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INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION OF BELARUSIAN UNIVERSITIES IN THE FIELD OF HUMAN RIGHTS TEACHING AND RESEARCH

V. G. SHADURSKI^a

^aBelarusian State University, 4 Niezaliežnasci Avenue, Minsk 220030, Belarus

The study is devoted to the analysis of long-term cooperation of Belarusian universities with their Swedish partners in the field of teaching and research on human rights. Using concrete examples, the author shows the most successful forms of Belarusian-Swedish cooperation, which influenced not only the situation in higher education, but also the perception of human rights issues in the Belarusian society as a whole (development of lecture courses, publication of research results, training seminars, exchange of teachers and students). The most notable results have been achieved towards gender equality.

Keywords: Belarus; Sweden; Belarusian State University; Raoul Wallenberg Institute; Belarusian-Sweden relations; Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency; human rights; gender equality.

МЕЖДУНАРОДНОЕ СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВО УНИВЕРСИТЕТОВ БЕЛАРУСИ В СФЕРЕ ПРЕПОДАВАНИЯ И ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ ПРАВ ЧЕЛОВЕКА

В. Г. ШАДУРСКИЙ¹⁾

¹⁾Белорусский государственный университет, пр. Независимости, 4, 220030, г. Минск, Беларусь

Анализируется многолетнее сотрудничество белорусских университетов с шведскими партнерами в сфере преподавания и исследования прав человека. На конкретных примерах автор показывает наиболее успешные формы белорусско-шведского сотрудничества, которые оказали влияние не только на ситуацию в сфере высшей школы, но и на восприятие проблематики прав человека в белорусском обществе в целом (разработка лекционных курсов, публикация результатов научных исследований, обучающие семинары, обмен преподавателями и студентами). Наиболее заметные результаты были достигнуты в направлении обеспечения гендерного равенства.

Ключевые слова: Беларусь; Швеция; Белорусский государственный университет; Институт имени Рауля Валленберга; белорусско-шведские отношения; Шведское агентство международного сотрудничества для развития; права человека; гендерное равенство.

In modern Belarus, the theme of human rights is becoming more and more common subject of keen public attention and intensive expert discussion. The specificity of this discussion is largely given by the so-called “Soviet heritage”. It lies in the fact that in the conditions of the ruling political regime at that time the main political emphasis was the promotion

of collective socio-economic guarantees and deny of the existence of universal values. In the Belarusian SSR, which was a composite part of the Soviet Union and formally had a pretty democratic constitution, the right to work, free education, medical care, and other rights were proudly declared. While freedoms advocated by Western countries (freedom of speech, thought,

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Автор:

Виктор Геннадьевич Шадурский – доктор исторических наук, профессор; декан факультета международных отношений.

Author:

Victor G. Shadyrski, doctor of science (history), full professor; dean of the faculty of international relations.

assembly, the right to own and publicly express their own opinion), were recognized only formally. In practice, they were considered not only secondary, but also harmful. In the opinion of Soviet leaders, the priority of personal rights of citizens undermined the stability and unity of the society, served as a tool of “bourgeois influence”. Interpretation of human rights was the central theme of the ideological struggle, in which, according to Soviet ideologists, there was no and could not be peaceful coexistence.

Pivotal socio-political and economic transformations of the late 1980s – early 1990s, which are still ongoing in most new independent states, set a thorny issue of ensuring real freedoms and human rights. Belarus, as well as other post-Soviet countries, started the process of transition from declarations of human rights to their implementation in practice. However, due to objective and subjective reasons, this process has been delayed and has not lost its relevance in the current political *agenda* by now.

One of the most important factors, contributing to the increased interest in human rights problems in Belarus, was the extension of international cooperation. It gave countries in transition possibilities to study and use the experience of ensuring human rights, accumulated by developed countries over a long period. The experience of Sweden and other Northern European countries, that set high standards of human rights protection to be their recognizable “brand”, and important basis for economic and social well-being traditionally cause the greatest interest in Belarus.

