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Academic Freedom in Belarus: State Repression and its Consequences at Home and Abroad

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Academic Freedom in Belarus: State Repression and its Consequences at Home and Abroad

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Foreword

In the three decades since the great European upheavals of 1989-91, which liberated the continent from the yoke of the Cold War and authoritarian State-Socialist Systems, no European country, no European society, and no European academic community has had to suffer and struggle longer with the relapse and persistence of the **disastrous cycle of repression and isolation** than Belarus.

The **explosive liberation** from this fatal cycle that took place in the summer and autumn months of 2020 and the extent of the solidarity and self-organisation of civil society **can therefore not be overestimated**: With the establishment of autonomous academic labour unions, the academic lectures and seminars organised in Minsk backyards or prisons with dozens or thousands of listeners, the kilometre-long human chains of Belarusian medical professionals against the torture of demonstrators, the courageous public video messages of entire faculties in support of the student protesters, and last but not least the many tens of thousands of demonstrating students who stood up to heavily armed special forces.

In this context, the force and fatality associated with the reinstatement of the criminal Minsk regime in 2021 – with massive Russian support – becomes obvious: It marks not only the relapse into an already **totalitarian cycle** of repression and isolation, which has put thousands of dissenting Belarusian opponents in internment camps and forced hundreds of thousands of Belarusians to flee – it also marks the reversal of perception and policy towards the courageous Belarusian civil society in large parts of Europe since 2022, which is no longer treated and perceived separately from the Belarusian oppressor apparatus with its support for the full-scale Russian war of aggression against Ukraine since 2022.

This study by the SCIENCE AT RISK Emergency Office, which is funded by the German Foreign Office, attempts not only to trace the development of Belarusian academia over the last three decades – which has been marked by ruptures, efforts to open up, and setbacks – but also to describe the appalling consequences of the brutal suppression for academic freedom and scientific activity in Belarus and in emigration.

This annual monitoring is therefore closely linked to the more than 500 Belarusian scientists and students financially supported by the SCIENCE AT RISK Emergency Office since 2020, as well as the more than one hundred scientific conferences, lectures, and interviews organised, all of which pursue the same goal: To ensure that the important voices of Belarusian academia are not silenced.

Dr. Philipp Christoph Schmäddecke
Director of the SCIENCE AT RISK Emergency Office by akno e.V.

Contents

Introduction5

Part 1. Science and Higher Education in Belarus since 1991
by Hanna Vasilevich7

Part 2. The triple challenge to academic freedom in Belarus: the impact of repression, ideological indoctrination, and isolation. 2020-2024
by Maryia Rohava17

Part 3. Academic Emigration from Belarus: Challenges of Integration
by Vasil Navumau30

Conclusion37

Introduction

The state of academic freedom in Belarus today is the result of structural and institutional conditions imposed by a personalised authoritarian regime, which have affected the academic community not only in the last four years but over the course of three decades. Belarusian higher education and science institutions have been operating in a highly restrictive political environment, lacking institutional and financial autonomy. The 2020 political crisis unleashed an unprecedented level of political repression in the country, eliminating the limited public spaces for academic and intellectual freedom and cultural creativity that had been established during a brief period of political liberalisation. An estimated 200,000 – 500,000 Belarusians fled the country due to large-scale repression after 2020.¹ The recent wave of emigration included specialised and skilled professionals, raising concerns about brain drain. The involvement of the Belarusian government in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led to the international isolation of higher education institutions and the exclusion of Belarusian scholars from academic networks and mobility opportunities. Amid the ongoing war against Ukraine, the Belarusian government has intensified information manipulation, ideological indoctrination, and militarisation at all levels of education. Independent organisations, private schools and initiatives providing alternative education have been closed down by the government or forced into exile.

The SCIENCE AT RISK Monitoring Report aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the structural, institutional, and political challenges facing Belarusian scholars today. **The first part of the report by Hanna Vasilevich** introduces the system of higher education and science in Belarus and traces its development between 1991 and 2024. The analysis highlights critical milestones in the development of academic freedom in Belarus from a historical perspective. It identifies the main features of the higher education and science system in Belarus and highlights its three main challenges: state control, international isolation, and loss of human capital.

The second part of the report by Maryia Rohava provides a detailed assessment of the state of academic freedom since 2020, based on five indicators included in the Academic Freedom Index (AFI):² (i) freedom to research and teach; (ii) freedom of academic exchange and dissemination; (iii) institutional autonomy; (iv) campus integrity; and (v) freedom of academic and cultural expression. The AFI, a collab-

1 Belarusians in exile: an overlooked issue addressed by the Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe, January 25, 2023. <https://pace.coe.int/en/news/8955/belarusians-in-exile-an-overlooked-issue-addressed-by-the-parliamentary-assembly> (accessed 1.12.2024).

2 Academic Freedom Index (AFI) <https://academic-freedom-index.net/> (accessed 6.11.2024).

oration between the V-DEM Institute (University of Gothenburg, Sweden) and the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (Germany), offers an overview of the state academic freedom across 179 countries over time. By offering an in-depth country analysis, this section aims to illustrate the systematic erosion of academic freedom in Belarus which corresponds to the institutionalisation of more repressive measures and ideological indoctrination in education over the period 2020-2024.

The third part of the report by Vasil Navumau explores the challenges and needs of Belarusian scholars outside Belarus, focusing on those who fled the country after 2020. Based on a survey of Belarusian scholars in exile and comparative analysis of individual cases, it identifies financial and administrative difficulties and the lack of robust academic networks in host countries as the main challenges.

The **concluding part of the report** presents recommendations for the international academic community and decision-makers on targeted support measures for Belarusian scholars that would sustain the country's higher education and science system after democratic changes.

Part 1

Science and Higher Education in Belarus since 1991

by Hanna Vasilevich



Main Features of the Current Science and Higher Education System in Belarus

Belarus has a variety of public and private scientific institutions, including higher education institutions (HEIs), research institutes under the National Academy of Sciences, and sectoral institutes under government ministries. In the 2023/24 academic year, Belarus had 49 HEIs. Of these, only one – the Belarusian State University (BSU) – appears in the major global international rankings, ranking 288th out of 1422 by QS in 2022 and falling to 387th out of 1497 in 2023 due to new indicators and reassessments.

Most Belarusian HEIs are state-run and heavily dependent on government funding (estimated at 82.9% in 2019 according to the author's calculations based on the BelStat data). After 2020, the share of state funding has grown, but the actual amount available has decreased. Private and philanthropic support remains limited. With limited access to external support due to the country's increasing political isolation after 2020, institutions are forced to increase tuition fees, thus shifting the financial burden to students and their families.

Belarus has a high student-to-population ratio of 254 per 10,000 inhabitants in 2023/24, down from 290 in 2019. This figure is repeatedly cited by the authorities as an argument for the country's advantage over the post-Soviet space and at least some Western countries (Ministry of Education, 2022). At the same time, the number of students has been in constant decline since 2011/2012 (from 445,600 in 2011/2012 to 222,500 in 2023/2024 according to BelStat), mainly due to the negative demographic trends in the country and accelerated by emigration.

Overall, after more than thirty years of independence and various transformations, the Belarusian higher education system is still influenced by its Soviet past, particularly in terms of organisational structure, very limited institutional autonomy, and emphasis on state control. The following challenges must be highlighted:

- **State Control:** The Belarusian government maintains a high degree of control over HEIs, influencing their governance, curriculum, and academic activities. The levers at the state's disposal are control over the financial resources accessible to HEIs, which is closely linked to the adherence of institutions to state policies and repression.
- **International Isolation:** While there have been efforts to increase international cooperation, these have been hampered by the state's violation of human rights and democratic principles and Belarus's support for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

- **Loss of human capital:** Diminishing financial support for higher education and inefficiencies within the system undermine the ability to invest in research and offer competitive salaries. This leads to an exodus of students and academics. The repression and climate of fear created in Belarusian universities after 2020 has dramatically accelerated the brain drain problem.

Periods of Transformation of the Belarusian Higher Education System

The system of science and higher education in Belarus has undergone significant changes since independence in 1991. The transformations can be divided into distinct periods, each marked by critical milestones.³ The patterns of development are illustrated by the Academic Freedom Index (AFI). The following graph shows the evolution of academic freedom in Belarus in a historical perspective, starting from the country's independence. In 2023, Belarus' overall score was the lowest in both Europe and the post-Soviet space.

Early Post-Independence Period (1991–2000)

The early 1990s were marked by reforms aimed at moving away from the Soviet-inherited education system to one that could meet the needs of an independent Belarus with a market-oriented economy. The adoption of the new Law on Education in 1991 allowed the establishment of private higher education institutions and introduced tuition fees in public institutions. The new law gave universities greater flexibility in designing programmes and curricula. In addition, numerous NGOs emerged, focusing on the development of educational concepts and programmes.

