

EHU: Belarusian University In Exile or For Exile?

Last month the Belarusian youth web site generation.by published a diagram showing that 2/3 of European Humanities University (EHU) graduates do not return to Belarus after completing their studies. According to generation.by, the data came from a poll of 2011 graduates of bachelors' programs published on the EHU website. The university described this information as false and explained that it was a mistake by their website administrator.

This has raised a heated discussion in Belarus in which many questioned whether it was a good idea to spend Western money to help people to leave Belarus. The argument is that the very reason for the existence of the EHU is to raise and nurture a new Belarusian elite rather than to stimulate immigration.

Established in 1992 in Belarus, the EHU had to move to Lithuania in 2005 because of pressure from Belarusian authorities. The exiled university found its new home in Vilnius, which is just a three-hour train ride from Minsk. According to a Radio Free Europe interview with the EHU Rector Anatoli Mikhailov, since 2006 the number of EHU students has risen tenfold. Currently around 1800 students are enrolled at EHU, more than 98% of whom are Belarusian.

EHU as an Exit Strategy

Darius Udryś, EHU's vice-rector for development and international relations who took his position earlier this year, explained to Belarus Digest that the actual figures of those who return to Belarus are not so low. Surveys of 2009-2010 graduates of EHU's full residency BA programs showed that about 37% returned to Belarus after graduation. 43% chose to continue their studies, enrolling in MA programs and 26% of

respondents enrolled in MA programs at EHU and 17% at other universities. Those who reside in Vilnius during their BA studies constitute a minority of EHU students.

It is not surprising that a significant number of EHU graduates prefer to pursue study and work opportunities abroad. The young and ambitious may have a hard time finding jobs in Belarus. Belarus today does not need people with strong knowledge of foreign languages and a Western education. The Belarusian state-owned economy is [subsidized](#) by Russia and does not have to be efficient to survive.

Foreign investors are scared to go to Belarus because of legal instability and pressure from some opposition groups which see them as "bailing out the regime". As a result many EHU graduates cannot find well-paid jobs in Belarus and look for more lucrative opportunities abroad. It is hardly possible to blame them or the EHU for this.

Incentives to Return

A proper system of incentives could encourage students to return to Belarus and use their education for the benefit of their country. Students could be asked to work in Belarus for a year or two if they received financial aid for their studies. Such a requirement would not be unprecedented. For instance, a large number of academic visitors to the United States are subject to a two-year home-country physical presence requirement. This is how the United States ensure that the education of foreign students paid by the US tax payers in the form of scholarships actually benefits the students' home countries.

It appears that the money spent on the EHU may not be wasted even when EHU graduates decide not to return to Belarus immediately after completing their studies. Changes will not happen overnight in Belarus and a long-term perspective requires the preparation of a new elite. The country's transition will be

less painful if well-educated Belarusians who have studied and worked in democratic societies are in charge.

No other country will offer EHU graduates a better opportunity to work in senior government positions to implement changes than their own. However, EHU graduates are more likely to consider going back to Belarus in the long-run only if they are genuinely interested in Belarus, not just in learning technical skills and foreign languages. Is the EHU doing enough to cultivate such interest?

The EHU as a Belarusian University

One of the hotly debated topic related to the EHU is the use of the Belarusian language and the identity of the EHU as a Belarusian institution. In an online conference on Radio Liberty in April, the Rector of the EHU Anatoly Mikhailov faced allegations that the university administration does not appreciate the value of the Belarusian language. Some argued that the EHU is a cosmopolitan Russian-speaking university without a focus on Belarus.

When the rector and two of three prorectors do not speak Belarusian, it is difficult to expect that they will encourage its use. A recently announced [vacancy](#) for the EHU Head of International Relations Unit mentions that the applicants should have knowledge of English, Russian and Lithuanian. Belarusian is not mentioned at all.

The Belarusian language is in a difficult situation today. According to the 2009 official census, 53.2% of Belarusian residents considered Belarusian to be their native language and 23% predominantly speak it at home. To illustrate the trend, in 1999 73.6% considered Belarusian their native language and 37% used it at home. The position of the language is getting weaker, not least because the pro-Russian authorities of Belarus often openly discourage its use. Aliaksandr Lukashenka speaks Belarusian when he wants to

mock opposition and human rights activists.

