

Time for Belarus to Implement Real Student Self-Governance?

Belarusian authorities are discreetly preparing a new Education Code, partly to demonstrate to the West that they are making changes. In 2015, Belarus joined the Bologna process and is now required to reform the education system accordingly.

So far, the Belarusian education law has completely ignored the issue of student self-governance. Authorities restrict activities of student unions by depriving them of autonomy, placing university staff into student unions, and limiting activities of independent youth organisations in universities.

As Belarus is adapting its education system to the Bologna process, its partners should make it clear that the law should become more student-friendly.

Politicised perception of students

As in many other countries, Belarusian students historically played a major role in the democratic movement. In 1830-1831 and 1863-1864, students were among the initiators of uprisings against the Russian Empire.

Even during the Soviet era, Belarusian students created organisations and wrote appeals to increase the use of the Belarusian language and to expand academic freedoms. This usually resulted in expulsion for the instigators by Soviet authorities. In 1985, one of the expelled students even jumped from the sixth floor of the Belarusian State University in protest.

Since Belarus's independence, student organisations have become particularly close to the pro-democracy movement, comprising a significant part of opposition protests: in 2006, students organised a tent city to protest election fraud during the presidential campaign.

During this time, October Square, where the protests took place, received the unofficial name "[Kastus Kalinouski](#)," after the leader of the uprising of 1863-1864 in the Belarusian lands.



Although one can hardly call Belarusian students politicised, they still remain the most active part of society. They are also a huge group, consisting of about 460 thousand people, or 4.7 per cent of the population.

What's more, researches at the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, an authoritative Belarusian

pollster, shows that the youth remain the group most exposed to the ideas of democratisation and Europeanisation in Belarusian society.

Fake student government

Many student unions actually do operate at Belarusian universities. In practice, however, they have very little influence over the university establishment and cannot defend student rights when they are broken. The current Education Code, adopted in 2011, lacks even a single mention of student government. Therefore, internal university regulations subordinate activities of student unions and only one, the Student Union of the Belarusian State University, has an appropriate legal status.

Without legal status, student unions fail to attract money from outside sources, but depend on funding from universities. Belarusian authorities give financial support to only one youth organisation working at Belarusian universities and schools – the [Belarusian Republican Youth Union](#).

This organisation is the successor of the Komsomol (the Communist Youth League) and has half a million members. However, the large number of members does not mean that all of them support the current regime. The majority of people are signed up for BRSM forcibly or because it helps them get a place in university accommodation during studies.

Most student unions are openly run by university authorities. At the Baranavichy State University, some members of the university administrative staff belong to the student union. Provisions of the Belarusian National Technical University or International Economic Institute state simply that the activities of student unions are under the leadership of universities' vice-chancellors.

[Aliaksandr Krot](#), Chairman of the Belarusian National Youth Council "RADA", told Belarus Digest, that there are numerous cases in which universities interfered in student union elections.

Moreover, university authorities demand that student unions be wary of any cooperation with independent youth organisations. In February 2016, the administration of the Belarusian State Medical University sent a letter to class-leaders that they should conduct preventive conversations with fellow students explaining why they should not cooperate with independent youth organisations.

In the letter, three independent organisations, the Centre for Development of Students' Initiatives, the Brotherhood of Organisers of Student Self-government and the Students' Council were called illegal. However, all of them are actually registered in Belarus.

The Belarusian authorities also create fake structures to replace independent youth organisations. As an example, in 2015 the authorities set up a Student Council under the Ministry of Education, which may seem solid, but in practise has no influence. The Council includes representatives of all universities in Belarus, but its purpose remains unclear.



Making student government more genuine

Now is the best time for Belarus's international partners to encourage reform in Belarusian higher education, not only because of a thaw in relations between Belarus and the West but also because the authorities are working on a new code and want to show the European Union that they can introduce at least gradual changes. So far, the Belarusian government has tried to hide certain problems while continuing to restrict youth organisations and even [expelling some students](#).

The new code should state directly that student government will be autonomous and free from guidance by university administration. Also, unions should obtain legal status, as this will allow them to obtain funding from outside the university.

However, even if the law changes, Belarusian authorities also need to change their behaviour towards student groups. Now

that Belarus has become part of the [Bologna Process](#), it should stop the persecution of independent youth organisations and student unions with whom they collaborate.

In 2015, the European Union invited Belarus to be part of the Bologna system, trusting that it would eventually implement reforms. Now it's time for Belarusian authorities to live up to their promises.