

Annex 3: Action Fiche – Special Measures for Belarus 2013

1. IDENTIFICATION

Title/Number	Special Measure: Open Europe Scholarship Scheme – Phase II (OESS II) <i>(CRIS: ENPI/2013/024-447)</i>		
Total cost	EU Contribution: EUR 8,000,000 from the 2013 budget		
Aid method / Method of implementation	Project approach – joint management with the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM)		
DAC-code	11420	Sector	Higher Education

2. RATIONALE

2.1. Sector context

This action is designed to continue the successful Open Europe Scholarship Scheme (OESS I – ENPI/2011/269-645) programme introduced in 2011 to support Belarusian students and academic community strongly affected by local political oppression and rigid national educational system. On the political level Belarus continues to face the consequences of the disputed 2010 presidential elections, which led to violent breakdown of peaceful demonstrators and numerous blamed court proceedings including against students. The latest parliamentary elections held on the 23 September 2012 are as well widely criticised by the international community for the lack of fair competition, human rights violations and falsifications. The preliminary OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) conclusions qualified the elections as not free, nor impartial or competitive.

Together with the political background, the situation in the academic sphere has also been worsening. The recent statement of the Bologna Follow-Up Group asserts that Belarus does not meet the conditions for joining the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Belarus remains the only large European country that is still not an EHEA member. According to the assessment of the Bologna Follow-Up Group, Belarus does not at present observe the principles and values of the Bologna Process, such as academic freedom, institutional autonomy and student participation in higher education governance.

Considering all above, Belarusian conditions largely prevent talented students from accessing to qualitative higher education in country. Moreover numerous students were expelled from universities on political reasons, other continue to study under significant pressure. OESS II aims at supporting this most active part of the Belarusian society with a purpose to offer high-level European education opportunities and thus prepare prominent young leaders that can significantly contribute to the modernisation of Belarus.

2.2. Lessons learnt

The on-going implementation of OESS I shows that it meets huge demand from the Belarusian students, as it does present new opportunities, which are not offered by any existing academic programme. The experience of the ongoing programme calls for better targeting of students inside Belarus especially from state universities with limited mobility choices, as previous communication channels were focusing students already engaged in various international programmes.

It is important to underline that experiences from the previously EC-funded scholarship program called "Access to Higher Education for Young Belarusians" (AHEYB - TACIS/2006/123-919) shows that students graduating with only a BA-degree will have little or no formal job possibilities within Belarus. In order for young graduating Belarusians to return and work for changes within Belarus it is recommended that they continue their studies in order to get a Master (MA) degree if possible.

The recently launched evaluation of assistance to the European Humanities University (EHU), which is an alternative to OESS, is expected to provide more details on specific issues to be taken into account with OESS II.

2.3. Complementary actions

EU Programmes

- Open Europe Scholarship Scheme I (OESS I – EUR 4 million): scholarship scheme designed to give Belarusian students the opportunity to follow up bachelor (BA) and Master (MA) degrees in European Universities. The scheme is already being implemented by the Nordic Council of Ministers since July 2011. It is estimated that around 80 students will have completed the BA or MA at the end of its implementation.
- EU language courses for young Belarusians (EUR 2 million): the specific objectives of this 2-year project are the enhancement of cross-cultural competences of young Belarusians through learning of EU languages in EU Member States, raising the awareness on the EU and European societies and values among representatives of Belarusian society and the establishment of professional and personal contacts of young Belarusians with counterparts in the EU. Implementation period: 2013-2014.
- Mobility Scheme for Targeted People-to-People Contacts (MOST - EUR 5 million): this action is a mobility scheme designed to facilitate direct people-to-people contacts between representatives of three broad sectors such as culture, education & youth and science & technology in Belarus and their counterparts in Member States of the European Union. First activities should start in mid-2013.
- Erasmus Mundus Action 1: joint programmes (masters and doctoral programmes) of outstanding academic quality, including a scholarships scheme. In the last few years about 5-6 Belarusian students per year received a scholarship. 50 students from Belarus have been selected over the nine annual selections up to 2012. The 2012 selection included 11 Belarusian nationals, seven out of which were selected under a special regional window for six countries in Eastern Europe;

neighbouring the EU. As a result 56 Belarusian nationals (50 Master Course, 2 PhD students and 4 academic staff) have benefited from Erasmus Mundus action 1 so far.