The lack of state support is one of several reasons why the majority of the urban population in Belarus understands Belarusian but speaks predominantly Russian. It is not surprising that some students find it difficult to study in Belarusian. Learning materials in Belarusian are hard to find and often nonexistent. Moreover, because the Belarusian national identity has been suppressed for such a long time, many simply [lack](#) the patriotic feeling and respect which most other nations of the region hold in relation to their native languages.

In the context of contemporary Belarus, the situation with the use of the Belarusian language at the EHU is not so bad. Darius Udryś explained to Belarus Digest that no university in today's Belarus offers more courses taught in Belarusian than EHU. According to him, about 25% of EHU classes are taught in Belarusian and the EHU's required core curriculum includes courses on Belarusian history and culture. Although some question the accuracy of the 25% figure already aired before by Anatoli Mikhaïlov, several classes, mostly related to Belarusian history and cultural heritage, are indeed taught in Belarusian.

Fr Alexander Nadson, who directs Belarusian Library in London and is regarded as a strong moral authority among Belarusian-speakers, also thinks that the situation of the Belarusian language and studies at the EHU is better than at most Belarus-based universities. His impression is that the university does permit instruction in Belarusian, and that its department of Belarusian studies is conducting a number of important projects. In 2008, the EHU awarded Fr Nadson an honorary doctorate.

Darius Udryś says that the university plans to replace Russian-language modules with English-speaking modules to respond to new trends and student demands. Student demands are

indeed importantm but so are the reasons for establishing the EHU as a center of research and teaching activities focused on Belarus.

It appears that more English-language teaching should go hand in hand with the encouragement of the usage of the Belarusian language. With Russia's more assertive policy and uncertain prospects for a democratic Belarus, the [cultivation](#) of its national identity may be easier to achieve than democracy for Belarus. Belarus needs an elite with a well-articulated national identity to make its statehood sustainable and democratic.

Towards Belarusian Tilsit

When British historian Norman Davies presented his new book "Vanished Kingdoms" earlier this year, he used Belarus as an example of a nation without a mature elite. According to him, a fragile Belarusian state emerged after World War I, and Stalin [purged](#) nearly all its national elite in the late 1930s. In his opinion this is the main reason why today Belarusians cannot govern themselves other than by a "teapot dictator" like Lukashenka. Norman Davies added that it usually takes time to form a demos and a self-sufficient political entity.

The role of exile intellectual centers is difficult to overestimate. For instance, in the period from 1890 to 1904, around 2,500 book titles in the Lithuanian Latin alphabet were published outside of today's Lithuania – mostly in Tilsit, a city in East Prussia. These publications and the Lithuanian intellectual movement in East Prussia played a crucial role in the formation of a modern national identity for Lithuanians and their statehood.

The EHU could conduct more serious research on current political and social topics and go beyond giving technical and foreign language skills to its students. The university could not only tolerate but actually encourage the use of the

Belarusian language in teaching subjects beyond Belarusian history and culture. This could be coupled with creating incentives for graduates to return to work in Belarus.

The Belarusian elite of that time lacked a similar safe haven, which made its nation-building task more difficult. With the EHU's help, Vilnius could become a Tilsit for Belarusians.

The Idea of Belarus at the Crossroads of Philosophy and History



In the world dominated by the “clash of civilizations” rhetoric and memories of bloody nationalist wars, nationalism is considered dangerous. However, the sentiment has become a highly positive phenomenon, and even, to an extent, a requirement at the international summer school “Belarus in the European Context: Current Discussions on Nation-Building,” organized by the Institute for Historical Research on Belarus and Philosophy Department of the European Humanities University ([EHU](#)) last week. Opening the school on August 2, Zahar Sybeka of Belarusian State Economic University said, tongue-in check, that all school participants were “nationalists.” The following six days proved him right as

they showed their passion for the Belarusian culture and history and their concern about the country's future.

