 "On developing and implementing qualification frameworks with consideration of Belarus joining EHEA" as of 16 June 2016), Letter by the Ministry of Education to HEIs (#08-19/4097/dc "On organization of educational process in HEIs in 2016/2017 academic year" as of 14 October 2016) describe the intention to develop the National Qualification Framework (still referring to the Council of Ministers Decision #34 "On developing National Qualification Framework" as of 17 January 2014) rather than incorporate it into the legislation and secure the NQF as a Bologna instrument.

Bologna architecture and transparency instruments

Despite the fact that in 2016 a series of events related to the higher education modernisation and improving the higher education content took place (on 20 November 2016 - seminar "Topical issues of developing higher education standards: generation 3+"; on 13 December 2016 - 4th Annual Dutch-Belarusian-Polish conference "Education as a human right: higher education modernisation as a response to XXI century challenges" where a number of amendments to the Education Code were presented), there is still no official information about the Education Code amendments related to the Bologna instruments and architecture incorporation into the legislation. At the same time, we can assume that the legal provisions of the Belarusian higher education transition to the three-cycle education model, ECTS introduction and incorporation of other Bologna instruments into the national higher education system will be secured in the new Education Code.

On the other hand, the incorporation of the higher education regulatory, educational and methodical instruments into the system is slowly progressing judging by the available information although the legal framework for it is still under consideration. Currently, the higher education system incorporates a number of regulatory, methodological and educational documents that regulate curricula, study programmes, internships, their content and structure.

The new generation of education standards based on competences, learning outcomes, ECTS and new diploma supplements corresponding to European standards in content and structure were discussed at the above-mentioned events.

The Roadmap envisages that Belarus '..commits to introducing the three-cycle system on the agreed Bologna model, establishing a first degree of 180-240 ECTS credits and consequently to gradually phase out the remaining 5 year *bakalavr* degree, and subsequently measure student workload in ECTS, as stipulated in the revised ECTS Users' Guide.' However, the regulatory documents presented at the above-mentioned events do not include provisions that fully correspond to the Bologna model. There

are differences in understanding of the first degree – *bakalavr* with ECTS credits varies from 180 to 270 and the duration of study from 3 years to 4,5 years. The 2nd doctoral degree program is excluded from the higher education system although there is a proposal to include *aspirantura* (1st doctoral degree program, PhD) as the third higher education degree and a research-oriented professional education program.

Quality assurance

The Roadmap states that Belarus ‘..commits to establishing, by the end of 2017, the legal basis for an independent quality assurance agency in conformity with the European Standards and Guidelines’ as well as ‘by the end of 2015, develop a timetable for establishing this agency’ and ‘..through the BFUG, invite foreign quality assurance experts to advise on the timetable and plans for establishing the agency as well as on the process leading to it being established’.

During the past year and a half, the Ministry of Education has not published any information concerning the fulfillment of this Roadmap requirements, including the information about amending the existing legal acts or developing the new ones. The only evidence of the Ministry of Education’s position on this matter was a presentation by the Head of the Quality Assurance Department of the Ministry of Education at the round table in October 2016. According to him, the Department responsible for the HEIs accreditation activities is an independent organization entrusted with certain decision-making powers and functional independence. However, the Department is a structural division of the Ministry accountable to the Minister himself and it does not make any decisions on accreditation, which are instead made by the Board of the Ministry of Education. Therefore, the Department’s activity does not fundamentally differ from other Ministerial departments and divisions.

It also does not show the willingness to implement the European Standards and Guidelines when focusing on quality assurance matters. In particular, the officials present the introduction of the Management Control System in accordance with ISO 9001 in Belarusian HEIs as an accomplishment, which is neither required by the ESG for internal quality assurance nor replaces it. Instead, the self-control system with the focus on control measures rather than the quality assurance system as such is discussed. The majority of the ESG provisions are interpreted in a very particular way, for example, the term ‘excellence’ is associated with the leading HEI status while ignoring the main meaning of it such as ‘continuous improvement’.

It is also important to point out that the official agency does not plan to make the accreditation process more transparent. Neither self-assessment reports nor final

review results are open to the public. Besides, the current documents regulating the accreditation process do not take into account the goals and objectives of particular universities. The Ministry's Quality Assurance Department still does not have its own website. Evidently, this Roadmap provision has not been implemented and it seems that nothing has been done in this respect since 2015.

Mobility of higher education staff and students, and internationalization

A significant development in the second half of 2016 was the draft "Concept of international academic mobility development within EHEA framework" (hereinafter – the Concept). This document does not include a direct reference to the Belarus Roadmap for Higher Education Reform however it seems like the Concept is a response to the regulations on 'developing a plan (national strategy) focused on staff and student mobility and internationalization development in 2015-2016'.

The draft Concept includes the short analysis of academic mobility, its goals, objectives, priorities and directions of development, as well as the list of concrete measures on the faculty and student international mobility support, development and diversification addressed to both those who want to study at the Belarusian institutions and those who want to study abroad. This corresponds to the Roadmap provisions to some extent. The Concept also includes the sources and level of financial support for academic mobility, strategic planning objectives in this area aiming to significantly increase the quality of administering the international exchange programmes.

