

# **YOUTH-RELATED EUROPEAN UNION PROGRAMMES IN BELARUS**

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POLICY PAPER**

Support in the field of education, training, exchange programmes and cross-border cooperation for youth are among the European Union's stated priorities. Across Europe, an increasing number of young people are participating in exchanges and different kinds of programmes. Unfortunately, this is not the case for the youth of

Belarus, at present one of Europe's most isolated countries. Although young people make up the most pro-European segment of Belarusian society, their access to EU programmes remains limited.

Of the three major EU initiatives in the field of higher education, Belarusians are only eligible to participate in the TEMPUS programme. In fact, many of the EU's programmes designed to help CIS countries, such as the TACIS programme, have experienced great difficulties in Belarus. This is because most EU programmes, including the provision of support for youth groups, operate on a government-to-government basis, thus allowing the autocratic regime in Belarus to control the operation of such programmes. Access to these programmes is reserved for youth groups which are controlled by, and which support the antidemocratic policies of the Lukashenka regime. Most of the pro-European and pro-democratic youth groups in Belarus are either not recognized or are repressed by the government, and therefore have little chance to benefit from EU programmes. Access to these programmes for groups which truly deserve support would be enhanced if the EU was able to work directly with individual youth organisations.

On a positive note, Belarusian youth groups are able to take part in the EU's Youth Programme via the third country status. This programme offers broad opportunities for intercultural learning and cooperation among young people in Europe. Unfortunately, the Youth programme is not well known in Belarus, and only a few groups are currently taking part in it. A key reason for such low participation is a lack of information. The EU's Information Center for CIS countries is based in Warsaw, which makes it difficult for Belarusian groups to obtain information about programmes or to seek assistance in applying. For organisations and groups which have heard about the programme, there is the additional problem of finding partners in member states with which to carry out their projects. Few Belarusian youth activists have personal contacts with foreign organisations, nor do they participate actively in international events, such as conferences, training workshops, or summer schools because of language barrier or participation fees.

The TEMPUS programme was most active in 1996–97 when 17 Belarusian universities took part in EU projects. This year, only one institution of higher education, Gomel Technological University, is participating in an international project: 'Dissemination, Cooperation, and University Reform in Economics Education in Belarus.' Universities from France and Spain are the partners for this project.

The decline in numbers of Belarusian universities participating in the TEMPUS programme can be explained by two major factors. As with other EU programmes, TEMPUS requires official agreements at the state level. Unfortunately, the Belarus' authoritarian regime seeks to reduce and control all international activities and assistance, especially in the fields of education, youth activism, and civil society development. For example, criminal investigations and court cases were launched against several Belarusian organisations that had received EU TACIS grants. The con-

ditions in which Belarusian entities and international partners might plan joint projects under the TEMPUS programme are getting more difficult and complicated.

Another factor that explains the low participation of Belarusian actors is lack of information. The contact person for the TEMPUS programme is located in the Academy of Management of the President of Belarus, which is the most odious, pro-regime institution of higher education in the country. This institution is dead set against any cooperation with pro-democratic structures. It is hard to imagine that an individual working at the Academy would make information about the TEMPUS programme widely available. As a result, little is known about the programme in Belarusian universities; most students have never heard of it.

As with other EU programmes, TEMPUS is facing ever more difficulties and restrictions in Belarus. The regime is simply not interested in developing international educational partnerships, integrating Belarusian universities into Europe's system of higher education, or instituting real educational reforms in the country. As more programmes like TEMPUS become controlled by the state, fewer universities and other entities will participate. One way to reverse this trend is to encourage the international participation and initiatives of progressive, reform-minded, and pro-democratic educators and students on an individual basis. In the case of Belarus, the EU should increase the flexibility of its programmes and adapt them to operate on a non-governmental basis.

There is a need to dramatically expand the access to European exchange programmes for Belarusian youth. More student exchanges and a greater participation in EU-supported activities would help to train new leaders and to spread information about the EU among young people in Belarus. Support for youth activities in Belarus would encourage young people to become more involved in civil activities and promote the needed democratic change in the country. Finally, it is necessary to help students who are already active. Many risk being dismissed from their universities because of their pro-democratic activities. Scholarships and other educational opportunities in Europe would encourage and support their brave efforts.

The lack of success for broad youth programmes between the EU and Belarus has been largely due to the specific character of the Lukashenka regime. Therefore, it is vital to search for new ways through which to inform and involve Belarusian youth without being dependent on state authorities.

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