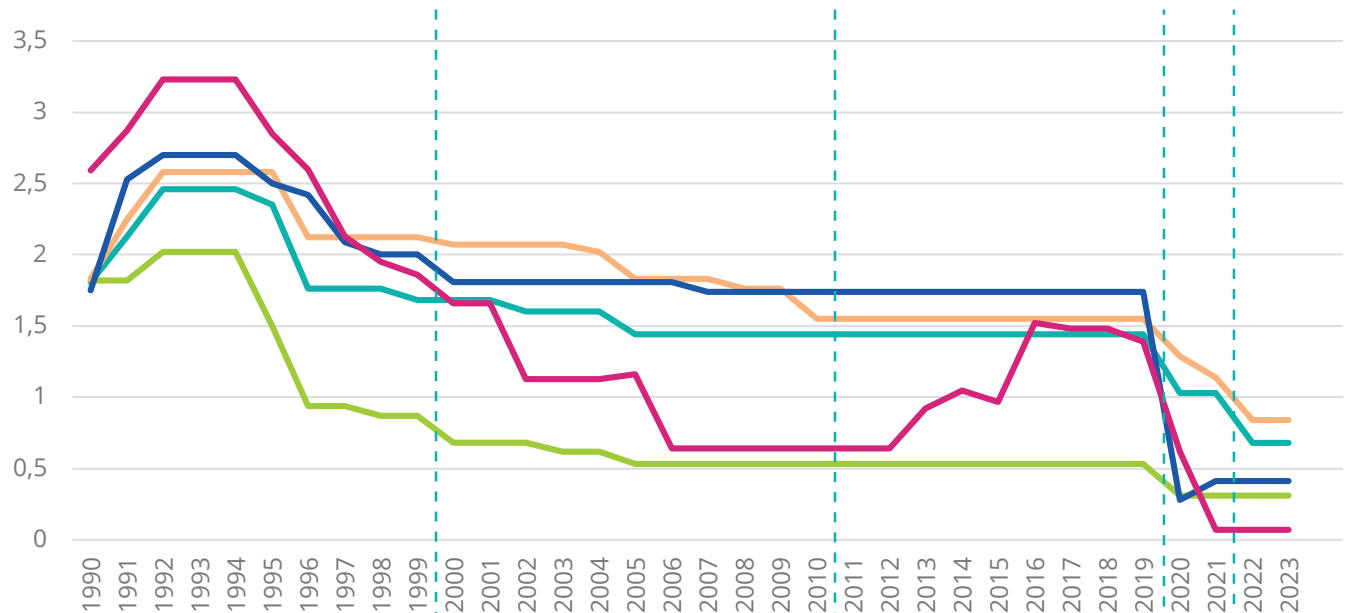
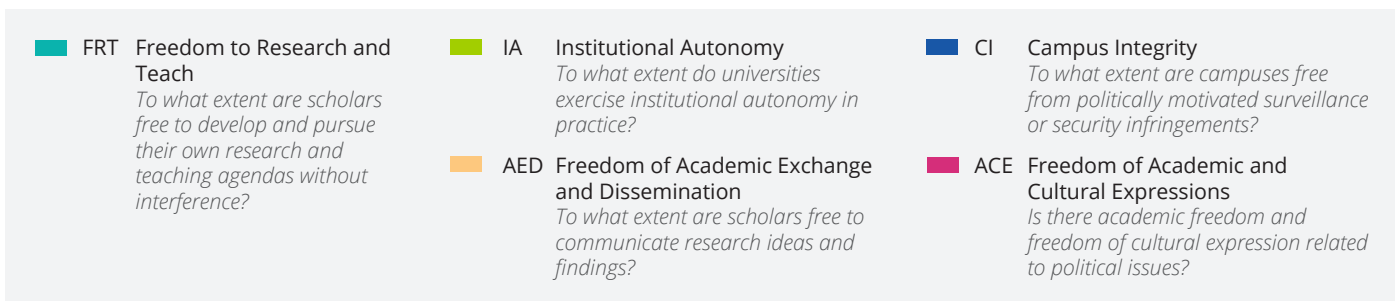
The government promoted the use of the Belarusian language in education. Belarusian language and literature courses were introduced in all universities. Financial incentives (a 20% bonus on monthly salary) were offered to instructors who taught in Belarusian. However, the 1995 referendum establishing official bilingualism in Belarus dismantled these initiatives. While the use of Belarusian was no longer actively discouraged, the decision to teach in Belarusian was left to individual lecturers.

3 30 Let Politiki v Sfere Obrazovaniya Belarusi (1991-2021). Belorusskoe Obrazovanie na Puti Izmenenii. Vilnius, 2021. <https://asvetaby.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/30-let-politiki-belarus.pdf> (accessed 3.11.2024).

Figure 1. Belarus' Academic Freedom Index Scores 1990 – 2023 and development periods of Belarus' science and higher education

AFI system of measurement:

0-4 on each dimension, where 0 –completely restricted and 4 – fully free.



⚡ Early Post-Independence Period

- Initial liberalisation (early 1990s)
- Shift towards state control (mid-1990s onwards), with restrictions on academic freedom

⚡ Integration into the EHEA

- Belarus took steps to join the Bologna Process
 - increased student mobility
 - 2012 – application rejected
- Continued state control, suppression of student activism, and restrictions on institutional autonomy

⚡ Globalisation Despite Consolidation of State Control

- 2015 – Belarus joined the Bologna Process
- Modernisation and internationalisation, but superficially, aimed at maintaining state control
- Limited autonomy and continued repression

⚡ Retreat from Democratic Principles and Repression

- Control of universities: increased regulation, ideological control, loyalist leadership
- Repression: expulsions, dismissals, fear in academia
- Limited opportunities: Access to education abroad restricted, Belarusian universities less attractive

⚡ Continued Regression and Consequences of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

- Isolation and sanctions for supporting Russia
- Increased cooperation in higher education with Russia and China
- Continued repression
- 2022 – suspension from the Bologna Process

Under the new law on education, university rectors, who had previously been appointed by the state, began to be elected, reflecting a shift towards greater institutional autonomy. In short, Belarus reached its peak in all aspects of academic freedom in the early years of independence (Fig.1).

After Aliaksandr Lukashenka took office in 1994, there was a gradual decline in all aspects of academic freedom, with the most significant drop occurring between 1994 and 1996 (Fig. 1). Overall, as noted by Lavruhin (2012)⁴, real decision-making power remained largely under the control of the state. Despite the implementation of the first national education reform in 1997, which aimed to modernise curricula and improve the quality of education, universities often faced state interference in critical areas such as curriculum development, faculty selection, and research.

Integration into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (2001-2010)

During this period, Belarus began to align its higher education system with European standards, in particular with the requirements of the Bologna Process. Notable milestones include:

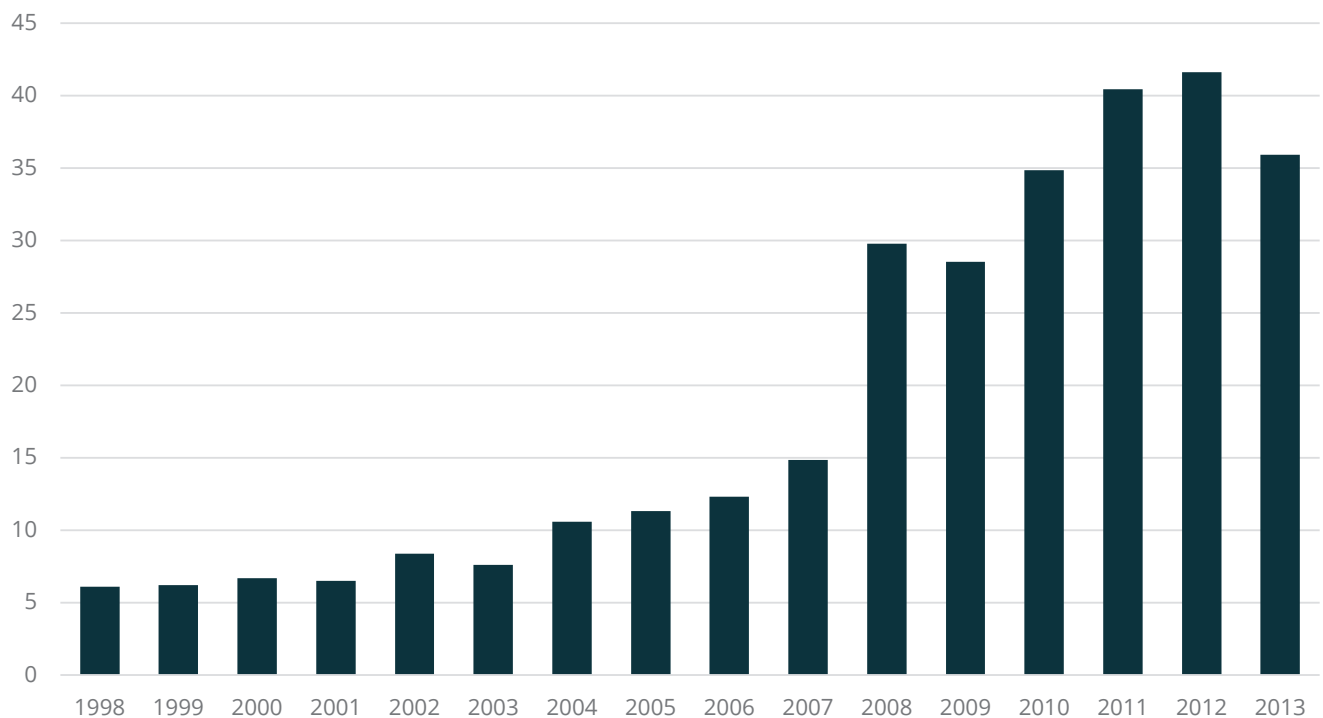
- **2003:** replacement of traditional entrance exams to HEIs with centralised exams. This change aimed to standardise and streamline the admission process across different educational institutions.
- **2004:** Belarus became a signatory to the Bologna Process, committing to harmonise its higher education system with the EHEA.
- **2006:** Introduction of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) to facilitate student mobility.
- **2011-2012:** Failed attempt to join the Bologna system.

This phase was marked by resistance to change from some academic and administrative staff and highlighted the need for substantial investment in infrastructure and faculty development to meet new standards. The authorities followed the path of Europeanisation of the education process because all neighbouring countries, including Russia and Ukraine, had already joined the Bologna Process, which potentially made Belarusian higher education institutions less competitive in attracting students from within the country and abroad. In addition, joining the Bologna Process was a tool

4 Lavruhin, Andrei. Higher School Transformations in Belarus and Ukraine in the Period between 1991 and 2011." *Perekrestki 1-2* (2012): 30-89. Vilnius, Lithuania.

