

# The Belarusian National University – the Path Forward

Two months ago dozens of prominent Belarusian intellectuals and civil society leaders called for the establishment of a Belarusian national university. This push followed realisation by leaders of Belarusian civil society that they were powerless to influence the election of the rector of the European Humanities University – the largest donor-sponsored independent educational project associated with Belarus.

Supporters of the Belarusian national university say that an independent university run by Belarusians and with Belarus at the core of its focus is not just a dream. It may well become a reality if they succeed in bringing together existing informal education providers in Belarus with centres of Belarusian studies at reputable Western institutions.

## The Long Road to a National University

Although an independent Belarus has existed for nearly 25 years, Soviet-style pedagogical practises still [heavily influence Belarusian higher education](#). The system remains largely unreformed – state ideology is taught as part of the higher education curriculum in Belarus.

Belarusian educational system focuses on preserving the status quo rather than preparing reformers

Although this year Belarus officially [joined the Bologna process](#), few believe that this will bring significant change. History, political science, and human rights related coursework focus primarily on preserving the status quo rather than preparing successive generations to implement reforms and push along the country's development.

Ten years ago, many hoped that the [European Humanities University](#) in Vilnius would become the true intellectual centre of Belarusian academic life. In its early years in exile the university managed to attract a group of respectable scholars, particularly in the fields of history and political science. However, within a few years most of them left either disillusioned or [dismissed by the administration](#).

Deprived of its strongest academics in areas such as history and political science, the research output and visibility of EHU among the general public in Belarus has [remained very low](#). The university developed a reputation as [a trampoline for Russian-speakers to emigrate from Belarus](#) rather than an incubator of new ideas and initiatives related to the place whence they came.

In May 2015, nearly 60 prominent civil society figures of Belarus [signed an appeal](#) calling for the creation of a national university. Although the vast majority of students and lecturers at the European Humanities University still come from Belarus, the signatories of the May appeal believe that EHU "has finally departed the field of [Belarusian] interests and influence on Belarusian democratic society" and is no longer a Belarusian project.

This address honed in its criticism at the EHU administration for its "[non-transparent election process](#) and unpredictable changes to the rules of the game" which left the university in the hands of the new rector David Pollick, "who has not only never dealt with Belarus-related issues, but also is not even familiar with the situation in the country or the region".

## **The Limited Promise of Informal Education**

With Belarusian state universities captive to the state's control and the donor-funded European Humanities University

shedding its Belarusian identity in nearly every aspect save the citizenship of its students and teaching staff several informal education projects emerged in Belarus. Many of those who had to leave the European Humanities University or various Belarusian state universities have wound up teaching for informal education initiatives.

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Some of these projects, such as the Flying University, the Belarusian Collegium or the European College of Liberal Arts, run long-term programmes, public lectures, workshops and summer schools with hundreds of Belarusians "graduating" from them or attending their courses. These initiatives provide a [unique environment for free-thinking](#) inside Belarus, a limited but important movement that has so far been tolerated by the authorities.

But despite the benefits and flexibility of an informal education, these projects lack crucial components offered by proper institutions of higher education. For one, students do not receive an internationally recognised degree for completing coursework lack international and interdisciplinary learning environment. Moreover, conducting serious academic research and bidding for research funding is very difficult without official affiliation with a recognised university. This led to the idea of Belarusian National University.

## **Belarusian National University – a Network University**

One of those pushing to establish the Belarusian National University is [Aliaksandr Milinkievič](#), leader of the opposition movement For Freedom and a former candidate for the EHU rector position. Milinkievič told Belarus Digest that an

important function of the National University should be to counterbalance the spread of the aggressive ideals of the "Russian World" doctrine in Belarus.

two-thirds of Belarusian students who study abroad go to Russia

According to Milinkievič, two-thirds of Belarusian students who study abroad go to Russia where they have the same rights as Russian citizens, while in the European Union Belarusians often have to pay much more than EU nationals to attend a university, to say nothing of the additional expenses they face with visas and other bureaucratic obstacles.

Milinkievič is calling for the new university to strike a balance between heavily focusing on Belarus and remaining an open international institution. The Belarusian National University should, he argues, come up with its own ideas about reforming the political system, economy and society in Belarus, and help the strengthen national and civic identity of its students.

The director of the Political Sphere Institute Andrej Kazakievič, who is also affiliated with the Belarusian Collegium, believes that building partnerships between informal education institutions in Belarus with foreign universities is currently the best means by which the Belarusian National University could be established.

Courses taken in an informal education setting could help students to proceed with formal master and doctoral level studies abroad

Kazakievič proposes establishing Master's and Doctoral programmes at reputable European universities that would be designed for Belarusians, though still remain open to anyone interested in order to make them more international in nature. The teaching staff should also comprise of a mix of Belarusian

and foreign scholars. The programmes should focus not only on Belarus but on the region in general in order to make them more attractive.

According to Kazakievič's vision, informal education initiatives would also become an integral part of this network. Courses taken in an informal education setting could help students to proceed with formal master and doctoral level studies abroad. An international PhD programme for Belarusians, coordinated by the Political Sphere Institute is just one potential option for establishing the necessary infrastructure, as it based in Belarus, but also cooperates with universities in Lithuania and Poland.

## **A Western Standard for Belarusian Studies**

The experience of Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Alberta and other centres focused on Ukraine all demonstrate how regional expertise within established universities can be utilised.

The success of informal education initiatives in Belarus shows that, in terms of research and teaching, a great deal can be done inside Belarus itself. Combining the strengths and reach of informal education in Belarus with quality control and formal qualifications afforded by EU institutions of higher learning seems like a promising way forward.

This combination would also allow for greater engagement with Belarusian academics from the diaspora. Several initiatives, such as the Belarusian Francis Skaryna Library in London or the Ostrogorski Centre, which, among other projects, runs Belarus Digest and [the Journal of Belarusian Studies](#), could also find ways to cooperate with the National University. And these are just some of the organisations working in the West

and in Belarus that are interested in supporting a truly independent Belarusian university.

The university could also act as an incubator for academics and higher education managers working on Belarus-related topics. Being based both in Belarus and abroad would help it strengthen working ties between students and faculty members and Belarusian civil society organisations, think tanks and independent media.

Whatever format this education project takes, the main indicator of success of this new initiative should be the volume and quality of its Belarus-related research and teaching as well as its real impact on developments in Belarus.

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