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Belarus outside the world educational market?

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Belarus has been stimulating the export of its higher education services, but the efforts to take part in integration projects for this purpose has brought limited results. The attempts to harmonize higher education systems in the post-Soviet space failed, and the creation of the Central Asian Higher Educational Area in 2021 proves it as well. Despite Belarusian attempts to join the Bologna process current sanctions resulted in this platform becoming inaccessible for the country. Left out of large-scale regional educational initiatives, Belarus will have to look for new opportunities for its educational exports.

Since the mid 2010s Belarus is striving to increase the exports of higher education services. This goal has been declared in the Concepts for the Development of the Export of Educational Services [for 2018-2020](#) and [2022-2025](#). The country has already succeeded in it. Namely the number of international students in Belarus has increased during 1999-2021 [more than 8 times, and their share rose from 0.7% to 6.5%](#).

However, recent events have significantly shaken Belarusian position at the world market of higher education services. In particular, the isolation of Central Asia in the format of its own educational area has once again split the post-Soviet area - the main source of applicants for Belarusian universities. In addition, the unsettled status of Belarus in the Bologna process after the start of the Russia's special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine does not contribute to the popularity of Belarusian diplomas among those who planned to use them as a springboard for leaving for Europe. The current geopolitical conditions complicate the export of Belarusian higher education services. Therefore, the country will have to look for new opportunities to attract international students and may be, enter new markets.

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Export of Belarusian education: good things come in small packages?

Since 2016, Belarus has set the task of [increasing the competitiveness of national higher education](#) at the global educational market and [increase the share of educational services in total exports](#). Until recently, these tasks have been more or less achieved, although the strategic documents are visibly cunning: no numerical indicators are given to evaluate their effectiveness. In addition, no regular statistics on the financial measurement of higher education exports are published. Most often figures on the number of international students are cited as the evidence of the country's movement in the right direction.

Nevertheless, the flow of international students to Belarus is not diversified and by three quarters consists of the citizens of five states: [Turkmenistan \(42% of foreign students in Belarus\), China \(17%\), Russia \(7%\), Uzbekistan and Sri Lanka \(5% each\)](#). Almost two thirds of international students come to Belarus from the Post-Soviet area and receive higher education mainly in Russian language. At the same time, today Belarusian universities are facing new barriers and increasing competition in the region they used to recruit international students.

Headhunters in the CIS

The enrollment of applicants from Turkmenistan is becoming unpredictable: several years ago, measures were taken by Turkmenistan to prevent its citizens from leaving for higher education abroad. For example, in 2019 the [list of foreign universities](#) whose diplomas are recognized in Turkmenistan was introduced. Only Belarusian State University was included into it. Thus, it became more difficult for other Belarusian universities to attract Turkmen citizens.

In addition, Russia is expanding its export of educational services to the post-Soviet area. Back in 2020, the head of Rossotrudnichestvo, Evgeniy Primakov stated that [cooperation with the CIS countries becomes one of the main priorities](#). In the light of the current sanctions against Russia, it has become especially relevant. For example, [14 branches of Russian universities have been established and 7 more are planned to open](#) soon just in Uzbekistan. It aggravates [the competition for Russian-speaking applicants](#) between Russian and Belarusian universities in the post-Soviet area.

The latter has become significantly fragmented in higher education area recently because the states participate in different regional initiatives each time in a new way. The attempts of such integration under Russia-led projects within the Commonwealth of Independent States (11 countries) or then the Eurasian Economic Union (5 member states) remained largely formal due to the competition for applicants between the participants. Seven CIS states, as well as Georgia, decided in favor of participating in the Bologna process. Five Central Asian states formally launched in 2021 their own higher education project resembling the European Higher Education Area. The resources of the Central Asian Higher Education Area remain limited and it is too early to evalu-

ate its results. However, this initiative may make Belarusian universities even less attractive for the Central Asian states' citizens who will be looking for new opportunities in their own region. Therefore, this fragmentation results into complicating the access to national higher education markets for those countries that do not participate in some initiative.

Is it possible to exit the Bologna process after joining it?

Belarus tried to join the Bologna process twice in order to encourage the influx of international students. Finally the country succeeded in 2015 provided that it should proceed with the reforms in higher education to meet the Bologna standards. However, since no real enforcement mechanisms or ways for official exclusion from the process are in place, Belarusian compliance with the requirements remained formal. The necessary levels of higher education (bachelor, master and PhD) and the credit system have been introduced but not the autonomy of universities, for instance.

However, even formal participation in the Bologna process contributed to the country's increase in exports of higher education. It contributed to the popularity of Belarusian diplomas among those who expected to use Belarusian universities as a transit point for moving to Europe. First of all, these were students from the countries of the post-Soviet space and Asia, but not from Europe: by 2021 the latter amounted to [just 1% of international students](#) in Belarusian universities.

The suspension of Belarusian participation in the Bologna process from 2022 may harm the popularity of its higher education abroad. However, the country was not formally excluded from the process, because there is no such a procedure. Nevertheless, the current situation is likely to scare away those who wanted to use a Belarusian diploma as a ticket to Europe.

Prospects for Belarusian higher education after 2022

The international situation deprives Belarusian higher education of traditional competitive advantages: the former markets for the export of higher education services are becoming less accessible, as well as the traditional incentives for international students.

The expectations that [African region is promising](#) for Belarusian higher education are overly optimistic. Applicants from these countries speak mainly English or French. Besides they may not be willing to pay a lot for higher education abroad. Taking into account difficulties with the participation of Belarusian banks in international payment systems, African students are unlikely to favour Belarusian universities in current situation. Therefore in the near future, Belarusian universities are more likely to increase the enrollment of international students at their traditional markets, namely, in Turkmenistan and China.

Despite formal compliance of Belarusian higher education with the Bologna principles, its reforms contrary to international standards does not seem to be promising. It will scare off those international students who were counting on a Belarusian diploma to participate in mobility or employment in other countries of the world. This is obvious for Minsk that has not yet introduced such reforms despite the official rhetoric. In order to attract foreign students in future, Belarus will have to somehow adapt to international standards. Otherwise, the country will have to abandon its ambitions to increase the export of educational services in the medium and even long term period.