Figure 2. Number of Belarusian Students Studying Abroad (in thousands), 1998–2013.

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data



to obtain more funds from foreign donors. Finally, it had a positive impact on higher education through the introduction of student mobility programmes. The number of Belarusian students studying abroad increased several times (Fig. 2), with Poland, Russia, Germany and the United States as the main destinations.

At the same time, the state retains a dominant role in shaping the curriculum, hiring and promoting faculty, and managing institutional affairs, leaving little room for autonomous decision-making at the university level. The Belarusian government continued to suppress student activism and dissent. Expulsions for political involvement were common, such as the 2005 expulsion of Tatsiana Khoma for attending a meeting of the European Student Union. The 2006 and 2010 presidential elections saw an increase in expulsions for protest participation. The pro-Lukashenka Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU), founded in 2002, also acted as an instrument of political control. To this day, participation in the BRYU is often required for academic and professional advancement, enforcing loyalty and support for the regime among students.

Belarus formally applied to join the EHEA in November 2011. However, the application was rejected in January 2012 due to Belarus' failure to comply with several basic principles of the Bologna Process, including academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and student participation in higher education governance.

The insincerity of attempts at Europeanisation and the dominant role of the state in the education system are reflected in Belarus' AFI score, which continues its downward trend.

Globalization Despite Consolidation of State Control (2011–2020)

During this period, Belarusian higher education has grappled with the need for modernisation and internationalisation while further consolidating state control.

Key developments in this period include:

- **2015:** Belarus joined the Bologna Process.
- **2015:** Adoption of the Education Code, consolidating previous laws and introducing measures to improve education quality.
- **2017:** Participation in the Erasmus+ programme to promote international cooperation and mobility.
- **2019:** Implementation of a comprehensive digitalisation strategy for higher education.

The 2011 Bologna Process rejection highlighted the need for real reform in the education sector. Beyond Bologna, several factors including booming business demands, the rise of alternative education initiatives, the need for lifelong learning, and the spread of digitalisation pressured Belarus to reform its higher education system. However, the government opted for superficial changes while maintaining control, diluting meaningful transformation. The system remained in flux, driven more by external pressures rather than a coherent strategy.

For most of the period, Belarus' AFI score remained relatively stable at a low level, highlighting the formal nature of the changes brought about by the modernisation attempts and accession to the Bologna Process.

During this phase, student and staff participation in university governance was limited to formal mechanisms for involvement (e.g. student unions or university councils), which lacked influence over critical decisions. The governance structure remained predominantly top-down and hierarchical, prioritising administrative control over democratic engagement. The appointment of all university rectors is subject to Lukashenka's approval, further consolidating state control. Political repression in universities continued, exemplified by the 2016 expulsion of Piotr Markiełau for his activism. The Belarusian authorities' Covid 19 policy also led to repression. A notable example is the 2020 expulsion of Lizaveta Prakopchyk, a student at Minsk State Linguistic University, who was dismissed for advocating quarantine measures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Professional bans, or the exclusion of individuals from their professions for political reasons, were a key tactic used to stifle dissent prior to 2020. These bans, often imposed before elections or as punishment for activism, targeted sectors such as law enforcement, government, media, education and academia, and led to professional and social marginalisation. Compulsory labour, a practice that requires graduates

to work in government-designated places, usually for two years after graduation, was also used to punish those deemed disloyal to the regime. They could be sent to rural areas or areas badly affected by the 1986 Chernobyl disaster.

Retreat from Democratic Principles and Repression (2020–2022)

The period following the 2020 presidential elections was marked by significant political unrest, increased state control over universities, and a regression from democratic principles in education.

Key developments include:

- **2021:** Introduction of regulations and informal practices restricting academic freedom and increasing state control.

Centralisation increased, with greater emphasis on politicisation and ideological control of education. Reform initiatives were halted or sidelined. International organisations, such as the DAAD and the Goethe-Institut in Minsk, were forced to cease operations as part of the government's efforts to stifle dissent and foreign influence. State repression has had a dramatic impact on academic freedom. Belarus' AFI scores plummeted to among the lowest in both Europe and the post-Soviet region. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated challenges in education provision and infrastructure.

The targeting of active and potentially dissenting faculty and administrators has led to a loss in expertise and a climate of fear and conformity. The appointment of ideologically aligned but less qualified individuals to key positions undermines academic standards and stifles intellectual freedom. Professional bans, used on an unprecedented scale, became a primary tool of repression, driving dissenters out of Belarusian society. Dismissals were often based on pretexts such as non-renewal of contracts, failed certifications, and forced resignations. Expulsions from institutions also served as de facto bans, hindering career prospects. Young people faced pressure to join the pro-Lukashenka Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU), and control over private institutions tightened, closing many alternative centres. Students faced severe repression during the 2020 protests. Plain-clothes security forces attacked peaceful student demonstrators on and off university campuses. In response to the protests, Lukashenka replaced at least eight university deans, and at least 153 students were expelled between August 2020 and May 2021, with many fleeing the country. Throughout 2021 and 2022, student activists faced arrest and lengthy sentences on dubious charges.⁵ In the most high-profile case, 12 people were sentenced to between two and three years in prison. While it is difficult to

5 Freedom in the World 2023: Belarus. Freedom House, 2023. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/freedom-world/2023> (accessed 3.11.2024).

assess the full extent of the crackdown, the significant reduction in the number of professors and professionals in higher education highlights the widespread impact of this repression.

New repressive practices have emerged, such as the abolishment of draft deferments for those enrolled in foreign universities, and the liquidation of NGOs and independent media. Educational purges under the guise of political and wartime stances continue, with security officials assessing loyalty in leadership appointments and preventative conversations instilling fear. Access to higher education is increasingly controlled, favouring loyal students and discouraging those perceived as outsiders. The attractiveness of Belarusian universities is diminishing as more students seek education abroad. According to the Ministry of Education, Belarusian universities are 6,000 students short of their enrolment targets for 2021. While they had planned to admit 55,000 first-year students, they were only able to accept 48,000. This left 500 state-funded university places unfilled. The main reason for this shortage is the mass exodus of young people from the country. The government is countering this trend with bureaucratic hurdles and legislative changes to restrict educational opportunities abroad, further consolidating control over the education system. International support for expelled students provides some relief, allowing them to continue their education in a safer environment. Poland and Germany, along with Lithuania and the Czech Republic due to their supportive stance towards Belarusian dissidents, remain major destinations. Scholarly emigration from Belarus after 2020 led to the creation of new initiatives, such as the proposed Belarusian National University in Exile. Announced by Belarusian scholars and intellectuals in 2023, the BNU plans to register and seek accreditation in an EU country by 2025-2026. The organisers are in talks with potential host countries, including Poland, Lithuania, Germany, the Czech Republic and Estonia.

Continued Regression and Consequences of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine (2022–Present)

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has had a significant impact on the Belarusian higher education system. Belarus' political alignment with Russia during the war led to international isolation and sanctions, which affected its educational institutions and collaborations. For example, the Czech Republic introduced restrictive measures against Belarusian students, treating them as citizens of the co-aggressor country. These measures led to complications with visa extensions and restrictions on the pursuit of some study programmes. Some restrictive measures were also adopted in Estonia, Latvia, and Sweden. For example, the University of Tartu, on its own initiative, limited applications from Belarusian students only to those who already had a resident permit in the EU. According to the Tsikhanouskaya Office, these restrictive measures have been partially lifted in all four countries, largely due to the

lobbying efforts of the Belarusian communities there. In February 2023, the University of Tartu reversed its decision not to admit prospective students from Belarus. However, Belarusians continue to be treated through the prism of securitisation. While cooperation with Western higher education institutions has been curtailed, Belarus' higher education ties with Russia and China have intensified. Initiatives to align Belarusian higher education standards and policies more closely with those of Russia can be traced as early as 2020. From 2022, they will develop into the unification of educational programmes and scientific and methodological support.⁶

Moreover, repressive and intimidating policies were implemented to silence and instil fear in students, teachers, and administrators. Universities continued to be purged, with ideological interviews becoming commonplace in the recruitment process, especially for leadership positions. Access to higher education was restricted for students deemed ideologically unsuitable, including obstacles to studying abroad.⁷ The government has also increasingly restricted Belarusian language instruction in schools and universities.⁸ Belarus remains at the bottom of the league table on all aspects of academic freedom.

The suspension from the Bologna Process in 2022⁹ resulted in a loss of recognition for Belarusian degrees within the EHEA, reduced student and faculty mobility, and significant cuts in access to European funding for education and research projects. It should also be noted that the decision was motivated solely by the regime's involvement in Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and not by the high level of domestic repression in Belarus, which contributed significantly to the policy choices of the Lukashenka administration.

Since 1991, the system of science and higher education in Belarus underlines the profound impact of political governance on the academic environment. The initial post-Soviet reforms offered a glimpse of the potential for academic freedom and innovation, but subsequent political developments, particularly under the Lukashenka regime, have largely reversed these gains. Repressive measures following the 2020 elections have further exacerbated these problems, highlighting the ongoing struggle for autonomy and academic freedom. However, the resilience of the academic community, both within Belarus and in exile, offers hope for a future where education and science can thrive independently of political interference.

6 "Belarus' i Rossiya zapustili protsess unifikatsii obrazovatel'nykh programm." Belnovosti, May 18, 2024. <https://www.belnovosti.by/obshchestvo/belarus-i-rossiya-zapustili-process-unifikatsii-obrazovatelnyh-programm> (accessed 3.11.2024).

