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## Action Fiche for Belarus

### 1. IDENTIFICATION

Title/Number	<b>Special Measure: Open Europe Scholarship Scheme</b> CRIS ref. ENPI/2011/23101		
Total cost	EU contribution: EUR 4 million		
Aid method / Method of implementation	Project approach –joint management with an international organisation (Nordic Council of Ministers- NCM)		
DAC-code	11420	Sector	Higher Education

### 2. RATIONALE

#### 2.1. Sector context

The latest presidential elections in Belarus in December 2010 were deemed unfair and non-transparent by the EU, European and other governments, international organisations, and human rights defenders. The violent aftermath of the elections, including widespread detentions and unprovoked attacks on media and civil society organisations as well as individual citizens, has been unequivocally condemned by the international community.

One of the groups of people most affected by the situation in Belarus is students and the academic community at large. Students active in the pro-democracy demonstrations are threatened by expulsions from Belarusian state universities. Even before the latest events, the Belarusian educational system did not encourage free and critical thinking and strict state control of both the curriculum and appointment of academic staff was implemented. Although Belarus now vows to adhere to the internationally accepted Bologna process for the development of higher education, in practice the entire Belarusian educational system is behind European and international standards.

The Belarusian academic community that remains committed to high standards and international recognition has reacted and, together with the international community, has developed alternatives for young Belarusians outside Belarus (see details in the section on complementary actions).

However, the aftermath of the elections increases the need for more options. Certain fields of education such as law, natural sciences, business, economics, medicine and engineering are insufficiently represented in the existing options. Also, the present alternatives tend to concentrate in the immediate neighbouring countries to Belarus, which in many cases may be ideal but may in some cases also rule out possibilities in specific fields where the expertise might be elsewhere.

The scholarship scheme presented in this action will complement existing study and scholarship possibilities, will extend these possibilities wider into Europe, and will cover the fields of study that are now underrepresented or not represented at all.

## 2.2. Lessons learnt

The complementary actions listed below have accumulated knowledge and experience on educational possibilities aimed for Belarusians abroad, and the different concerns that need to be addressed. For example, the experience of the European Humanities University (EHU) provides examples on how Belarusian identity can be maintained outside Belarus, and the EU-Nordic Council of Ministers programme for Belarusians in Ukraine underlines the importance of providing common gatherings for Belarusian students studying in different cities in Ukraine. Experience from these and other programmes can be gathered in a systematic way before the launching of the action.

## 2.3. Complementary actions

### EU Programmes

- Erasmus Mundus Action 1: Joint programmes (masters and doctoral programmes) of outstanding academic quality, including a scholarships scheme. In the last few years about 20-25 Belarusian students were short-listed but only 5-6 receive a scholarship due to budget restrictions.
- Erasmus Mundus Action 2 (previously was called Erasmus Mundus External Cooperation Window): partnerships between European and third-country higher education institutions as a basis for structured cooperation, exchange and mobility at all levels. Around 50-60 Belarusian students participate in this mobility scheme every year.
- Studies in law, humanities and social sciences at the European Humanities University, the Belarusian university-in-exile in Vilnius, Lithuania, supported by the EU, Nordic Council of Ministers and 15 other donors through the EHU Trust Fund (2.000 students on a constant basis);
- The EU-Nordic Council of Ministers scholarship programme at universities in Ukraine; admission has terminated (currently 29 students still studying);

### Other donors

- The Polish ‘Konstanty Kalinowski Scholarship Programme’ at 17 universities in Poland in mainly social sciences (53 students admitted in 2010);
- The Visegrad Group Scholarship Programme funded by the International Visegrad Fund, enabling studies in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia;
- Scholarships offered by individual EU Member States.

## 2.4. Donor coordination

The EU Delegation in Minsk organises on a regular basis donor coordination meetings with EU Member States, as well as with all major donors active in Belarus, in order to adjust actions in the priority areas of assistance. Such coordination is organised in

compliance with principles of the Paris Declaration and is aimed to ensure maximum aid effectiveness.

### **3. DESCRIPTION**

#### **3.1. Objectives**

Overall objective: To contribute to a democratic and prosperous development in Belarus by giving young Belarusians access to higher education without ideological bias and according to internationally accepted academic standards.

Specific objectives: To provide young Belarusians the possibility to acquire Bachelor (BA) and Masters (MA) degrees at recognized European universities, especially in fields that are not adequately represented in the existing scholarship schemes. Specific priority fields may include: Law, Economics and related Social sciences, Business studies, Natural sciences, Medicine and Engineering.

#### **3.2. Expected results and main activities**

##### Expected results

- Implementation of a 4-year academic programme, which would enable 2 intakes for 3-year BA programmes (1 intake for 4-year BA programmes) and 2 intakes for 2-year MA programmes.
- A number of students (between 80 and 180) will have completed the BA or MA programmes successfully.
- The project as a whole will contribute to democratisation in Belarus with citizens with internationally recognized degrees from high-quality universities around Europe, and the accompanying international networks that Belarusian students will create during their studies abroad.

