

EHU Rector Selection: Time to Fix Mistakes and Improve Credibility

The “Rector Selection Saga” at the European Humanities University (EHU) in Vilnius, the Belarusian university in exile, has been going on for more than half a year. It enters its third season with the Governing Board’s Rector Selection Committee making every mistake in the book – again.

It appears that the current Selection Committee (with no Belarusians on it) has no capacity to legitimise any candidate it would raise, especially after many criticised the process of pushing a hand-picked candidate, Dr. Garry David Pollick.

By 1 March 2015 the Governing Board was expected to recommend a final candidate for the rectorship position to the General Assembly of the Part-Owners (GAPO). This, however, has not happened.

Postponing the process further significantly increases the damage to EHU's credibility just as prime time for student recruitment descends upon the institution. This decision also pushes GAPO to take the initiative into its own hands and act without consent of the Board, for first time in the history of EHU.

Laying Eggs, Executive Style

The current acting rector Dr. Garry David Pollick has incomprehensibly made his way through on to the final rounds of the selection process. He was introduced as a provost and COO of the European Humanities University slightly over a year ago and became EHU Acting Rector in October 2014.

Pollick’s engagement at EHU has been marked by an astonishing

rise to the top. But what did this candidate achieve in the year that he has lead EHU? And why does the Selection Committee keep pushing him to the top with such sustained vigour?

The critical point in this whole discussion is how the [Belarusian focus of the institution](#) has lately become somewhat of a marginal idea. This problem – probably for the first time in the last 10 years – has finally engaged Belarusian civil society in a discussion of what the role of EHU is in developing the national project for democratic Belarus. Three months ago, 40 leading minds from Belarus and abroad signed in January 2015 [an open letter calling to keep the 'Belarusian heart'](#) of EHU and not abandon its legacy.

Under Pollick's leadership, EHU has suffered from the disastrous losses of reputation as well as increased financial losses

Under Pollick's leadership, EHU has suffered from the disastrous losses of reputation which, among other things, include unnecessary legal disputes over dismissals of former employees and breaches of the EHU Statute by particular administrative bodies of the university.

Dr. Pollick oversaw a hiring process that gave rise to a budget deficit of nearly €1 million (there was no comparable budget deficit before). This caused major donors like the European Commission and Norway to suspend funding, pending a plan to reduce this deficit to a manageable size – a plan they have been waiting to receive from Pollick since last summer.

One of his few accomplishments – a rather [self-serving redraft of EHU's Statute](#), created a University Council that Dr. Pollick boasted would help make EHU more democratic. According to the Statute, it is supposed to meet every two months. Dr. Pollick has not called a meeting of the Council in months. This is, very likely due to the fact that he decided that he

can no longer work there with EHU's CFO, who was asking uncomfortable questions about a number of financial matters that involve Dr. Pollick.

Lithuania's Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education gave EHU poor marks for strategic management

Not surprisingly, a report released by Lithuania's Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education in early February gives EHU [poor marks for strategic management](#) – the area that Dr. Pollick, probably the most expensive education consultant in the whole region, currently supervises. The university spent well over a hundred thousand euros on his compensation rather than on the development of academic programmes or campus renovations over the span of a single year.

Losing the Battle, saving Face

Presumably, the Board will no longer support Pollick, since few Board members are willing to take personal responsibility for choosing a candidate who has almost no support outside the Selection Committee. Unfortunately for EHU, a small group of influential and desperate Board members continue to push Pollick further along the selection process for the university's top post.

According to some sources, last month, in an almost comically desperate effort to shore up their candidate, two individuals from the current EHU governance structures made their way to New York in the hopes of enlisting George Soros in their dubious adventure. Since George Soros is the founder and chairman of Open Society Foundation (one of three Part-Owners of EHU), his opinion on who becomes rector is of crucial importance. No surprise, however, that George Soros refused to support the legitimisation of a shady candidate and insisted on a fair selection process before it is too late.

What else could select members of the Governing Board do

further to discredit the current selection process? Arrange a “members only” Board meeting without the presence of student representatives and the EHU Trust Fund Manager (who are usually invited as observers) at Frankfurt Airport to further delay the final decision and keep Pollick on board as the most highly-compensated temporary rector in the history of Lithuania and Belarus for another month or two for the sake of an “exchange of opinions”? Fantastical as it may sound, this is precisely what they did. The airport meeting will take place at the end of March.

The Rule of Law, the Rule of GAPO

If the EHU Board is so misguided as to nominate a candidate who has failed to perform the work for which he was hired, and GAPO to approve this, it will most likely mean a terminal loss of credibility for the European Humanities University as a whole. However, the current degree of dissatisfaction with the selection process may well warrant a negative decision by GAPO, should the Board decide to nominate Pollick.

GAPO, not the Board, officially appoints and dismisses EHU’s Rector and can even dismiss the existing Governing Board

According to the EHU Statute, it is GAPO, not the Board, which officially appoints and dismisses EHU’s Rector and makes all fundamental decisions in the life of the university. GAPO could even dismiss the existing Governing Board, if it so chooses. If they were to reject a Board nominee or fully reboot the selection process, a new page of democratic governance would be opened in the history of EHU. GAPO has never voted against a Board decision before and is likely to act independently for the time in its history.

Such a scenario would become a clear signal to alumni, students, faculty, donors and other stakeholders that GAPO takes seriously their obligation to properly govern and manage a Belarusian academic institution. If GAPO starts anew the

search for a rector and dissolves the existing Selection Committee, Belarusians will achieve their first institutional success on the way to real engagement for change and this, in turn, will restore hope for a European future for Belarusian higher education, starting with EHU.

That said, no matter who becomes a finalist at this point, given the existing selection process, without a new, reliable procedure, his or her legitimacy would be very low in many people's eyes. So now the question is not just who and how will actually become the next rector, but also whether the current Governing Board will continue to exist in its present form.

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