Fittingly, the school was held in "[Kernavės](#) Bajorynė", next to the highly symbolic UNESCO World Heritage Site that has become a treasure trove for archeologists. The event brought together intellectuals from Belarus, Poland, Latvia, Russia, and Lithuania to debate the development of Belarusian identity and the Belarusian national idea. The researchers also discussed the role of social groups in cities and villages, the role of history and memory in Belarus' national identity, as well as the issues of nationalism, Europeization, and democratization.

Although the school guests were divided into experts/tutors and participants, their roles have merged in heated discussions. Everybody had an opportunity to present and defend his/her work and comment on the others' research.

While historians and philosophers were the majority, the gathering also included political scientists, a journalist, and a jurist. The schools represented at summer school included Belarusian State University (BSU), Harvard University, Metropolitan University Prague, Polish Academy of Sciences, European Humanities University, the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, University of Bremen, Samara State University, Hrodna State University, Polotsk State University, and University of Latvia.

Many interesting views were expressed during the school sessions. Olga Shparaga, EHU professor of philosophy, argued that for Belarusians "the question about the idea of Europe" is, first and foremost, a question about themselves. In contrast, University of Białystok professor Aleh Latyshonak said Belarusians lack "Europeanness." While Latyshonak said he views Belarusians as a Eurasian civilization, he believes Belarus could pass a Byzantine civilization in a best-case scenario.

In his turn, Belarusian philosopher and writer Ihar Babkou presented identity as a “battlefield” of power and knowledge. Interestingly, Valentin Akudovich, who teaches at the Belarusian Collegium, argued that Belarusian ethno nationalism has no future and will be very soon superceded by civic nationalism. In her presentation, Elena Temper of the University of Leipzig discussed the meaning of memory for the national self-identification and argued that the two most vivid examples of collective memory for Belarusians are the Great Patriotic War and Kurapaty.

Other prominent participants included editor-in-chief of Belarusian magazine ARCHE Valer Bulgakau; Poland-based Belarusian historian Yauhen Miranovich; EHU lecturer Piotr Rudkouski; Hrodna State University professor Siarhei Tokts; Alvydas Nikzentaitis of Vilnius Pedagogical University; and EHU professor Ales Smalianchuk.

At the final banquet, the school guests were united by signing Polish, Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Russian songs. The school materials will be published by the EHU in the fall, and the organizers hope to make the summer school an annual tradition.

Listening to each other has allowed the researchers to share their views and learn from each other. As philosopher Alyaksei Dzermant [summed up](#), the event has left the participants with an impression “that a lot more unites rather than divides” them.

VC

Political Sphere in Belarus: from Marxism-Leninism to Political Science

Like its native country, the discipline of political science in Belarus will take decades to outgrow its Soviet past. After all, most of the country's contemporary social science luminaries were brought up on the volumes of scientific communism, memorizing the blessings of the socialist revolution and the proletarian dictatorship, and today force-feed their own students with courses like the "Ideology of the Belarusian State." As a result, the spectre of communist past still haunts the Belarusian academia.

Overcoming that "spectre" is what inspired five young researchers at the Belarusian State University to found *Palitychnaja Sfera* (*Political Sphere*), the only professional journal of political studies in Belarus. Since its inception in 2001, the journal has evolved into a dynamic and professional research institute geared toward acquiring new knowledge and presenting it at the academic and political levels, as well as to the public at large. Today, *Political Sphere* is, first and foremost, a community of political and social scientists.

"Our main focus is the gradual formation of a Belarusian school of political studies," explained Andrei Kazakevich, director of the Institute, in a Feb. 15 interview. *Political Sphere* aims to represent achievements of Belarusian political science without political and ideological limitations, overcome negative consequences of authoritarian rule for the Belarusian academic community and society, and maintain a dialogue between political scientists, the public, and the

private institutions. *Political Sphere* also hopes to encourage the study of Belarusian politics, stimulate research and analytical activities in Belarus, and integrate Belarusian scientists in the international academic community, according to the "Concept note" on the Institute's web site.

This spring, *Political Sphere* is completing a research project on the evolution of Belarusian national identity in 1990-2008. Nation, national project, concept of nation, and ethnic conflicts are the focus for the upcoming issue of the journal. "The topic is very important for Belarus, which is undergoing the process of nation-building, and where the national identity is fragmented," said Kazakevich.