7 Alsheuski, Siarhei. "Obrazovanie: Chastnomu i Chuzherodnomu Zdes' Ne Mesto." Belaruski Ezhegodnik, 2023, 168–174, at 168. <https://web.archive.org/web/20231218105731/https://nmn.media/yearbook/get/yearbook2023.pdf> (accessed 3.11.2024). Note: New advertising restrictions prohibit promoting jobs and education opportunities abroad, except for organizations officially involved in overseas employment and education services. Such advertisements must be pre-approved by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and placed only on specific websites.

8 Freedom in the World 2023: Belarus.

9 "Belarus." EHEA. n.d. <https://ehea.info/page-belarus> (accessed 3.11.2024).

Part 2

**The triple challenge to
academic freedom in
Belarus: the impact of
repression, ideological
indoctrination, and
isolation. 2020–2024**

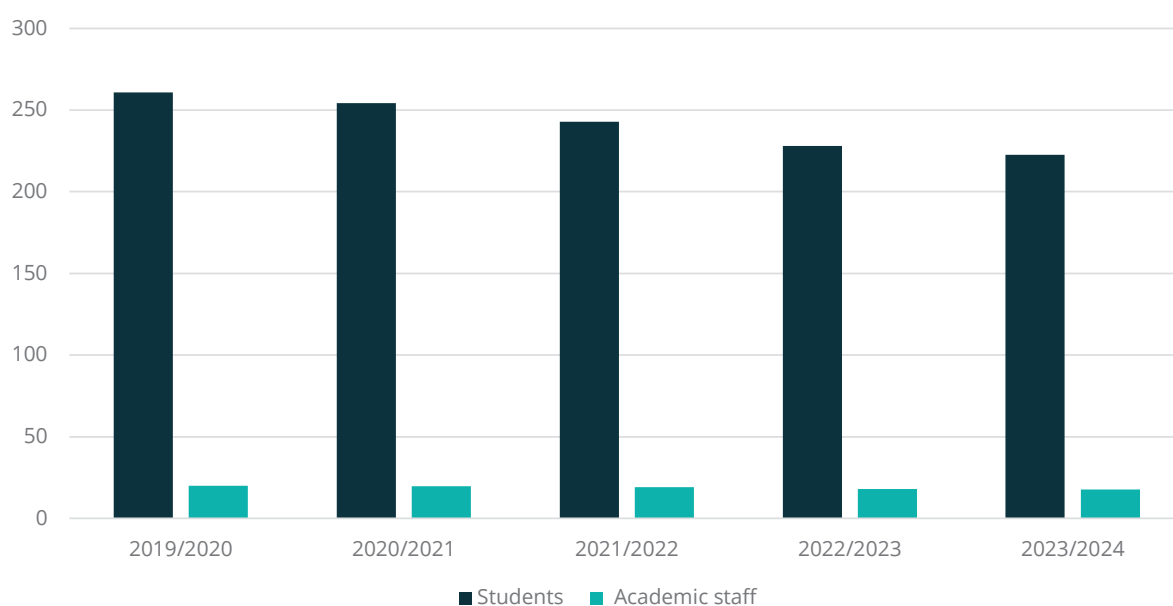
by Maryia Rohava



According to data published by the government-controlled statistical agency, the number of students and academic staff in universities has been continuously decreasing between 2019 and 2023 (Fig. 3).¹⁰ Although factors such as population decline¹¹ contributed to this downward trend, the ongoing political crisis, increasing restrictions on civil liberties, and the deteriorating political and human rights situation reverberated through the higher education system in Belarus, tightening the government’s grip on universities. Political repression within academic institutions, arrests, and prosecutions of students and academic staff, state control of academic curricula, and increased levels of ideological indoctrination and militarisation are the key aspects that have defined the last four-year period of deteriorating academic freedom in Belarus.

Figure 3. Number of Students and Academic Staff (in thousands)

Source: National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus



This part of the report reviews the state of academic freedom in Belarus by examining changes in five key components between 2020 and 2024: i) freedom to research and teach; ii) academic exchange and dissemination; iii) institutional autonomy; iv) campus integrity; and v) academic and cultural expression. By providing more contextual analysis and data on the factors contributing to the decline of academic freedom, it aims to highlight the systematic erosion of academic freedom in Belarus, which corresponds to the institutionalisation of a more repressive autocratic regime between 2021 and 2024. Furthermore, the analysis indicates that Lukashenka’s active support for Russia’s war in Ukraine has further deteriorated the conditions for international academic exchange and mobility, academically isolating the country and steering Belarusian higher education institutions towards deeper integration into the Russian sphere.

10 National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, ‘Education in Belarus, 2024.’ July 12, 2024. <https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/a9c/z4v111ihadxu922sttoztjzmv20q1s8.pdf> (accessed 2.12.2024).

11 World Health Organisation, ‘Population, Belarus,’ 2022. <https://data.who.int/countries/112> (accessed 2.12.2024).

Freedom to Research and Teach

Freedom of research and teaching has come under significant ideological pressure between 2021 and 2024. Since the introduction of the ideology of Belarusian statehood into university teaching in 2003,¹² specially appointed personnel for ideological work at educational institutions have been central figures in academic institutions, tasked with implementing a government-prescribed ideological doctrine. The political crisis of 2020 and Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine changed the Belarusian government's view of the role of academic institutions and research centres in the political system. The government has stepped up ideological indoctrination at all levels of education, introducing revised textbooks and university courses according to the new concept of social sciences and humanities, strengthening state ideology and promoting the official historical narrative of the Great Patriotic War and traditional family relations.

In January 2022, Lukashenka announced the Year of Historical Memory and established the Republican Council on Historical Policy, tasked with developing a unified state policy on historical memory and the interpretation of history to be taught in Belarus.¹³ On January 5, 2022, the Law on the Genocide of the Belarusian People was adopted, which criminalises any alternative interpretation of the history of World War II.¹⁴ These changes were reinforced by the constitutional amendment of February 2022, which included a constitutional duty of the state to ensure the preservation of historical truth.¹⁵

The enshrinement of the official historical narrative in law provided the government with additional tools for repression, allowing the authorities to persecute independent publishing houses and ban publications about certain historical events, symbols, and figures by adding them to the list of extremist materials administered by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In July 2024, the list of court-designated extremist materials, such as websites, social media accounts, publications, slogans, poems and songs, included more than 4,300 items (Fig. 4).¹⁶ The distribution of such materials is subject to administrative liability and criminal prosecution.¹⁷

12 Nelly Bekus, 'European Belarus versus State Ideology: Construction of the Nation in the Belarusian Political Discourses,' *Polish Sociological Review*, no. 163 (2008): 263–83.

13 Aliaksei Bratachkin, '2022 Is the Year of "Historical Memory" and Political Use of History in Belarus,' February 13, 2023. <https://penbelarus.org/en/2023/02/13/2022-y-god-gistarychnaj-pamyaczi-i-palitychnaga-vykarystannya-gistoryi-u-belarusi.html> (accessed 4.9.2024).

14 Human Constanta, 'On the Genocide of Belarusian People – Legal Overview of the New Law,' July 13, 2022. <https://humanconstantia.org/en/on-the-genocide-of-belarusian-people-legal-overview-of-the-new-law/> (accessed 4.9.2024).

15 See Article 15 in European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission), 'Belarus: Constitution (with Amendments Adopted by Referendum of 27 February 2022) - Unofficial Translation' [https://www.venice.coe.int/web-forms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-REF\(2022\)034-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/web-forms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-REF(2022)034-e) (accessed 4.9.2024).

16 Henadz Korshunau, 'The Belarusian Barometer of Repression: Second Quarter of 2024,' July 2024. <https://newideas.center/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/barometr-represij-2-2024-en.pdf> (accessed 27.11.2024).

17 Anaïs Marin, 'Situation of Human Rights in Belarus,' Special Rapporteur (United Nations, General Assembly, 25 August 2023), <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n23/251/37/pdf/n2325137.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed 27.11.2024).

Figure 4. The increase of the number of materials designated as extremist in Belarus

Source: Centre for New Ideas



These measures targeted independent publishing houses and alternative venues for the dissemination of research publications, particularly in the fields of history, arts, and the humanities. In 2024, independent educational initiatives were labelled as extremist formations.¹⁸ More than 50 books were added to the list, including a collection of historical documents from the state archives and a historical monograph based on a dissertation officially defended in Belarus in 2006.¹⁹ Three books by historian Ihar Melnikau were categorised as extremist materials in August 2024, six months after he was detained and later charged with promoting extremist activities.²⁰ The process of adding new publications to the lists is not transparent and is carried out in closed court sessions through a special procedure based on a decision by the state-controlled expert commission.

In the spring of 2022, four independent publishing houses were closed by the Ministry of Information, while the books they published were added to the list of extremist materials, preventing their further distribution in the country.²¹ Continued

18 Human Constanta, 'Death Penalty for Terrorism and Mass Sentences for Helping Political Prisoners: Review of the Fight against Extremism in Belarus in July–September 2024,' November 13, 2024. <https://humanconstanta.org/en/death-penalty-for-terrorism-and-mass-sentences-for-helping-political-prisoners-review-of-the-fight-against-extremism-in-belarus-for-july-september-2024/> (accessed 27.11.2024).

19 PEN Belarus, 'Banned Books,' June 20, 2024. <https://penbelarus.org/en/2024/06/20/banned-books.html> (accessed 27.11.2024).

20 Viasna, Human Rights Centre, 'Statement on the Status of a Political Prisoner: Ihar Melnikau,' August 30, 2024. <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/ihar-melnikau> (accessed 27.11.2024).

