Strasbourg, March 5, 2015

**REPORT ON A VISIT BY MEMBERS OF THE BFUG TO MINSK, ORGANIZED BY THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE**

**Introduction**

The Council of Europe organized a visit by members of the BFUG to Minsk on March 3 - 4, 2015. The visit comprised a seminar on the European Higher Education Area for members of the Belarusian academic community on March 3 and a series of meetings on March 4:

* The Minister and First Deputy Minister of Education and Ministry officials, including the Heads of Department for Higher Education and for Quality Assurance, and the Rector of the National Higher Education Institute.
* Representatives of civil society organizations, including the Independent Bologna Committee, the Office for a Democratic Belarus and several non-recognized student organizations.
* Representatives of officially recognized student unions at several universities as well as the recently established Republican Student Council.
* Members of the Presidium of the Republican Council of Rectors, representing the Belarus State Economic University, Minsk University of Management (a private institution), the Belarus State Pedagogical University, Minsk Linguistic University, and the National Higher Education Institute.
* Two Vice Rectors and other representatives of the Belarusian State University of Informatics and Radioelectronics.

The members of the BFUG delegation were: Andrejs Rauhvargers (Latvia; current Co-Chair of the BFUG and Co-Chair of the Implementation WG); Fr. Friedrich Bechina (Holy See; immediate past Co-Chair of the BFUG and Co-Chair of the Structural Reforms WG), Bartłomiej Banaszak (Poland; Co-Chair of the Structural Reforms WG); Peter Greisler (Germany; Co-Chair of the Mobility and Internationalization WG); Erin Nordal (Vice Chair, European Students Union), Gayane Harutyunyan (Head, Bologna Secretariat), Mette Mørck Andersen and Marta Touykova ( European Commission; both participated in the meetings on March 4 only) and Sjur Bergan (Council of Europe; Co-Chair of the Structural Reforms Working Group). Jens Vraa-Jensen (Education International) was prevented from participating as the airline did not accept the documents attesting he would receive his visa on arrival in Minsk and denied him boarding.

The seminar and the series of meetings were organized by the Council of Europe, the Council of Europe Information Point in Belarus, and the National Institute for Higher Education.

The present report seeks to provide an analytical summary of the main points covered by the visit. It does not seek to provide an extensive, meeting-by-meeting narrative and it does not seek to provide a joint opinion on what the BFUG's advice to the Ministers on the application by Belarus should be. This was not the purpose of the visit and members of the delegation do not necessarily hold the same view on what the BFUG's advice should be.

**Degree structure**

The visit confirmed that the Belarusian degree structure consists of a first degree of 3 - 5 years' duration and a second degree of 1 - 2 years' duration. Access to higher education is granted on the basis of 11 years of primary and secondary school. There are two doctoral level degrees: *kandidat nauk* and *doktor nauk*. There is some movement from a 5 year to a 4 year first degree, as illustrated by the visit to the Belarus State University of Informatics and Radioelectronics, which had implemented the shift in 2013. Experience seems to show that while relatively few students with a 5 year first degree go on to take a Master's degree, more students with a 4 year first degree do so. The Presidium of the Council of Rectors stated that a second degree qualification will now be required for access to doctoral studies. Workload is indicated in years of study. While there is awareness of the ECTS, ECTS credits are not systematically used as a reference or awarded to students.

Interlocutors in the Ministry, the National Institute for Higher Education, and from the Rectors’ Council underlined the need to align the Belarusian degree system more strongly with the needs of the labor market.

There is currently no National Qualifications Framework but there is work on developing a framework in certain disciplines and specialties. This reflects a quite strong emphasis on disciplinary specialization, which was also underlined in the discussion with the Belarus State University for Informatics and Radioelectronics in its shift from a 5 year to a 4 year degree, which was in part accomplished by reducing elements of humanities and social sciences in the study programs of what is a well performing, highly specialized institution. We did not get a clear impression of how Belarus might draw on the experience of the ongoing work on developing frameworks for certain disciplines to develop a fully-fledged national QF, although there was reference to the desirability of developing a national framework.

**Quality assurance**

External quality assurance is currently conducted by a Department for Quality Assurance within the Ministry of Education. There was some interest in our argument that quality assurance should be carried out by an independent agency, with reference to the European Standards and Guidelines. At the same time, there was only limited understanding and acceptance of the role of students in quality assurance, in particular at program level. Several rectors referred to the fact that universities carry out student satisfaction survey but questioned whether students were qualified to assess study programs they had themselves not completed. There was more openness to student participation in institutional assessment; see however the discussion of student participation below.

