How Far Is Belarusian Education from European Standards?

"Belarus aspires to the integration with the universal educational system preserving its achievements and traditions", – said the Deputy Minister of Education Alexander Zhuk on 3 April 2013. However, what he meant under "traditions" sometimes clearly contradicts the principles of education accepted elsewhere in Europe.

The system of manual control, absence of real self-governance, political pressure on students and universities plague the atmosphere of educational freedom in the geographic heart of Europe.

Evident Lack of Academic Freedoms

Belarus remains the only European state outside of the Bologna system. This gap complicates recognition of Belarusian academic degrees and slows down the Belarusian-European academic exchanges. Bologna system experts expect substantially greater amount of academic freedoms in Belarus – something which the government of Belarus resists.

European University Association completed in 2012 a study on university autonomy in Belarus. The study authors examined problems in four areas: organisational, financial, staffing and academic autonomy. Their methodology allows assessing progress in each area in figures: from 0 (the worst) to 100 (the best).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Autonomy</th>
<th>Index (out of 100%)</th>
<th>Country With a Lower Index in Europe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

EUA Index on University Autonomy in Belarus
In terms of organisational autonomy, Belarusian universities demonstrate poor results. While in Europe the academic community itself elects and dismiss the heads of universities, in Belarus this right belongs to the President for state universities and the Minister of Education for private universities. The same dependency on the Ministry of Education also plagues other organisational issues such as structural arrangement of university departments and composition of its management bodies.

Universities’ financial dependence also weakens Belarusian academic freedom. In accordance with the Code of Education, the Ministry of Education prepares all the budgets of universities and appropriates funds for them. They cannot even dispose of the money left after a fiscal year – they have to return it to the state. In addition, universities do not own their building – they only have a right to use them. This makes them very dependent on the true owner of the campuses – the state.

Some restrictions also affect the "staffing area" of academic independence. Candidates for top academic posts must have a prescribed minimum academic degrees. Why decides on awarding degrees? The state body called the Higher Attestation Commission plays a crucial role. Only this agency, but not universities, can award people scholarly degrees. It decides who "deserves" a PhD or another degree to become a Belarusian academic.

Proper academic autonomy includes a number of rights of
universities: to decide on the number of students to enrol, to select qualifying candidates, to launch and terminate educational courses, to draft study plans and programmes, to choose the language of education etc. The government decides on each and every of these issues.

**Education as a Tool for Politics**

The Belarusian regime as many other autocracies does its best to control the higher education not just legally or financially, but politically and ideologically.

At the end of 2012 three Belarusian NGOs: Centre for Students Initiatives’ Development, "Solidarity" and Public Bologna Committee – prepared a joint report, in which they highlighted serious interference of the universities by the government into the process of education.

Incidents of interference include multiple reported cases of forcing students to vote during the parliamentary elections in September 2012, using students to do unpaid work and putting pressure on dissident professors. For example, at the end of March 2013 Ihar Kuzminich, a lecturer of the Yanka Kupala State University of Hrodna retired in protest against pressure upon him and the dismissal of his colleague for writing a history textbook.

In 2004 the whole institution – European Humanities University – had to move to Vilnius because of intense pressure for free-thinking and attempts to become academically independent in European sense. Now this university operates in Lithuania as a local educational institution with 90% Belarusians out of all students.

Another example of politicisation of higher education is the practise of politically-motivated expulsions after almost every electoral campaign. After the last wave of such expulsions dating back to December 2010, six heads of the universities joined the "black list" of Belarusian officials,
who cannot travel to the European Union.

All students are also supposed to take the mandatory "Belarusian ideology" course, which shows that the government sees higher education a mere tool for its own political purposes.

Students Cannot Fully Enjoy Their Rights

For decades Belarus is no longer a totalitarian state and the situation is much better than in Soviet times. Hundreds of students travel abroad to study via Erasmus Mundus, Tempus and other exchange programmes. Universities can also invite foreign lecturers for short- or long-term visits.

Formally, students self-governance exists in form of "students' councils" at every university. But in reality these bodies always go along with the administration and are composed mostly of members of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM) – the largest pro-governmental national youth organisation. The latter, meanwhile, has its own cells at every university, school and college.

One symptomatic case occurred in 2011 when the NGO "Civil Forum" tried to gather all the heads of students' councils from different universities for a workshop on student self-government. Many of those refused to attend the event after "consultations with the university administration".

All in all, these fake demonstrations of academic freedoms keep the Belarusian out-of-date higher education away from the Western educational standards. The government only conceals real failures, preserving its pernicious control over what must be as free as possible – universities.

With this approach it will be really hard not just to join the Bologna process, but even to maintain the current level of quality in higher education. De-politicisation, guarantees of academic freedoms and creating real student self-government
bodies must become the first steps in the right direction.