21 PEN Belarus, 'Statement on the Repression of Belarusian Book Publishers and the Destruction of the Independent Publishing Industry,' May 30, 2022, <https://penbelarus.org/en/2022/05/30/zayava-z-nagody-represij-supracz-belaruskih-knigarou-i-znishchennya-nezalezhnaj-vydavczkaj-galiny.html> (accessed 27.11.2024).

government persecution, especially in the fields of Belarusian history, arts, and culture, and social and political sciences, forced independent publishers and researchers to emigrate and continue their activities abroad.

Belarus' involvement in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has further contributed to the government's efforts to impose an ideology and state propaganda in academic institutions that would support and promote Russia's official narratives about the war. The official rhetoric has shifted towards pro-Russian imperialist discourses and interpretations of history, becoming openly anti-Western and challenging perceptions of certain historical figures and periods established in Belarusian historiography in previous years.²²

The number of meetings with pro-government activists and propagandists in universities has increased significantly and has become a regular event organised by the Belarusian Republican Youth Union. Such meetings are devoted to lectures on ideologically charged interpretations of the political situation in the country, the world, and the war in Ukraine.²³ Some propagandists were elevated to new high-level positions in academic and research institutions with an objective of enforcing the state version of historical memory in education.²⁴

In addition, the government has stepped up its efforts to increase militarisation in schools and academic institutions by promoting meetings of military-patriotic clubs and organising nationwide military field training for students with the involvement of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the security forces. The first military-patriotic education programme was launched at the Kulyashou Mahilou State University in 2024.²⁵ The ongoing militarisation trend indicates a systematic effort by the government to involve the military and security services in education at both school and university levels, promoting the cult of the armed forces, militarism and ideologically charged patriotism.²⁶

The changes in the education system since 2022 indicate the intense ideological pressure that the government and state institutions exert on academic personnel. The active involvement of the presidential administration and ministries in monitoring and implementing teaching guidelines and ideological education creates an academic environment that does not tolerate political dissent and opinions that might be critical of the institution or the education system.

22 Pavel Slunkin et al., 'Belarus Change Tracker #5,' May 2023. <https://bct.expert/en/issue/may-2023> (accessed 27.11.2024).

23 iSANS, 'Key Changes in the Education System of Belarus during the 2022-2023,' September 2023. https://isans.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/changes_in_education_system_2022-2023_academic_year.pdf (accessed 27.11.2024).

24 'Propagandist Was Appointed as Editor of a Science Methodology Journal for Teachers,' Zerkalo, 10 May 2024. <https://news.zerkalo.io/cellar/67949.html> (accessed 27.11.2024).

25 Pavel Slunkin et al., 'Belarus Change Tracker #7,' May 2024, <https://bct.expert/en/issue/may-2024> (accessed 27.11.2024).

26 Belarusian Helsinki Committee, 'Belarus: The Right to Education, Advances and Challenges,' 2023. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/education/cfi-hrc53/submission-education-hrc53-cso-bhc-en.pdf> (accessed 27.11.2024).

Academic Exchange and Dissemination

Between 2020 and 2024, the situation of academic exchange and international cooperation in Belarus has changed dramatically, with educational institutions moving away from the European educational area and towards closer ties with universities and institutions in Russia and China.

Political repression and human rights violations, as well as Belarus' involvement in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, led to several successive rounds of restrictive measures and individual and sectoral sanctions. In the context of the European Union, sectoral sanctions, such as financial and services restrictions, put an end to any ongoing cooperation with Belarusian public bodies and institutions, including universities and research institutes.²⁷ In addition to EU-wide measures, European countries adopted national measures to suspend academic institutional cooperation and restrict access to research funding for scientists affiliated with Belarusian state institutions. Individual collaborations with scientists based in Belarus have also been restricted, made conditional on the availability of their own funds or on participation in an individual capacity without specifying their professional affiliation.

In March and April 2022, European associations and national research councils in EU member states announced the suspension of all formal and institutional partnerships with education and knowledge institutions in Belarus. In April 2022, the members of the Bologna Follow-Up Group suspended Belarus' right of representation in the Bologna process and all structures and activities of the EHEA.²⁸ This decision marked a decisive moment in international cooperation, further isolating Belarusian higher education from European educational institutions.

The Belarusian government and academic institutions have intensified their efforts to establish scientific cooperations and agreements with Russian institutions and to facilitate integration between the two higher education systems. New areas of cooperation include the preservation of common historical memory and cultural values, pedagogical methods, and scientific and industrial integration within the Union State. In addition, Russian state-funded organisations, most notably the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent State Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad (Rossotrudnichestvo), have significantly increased the number of sponsored events, academic programmes and scholarships for young people and students from Belarus (from 72 in 2019 to 1300 in 2023).²⁹

27 Council of the EU, 'Timeline - EU Sanctions against Belarus,' August 5, 2024. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-belarus/belarus-timeline/> (accessed 27.11.2024).

28 Bologna Follow-Up Group Meeting LXXX, 'Statement by Members and Consultative Members of the Bologna Follow-Up Group on Consequences of the Russian Federation Invasion of Ukraine' (European Higher Education Area, April 11, 2022).

29 iSANS, 'Belarusian Education and Russia's Presence,' 2023. <https://isans.org/analysis/monitoring/belarusian-education-and-russias-presence-in-it.html> (accessed 27.11.2024).

China has also been prioritised as an educational and scientific partner for Belarusian academic institutions. Regular contacts and high-level meetings at governmental and institutional levels indicate a strong political commitment to invest in scientific cooperation with Chinese institutions. In addition to bilateral academic agreements, joint education and research programmes have been established to promote students and scholar exchanges. There are also plans to establish Chinese-Belarusian centres for scientific research.³⁰

The changes in institutional cooperation in Belarusian universities have also affected individual opportunities for scholars to participate in international conferences and exchange programmes. According to a recent survey of Belarusian urban residents, educational and research mobility, including conference participation, represented around 4% of visits made to the EU countries in the last five years.³¹

Scholars employed in Belarusian state universities are now required to obtain official permission from the university administration to attend academic conferences, give lectures, and participate in other professional events. The government, through its ministries, draws up annual plans for international conferences and public engagements. The recent case of the Belarusian State Medical University has shown that the university administration monitors the implementation of these plans and often restricts participation outside the scope of state-approved academic and public engagements.³²

Individual educational mobility has also been affected by Presidential Decree No. 278 of 2 September 2023, which is aimed at Belarusian citizens who have moved abroad for political reasons. The decree stipulates that Belarusian educational institutions may issue copies of documents certifying studies in person or under powers of attorney established in Belarus. The administrative procedures prevent Belarusian scholars who have been forced to leave the country from obtaining certified documents, which affects their ability to study or work abroad. Other potential issues that can directly impact researchers include the absence of a valid travel document, since the government discontinued the issuance of passports abroad in 2023.³³

30 Belarusian State University, 'New Cooperation Agreements Were Reached between BSU and Peking University (PKU) within the Framework of the Forum of Rectors of Higher Education Institutions of Belarus and China,' June 26, 2024. <https://bsu.by/en/news/new-cooperation-agreements-were-reached-between-bsu-and-pekings-university-pku-within-the-framework-o-d/> (accessed 27.11.2024).

31 The survey shows that 78% of Belarusians surveyed have not visited any EU countries in the last five years. For the 22% of those who have visited the EU, the main purposes of their trips were tourism and visiting family or friends. Chatham House, 'Belarusians' Perception of the West and Connections with It (Poll Conducted 28 June - 3 July 2024)', 3 September 2024. <https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-19> (accessed 2.12.2024).

32 'BSMU Staff Is Not Permitted to Participate in Conferences without the Ministry of Health's Approval and a "Special Permission". Students and Teaching Staff Are Against,' Zerkalo, April 24, 2024. <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/66744.html> (accessed 27.11.2024).

33 UN Special Rapporteur, 'A/HRC/56/65: Situation of Human Rights in Belarus,' May 9, 2024. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5665-situation-human-rights-belarus-report-special-rapporteur> (accessed 27.11.2024).

Institutional Autonomy

The Belarusian higher education system has lacked institutional autonomy since the country's independence. The situation did not improve after Belarus' conditional inclusion in the European Higher Education Area in 2015.³⁴ The political crisis of 2020 and the amendments to the National Education Code introduced in 2022 and 2023 further consolidated the highly centralised governance model of education, which remains fully subordinated to the presidency.³⁵

The president and the presidential administration control key appointments in Belarusian universities and implement policy decisions on higher education and research through the Ministry of Education. The president appoints and dismisses rectors of public universities, while the Ministry of Education is responsible for appointments in private universities. In response to student protests in September and October 2020, Lukashenka replaced the rectors of three universities. Another major change in the structure of Belarusian universities was the addition of the post of Vice-Rector for Security and Human Resources to the university administration in 2021.³⁶ These posts have been filled by KGB officers who actively monitor any protest activities on campus and participate in decisions on the promotion and employment of academic personnel. The inclusion of state security services in university administration has cemented the system of government surveillance and control. In the positions of Vice-Rector for Security and Human Resources, KGB officers have identified academic staff involved in peaceful protest activities and summoned them for interviews that have included personal threats and intimidation, often resulting in their dismissal.

Since 2021, public university administrations have been actively reviewing and terminating the employment contracts of teaching and research staff with dissenting political opinions. The exact number of affected scholars is difficult to estimate, as many chose not to disclose their situation and names for fear of political prosecution.³⁷ More than 150 scholars lost their positions in the first wave of repression in 2020-2021. However, dismissals continued in 2023 and 2024, affecting hundreds of

34 Tatsiana Chulitskaya et al., 'From Scientific Communism to Political Science: The Development of the Profession in Selected Former Soviet European States,' in *Opportunities and Challenges for New and Peripheral Political Science Communities: A Consolidated Discipline?*, ed. Gabriella Ilonszki and Christophe Roux (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022).

