

Action Fiche for the project "Higher Education for Belarusian Students – Part II"

ANNEX

1. IDENTIFICATION

Title	Higher education for Belarusian students – Part II		
Total cost	Maximum EC contribution: EUR 1 million		
Aid method / Management mode	Joint Management		
DAC-code	11420	Sector	Higher Education

2. RATIONALE

2.1. Sector context

EC assistance to Belarus is guided by the successive GAERC conclusions on Belarus. According to the November 2004 GAERC conclusions, assistance to Belarus will aim to “support the needs of the population and democratisation notably by humanitarian, regional, and cross-border cooperation and by projects supporting directly and indirectly democratisation and democratic forces in Belarus”.

The November 2005 GAERC conclusions further specify that assistance will seek to “promote shared democratic values between the people of the EU and Belarus by intensifying people-to-people contacts and by strengthening good neighbourly relations across borders (e.g. through student and scientific exchanges, scholarships, youth travel, contacts between small- and medium-sized enterprises, training local authority officials, etc)”.

Education is one of the most important areas in laying the foundations for democracy and the EC fully acknowledges the key role of the Belarusian youth in the democratization process in Belarus. Since 2005, the EC ensures continued support to the Belarusian civil society in general and to the higher education sector in particular.

In the higher education sector, the European Humanities University in exile plays an important role. It is currently the only independent Belarusian university that allows Belarusian students to express themselves freely and to study such disciplines as Political Sciences and European Studies, Communication and Media, International and European Law (including Human Rights Law), Belarusian studies, etc, without political interference. It also promotes democratic governance and human rights among Belarusian students. The political value of the EHU is therefore evident, as long as the current situation in Belarus prevails. In coordination with other donors, the EC has agreed to ensure targeted support to the EHU in the form of further scholarships to Belarusian students in order to help bridge the financial gap until a medium-term solution for the EHU to become self-sufficient is in place.

2.2. Lessons learnt

The EC is supporting Belarusian students to study at the EHU and in universities of other neighbouring countries like Poland and Ukraine.

The two projects (DDH/2005/113-304 and TACIS/2006/123-919) for supporting higher education for Belarusian students amount to € 6.7 million, out of which € 5.5 million have been directly allocated to the EHU through the Nordic Council of Ministers, making the Commission the main donor of the EHU.

The first project was aiming at helping the EHU to set-up in Vilnius (+ 350 students), while the second is providing scholarships to repressed Belarusian students (205 at the EHU and 100 in Ukraine), who had been penalised by the Belarusian regime following their participation in the post-elections demonstrations of March 2006. The second project also covers the living expenses of the students of the first project.

The EHU is now providing high-quality education to Belarusian students. However, despite the significant support provided by the EC and other donors, the EHU has not yet become a self-sustainable university. Therefore, a sound financial management system has to be set-up at the EHU and concrete financial initiatives from the donor community have to be taken.

2.3. Complementary actions

In addition to support targeted at studies in the EHU, the Commission also provides scholarships for Belarusian students within the framework of the Erasmus Mundus Programme as from 2007. Under the Erasmus Mundus External Co-operation Window – EMECW, Belarusian students will be able to study abroad in a EU university of their choice. To this end, € 6 million have been set aside for Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine.

In recognition of the difficult situation which Belarus is facing, a special measure is foreseen in the EMECW programme for "vulnerable groups", which are described as follows:

"Nationals of the third-countries concerned by the geographical lot who are in particularly vulnerable situations. It may cover mobility for students holding the nationality of one of the third-countries concerned and having a refugee status or asylum beneficiaries (international or according to the national legislation of one of the European recipient countries) or where it can be proved that they have been the object of unjustified expulsion from university on racial, ethnic, religious, political, gender or sexual inclination grounds"

For the new academic year 2007-2008, at least 63 Belarusian students will be able to receive scholarships to study in EU universities under EMECW.

2.4. Donor coordination

The Commission organises on a regular basis donor coordination meetings both in Brussels and in Belarus. EU Member States, IFIs and other donors such as the US, Canada, Norway and Ukraine participate in these meetings.

An EHU International Board, consisting of donor representatives and other committed individuals was set up at the initiative of the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) and the Mc Arthur Foundation. The EHU Governance Working Group was commissioned by the EHU International Board in November 2006 to make recommendations on how to establish a Governing Board within the university structure of the EHU to support EHU management and administration, and to maximize fundraising efforts. The purpose of the proposed Governing Board is to provide strategic guidance and fiduciary oversight to the University.