The current quality assurance practice stresses quantitative/statistical aspects and ISO standards. Developing a QA practice in conformity with the ESG will require substantial work and is not merely an issue of establishing an agency outside of the Ministry. Sustained work will be required to develop a quality culture within institutions as well as in public authorities. This is, on the other hand, an issue not only for Belarus.

**Transparency instruments**

As referred to above, the ECTS is known but not systematically used or awarded, and workload is expressed in years of study rather than in ECTS - or ECTS compatible - credits. Transcripts are issued but the Diploma Supplement is not systematically used. Although competences are often mentioned, the learning outcomes approach is yet to be adopted.

The total workload for students is high and estimated at 54 hours per week, of which a high proportion is classroom teaching. The figures most frequently referred to was in the 24 - 28 hour range but interlocutors underlined that there are differences between disciplines and levels of study. We asked representatives of the officially recognized student unions whether they considered the workload excessive and the reply was that it was not, as they needed to invest much efforts in their studies and that they nevertheless found time for social and organizational activities in addition to their studies.

**Mobility**

Academic mobility of both staff and students is relatively limited, with a high proportion of international students in Belarus coming from China, Vietnam, Iran, Iraq, and countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States and hence largely but not exclusively from outside of the EHEA. There is some involvement with the ERASMUS+ program but insufficient language competence and non-use of the ECTS are obstacles.

The Ministry and the Rectors’ Council both confirmed that absences of up to 10 days during the semester required written approval by the Rector and absences of more than 10 days the approval of the Ministry (but not the personal approval by the Minister). It is clear that this is an obstacle to mobility but the views expressed by our interlocutors on the reasons for this regulation differed. The Ministry underlined that the regulation was intended to ensure applications for mobility be well justified in terms of the academic benefit of the travel and ensure the efficient use of exchanges, whereas the Independent Bologna Committee and other civil society organizations saw the practice as an instrument of political control and dissuasion. The civil society organizations also stated that whether permission to go abroad for academic purposes was granted often depended on the destination and purpose of travel; an application to attend an academic conference on e.g. human rights was likely to be refused.

**Rectors' conference**

The Republican Council of Rectors - the Belarusian Rectors' Conference - has all 54 Belarusian universities, both public and private, as members. The full conference meets twice a year, whereas the Presidium of 10 Rectors, of whom we met with five, meets four times a year. There are also Rectors' Councils at *oblast'* (regional) level. The Republican Council of Rectors is not a member of the EUA.

The Council represents the universities with public authorities and is in frequent dialogue with the Ministry of Education. The Head of State is occasionally invited to meetings of the full Council if the issues for discussion warrant such an invitation.

At our direct question, members of the Presidium stated that they would make their case to Parliament should they disagree with Ministry positions on issues they consider important, and that they have done so in the past. The Council is heard in the preparation of legislation concerning higher education and, depending on the issue, its opinion will be stated by the Presidium or by the full Council.

**Scholarships/work obligation**

Belarusian universities accept students financed through publicly funded scholarships as well as privately funded students (generally funded by their parents or themselves). Students on scholarships undertake the obligation to work for two years immediately following graduation in jobs to which they are directed by public authorities. The Ministry sees this mandatory work placement as a reasonable obligation undertaken in return for a public scholarship and underlines that students sign a contract to this effect when receiving their scholarship and also sees this as a way of ensuring first employment. The civil society organizations strongly stated that this work placement is an unreasonable obligation and can be - and is - used to exercise pressure on students. Upon graduation, graduates and particularly those in teacher training and medicine hove some choice in work placement, but those placements generally are in unattractive, (mainly rural) areas and while venally related to a student's specialization, this is not an absolute right or requirement. Higher education is free of charge, but any student refusing the job offered will need to reimburse the cost of his/her education.

**University autonomy and student representation**

These were the most difficult issues covered during our meetings with the various stakeholders, and the issues on which views diverged the most strongly. The Rectors underlined that their institutions are autonomous, whereas the civil society organizations stated that no university could be fully independent of the government.

The civil society organizations pointed to the use of short term contracts for faculty as a threat to their independence as faculty taking views not in conformity with those of the government or the leadership of their institutions could risk not having their contracts renewed, something that had happened on several occasions.