35 'The Code of Education of the Republic of Belarus No. 243-3 [Kodeks Respubliki Belarus' Ob Obrazovanii № 243-3],' January 13, 2011. <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=hk1100243> (accessed 27.11.2024).

36 Belarusian Students' Association, 'The State of Academia in Belarus,' 2021. <https://esu-online.org/publications/belarusian-students-association-report-the-state-of-academia-in-belarus-2021/> (accessed 27.11.2024).

37 "'They Are Recruiting People from the Industry to Cover the Shortage of Personnel.'" How Disloyal Lecturers Have Been Dismissed from Universities,' Otrazhenie (blog), February 15, 2022 <https://telegra.ph/Nabirayut-lyudej-s-proizvodstva-ch-to-by-zakryt-nehvatku-kadrov-Kak-v-universitetah-uvolnyayut-neloyalnyh-prepodavatelej-02-15> (accessed 27.11.2024).

scholars in public universities across the country forcing many to seek new professional options.³⁸ It must be stressed that political dissent and any actions deemed critical of the government, its policies and actions were the main reasons for the dismissals, arrests, administrative and criminal prosecutions of academic staff.

The financial autonomy of public higher education institutions remained extremely low, with state universities heavily dependent on the Ministry of Education for financial support. The financial situation of universities was further aggravated by declining enrolments in 2021-2024. In 2023, the Ministry increased tuition fees by up to 17%, especially for top programmes in medicine and computer science.³⁹ This increase was justified by the need to cover higher wages for public university employees and maintenance costs for university buildings and structures. In addition, the authorities intensified financial monitoring of payments to graduates who received publicly funded university places but did not complete the mandatory post-graduation work placement.⁴⁰ The government announced plans to extend mandatory work placements by expanding the list of critical skills vocational programmes, which include five years of state-mandated employment.

The number of private universities decreased from eight to five, following the announcement of the closure of two private universities in June 2024.⁴¹ Reasons for these closures included increased administrative control by the government over private educational institutions and declining enrolment.

Campus Integrity

Among the five key indicators included in the Academic Freedom Index, campus integrity in Belarusian academic institutions fell to its lowest score in 2020 due to security breaches on academic campuses.

In September and October 2020, students participated in peaceful protests through marches, demonstrations, and sit-ins in response to police violence and the fraudu-

38 'Universities Dismissed 500 Staff Members Due to Protests,' DW, June 4, 2024. <https://www.dw.com/ru/iz-vuza-v-belarusi-uvolili-500-sotrudnikov-za-podderzku-protestov/a-69265229> (accessed 27.11.2024).

39 'Universities Set New Tuition Fees. How Much Higher Education Costs after the Announced Increase by the Ministry of Education,' Zerkalo, December 4, 2023. <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/55444.html> (accessed 27.11.2024).

40 'The State Control Committee Reported How Much Money Was Collected from Graduates Who Did Not Complete Their State-Mandated Work Placement,' Zerkalo, September 4, 2024, <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/77527.html> (accessed 27.11.2024).

41 'Top 12 First Higher Education Institutions of Independent Belarus. What Happened to Them?,' Zerkalo, June 21, 2024, <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/71392.html> (accessed 27.11.2024).

lent presidential election. Riot police and security forces, often with support of university administrators, invaded university campuses and forcibly detained students and academic staff. Hundreds of students from various Belarusian universities were arrested both on and off campus during this period.⁴² In November 2020, eleven student activists and members of the Belarusian Students' Association, along with one university lecturer, were arrested and later sentenced to two and a half years imprisonment for "organising and preparing actions that seriously violated public order."⁴³ The events of 2020 have brought significant changes to university campuses, where security surveillance, the presence of security services, and the increase in disciplinary actions, ill-treatment, and violence by the police have become part of the academic reality after 2020.

It is difficult to assess the full extent of arrests, dismissals and disciplinary actions against students and academic staff between 2020 and 2021. Data collected by human rights organisations and an independent student association include cases that were either reported by individuals or published in the media. Some students and scholars chose not to share the information for safety reasons and to avoid future persecution for their political opinions. The Belarusian Students' Association recorded 399 cases of detention and 146 cases of expulsion of students from universities in September-December 2020, and 167 expulsions of students and 77 cases of professors and teachers losing their jobs in 2021.⁴⁴ However, the number of politically motivated expulsions and dismissals in Belarusian universities was significantly higher. At the Belarusian State University, one of the country's largest higher education and research institutions, 140 students have been expelled and 50 academic staff dismissed from August 2020 to July 2023. Other data include the criminal and administrative prosecution of more than 500 students and academic staff for their political opinions and participation in peaceful protests between 2020 and 2023.⁴⁵ Although these figures are incomplete, they indicate that political persecution of students and academics continued on a massive scale during 2020-2023,⁴⁶ with a significant impact on the structure of academic campuses and the disciplinary measures adopted by university administrations.

42 Scholars at Risk, 'Free to Think 2021: Belarus,' 2021. <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Free-to-Think-2021-Belarus.pdf> (accessed 27.11.2024).

43 Amnesty International, 'Belarus: University Students Expelled from Universities and Imprisoned for Peaceful Protest,' May 24, 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/05/belarus-university-students-expelled-from-universities-and-imprisoned-for-peaceful-protest/> (accessed 27.11.2024).

44 Belarusian Students' Association Report, 'The State of Academic in Belarus 2023,' February 14, 2024. <https://esu-online.org/belarusian-students-association-report-the-state-of-academia-in-belarus-2023/> (accessed 27.11.2024).

45 'In Three Years, 50 Lecturers Were Dismissed in BSU for Participating in Protests,' Mediazona Belarus, June 3, 2024. <https://mediazonaby.com/news/2024/06/03/bgu> (accessed 27.11.2024).

46 'Ministry of Internal Affairs Reported on the Number of Students and Lecturers Involved in Extremist Activities,' Mediazona Belarus, March 14, 2024. <https://mediazonaby.com/number/2024/03/14/130> (accessed 27.11.2024).

Various levels of university administration, from vice-chancellors and department heads to administrative staff, have been involved in the repression of students and academics. Honest University, a project launched by the NGO Honest People, has documented 1,693 incidents of students and professors facing repression or administrative pressure in universities.⁴⁷ The reported incidents show the involvement of university administrators in expelling students and dismissing academic staff, giving false testimony in court, and giving statements to law enforcement agencies.

Academic and Cultural Expression

Belarus has reached its lowest ranking in international indexes that measure freedom of expression and civil liberties. Reporters Without Borders described Belarus as the most dangerous country in Europe for journalists until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and ranked it 167 out of 180 countries in 2024.⁴⁸ According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists, 36 journalists and media workers remained in prison, and more than 32 independent media outlets were labelled "extremist formations" by the authorities. The government maintains a tight grip on the country's information possibilities, actively blocking independent media outlets and information sources and using "anti-extremism" legislation to restrict access to information materials and limit freedom of expression.⁴⁹ Accessing, sharing, reposting, or commenting on information from these outlets can lead to both administrative and criminal prosecution. From July to September 2024, Human Constanta recorded over 140 new criminal prosecutions related to sharing, liking, or sending in private messages information from the outlets labelled as extremist material.⁵⁰

As of December 2024, there were 1,296 political prisoners in Belarus, including more than 170 cultural workers and 16 representatives of the Belarusian academic community.⁵¹ Prominent cases of scholars currently imprisoned in Belarus include philologist and literary scholar Aliaksandr Feduta, researcher Tatsiana Kuzina, philosopher Uladzimir Matskevich, political experts Valeryia Kastsyuhova and Yahor Lebiadok, and law student Marfa Rabkova.

47 Honest University, 'Repression of Students and Professors in Belarus.' <https://hu-repressions.honestby.org/en> (accessed 27.11.2024).

48 Reporters Without Borders, 'Index 2024 – Belarus.' <https://rsf.org/en/country/belarus> (accessed 27.11.2024).

49 Freedom House, 'Freedom on the Net 2024 - Belarus,' 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/freedom-net/2024> (accessed 27.11.2024).

50 Human Constanta, 'Death Penalty for Terrorism and Mass Sentences for Helping Political Prisoners: Review of the Fight against Extremism in Belarus in July-September 2024'.

51 Viasna, Human Rights Centre, 'Political Prisoners in Belarus,' December 2, 2024. <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en> (accessed 2.12.2024).

The UN Special Rapporteur found that the regime has escalated the practice of holding Belarusian political prisoners *incommunicado*, denying them any communication with their lawyers and family members. The report, which covered the period from April 2023 to March 2024, also highlighted an ongoing crackdown on freedom of expression, ill-treatment in prisons, widespread arbitrary detention, politically motivated convictions, and an increasing interference with the right to privacy.⁵²

Arbitrary detentions were reported in universities in 2023 and 2024, with students and academic staff accused of distributing extremist materials and symbols. Several reports indicate that both security services and representatives of university administrations conduct searches of private mobile phones to check subscriptions to materials and sources deemed extremist.

