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|  | *Doc. Code: BFUG\_LV\_IS\_45\_8c* |

**Options paper - Belarus application to join the Bologna Process**

**A) Context in brief**

To recall, the two criteria for joining the EHEA approved by Ministers in Berlin in 2003 are:

* an applicant country needs to be a party to the European Cultural Convention;
* the competent public authorities of the applicant country need to commit to and implement the values, goals and key policies of the EHEA.

The application in 2011 from Belarus to join the Bologna Process was not accepted by the BFUG prior to the Bucharest Bologna Conference in 2012, the application having been evaluated by an ad-hoc committee set up for that purpose.

The Belarus authorities have applied again (1 November 2014) for membership of the Bologna Process, and the application is currently under consideration. The BFUG has appointed an ad-hoc committee[[1]](#footnote-2) to evaluate the application. In addition, the Council of Europe organised a visit to Minsk on 3-4 March which comprised a seminar on the EHEA for some 50 representatives of public authorities and the higher education community as well as a series of meetings. A separate report of this visit will be submitted to the BFUG.

Following on from the BFUG discussions (26-27 January meeting) as to the potential outcomes to the application, the BFUG Board (23-24 February meeting) discussed the different options in more detail. This paper sets out those options to assist the BFUG in its decision at its meeting on 24-25 March and should be read in conjunction with the report of the ad hoc committee on the Belarusian application.

The paper draws on

* the documents submitted (official Belarus application and the alternative report by the Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee, submitted to the Bologna Secretariat on 10 December 2014);
* the evaluations of the ad-hoc committee;
* and the findings of the mission to Minsk.

**B) Options**

The January BFUG meeting noted that there are three options to consider. The first is to reject the request for accession; the second is to accept the request unconditionally; and the third option is to grant accession on the basis of certain conditions.

Arguments for and against the different options may be as follows.

**Option 1. Rejection of the application**

Reasons for choosing this option:

* The higher education system does not correspond to the core structures of the Bologna Process, nor are there any clear plans for further reforms or legislative acts e.g. to better implement the three-cycle structure or introduce an independent quality assurance mechanism.
* As in the case of the earlier rejection in 2012, concerns still remain about the fact that academic freedom is circumscribed and student rights are violated.

Reasons for not choosing this option:

* A second rejection could mean that the incentive to introduce further reforms, and to maintain existing ones, could be lost, given that membership of the Bologna Process has been deemed a motivating factor for recent changes, e.g. the initial introduction of ECTS.
* The lack of access to peer-learning and peer-review within the Bologna Process will hamper efforts to meet the objectives of the Bologna Process.
* No stakeholders, whether public authorities or civil society organisations, met with in Minsk recommend this option nor see it as an option that will bring about change and further reforms.

**Conclusion:** On balance, rejecting membership and access to the Bologna Process will risk halting developments and could hinder further improvements such as legislative adoption of higher education strategies that, at this stage, are only agreed on by Rectors. This options also entails the risk of isolating those members of the higher education community in Belarus who wish to work in favour of European-oriented reforms.

**Option 2. Membership**

Reasons for choosing this option:

* Better access to the EHEA will mean more opportunities for inward and outward mobility for students and staff to the benefit of higher education institutions.
* More open institutions and more foreign students, which the authorities stress as the main reason for membership of the Bologna Process, are in themselves a modernising force that can help drive reforms.

Reasons for not choosing this option:

* Belarus has not undertaken any significant amount of Bologna-type reform and thus has not demonstrated a clear will to meet the criteria for accession. Accepting a country in this situation undermines the very concept of the European Higher Education Area.
* The prospect of possible future membership has been considered a motivating factor for the more recent, limited reforms. Civil society organisations have expressed concerns that unconditional accession will not bring about further reforms, since the authorities are more interested in access to EHEA than the actual principles behind EHEA.

**Conclusion:** On balance, granting full access without any conditionality will, similar to rejecting membership, run the risk of halting developments and could hinder further improvements such as legislative adoption of higher education strategies. It will not have the support of an important group of stakeholders fighting for the core principles behind the Bologna Process to be implemented in Belarus.

**Option 3. Conditional access**

This option would consist of access to the Bologna Process on the basis of the fulfilment of a roadmap of actions in the areas identified as problematic in the report of the ad hoc committee. Such a road map could, as a minimum, include the implementation of the three-cycle structure on the Bologna model, independent quality assurance, autonomy of institutions for better curriculum design, work load, mobility and participation of stakeholders, especially students. The road map and evaluation of results would be based on dialogue with a Committee appointed by the BFUG for that purpose.

The conditional approach could take one of two forms. Either:

a) Commitment to future accession: Permitting access at a future date on condition of the completion of the key reforms set out in the roadmap. In the meantime, Belarus would be invited to participate in all appropriate peer learning activities and to observe the proceedings of the BFUG.

b) Accession now, accompanied by a commitment by the Belarusian authorities to agreeing the roadmap with the BFUG and implementing it over the next three years.

If desired, either of these approaches could be designated as giving observer or associate status to Belarus, leading to full membership on completion of the roadmap of reforms.

Reasons for choosing this option:

* This option opens a dialogue with Belarus, to encourage further reform, without suggesting that all conditions for full membership have already been met.
* Peer-learning and peer-review as supportive measures until confirmation of full membership could help maintain the momentum for reforms.
* Civil society organisations – whose support is needed to establish more democratic institutions – advocate this option (approach with strong conditions).
* The heightened monitoring for compliance with Bologna reforms it proposes is consistent with the desire expressed in the BFUG to strengthen monitoring on Bologna reforms for all current members.
* Belarus will be in a different position than (other) countries which acceded to the EHEA in 2003 or later. Although many of these received advice and assistance from their peers in the EHEA, Belarus would be joining the EHEA more than 15 years after the launch of the Bologna Process and would therefore face a bigger challenge in implementing its main policies than countries which joined 4 - 11 years after its launch.

Reasons for not choosing this option:

* The Belarusian authorities might consider this decision demotivating and similar to rejecting the application for membership.
* This option is a departure from the past by introducing a new pathway for decisions on accession (previously, only yes/no options have been possible) even if, as noted, other new members have received assistance and advice in the past.
* This option implies differential treatment for new members.

**Conclusion**: On balance, conditional access, accompanied by peer-learning and peer-review activities, with confirmation of full membership at a later stage, would be more in line with the objectives of the Bologna Process and the reinforced focus on implementation, while taking account of the fact that little progress has been achieved in a number of areas, including students' rights, since 2012. The approach would also have the advantage of being in line with the recommendations of civil society.

**C ) For decision by the BFUG**

The BFUG is asked to consider the alternatives outlined above, and to decide whether to recommend to ministers to either:

* reject the application (option 1);
* accept the application (option 2); or
* offer contingent status to Belarus (option 3), on the basis of either future access (3a) or access now (3b).

1. Present and outgoing Co-Chairs of the BFUG (Latvia, Iceland, Italy and Holy See), the Secretariat and Armenia with the contribution of CoE.

   Some members of the ad hoc committee together with other representatives made a fact-finding mission to Minsk. The group participating in bilateral meetings on 4 March 2015 on behalf of the BFUG consisted of representatives from the Council of Europe, Latvia, Poland, the Holy See, Germany, Armenia, ESU and the European Commission. Education International was unfortunately prevented from participating, as originally planned. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)