The same divergence of views applies to the role of student representation and student organizations (see also quality assurance, above). The Ministry as well as the representatives of the officially recognized student unions underlined that students play an important role in the life and governance of universities and that 25 per cent of the seats on university governance bodies are reserved for students, although they referred to difficulties in filling the seats on some occasions. They also pointed to the establishment in February 2015 of the Republican Student Council, as a national student union, as an important step. The Minister underlined that this Council had been established under the auspices of the Ministry to further the development of the higher education system.

This view was sharply contested by the Independent Bologna Committee and other civil society organizations, including non-recognized student governance organizations. Their status as non-recognized also implied that this meeting had to be held at the Council of Europe Information Point. These organizations underlined that student elections are not real because all candidates must be approved by the institution and belong to the recognized student unions. They also pointed to the fact that membership of non-recognized organizations is illegal and can have consequences. The Belarusian Student Association (BSA), which is the only Belarusian member of ESU, has not been able to operate openly since 2001.

One Rector stated in private conversation that by culture and tradition student associations a more focused on issues like conditions in dormitories and organization social and cultural activities for students than in participating in institutional governance. This impression was at least to a considerable extent confirmed in the meeting with the officially recognized student unions, where many of the activities referred to concerned precisely these issues. A representative of one union at one of the universities underlined that all members of his union had been able to obtain a place in a student dormitory. Representatives of the recognized student unions pointed to examples of student proposals to Deans that had led to positive changes.

Questions about the possibility for students to participate in political activities, especially leading up to the elections to be held in fall 2015, were answered by saying students had the same possibility as all citizens to engage in political activities in accordance with the legislation. Rectors said they valued divergence of opinion. One Rector asserted that some students invoked political reasons when expelled for academic failure, whereas another Rector met with students to explain their rights and obligations under the law. To a direct question about the refusal to recognize a specific organization the Ministry said it was unaware of the organization and referred to the Ministry of Justice as competent authority for approval/registration of associations.

**Prospects and consequences of the decision on the application by Belarus**

We heard very strong appeals by both public authorities and members of the academic community for Ministers to admit Belarus to the EHEA. These appeals were partly founded on a view of Belarus as a European country and of what was seen as its exclusion from the EHEA as unnatural and as hindering the development of higher education in Belarus toward European standards. It was underlined that Belarusian universities do have contacts and cooperation with many institutions in EHEA countries as well as in North America, but membership of the EHEA was nevertheless seen as important to the further development of the system as well as of practice.

There seem to be somewhat divergent views on the extent to which the situation of higher education has evolved since 2011 - 12, when Belarus' application to accede to the EHEA was rejected, but the Independent Bologna Committee maintains there has been some progress in structural reform while maintaining that the situation has not improved as regards academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and student representation.

Neither acceptance nor non-acceptance of Belarus in the EHEA will imply that the current situation will be preserved but there were quite divergent views of the consequences of either option. The Presidium of the Rectors' Council underlined its strong support for EHEA membership and felt this would be an important factor in reforming and developing higher education in Belarus. Other interlocutors, also in private conversations, expressed concern that a rejection of the application would mean that a window of opportunity would be closed and that those who wanted to reform higher education in a European direction would find themselves in an even more difficult situation.

The views among civil society organizations were also divergent on this point, with some organizations expressing strong doubts about whether Belarus would in fact implement substantial reforms if admitted to the EHEA and others arguing that EHEA membership is likely to bring reforms and that a rejection would isolate those who work for reforms and a European orientation.

**Road map**

The Independent Bologna Committee in its alternative report puts forward the idea of a road map toward Belarusian membership of the EHEA. In our meetings, we underlined that Belarus would face many challenges if it were admitted to the EHEA in that it would join a process that has now been developing for 15 years. We also referred to the fact that many countries that joined the EHEA in 2003 and later were offered and accepted advice and assistance in implementing EHEA policies and reforms in their respective systems. The Head of the Bologna Secretariat in particular pointed to the case of Armenia in this respect.

The offer of advice and assistance was well received and we concluded the meeting with the Minister by suggesting it would be helpful if he would submit a proposal in writing for how such advice and assistance could be organized and the issues that could be covered.

It was not possible from our discussions to form an opinion on whether such a roadmap would be acceptable to the Belarusian authorities if offered as part of a decision accepting Belarus in the EHEA in 2015 or as a part of a decision accepting Belarus in the EHEA in 2015 with a view of confirming indefinitely this decision in 2018 or as part of a decision pointing to a possible accession in 2018 Opinions among BFUG members and consultative members participating in the visit differ on this point, which should be an important point in the BFUG debate.

One interlocutor from the civil society organizations underlined the importance of organization seminars at regional universities and to include representatives of civil society organizations among the participants.