One of the striking examples of international cooperation in the field of human rights was the long-term partnership of the largest Belarusian universities with the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law (Raoul Wallenberg Institute). Due to its significant influence on the academic discussion of human rights in Belarus, this format of the Belarusian-Swedish interaction deserves a special scientific study.

The launch of the long-term academic interaction between Belarus and Sweden in the field of human rights was given by a joint seminar held in Minsk on the basis of the faculty of international relations of the Belarusian State University (FIR BSU) on 21 November 2008, as part of Swedish presidency in the Council of Europe. The event was dedicated to the theme “Implementation of human rights in a European perspective – exchange of experiences and challenges for the future”. The seminar was attended by the representatives of the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ambassador of Sweden to Belarus S. Erickson, the adviser on strategic planning and quality assurance at the Raoul Wallenberg Institute M. Johansson, Belarusian and foreign scientists, students [1].

After the successful seminar, the Swedish side, appreciating the high potential of Belarusian teachers and

students, suggested continuing the implementation of joint activities. The Institute informed the leadership of the FIR BSU about the intention to seek financial support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). 2009 was marked by mutual visits and lectures, in which the representatives of the FIR BSU and the Raoul Wallenberg Institute took part. The leadership of the institute was interested in how the human rights problem is presented in the educational process of Belarusian universities, how high the interest is in this issue on the part of teachers and students. The Belarusian side drew attention to the fact that the planned joint activities would remain within the framework of scientific and educational activities and did not get into a wider political space.

Given the particular sensitivity in perceiving human rights issues in the power vertical of Belarus, partners from the two countries agreed on the “basic rules” of joint projects. It was decided to focus on the expansion of scientific research in the direction of theory and practice of activities in the field of human rights. Scientific research was supposed to become, according to partners, a platform for expanding and updating existing and creating new training courses in human rights. Moreover, it was planned to devote not only separate courses to teaching various aspects of human rights, but also, if possible, use special modules for this purpose within other broader socio-humanitarian disciplines.

An important formal step in the bilateral activities was the Memorandum of cooperation, signed on 1 December 2009, by the rector of the Belarusian State University academician S. Ablameyko and the director of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute L. Holmström. The signed document outlined the development of the existing and introduction of new training courses on human rights topics at the faculty of international relations and the faculty of law of the BSU, the exchange of teachers and staff, the provision of scholarships for master degree programs at Lund University to Belarusian students. Among the promising areas of cooperation was the transfer of the necessary literature and databases to the BSU library, the translation of the most relevant educational and scientific literature into Russian or Belarusian, the organization of seminars in Sweden for representatives of Belarusian state institutions and public organizations. Several other forms and mechanisms of cooperation were also envisaged [2].

Looking ahead, it should be noted that the second similar memorandum between the BSU and the Swedish partner organization was signed on 16 November 2016, by rector S. Ablameyko and director of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute M. M. Kjaerum during his visit to Minsk.

After the signing of the first memorandum, the active preparation of a cooperation program, clarification and coordination of positions on all planned activities

began. As a result of the efforts undertaken, the Raoul Wallenberg Institute received state funding to support academic cooperation with Belarus for a period of four and a half years, namely from 1 January 2011, to 1 July 2015. The Swedish grant was called “Promoting democracy in Belarus through human rights capacity building”.

In addition to two BSU faculties, Belarusian National Technical University (BNTU) and Belarusian State Economic University (BSEU) were invited to participate in academic cooperation. For the next years, the promotion of the ideas of human rights and gender equality in Belarusian universities, among young people, in state and public institutions was declared as the main task of cooperation. It was supposed to achieve these goals, first of all, through the training and professional development of experts, the creation of an educational, scientific and methodological base at the Belarusian State University. The authors of the joint program of action concept hoped to expand the interaction between the universities, government structures, and public associations in the field of human rights. It should be emphasized that the mainstream of joint activities was achieving gender equality. Such an approach to cooperation suited the Belarusian partners, since the gender theme did not cause strong rejection in Belarus, it was in this area that the country had significant achievements.