The journal *Political Sphere* receives submissions from the researchers in Ukraine, Russia, Lithuania, and the United States, but most of its contents comes from Belarusian authors, according to Kazakevich. All articles pass an anonymous review. Sometimes the institute publishes the so-called "English issues," compiled from the most interesting articles translated into English, said the Institute's researcher and board member Siarhei Kuzniatsou in a Feb. 16 e-mail. The publication's primary audience is political scientists, students, analysts, and observers. While *Political Sphere* may also be of interest for politicians and government officials, "they feel themselves smart enough without such readings," noted Dzianis Melyantsou, a researcher and board member of the Institute, in a Feb. 15 e-mail.

Having experienced the "idiosyncrasies" of Belarusian academia firsthand, members of the Institute identify the absence of empirical research and the isolation from international academia as the main obstacles to the growth of political science in Belarus. These obstacles have been both the main reason for the journal's existence and the primary concern of the founders of *Political Sphere*, who in 2005 moved the journal to the European Humanities University in exile in Vilnius, Lithuania, due to the increasing suppression at home.

According to Kazakevich, the move is partial, and Minsk remains the center for the scientific community associated with the journal. In 2009, Political Sphere became independent from EHU, but remains registered in Lithuania.

The *Political Sphere* team consists of 12-15 permanent authors and researchers, all of whom are political scientists and sociologists between the ages of 25 and 35. Some of them are associated with Belarusian State University and National Academy of Sciences, while others received their MA and PhD degrees abroad, according to Melyantsou. Andrei Yahorau, a researcher and a board member at the Institute, said in a Feb. 16 e-mail the team's age corresponds to the age of the Belarusian political science, which started developing only in the recent 15-20 years. According to Yahorau, the team's interest in political science emerged as a result of the necessity to understand the political contradictions of the 90s. With contemporary Belarus being a "barely known state from the scientific view point," we are excited about discovering and describing every piece of Belarus' political reality," he said.

The difficult conditions of Belarus' social sciences have affected the career trajectories of all members of Institute. "It is very difficult (and often impossible) to defend a dissertation, get a job at the university that will correspond to one's qualification and career plans, undertake independent research, or officially publish one's work," said Yahorau.

"For the authoritarian regime in Belarus, research on politics is a taboo," Kazakevich said. "Political science is squeezed out by ideology, and 'politics' is considered as an undesirable and risky research subject. Belarus' conservative and patronizing academic community is isolated from its western equivalents, and there is no dynamic or incentives for creative work." Kazakevich said the discipline of political science has never become quite legitimate in Belarus. "Its main difference with the West is the orientation on

translating current knowledge and speculative musings. Empirical research and attention to details is lacking,” he added.

Despite the difficulties the team faces, *Political Sphere* aspires to take the place it deserves in the Belarusian academic community as well as integrate into the international academic field. Yahorau also said, “To be accepted as researchers and professors, to prepare the next generations of Belarusian political scientists, to form a vibrant scholarly community, and to discover the political reality in Belarus for ourselves, our country and the world, is our greatest ambition.”

VC

The article originally appeared in Spring 2010 Belarusian Review (Vol. 22, No. 1).

Travel Safe, Belarusian Student



Despite having one of the highest student ratios in Europe, a virtually free higher education, and laws making study abroad difficult, the best and brightest young Belarusians continue flocking to or at least dreaming of expensive Western universities. The situation is exacerbated by Minsk’s practice of closing down independent-minded

educational institutions and expelling Belarusian students and Western lecturers for refusing to toe the official line.

On February 18, representatives of the Nordic Council of Ministers visited the European Humanities University (EHU) in exile. EHU was founded in Minsk in 1992 “in order to open our minds to those values constituting the basic principles of democracy,” according to Professor Anatoli Mikhailov, EHU’s rector and one of its founders.

EHU was closed for political reasons in Belarus in 2004. It was then reorganized in Vilnius at the invitation of the Lithuanian government. Since 2006, EHU has enjoyed the status of a private Lithuanian university. Currently, EHU is the only Belarusian university offering western-standard education. EHU is also the only Belarusian university that still retains a degree of autonomy from the authorities.