At the same time, the draft Concept does not allow to assess whether it addresses the most important Roadmap requirement in the field of academic mobility concerning '..changes to the current system of mobility permits, to allow longer periods of mobility within the EHEA for both staff and students, without ministerial approval'. The Concept also refers to the Belarusian Ministry of Education Order #108 as of 10 February 2016 "On processing documents regulating staff business trips for the organisations subordinate to the Ministry of Education" published after Belarus joined the Bologna process but this order is not available for public access. The draft Concept sets out as an objective 'developing legal acts regulating academic mobility in accordance with the new edition of the Education Code', but at the same time, based on the received information, the new Code would not envisage the changes to the articles related to the legal basis of academic mobility.

A significant shortcoming of the draft Concept is that its terminology is irrelevant to the one used by EHEA. It is also unclear whether this document is already approved or is in the process of drafting, also its authors are unknown. On the other hand, it is

obvious that the Concept should be considered as a positive step towards the implementation of the Roadmap provisions on academic mobility .

Lifelong learning and the social dimension of higher education

The Roadmap envisages that by the end of 2016, the Belarusian government should have ‘..reviewed the obligation for students whose education is financed by public funds to accept work placements on graduation with a view to limiting it to specific professions for which there is a significant unmet need in the country and taking into account practice in other European countries’. This obligation was seen by the Belarusian society as a promise to significantly limit the practice of the mandatory work placements for the graduates financed by public funds, and ensure equal rights of all graduates irrespective of the financing for their studies to receive the state support for the entry-level jobs.

However, the steps recently undertaken by the Belarusian authorities show that the practice of mandatory work placements is not being limited and that the conditions for the graduates have been worsening. The insignificant steps to decrease by 20-25 per cent the amount of the public funds to be reimbursed in case of graduate’s rejection of the work placement are envisaged by [the Council of Ministers’ Regulation #998 as of 7 December 2016](#). However, this cannot outweigh the measures related to the expansion of the mandatory work placements scheme.

[The Presidential Decree #4 as of 9 January 2017](#) extends the use of the targeted training for specialists, which envisages at least 5 years of mandatory work placement instead of 2 years. Additionally, the number of placements for targeted training of specialists was increased up to 50 per cent of admission quotes in the healthcare field, 6 per cent in agriculture and 4 per cent in other fields. Besides increasing the duration of mandatory employment, the government partially or fully transfers its spending on student education to so called ‘customers’ - organisations that will employ the specialists after graduation. In the conditions of the worsening situation in the labour market and increasing deficit of jobs for university graduates, the government does not undertake any steps to assist those who studied on the tuition basis with finding first employment.

The state obligation to review the criteria for financial support of students with a view to ensure social equality is not fulfilled. There is no evidence that discriminative rules on the provision of such support have been reviewed. So far, students studying on the tuition basis do not enjoy equal conditions related to the allocation of stipends, dormitory places or compensation for housing outside of dormitory. Students of private HEIs are denied the rights to preferential education loans.

There is no evidence that the government is developing the legislation, which will recognize the results of informal education either.

EHEA fundamental values

By mid-2017, the Ministry should conduct an analysis of the national legislation and submit to the Parliament a proposal on the measures required to incorporate the principles of the Magna Charta Universitatum and Council of Europe Recommendation Rec/CM (2012)7 on the responsibility of public authorities for academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

Currently, there is no evidence that such work is being conducted. The absence of public access to the Education Code amendments does not allow to evaluate and analyse implementation steps towards incorporating the recommendation Rec/CM (2012)7. However, based on the information from available sources we can conclude that the government does not plan significant legislative amendments related to expanding academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The only measure, which is publicly discussed, is limited expansion of HEIs autonomy related to curriculum development.

By mid-2016, Belarus should have developed a plan detailing legislative and policy measures aimed at enabling students and staff to organize freely and to register their organizations and by-mid 2017 introduce any required legislative measures. However, there are no signs that anything has been done in this respect and legislation would be amended to ensure the rights of students and staff.

Conclusions

The process of the implementation of Belarus Roadmap for Higher Education Reform enters its critical phase. In 2017 all the Bologna commitments for higher education reform undertaken by the Belarusian authorities in 2015 in Yerevan must be incorporated into the national legislation.

However, the government continuously postpones the submission of the draft legislative amendments to the Education Code and their review by the National Assembly. The proposal by the Ministry of Education concerning the legislative changes in accordance with the Roadmap is not in public assess and not available for public discussion. Based on the information from available sources, we can conclude that there is no significant progress in the Roadmap implementation especially in terms of the social dimension of higher education, academic values, establishment of independent quality assurance agency and others. This demonstrates a high risk that

the Belarus Roadmap for Higher Education Reform will not be implemented on time and to the extent that was initially envisaged.

Recommendations

In the situation of the increasing risk of the failure to implement the Roadmap provisions, we recommend to the European and Belarusian stakeholders of the Roadmap implementation process:

- To demand the public and open discussion of the Education Code amendments and other legal acts related to the higher education system reforms;
- To organise a transparent international expert evaluation of the legislative amendments prepared by the Belarusian government and their compatibility with the Roadmap provisions and requirements;
- To assist Belarus with the expertise related to incorporation of the Roadmap provisions into the national legislation.