Despite the growing contradictions between Belarus and the European Union as a whole and Sweden in particular at the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011, inter-university partnership started quite actively. On 8 February 2011, a bilateral training seminar “Gender equality and its maintenance in higher educational institutions of Belarus” was held on the basis of BNTU in Minsk, in which several dozens of teachers and graduate students took part. On 10 February 2011 Belarusian and Swedish participants gathered at the one-day round table “Teaching human rights in higher educational institutions of the Republic of Belarus”, the task of which was to take an inventory of existing human rights courses and studies at Belarusian universities, as well as to discuss the prospects for their further development.

With the introduction of EU sanctions against several Belarusian leaders and enterprises after the well-known events related to the presidential election in Belarus (December 2010), as well as with official Minsk’s retaliatory measures against many representatives of the European Union member states, a certain threat to the implementation of agreements between partners occurred. In these sophisticated conditions, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, represented by then Deputy Minister V. Voronetsky, provided the necessary support to the university consortium. On his behalf, on 20 January 2011, a delegation of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute, composed of

Emma Melander Borg, D. Geer, and dean of the FIR BSU V. Shadurski was received at the ministry. During the constructive meeting, the main directions of the ongoing Belarusian-Swedish academic dialogue in the field of human rights were supported.

It should be recognized that the tension in international relations was still being influenced the course of the project. So, many important visits of foreign researchers to Belarus did not take place. The Swedish ambassador for human rights, H. Dahlgren, was unable to speak at BSU in November 2011, although the question of his visit to Belarus was agreed upon in advance. Such external obstacles created certain organizational and financial problems that caused tension on both sides.

That situation, as well as the increasing number of joint meetings, visits and exchanges, raised the question of the need for clear coordination of partners’ actions, and mechanisms for quickly finding solutions acceptable to all parties.

The answer to this challenge was the creation of the Steering Committee, which on an equal footing included leadership and faculty of partner faculties. On 16 March 2011, on the basis of BSU, its first meeting was held, initially consisting of 8 people, including deans of the faculties of BSU (S. Balashenko, V. Shadurski), BNTU (G. Brovka), BSEU (A. Shklyarevsky). Since 2011, all the decisions on future events, organizing internships, defining selection criteria for participants of foreign trips, etc. were taken at meetings of the Steering Committee, which were held, as a rule, at least twice a year. Participation in the work of the council has become a good source of mutual enrichment in the field of management culture (conducting discussions, reaching compromise solutions, reasoned justification of certain decisions, etc.) existing in the academic environment not only from different countries, but also from various universities. The coordination of cooperation on the Belarusian side was entrusted to the deputy dean of the FIR BSU A. Selivanov. He carries out his assignment to date.

Within the framework of the Steering Committee, three working groups were created: monitoring and evaluation working group, gender participation working group and students participation working group.

A deeply scientific and balanced approach to the topic of human rights, a high level of qualification of experts invited to training seminars, the possibility of an open discussion at events in Belarus and other countries, financing of trips both within the country and abroad contributed to an increase in the number of university teachers and researchers, interested in developing academic cooperation. The expansion of the Belarusian participants was facilitated by one of the most notable events of the second year of partnership – the study program “International and Swedish experience in the promotion and protection of human

rights: theory and practice". The program, organized on the basis of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute in Lund on 5–16 November 2012, was attended by about 30 participants from universities, state institutions and non-governmental organizations of Belarus. The program content – lectures, seminars, presentations, study visits were adapted to the specific interests of the participants. Simultaneous interpreting was organized for non-English speakers, and all travel expenses were covered by the Swedish side.