In 2008, the European Commission established the EHU Trust Fund, inviting support from the EU member states and international donors, and Lithuania’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs has supported the maintenance of the EHU premises since 2007.

Students who study in their native Belarus are discriminated against all the same. Some are expelled for active participation in activities disapproved of by the Belarusian authorities. In 2005, the Belarus State Economic University expelled Tatsiana Khoma, a fourth year student, for attending the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) meeting without the university’s permission.

In November 2009, Tatsiana Shaputska, press-secretary of the Young Front, was expelled from the Belarusian State University’s law department for participating in the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership in Brussels without asking the dean for a required permission to leave the country.

Shaputska's case caused quite a stir. Even Swedish Foreign Affairs Minister Carl Bildt came to the rescue, saying it would be "absolutely unacceptable" if the expulsion was related to the student's participation in the Forum. Foreign Minister of Belarus Siarhej Martynau said that the main reason for expulsion is "the absence rate." He stressed that "not the government, but the university expels students."

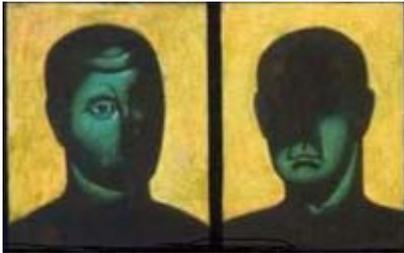
When offered to attend EHU, Shaputska decided not to leave Belarus but continue education as a distance-learning student in the department of political science. At the same time, she is preparing a complaint to the court with the help of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee.

The EHU provides education to over one and a half thousand Belarusians and collaborates with some European and US universities. This collaboration is very important for young Belarusians. However, it is quite a challenge for the university's graduates to find a job in Belarus, especially given the fact that the EHU education certificates are not officially recognized in Belarus. So most continue their careers abroad. Thus, in effect EHU is preparing "Belarusians for export," and the financial support it receives to a large extent supports emigration from Belarus.

Perhaps the University's European supporters could come up with scholarships and grants encouraging students to work in Belarus for at least a short period of time. For instance, Belarusian citizens are not eligible for the Junior Faculty Development Program that program provides university instructors with a semester-long opportunity to study and work with faculty at the US universities and is open to citizens of Moldova, Ukraine, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and many other states. A similar program could be established to encourage EHU graduates to conduct research and publish in Belarus.

You can read more about the EHU at its [web site](#)

Journal 'Political Sphere' Inviting Submissions



The Editorial Board of the peer-reviewed journal of political studies *Political sphere (Palitychnaja Sfera)* is currently inviting submissions for Issue 14 (spring 2010).

The main focus of the issue is nation, national project, idea of nation, ethnic conflicts.

Deadline: March 22, 2010.

Text may be submitted in Belarusian, Russian or English.

Articles on other topics are welcome as well.

Only the texts not published before neither as a part of monograph nor as a separate article can be submitted.

Articles received by the editorial board are put to mandatory anonymous scientific review (peer-review).

You can find more details of general and format requirements [here](#).

Political Sphere was founded in 2001 by a young generation of Belarusian political scientists. In 2001-2005, the Journal was published on the base of the Political Science Department of the Belarusian State University in Minsk. In 2005, as a result of increasing suppression in the Belarusian academia, the Journal moved to the European Humanities University in exile in Vilnius.

At present, *Political Sphere* is the only professional journal of political studies in Belarus. It has evolved into a vibrant community of Belarusian social scientists with its own seminars and research projects.

The Journal aims to encourage the study of Belarusian politics, stimulate research and analytical activities in Belarus, and integrate Belarusian social scientists into the international academic community.

E-mail for contacts: **i n f o @ p a l i t y k a . o r g**

Web: palityka.org

- Idea of nation as a political community (historic and theoretical perspective)
- Idea of nation in Eastern and Central Europe
- National projects as cultural and political phenomena
- History of Belarusian nationalism
- History of nationalism in Eastern Europe
- Nationalism and cosmopolitanism as social phenomena
- Nation, ethnicity, tradition
- Ethnic conflicts, migration