Communication in Belarusian is increasingly perceived as a sign of political disloyalty, resulting in the growing prominence of Russian in higher education institutions. Belarusian scholars writing in their native language face many obstacles when trying to publish their work. Publications specialising in Belarusian history, such as the journals *ARCHE: Pachatak and Nasha Historyia* [Our History], were labelled as extremist and removed from sale and libraries. Scholars specialising in Belarusian history are forced to adapt to the changing political dynamics in universities and the increasing instrumentalisation of historical memory for political and ideological purposes. As many scientific topics become politically controversial and even dangerous, researchers are forced to practice self-censorship or change their field of specialisation to politically safe areas of knowledge. The result of this repression is the destruction of independent scientific expertise and intellectual potential, especially in the fields of historical and social sciences in Belarus.⁵³

Over the past four years, Lukashenka's authoritarian regime has created an atmosphere of fear and international isolation. The massive scale of political repression has made it difficult to analyse data on academic repression in universities separately from broader political prosecution in the country. Silencing political dissent in the public sphere and maintaining political control have been key objectives, particularly in the run-up to the presidential elections scheduled for January 26, 2025, as a means of restoring the political legitimacy of the presidency. The regime has used its vast administrative and security capacity in public institutions and repressive legislation to persecute those who have shown any signs of political dissent,

52 UN Special Rapporteur, 'A/HRC/56/65: Situation of Human Rights in Belarus.'

53 Aliaksei Lastouski and Per Anders Rudling, 'A Silent Death: The Destruction of Academic Scholarship in Belarus,' in *A World Order in Transformation? A Comparative Study of Consequences of the War and Reactions to These Changes in the Region*, CBEEES State of the Region Report (Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEEES), Södertörn University, 2024), 99–108, <https://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1846696/FULLTEXT01.pdf#page=99> (accessed 2.12.2024).

including critical analysis of government policies and historical narratives, as well as condemnation of Russia's war in Ukraine.

The government has also intensified its persecution of independent political and social expertise, targeting Belarusian experts, researchers and educational initiatives based abroad. In July 2022, the Code of Criminal Procedure was amended to include provisions for the initiation of criminal cases *in absentia*. Since 2023, the government has initiated several cases, accusing individuals of participating in extremist activities and engaging in activities harmful to Belarusian national security.⁵⁴ Such extreme measures of retaliation for academic work and political expressions are designed to stifle alternative sources of information and limit access to independent expertise, as the government and state media continue to expand their strategies of information manipulation to promote ideological narratives.⁵⁵

As the country enters the fifth year since the 2020 political crisis, public opinion remains politically polarised. At the same time, recent waves of opinion polls suggest that Belarusians are becoming more receptive to pro-government propaganda narratives.⁵⁶ A significant decline in personal contact with the West – only 22% of Belarusian urban residents have visited EU countries in the last five years⁵⁷ – and limited access to independent and verified information suggest that the political landscape may continue to be shaped in ways that further entrench government's control over information and higher education.

54 Scholars at Risk, 'New Incident Report,' July 1, 2024, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2024-07-01-multiple-institutions/> (accessed 27.11.2024).

55 Media IQ, 'From "Extremism" Tactics to a South-East Shift: Dominant Information Manipulation Trends in H1 2024,' October 14, 2024. <https://mediaiq.info/from-extremism-tactics-to-a-south-east-shift-dominant-information-manipulation-trends-in-h1-2024> (accessed 27.11.2024).

56 Slunkin et al., 'Belarus Change Tracker #7'.

57 Chatham House, 'Belarusians' Perception of the West and Connections with It (Poll Conducted June 28 - July 3, 2024),' September 3, 2024.

Part 3

Academic Emigration from Belarus: Challenges of Integration

by Vasil Navumau



The state's repressive actions in the aftermath of the 2020 protests, ranging from arrests and dismissals to threats and surveillance, have not only stifled basic human rights and academic freedom, but have also forced many in the academic community to either flee the country or significantly alter their professional trajectories.⁵⁸ The prosecution of 20 analysts from Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's office (ranging from sociologists to political scientists and economists) on January 24, 2024⁵⁹ shows that the regime has not only escalated its attacks on academics inside Belarus, but has also targeted those scholars who have been abroad since well before August 2020. Scholars and students are at the forefront of defending democratic values and human rights, often at great personal and professional risk. Thus, purges of independent academic voices at home and campaigns to undermine the freedoms of those living abroad remain central aspects of state policy towards the academic community. The resulting exodus and internal repression have profound implications for the future of higher education, democratisation and the intellectual climate in Belarus.

Among the most popular destinations for Belarusian academics are Poland, Germany, Lithuania, the UK, and Georgia, due to their pre-existing Belarusian communities.⁶⁰ While Germany showed sympathy for the Belarusian protest movement and its exiled activists, bureaucratic obstacles and a complex academic environment hindered their ability to secure long-term positions. Poland and Lithuania, on the other hand, presented fewer administrative barriers, as well as linguistic and personal ties for many activists. Moreover, the situation for Belarusians abroad worsened after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As perceived representatives of a co-aggressor country, they faced the consequences of international sanctions. For many Belarusians who had already fled their homeland, the full-scale invasion meant a second forced displacement. In light of these challenges, this part of the report seeks to draw attention to the struggles of Belarusian scholars, with a particular focus on those who fled their homeland after 2020 and are now living in Germany, Lithuania, and Poland. It also assesses how the experience of living and working abroad has influenced the value systems of displaced Belarusian academics. The aim is to understand how these experiences can help them to become catalysts for the democratisation of Belarusian higher education and, by extension, Belarusian society, should the current authoritarian regime eventually fall.

58 Belarusian Students' Association. (2023). State of Belarusian academia in 2022. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/197tqYy-ChGwfYBX6a9r4bcBN7QzESUoOV/view> (accessed 3.12.2024)

59 Spring96. (2024). The Investigative Committee initiated special proceedings against 20 "Tsikhanouskaya analysts," <https://spring96.org/en/news/114134> (accessed 10.11.2024)

60 Navumau, V., Matveieva, O., Andrukovich, V., Lozka, K., & Rikhter, K. (2024). Belarusian activists abroad: Overcoming integration challenges in exile. Institute for European Politics. https://iep-berlin.de/site/assets/files/3781/iep_visibility_publication_en_final.pdf (accessed 10.11.2024)

The research methods include an online survey and comparative content analyses of individual cases. The online survey targeted 82 Belarusian academics, ranging from postgraduate students (masters and doctoral level) to established senior scholars (professors, senior research fellows). The questionnaire was distributed using snowball sampling, starting with the personal networks of the authors of the report in the above-mentioned countries. Participants were encouraged to share the questionnaire with other Belarusian scholars in their networks, in order to reach a wider group. It is important to note that this sample is not representative of all Belarusian academics. The method of distribution makes the results subject to selection bias. Rather, the findings reflect the experiences and opinions of those who were accessible and willing to participate, which means that there are limitations in generalising these findings to the entire Belarusian academic community. This analysis should be seen as an insight into the challenges faced by this particular group rather than a comprehensive representation of all Belarusian scholars.

Demographic Overview of Survey Participants

The age distribution of the Belarusian academic emigrants who participated in the survey ranges from 21 to 60+. The largest groups are established professionals aged 36-45 (38%) and 46-59 (21%). 28% of respondents are younger academics aged 21-35 and 7% are aged 60+. In terms of gender, women make up 50% of the respondents, with the majority in the 21-35 and 36-45 age groups. Men represent 45% of the sample.

The academic disciplines of the respondents are diverse, with notable representation in political science (13 respondents), history (12 respondents), sociology (8 respondents), economics (6 respondents), art/art history (5 respondents), physics (5 respondents), archaeology (3 respondents), and other disciplines. About 50% have advanced degrees (PhD equivalent and higher). In terms of their current employment, 13% are postdoctoral researchers, 11% are PhD students, 9% are in long-term research positions, 6% are in short-term research positions, while a whopping 67% are employed outside academia. Most of these respondents however indicated that they are still involved in research activities. Some scholars have left academia altogether due to employment challenges.

60% of the survey's respondents are currently in Poland (27%), Germany, (21%) and Lithuania (12%), with the remainder scattered throughout other European countries. These figures reflect a pattern of displacement shown in the first part of this report, with Poland, Germany and Lithuania being the main destinations due to their academic infrastructure, geographical proximity to Belarus and supportive stance towards Belarusian dissidents. In terms of their legal status in the host countries, over 52% of respondents have obtained a temporary residence permit, 7% a long-term D visa (national visa), 15% refugee status. The remaining respondents preferred not to disclose their current residence status.

Reasons for Leaving Belarus and Choice of Host Country

The majority of the surveyed scholars were forced to leave Belarus after the 2020 presidential elections, which resulted in widespread repression. The data indicates that 28% of respondents left Belarus in late 2020, 27% in 2021, 18% in 2022, and 8% in 2023, illustrating the ongoing impact of political repression on Belarusian scholars and the deteriorating political climate. A further 6% said they had left Belarus before August 2020 for various professional or personal reasons.

Among the reasons for leaving Belarus after 2020 (multiple answers were possible), a significant 60% of respondents cited fear of repression. 40% of respondents cited direct political pressure as a key reason for leaving, indicating that they had faced specific threats or coercion as a result of their professional activities, research, or public statements. In addition, 50% of academics left the country due to their participation in protest activities, which put them at significant risk of arrest, violence or other forms of persecution by the state.

Belarusian scholars chose their host countries on the basis of several key factors. Some **45%** of respondents said that the main reason was the ease of **obtaining a visa or residency** status in a particular country. **35%** mentioned the **quality of life** as an important reason, including access to housing, healthcare, and general living conditions. In addition, **30%** of scholars were influenced by their **previous experiences or existing connections** in the host country, such as friends, family, or professional networks. **The presence of Belarusian communities** in the host country also played a role for around **25%** of respondents, as it facilitated the process of cultural adaptation and provided social support. Finally, **20%** of scholars chose their host because of **better academic or career opportunities**, including access to high-quality educational institutions and research facilities that matched their professional ambitions.

Approximately 30% of Belarusian scholars reported being forced to change host countries more than once (mostly twice) after initially leaving Belarus. These multiple moves are driven either by the challenges of securing stable residency and longer-term academic positions in the initial host country, or by ongoing transnational political repression by the Belarusian state. In 2023, the Belarusian government introduced the law prohibiting the exchange of expired documents at Belarusian consulates abroad, in an attempt to force those with expired passports to return to Belarus. This facilitated the further movement of Belarusians to Poland and Lithuania, as the authorities of these countries, aware of the restrictive measures, provided the necessary assistance.