During the program, its participants had the opportunity not only to listen to lectures by qualified specialists of the institute on human rights issues in Sweden and other countries, but also to discuss the situation with understanding and interpretation of human rights in Belarus. It should be emphasized that an active and open discussion during the meeting, Belarusian and foreign participants never acted in an accusatory manner. The parties did not try on the roles of "teachers and students". Such an approach formed trust between representatives from different countries, strengthened the culture of dialogue. Foreign participants in the events had the opportunity to notice the high level of Belarusian citizens' education, based on a critical approach to the analyzed reality. During the contacts, foreigners discovered new facets of the young East European state, striving to build constructive relations with neighboring countries. The Belarusian representatives had the opportunity to make sure that respect for human rights, the real separation of branches of government, transparency in the activities of all levels of government are the most important condition for the successful development of Sweden.

After 2012, similar trips of numerous Belarusian delegations to Sweden repeated two more times – in 2013 and 2014.

The events noted above – conferences, seminars, meetings, study visits contributed to the expansion of the circle of specialists for whom the problematic field of human rights has become not only a more understandable topic, but also motivated them to further research and implement human rights in specific areas of life. This was the concrete result of international academic cooperation not only at the level of specific universities, but also throughout the country.

To improve the access of Belarusian teachers and specialists to foreign "classics" aimed at studying human rights in 2013, three well-known foreign publications were translated into Belarusian and Russian. As a result, the library of Belarus received the 5th edition of R. Smith "International protection of human rights", the world-famous university textbook, translated from English into Russian, published in a circulation of 3000 copies. The textbook examined the history of human rights, the main international documents and case law of international regulatory bodies, and also analyzed the activities of international organizations (UN,

Council of Europe, OSCE, OAS, CIS) in the field of human rights [3].

In the same 2013, a book of another British author A. Clapham "Human rights: very brief introduction" was published in a print run of 5 000 copies in Belarusian [4]. And finally, in four languages (English, French, Russian, and Belarusian) and again in a quite large print run for Belarus (1500 copies), C. Viale's book "The lexicon of human rights" was published [5].

Despite the continued high interest of Belarusian specialists in translated publications, the Steering Committee decided to concentrate more on the publication of Belarusian studies and training materials. One of the first publications in this series was a textbook "Human rights" published in 2015 under the scientific editorship of S. Balashenko and E. Deikalo. The collective study guide made it possible to form a comprehensive understanding of the legal regulation of human rights. It examined the norms of both the national legislation of the Republic of Belarus and international law, presented judicial practice related to various aspects of both domestic and external legal protection of human rights [6].

As already noted, an increase in the number of specialists has contributed to the fact that the topic of human rights has become the subject of positive reflection in public discussions and the media. A serious marker for the advancement of human rights issues in Belarus was the adoption of the Interagency plan for the implementation of recommendations adopted by the Republic of Belarus following the second cycle of the universal periodic review of the UN Human Rights Council, and the recommendations addressed to the Republic of Belarus by human rights treaty bodies for 2016–2019 years. The Interagency plan approved by the Decree of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus of 24 October 2016 No. 860 became a conceptual document aimed at facilitating the implementation of international obligations in the field of human rights by the Republic of Belarus, including the improvement of legislation and law enforcement practice [7].

The adoption of this plan was an important signal that the topic of human rights in Belarus finds a more prominent place not only on the agenda of educational institutions and non-governmental associations, but also state bodies. Why did the government take this step? In our opinion, diplomats, scientists, and experts were able to convince decision-makers that the topic of human rights not only provides a specific reason for domestic and international criticism of Belarusian realities, but also represents the country in many respects from a positive perspective. So, according to the UN development program, in the ranking of the human development index for 2015, Belarus took 50th place, entering the group of countries with a high level of human development. According to the information

of the United Nations Population Fund at the end of 2014, Belarus took 1st place in the world in reducing maternal mortality and was included in the number of 42 states in which 100 % of cases are delivered by qualified medical personnel. The preamble to the Interdepartmental plan also indicated that according to the report of the UN Children's Fund for 2014, Belarus had the best rate in the region of the Commonwealth of Independent States in terms of child mortality. The Republic of Belarus was included in the list of 25 countries most favorable for motherhood, and ranked 31st in the world in terms of gender equality [7].

