



The Belarus Public Policy Fund

(project of the Pontis Foundation and the Belarusian Institute for
Strategic Studies)

presents

The Concept of Effective Working of Student's Unions

by

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Spring 2010



This policy paper has been prepared with the assistance of the Pontis Foundation and the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies and supported by the Belarus Public Policy Fund. The aim of the fund is to provide direct support for Belarusian experts working on issues of strategic importance and thus to stimulate public policy debate in Belarus. The opinions presented in the paper are of the author exclusively, neither necessarily of the Pontis Foundation nor of those of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies.

The Concept of Effective Working of Student's Unions

Project Summary

A study of student unions in Minsk was conducted with the aim of researching the activities of student unions and investigating how students themselves evaluate their organisations. To achieve this, meetings with the chairmen of nine student unions were held. This was followed by a series of focus groups with eight students from each university selected to give their opinions on the activities of their university's student union. A comparison was made between the answers of the chairmen and the responses of the students on the following key questions: motivation to join the union, how the union informs the students about its activities, possibilities to contact the union to solve problems, and main activities of the union.

About 400 000 students are currently studying in Belarus. Among full-time students in the city of Minsk, around 80% are members of a students union.

Main Findings

Student unions need reform, especially in terms of an adjustment in their activities. The findings showed that the unions overwhelmingly focus activities on social and cultural aspects. In reality, the unions also ought to defend student rights and to represent their interests in the face of the university administration.

1. The priority goal of the union should be advocacy, whereas the unions are currently positioned mainly as organisers of cultural events and sources of material aid.
2. Students rarely contact their unions. When they do, financial assistance or organising cultural events are the main reasons. Students are unaware that the union is able to protect their rights and help in their protection. 55% of the students determined cultural activities as the primary union function, with 38% of the respondents indicating financial support as the main student union activity.
3. Information about union activities is not visible, accessible or made interesting for students. 21% are not aware of ongoing union activities.
4. Students enter the union via voluntary consent (69%) or by enforcement (31%).
5. Collaboration with other organisations within the university well developed. But inter-university cooperation is low.

Recommendations

1. Students should be fully informed about the purpose, the opportunities and the functions of the union. They should be educated in what rights students have and how the union can protect them. These rights are not only social, but also civil, political, and economic.
2. More attention should be paid to capacity development, in terms of improving management quality and conducting strategic planning. This could be achieved via management training or education in effective planning and communication skills. Interim mentoring of new leaders, transfer of experience in activities and improved preparation of work guidelines are some suggestions. Unions could be guided by the national union or the federation of the unions in Belarus, as well as NGOs dealing with assistance in structural development of organisations (for example, Forum Syd).

3. Student unions have the right to advocate for students in disputes and conflicts with the administration or staff. This activity can be improved for example, by inserting a clause on the retention of the obligatory participation in activities outside the curriculum in the contract between the union and the university.
4. The dissemination of information should be improved through the use of leaflets, newspapers, websites, forum, groups in social networks and e-mail.
5. In order to secure the financing of the recommended activities, the budget of the trade union could be redistributed, with external funds raised for specific activities. Cultural, entertainment, charitable and other such events could be conducted through sponsorship. Union leaders should negotiate with entrepreneurs and managers of companies to achieve this.