- 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. Belarusian participation has increased due to the additional budget allocation to 180 scholarships in 2011 and 198 in 2012. 643 Belarusian nationals (students and academic staff) have benefited from Erasmus Mundus action 2 so far.
- 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 (NCM) and 15 other donors through the EHU Trust Fund (2.000 students on a constant basis).
- Tempus: programme which supports the modernisation of higher education in the EU's surrounding area. Belarus is currently involved in 21 Tempus projects. Tempus supports Belarusian universities to improve their administrative and organisational structures / study programs, promote teacher trainings, student mobility, consultation with entrepreneurial world, cooperation with stakeholders. Through Tempus projects, Belarusian universities develop with the assistance of European experts a number of new Master's degree programs in several fields of study.
- The regional Eastern Partnership Youth Programme (EUR 14 million in 2012 and EUR 15 million in 2013) supports cooperation between young people and youth organisations from the EU and its Neighbouring Partner countries by providing non-formal learning opportunities such as youth exchanges, transnational voluntary service and training and networking activities through the Eastern Partnership Youth Window of the Youth in Action Programme. Each year, several hundred Belarusians are involved in these activities.
- The EU-Nordic Council of Ministers scholarship programme at universities in Ukraine.

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.

It is important to underline the difference between Erasmus Mundus (EM) scholarships and OESS II. Being much more flexible, OESS offers an individually based study possibility at any level from exiting high school to entering Ph.D. studies for young qualified Belarusians regardless of their previous academic experience.

Moreover, while EM can only be operated through an annual call for application and pre-established and selected consortium of higher education institutions, OESS offers open choice as it does not require the student to be associated with any specific institution: students can choose among all courses offered to international students at all universities in the European Union and European Economic Area countries.

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 other major donors active in Belarus, in order to coordinate actions in the priority areas of assistance. Such coordination is organised in compliance with principles of the Paris Declaration and Accra Agenda for Action and is aimed to ensure maximum aid effectiveness.

In addition, the European Commission and the European External Action Service organise regular implementers and donors meetings in Brussels (about twice a year). EU Member States; IFIs and other donors such as the United States, Canada and Norway take part.

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

- Implementation of a 4-year academic programme, which would enable 2 intakes for 3-year BA programmes (or 1 intake for 3-year BA programmes and 1 intake for 4-year BA programmes) and 2 intakes for 2-year MA programmes.
- A number of students (between 200 and 300) 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 neighbouring 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 implementer (NCM) 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 implementer. Final decision is taken by a steering committee (see section 4.1 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 of the action in general.

3.4. Cross-cutting 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 criterion. The steering committee will be gender balanced.

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 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) in accordance with Article 53d of the Financial Regulation. The international organisation complies with the criteria provided for in the applicable Financial Regulation.

The NCM, which already implements OESS I, has been selected as implementer for OESS II 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 manages the European Humanities University Trust Fund. The NCM also implements 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 has been set up for OESS I, combining expertise on Belarus and on higher education in general. It is proposed that this steering committee will also oversee the second phase of OESS, and continue to take decisions on scholarships.

The change of management mode constitutes a substantial change except where the Commission "re-centralises" or reduces the level of tasks previously delegated to the

beneficiary country, international organisation or delegated body under, respectively, decentralised, joint or indirect centralised management.

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.

4.3. Budget and calendar

The indicative budget available to implement the action is detailed in the Appendix.

The indicative duration of the action is 5 years from the signature of the standard 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 first quarter of 2013.

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 is foreseen, and audits may be conducted on the systems and procedures used.

Audit and evaluation service contracts will be concluded by the Commission.

Budget allocated to evaluation and audit is EUR 75,000.

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.

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.

Where appropriate, communication and visibility will follow the Communication and Visibility Manual for EU external actions.