An even more optimistic situation has developed in the field of gender equality. In the history of the Republic of Belarus, there have been five national plans for achieving gender equality. With the approval of every further plan, its content became more balanced and reasonable, the terminology used in the document improved. Thus, the first plan was called the National plan of action for the advancement of women for 1996–2000, which shows its focus exclusively on women. The fifth National plan of action for gender equality in the Republic of Belarus for 2017–2020 was adopted by the resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus on 17 February 2017 No. 149. Monitoring the implementation of this document, which was widely attended by the representatives of the university consortium, was entrusted to the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Republic of Belarus. The Ministry was instructed with annual (by 20 March) submission of information about the implementation of the national plan to the Government of the Republic of Belarus¹.

In more favorable conditions, the preparation of a new cooperation program between the consortium of Belarusian universities and the Raoul Wallenberg Institute took place without any special obstacles. This institute received Sida funding as part of a new stage of cooperation called "Academic cooperation on human rights in Belarus, 2015–2019". At this stage, in addition to the three partner universities, it was planned to invite representatives of regional universities of Belarus to academic interaction.

Based on the plans, other universities joined the inter-university network: Polotsk State University (2014), Mogilev State University (2016), and Gomel State University (2018). This circumstance gave new dynamics not only to Belarusians studying foreign experience, but also created the conditions for more active inter-university partnership not only on a broad topic of human rights, but also on other pressing topics. In addition to the employees of the six universities mentioned above, teachers and students of all

Belarusian universities were constantly invited to the inter-university events in the field of human rights.

Gender equality remained the central element of academic cooperation, as before. Achievements in this area can be assessed as the most significant.

Thus, as a pilot project, the Council of the FIR BSU prepared and launched the implementation of the FIR BSU Gender plan for 2015–2017. The main place in the plan was dedicated to gender education of the academic staff and the administration of the faculty, overcoming gender stereotypes, forming attitudes of gender-neutral behavior, attracting the attention of as many people as possible to this problem field².

According to the initiators of the plan, the expansion of the gender dialogue within the faculty was designed to make the functioning of the team more understandable, transparent, fair, and therefore more effective. Effective, from that point of view, so as not to waste precious time and energy on the reproduction of outdated stereotypes about the roles of men and women.

Drawing up a gender plan has become a tradition not only at the FIR BSU. This format of activity was adopted by several other universities. Participants of the events, aimed at achieving gender equality, shared their experience in scientific, educational, and other publications [8].

The next significant step in the implementation of joint actions of Belarusian universities and the Raoul Wallenberg Institute was the conduct of a gender audit in April – December 2017 at the FIR BSU. The organizers defined its main task as an analysis of the implementation effectiveness of the FIR BSU gender plan, as well as the provisions and recommendations of the legislation of the Republic of Belarus in the field of gender equality. An organizing committee of the study was created, and several working groups were formed from teachers and students. As a part of the audit, a sociological survey of 50 employees and 269 students was conducted, they were asked to answer several questions related to gender equality. The organizing committee carried out focus group studies, analyzed statistical data available in the faculty documentation, and complied with a time budget. An active discussion started at the FIR BSU on how to overcome gender stereotypes, how to improve communication between the dean's office and teachers, teachers and students. The audit report was published in both Russian and English [9].

The head of the organizing committee for the audit, senior lecturer of the FIR BSU, Y. Zinchenko, gave a brief but succinct description of this landmark event: "It was an interesting experience, primarily because it was a reflection on how we live, how we allocate our

¹Decree of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus of 17 Feb. 2017 No. 149 "On approval of the National plan of action for gender equality in the Republic of Belarus for 2017–2020" [Electronic resource]. URL: https://www.pravo.by/upload/docs/op/C21700149_1487883600.pdf (date of access: 22.03.2020).

