

# The EHU Saga: Building A Future for Belarus, Not Just Selecting a Rector

As a member of the Board of Governors of the European Humanities University and a member of the current search committee, I read with interest but also distinct concern Mr. Kharytonau's recent article "[EHU Rector Selection: Time to Fix Mistakes and Improve Credibility.](#)"

I reacted with interest because an alumnus of the University cared enough to write the article and because it is always time to "fix mistakes and improve credibility." I read the article with concern because the level of critical thinking and analysis his essay displayed did not rise to the level I have come to expect from my exposure over the years to hundreds of EHU graduates.

Mr. Kharytonau's main concern about EHU's future is primarily that EHU is weakening or abandoning its Belarusian mission – a position for which he provides no evidence, a position that ignores that every major change Anatoli Mikhailov, as EHU's founding Rector, has enacted over the past four years, was designed explicitly to strengthen EHU's capacity to pursue its Belarusian mission for the long term and a position that ignores the founding Rector's role as an observer and advisor in the search process.

Having access as a member of the EHU Board to "primary" material on which to base my judgments, I certainly have an advantage over Mr. Kharytonau. On the other hand, a commitment to critical thinking involves pro-active, open-minded inquiry informed by evidence. I am not aware of any effort on the part of Mr. Kharytonau's to seek such evidence from those directly involved. On the other hand, his article is prima facia

evidence that the Board has failed to communicate clearly with one of its most important constituencies. It is for that warning that I am most grateful to Mr. Kharytonau. While I disagree with his conclusions, I hope this response will help close that communication gap.

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After pro-forma criticism of process and motive, Mr. Kharytonau asserts that "the critical point in this whole discussion is how the Belarusian focus of the institution has lately become somewhat of a marginal idea." As evidence of this marginalization, he notes only that the concern about such a lost focus has been discussed widely in Belarus. He ignores actual events and actions that point strongly to a greater, not lesser focus on the Belarusian mission.

First and foremost, the "Belarusian focus " or mission has been and remains rooted in the vision and leadership of Anatoli Mikhailov, in his willingness to see the shortcomings of his own work and his insistence that the Board and he had to correct those shortcomings if the Belarusian mission was to be fulfilled. Mr. Kharytonau and many others simply concluded that such self-criticism and change must mean an abandonment of the Belarusian mission. They have completely overlooked the very rare quality Professor Mikhailov has demonstrated as a founding entrepreneur and rector to be self-critical and to insist on change in order to keep faith with the original mission.

Professor Mikhailov began making the case over four years ago that EHU was approaching a critical juncture. It had survived the traumatic process of closing and re-establishing itself in exile but had not yet created a university with a curriculum and level of research of the quality needed to fulfill the longer term task of establishing a democratic society in

Belarus, let alone to meet Lithuanian and European accreditation standards. He argued that nurturing and restoring the historic capacity of Belarus to be open to and to absorb the best of many cultures while forging its own cultural identity was a task of decades not just years. To serve the long-term goal of building a healthy, vibrant Belarusian state and culture required the existence of an independent, quality university that could hold its own at the highest levels in a European as well as global context. EHU had to become more than a safe haven and loose collection of scholars fleeing a closed-minded, autocratic ruler who viscerally feared any institution that promoted academic freedom and critical thinking.

The Board, whose members come from a seven countries including Belarus, have led large universities and strong liberal arts colleges, have experience with large and small not-for-profit institutions, have business and government experience. All serve as volunteers without any remuneration and all concurred fully with Professor Mikhailov' assessment.

At that time, Professor Mikhailov also insisted that, given his age and the demands necessary to effect such change, he would need help in leading such transformation. The Board agreed and still agrees. This process of transformation has been massive. It began with changes to the Rector's office and the leadership structure and expanded to a full restructuring of the faculty, bringing the institution into full compliance with Lithuanian labor laws. Faculty governance was reorganized, so that faculty appropriately could play a leading role in restructuring the curriculum and aligning it with the needs of Belarus and 21<sup>st</sup> century institutions. Financial sustainability to preserve independence and recruitment are other critical issues that must be addressed in realistic and rigorous ways.

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Central to every step in this process has been an evaluation of what the changes will do to support EHU's Belarusian mission. Some critics judge EHU's commitment to a Belarusian mission by the percentage of our faculty who are Belarusian (88%), or even by some absolute percentage of Belarusian students enrolled (96%) or by the amount of research its faculty produce. But serious, lasting success must also be measured by whether Belarusian students have access to an education that is comparable to that available to the best of their peers globally and that will give them the courage and means to transform their society. That standard requires that we must find a way to make EHU financially accessible while also preserving the institution's independence. The challenge is immense.

The Board and the Founding Rector know well the pain, conflict, and difficulty of carrying out the changes needed to build a quality university that could be independent from state control, compete globally, and represent the best of Belarusian culture. Many in the EHU community now recognize that to fulfill its mission while remaining fiscally responsible, EHU could no longer be primarily a refuge for scholars seeking academic freedom as vital, necessary, and noble as that phase was for the university. I wish both the pain and the private and public anger could have been avoided

Certainly, there have been both missteps and mistakes in this transformation process. The most poignant for me has been our inability to find a means to recognize and to express adequately our thanks for all of those scholars who stood for academic freedom and joined the first EHU faculty in exile. They modeled for the citizens of their country what it means to live in an open society. There was no way all could be included in the restructuring of EHU or to have their academic

careers supported to the extent they deserved to be. The Board's gratitude to them is genuine even, if at this point, inadequately expressed. Our goal is to create a future that will justify the sacrifices the founding faculty have made and recognize what they have given to EHU and to Belarus.

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In this process, the Board has made extraordinary demands on the administration, faculty and students and, in so doing, contributed to occasional missed deadlines for payrolls, inadequate training, and lack of timely information on student services and admissions. While I regret that pressure, I remain incredibly impressed and grateful that the dedication and commitment in the community to the vision of the university has prevailed as all have worked under this pressure.

We on the Board also failed to recognize in a timely way that we had failed to explain adequately and thereby persuade representatives of the donor nations that the "front-end" investment in budgetary resources we were recommending to carry out this major transition was the wisest way to proceed. I for one thought we had made the case that incurring budgetary deficits now offered less long-term risk than maintaining a balanced budget during the transition, but in the end we failed. The situation is a microcosm of the larger debate taking place in the European Union, and, as with that situation, the cost-cutting will be painful but it will be done.

The passionate involvement of students, faculty, and other members of Belarusian society demonstrate the importance of EHU to Belarus and to the Belarusian mission. For the Board, the critical issue is to set EHU on the shortest possible path to resume full operations in Belarus and to EHU's long-term

survival as an institution that is strong, innovative, fiscally responsible, and capable of helping to shape Belarus's future as a democratic country that can take its rightful place within Europe.

*Gregory Prince*

*Member, EHU Governing Board, President Emeritus of Hampshire College, Amherst, MA, USA, and author of Teach Them to Challenge Authority, Educating for Healthy Societies, a book that in part celebrates EHU and its mission and argues its importance for the United States as well as for Belarus.*