Distance learning at the EHU is supported by the US. Other donors' support programmes are mainly in the form of co-operation between their national universities and the EHU. These measures do not constitute support to the EHU's existing teaching programmes in Vilnius. For the 2007-2008 academic year, the EHU has asked the Donor Community to secure the enrolment of 80 students for the BA programmes. Norway will finance 15 of those students and the EC grant will cover the remaining 65 students. So far, no other donor has demonstrated an interest in financing the teaching programmes that the EHU already has in place in Vilnius.

3. DESCRIPTION

3.1. Objectives

The overall objective of the EC support is to contribute to a democratic and prosperous development in Belarus by giving young Belarusians access to higher education.

The specific objective of the project is to provide targeted support to the EHU in the form of further scholarships to Belarusian students in order to help bridge the financial gap until a medium-term solution for the EHU to become self-sufficient is in place. The project will enable access through scholarships - for 65 Belarusian students to be enrolled in 2007 - to the BA programmes at the EHU in Vilnius.

The scholarships will mainly cover the following posts:

- Direct teaching costs
- Living expenses (including subsistence allowance and housing allowance)
- Health insurance

3.2. Expected results and main activities

The project is expected to have the following results:

Financing scholarships for students to be enrolled by EHU in 2007 will enable EHU to provide education and subsistence to 65 students studying towards a degree in the same BA programs for four years.

3.3. Stakeholders

The beneficiaries of the project are the Belarusian students. The main stakeholders are the EHU donors' community (Member States, international organisations, NGOs and other countries) and Belarusian NGOs, including those that have contributed to the identification of repressed students.

3.4. Risks and assumptions

3.4.1. Risks

- The political regime in Belarus does not officially object to Belarusian students studying abroad, although the regime openly discourages Belarusian students from studying at the EHU. There is a risk that the Belarusian authorities may apply repressive measures, both against the students and the Belarusian teaching staff.
- The diplomas delivered by the EHU are unlikely to be recognized in Belarus under the current political situation. Therefore, students might face difficulties to find a job in relation with their competences upon their return to Belarus.
- The risk of project funded students not coming back to their home country after they finish their studies is reduced by the fact that they will study in countries neighbouring Belarus. This will enable them to stay in close contact with home and social networks they had to leave. However, a lack of democratic changes in the nearest future may limit employment opportunities of at least some grantees in Belarus, especially in areas directly related to democratization (e.g. journalism, political sciences, Law). This may encourage them to consider options other than coming back to the home country.
- The main challenge in the selection procedure of grantees insofar these have been penalised in Belarusian universities for political reasons will remain to combine sound political and academic judgment in assessing each applicant. The close cooperation with the Nordic national student exchange bodies and NCM's contacts with experts enjoying the first hand knowledge of Belarusian affairs will ensure the maximum efficiency in selecting the most appropriate applicants.

3.4.2. Assumptions

- Good co-operation among the donor community.
- Appropriate financial contributions of the Member States, international organisations, other countries and NGOs, who are politically supporting the EHU.
- Sound and transparent management of the donors' funds and transparent flow of information on the donor's contribution.
- Sound and transparent accounts of the EHU.

3.5. Crosscutting Issues

The project will contribute to the development of good governance, human rights and gender equality.

4. IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

4.1. Implementation method

Joint management through the signature of a standard international organisation contribution agreement with the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The contractual framework to be signed with the International Organisation will fully observe the conditions laid down in articles 53 quinquies of the Financial Regulation and 43 of Its Implementing Rules. For Nordic Council of Ministers, the special and the general conditions of the standard model for International Organisations published on the AIDCO Website will thus be signed.

4.2. Procurement and grant award procedures

All contracts implementing the action must be awarded and implemented in accordance with the procedures and standard documents laid down and published by the International Organisation concerned.

In any case, the International Organisation concerned will be held by contract to apply the Community principles for grants as laid down in article 43.6 of implementing rules to the Financial Regulation.

4.3. Budget and calendar

The project will cover four years of studies for a maximum of 65 students for a maximum total budget of EUR 1 million

The indicative operational duration as from the signature of the Agreement is foreseen to be 36 months.

4.4. Performance monitoring

The project will be monitored according to standard procedures. Project monitoring and evaluation will be based on periodic assessment of progress on delivery of specified project results and towards achievement of project objectives.

4.5. Evaluation and audit

There will be two evaluations: a mid-term one, which will allow adjusting the project activities, and an ex-post evaluation, which will focus in particular on the long-run impact of the action.

Audits may also be conducted on the systems and procedures used if need be. Audit and evaluation contracts will be concluded by the Commission.

4.6. Communication and visibility

Communication and visibility will be ensured by dissemination activities. Visibility tasks will be performed according to the EC rules and recommendations.