²Materials of the current archive of the dean's office of the FIR BSU. Gender Plan of the FIR BSU for 2015–2017.

time, how we evaluate our capabilities. The work with the obtained material showed that it is not always possible to identify problems”³ [9, p. 14].

Another significant achievement of the cooperation between Belarusian universities and the Raoul Wallenberg Institute was a large-scale mobility of teachers

and students, which was fully funded by the Swedish side. Numerous visits to foreign universities allowed Belarusian representatives to study the experience of foreign colleagues, establish new connections, and popularize the achievements of their country and their universities (see table).

The number of employees and students of Belarusian universities who went abroad in the framework of cooperation with Swedish partners only during the last three years (2017–2019)

Year	Number of teachers visiting abroad	Number of students visiting abroad	Total
2017	39	30	69
2018	41	24	65
2019	66	44	110
2017–2019	146	98	244

Note. Calculation based on the materials of the current archive of the dean’s office of the FIR BSU. Information on cooperation with the Raoul Wallenberg Institute. 2015–2017.

An important result of the recent years, which, in our opinion, is systematic and long-term, is the creation of the Human Rights Centre at the FIR BSU in 2016. Its main goal defined by the Supervisory Board was to unite the efforts of the Belarusian university community representatives in inter-university interaction and interdisciplinary cooperation. The leadership of the centre was entrusted to the associate professor at the BSU E. Konnova.

Since its creation, the centre has begun active work on the basis of the approved strategy, which outlined its main tasks, principles, and activities. This inter-university social structure is called upon to continue researching the field of human rights promotion. However, at the new stage of academic cooperation, the main emphasis should be placed on the principle of interdisciplinary studies of human rights, on the practical application of the scientific analysis results.

An interdisciplinary approach to the study of human rights is ensured by the previous active involvement in the university consortium of representatives of various specialties and scientific sectors. Experts in medicine, architecture and construction, economics, and computer science have become increasingly involved in the discussion about the practical implementation of human rights. For compliance with legal standards, the labour sphere, architectural and construction norms, standards in the field of education, and medical care began to be actively analysed. Attention to the rights of the most vulnerable groups (people with disabilities, elderly people, women, children, refugees, stateless persons, and migrants in general) has increased.

Thus, at the moment, the centre has already implemented 12 interdisciplinary studies on relevant human rights topics, including applied research, which were carried out in close cooperation with state bodies of the Republic of Belarus [10].

Another new trend that has emerged in the activities of the university consortium and the Human Rights Centre, in particular, is the establishment of stable contacts between scientists, on the one hand, and representatives of the legislative, executive and judicial authorities of Belarus, on the other. Only in 2019, a seminar and conference, in which the listed categories of specialists took part, were successfully held based on the mentioned centre. During the discussions, new proposals and topics for joint development arose⁴.

It becomes more and more obvious that to be successful and effective in the modern world, representatives of all fields of activity (scientists and experts, politicians and businessmen, government officials and public activists) should, figuratively speaking, wear “human rights glasses”.

To sum up, the topic of human rights in Belarus is becoming increasingly relevant. It becomes the cornerstone of the transformation of the country and society. This circumstance confronts the participants of the Belarusian-Swedish academic cooperation with increasingly complex tasks – expanding and deepening the analysis of human rights issues from both theoretical and practical sides. As the study of accumulated experience shows, the use of an interdisciplinary approach, as well as more active interaction of specialists from various scientific sectors, representatives of state power and civil society structures can contribute to improving the quality of research.

³Translated by V. Sh.

⁴2nd International conference “Interdisciplinary approach to research in the field of human rights” [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://fir.bsu.by/faculty/centres/human-rights/hrc-events> (date of access: 12.04.2020).

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