##### Main activities

- Identification of the European Universities wishing to participate in the programme. The implementer (NCM) will use the existing Nordic and European university networks to approach a selected group of universities around Europe, giving preference to the neighboring countries (Baltic region, Ukraine, Moldova, etc.). Special emphasis would be put to identify universities which can offer the priority disciplines listed above under 'Specific objectives'.
- Conclusion of contracts with the universities: the European universities selected will be contracted by the implementing partner of the action for the entire period of the degrees intended. Each agreement with a university would include: the number of places of study and in which fields, tuition costs and level of scholarship to be provided (living expenses).
- Application and selection process: once a list of study places is completed, an application process will be opened for Belarusians. The scholarships would be advertised on NCM websites, participating university websites, and through our

connections within Belarus, which have been built in connection with other NCM projects. The academic evaluation of the applications will be undertaken by the university in question, accompanied by a personal background evaluation by the implementing partner. The final decision is taken by the Steering Committee (see below).

- Preparatory language courses for the students when needed.
- Scholarships would be distributed e.g. every semester, each disbursement subject to successful completion of studies for the previous period. However, in order to secure successful completion of studies (and hence secure the investment in the individual) for students not able to perfectly progress academically a possibility for prolongation of the formal study period should be included.
- A constant monitoring of students during their studies, as well as post-graduation follow-up e.g. one and two years after the students have completed their studies will be implemented.
- Mid-term and final reports for the entire action will also be prepared, and shall be used to reflect on whether Erasmus Mundus should develop a specific window for Belarusian students.

### **3.3. Risks and assumptions**

#### Risks

- Dropping out of students for reasons other than academic. Any study abroad experience for an extended period of time entails risks of personal anxiety and changes in plans. By appointing a personal adviser (older student) for a small group of Belarusian students at each foreign university such effects can be reduced. Acceptable drop out rates can be established before the launch of the action, and intervention plans drafted in case they are exceeded.
- Project funded students not coming back to their home country after they finish their studies. This is a common and unavoidable risk in all study abroad programs. However, experience demonstrates that the number of students returning to Belarus is high, especially if students have family and/or relatives still staying in Belarus. Effort can be put into maintaining the Belarusian identity of all students participating in the action through common gatherings etc.

#### Assumptions

- It is assumed that applicants meet the necessary academic, linguistic, and personal requirements of the participating universities and the action in general.

### **3.4. Crosscutting Issues**

Gender equality principles will be implemented at all stages of the action. It is expected that, in general terms, an equal amount of applications from both genders

will be received. Acceptance is primarily based on academic qualification, but a balance of genders will also be a criteria. The Steering Committee will have both female and male members.

### **3.5. Stakeholders**

The target group is young Belarusians (18 – 26 years) seeking a higher education degree in one of the priority fields. Students expelled from Belarusian state universities or under threat to be expelled have special priority.

Other stakeholders include the participating Universities.

## **4. IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES**

### **4.1. Method of implementation**

Joint management through the signature of a standard contribution agreement with an international organisation, the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM). The contractual framework will fully observe the conditions laid down in Article 53d of the Financial Regulation and Article 43 of its Implementing Rules.

The NCM has been selected as implementer because it has extensive experience in Belarus and a positive track record of working with the EU Delegation in Minsk as well as with the European Commission Headquarters in Brussels. The NCM has passed the 4-pillar assessment of the EU, enabling subcontracting.

The NCM manages the European Humanities University Trust Fund. The NCM also manages three EU-financed projects for the benefit of the EHU. One of the projects also includes a scholarships programme for repressed Belarusian students studying at universities in Ukraine. In addition, the NCM manages the EU financed Instrument for Stability action for Belarus, which started in March 2011.

A Steering Committee for the action will be set up, combining expertise on Belarus and on higher education in general. The Steering Committee would oversee the project and take all decisions on scholarships.

### **4.2. Procurement and grant award procedures**

All contracts implementing the action are awarded and implemented in accordance with the procedures and standard documents laid down and published by the relevant International Organisation. Concerning grants, the International Organisation will be required to apply EU principles as per Article 43.6 of the Implementing Rules.

### 4.3. Budget and calendar

#### Indicative Budget

Heading	Total € '000
Scholarships	3,245
Administration, communication, travel costs	600
Visibility	5
Evaluation and Audit	150
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4,000</b>

#### Calendar

The indicative duration of the action is 5 years from the signature of the contribution agreement (a maximum of 4 years of study with an extra year for possible delayed students and follow-up). The indicative start of the action will be autumn 2011.

### 4.4. Performance monitoring

Student performance will be monitored on a regular basis by the participating universities. A summary report will be outlined at the end of each semester by the implementer of the action, stating the academic progress of the students. Based on feed-back from the participating universities, a revised budget and activity plan will be outlined at the end of each academic year.

### 4.5. Evaluation and audit

A final evaluation and audit are foreseen.

### 4.6. Communication and visibility

The scholarship programme will be announced on relevant websites (NCM, European Commission) and through existing channels of communication (NGOs, embassies and representations). It will also be communicated through existing networks within Belarus. In term, these websites will provide also information on the Erasmus Mundus actions for Belarusian students.

An annual gathering of all participating students will be organised, possibly in cooperation with the EHU and other programmes such as the Kalinowski programme in Poland.

Coverage in mainline printed and online media will be systematically sought.