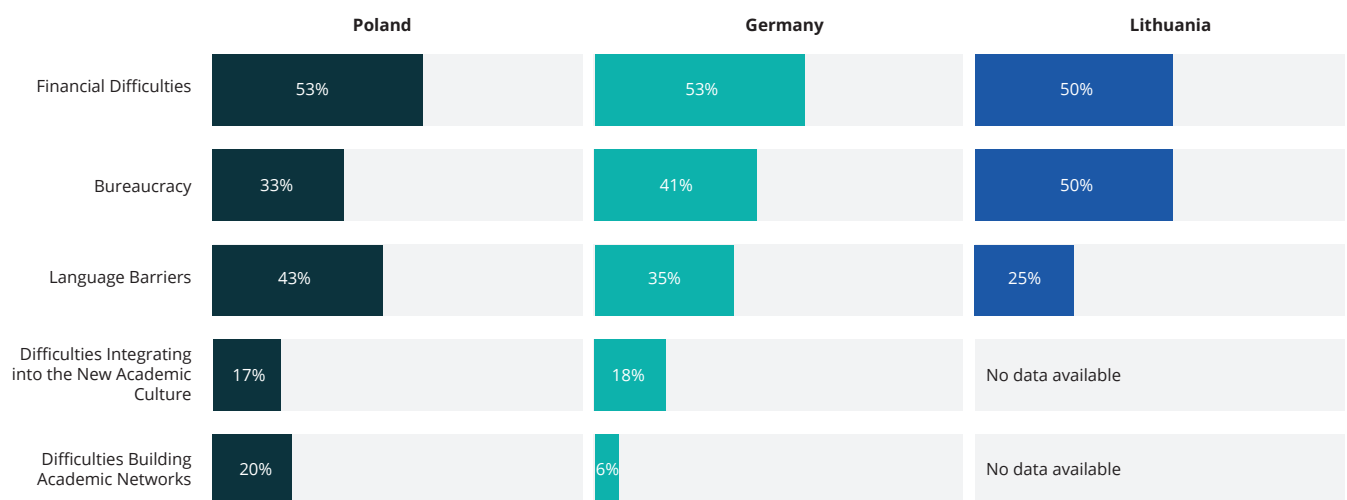
Working in Academic Institutions Abroad

Comparing respondents' experiences in host academic institutions with their experiences in Belarus,⁶¹ around **60%** of scholars reported being **satisfied or very satisfied** with their current working conditions. They highlight **better funding opportunities (50%)** and **higher standards of research and teaching (35%)**. This translates into more **professional autonomy** and **support for independent research**, which has significantly improved their ability to focus on their academic work without the political constraints they experienced in Belarus, **higher salaries (33%)**, and greater **transparency in administrative processes (15%)**.

Challenges experienced by Belarusian academics in Poland, Germany, and Lithuania

Belarusian academics in Poland, Germany, and Lithuania face numerous challenges, which vary in intensity between the three countries (Fig. 5). **Financial difficulties**, related to the high cost of living in Europe, the loss of assets back in Belarus, low stipends or salaries, appear to be relatively consistent in all three countries. **Bureaucratic hurdles** seem to be more prominent in Lithuania and Germany, with difficulties in obtaining and translating documents being a common challenge in all three countries. **Language barriers** are a greater challenge in Poland, with respondents highlighting that language skills become a gatekeeping factor for access to

Figure 5. Challenges experienced by the surveyed Belarusian scholars in Poland, Germany, and Lithuania



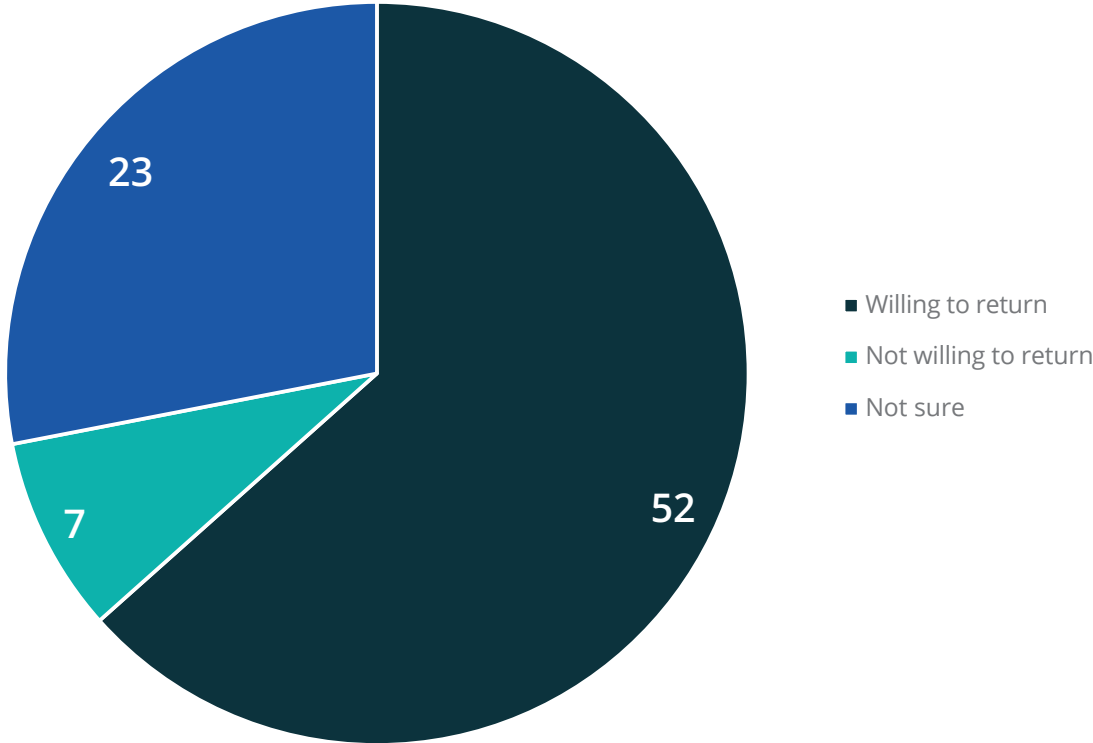
61 Multiple replies were possible.

certain job opportunities. It should be noted that when respondents from Lithuania answered this question, they often meant difficulties related to a lack of knowledge of English. The lack of robust **academic networks** and **difficulties in adapting to new academic cultures** add to the challenges faced by Belarusian academics in exile. In addition, respondents expressed the difficulties in navigating complex legal and administrative systems, obtaining official recognition of their academic credentials, and finding affordable and stable housing.

Decision to return to Belarus

The survey data show that a significant percentage of Belarusian scholars (63%) express a desire to return to Belarus after democratic changes (Fig. 6). Of these, 15% express a strong desire to return to their homeland. A recurring theme in their answers is the notion of “home.” Respondents talk about their emotional ties to Belarus, their families, and their desire to live and work in a country where they feel safe and valued.

Figure 6. The willingness of the surveyed scholars to return to Belarus after democratic changes



28% of scholars express uncertainty about returning, while 9% say that they are not considering returning to Belarus. In explaining their choices, they express concerns about the timeframe for democratic reforms and the feasibility of resuming their academic careers. Respondents stress that even if political changes occur, addressing issues such as corruption, politicisation of academia, and the lack of academic freedom will require a long process of reform. Guarantees of security and freedom from repression are paramount for many. Other reasons for hesitation include concerns about the lingering effects of repression, distrust of academic and social structures, and the potential need to work with colleagues who supported the regime. Some also mentioned the trauma of political persecution they had experienced, which made them reluctant to return to the same environment. Family considerations further complicate the decision, as respondents with children, for example, have begun to adjust to life in their host countries. Several scholars also state that their professional and personal lives have begun to stabilise abroad, making the prospect of being uprooted again less attractive. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine had a significant impact on the decision to return to Belarus. Around half of those who were uncertain about returning said that the ongoing war and the political situation in Belarus had delayed any plans to return. In addition, around 30% of those who were uncertain about returning said that their association with Belarus, now seen as aligned with Russia, had negatively affected their job opportunities abroad. This further solidified their decision to pursue long-term academic careers outside Belarus.

Overall, while the emotional attachment to Belarus and the willingness to contribute to its future remain strong for many, the responses reflect the growing complexity of the decision to return to Belarus. Uncertainty about meaningful change, stress and trauma related to repression in the home country and the ongoing war in Ukraine make scholars reluctant to return. Having adapted to life in the host country is a rather rare reason for not returning to Belarus among the respondents. Although scholars appreciate the experience of working in academic institutions abroad, particularly in terms of funding opportunities, high standards of education and research, and institutional autonomy, the challenges of living abroad are complex. They range from navigating bureaucratic systems and dealing with unemployment to overcoming language barriers and difficulties in building networks. The need to change host countries frequently due to short-term employment opportunities available to Belarusian scholars is challenging in terms of securing legal status. The impact of repression by the Belarusian state abroad further aggravates the already precarious situation of Belarusian scholars.

Conclusions and recommendations

The state of academic freedom in Belarus has suffered from two major political crises, which have had serious consequences for Belarusian scholars and higher education and research institutions. The political crisis following the 2020 presidential elections saw an unprecedented level of political repression by Lukashenka's authoritarian government, including detentions, administrative and criminal prosecutions, and dismissals in public universities. The government implemented repressive measures that stifled academic freedom and further restricted the autonomy of higher education institutions. The widespread political persecution affected the professional careers of Belarusian academics, who were forced to change or leave their academic professions or to flee the country.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has further exacerbated the political crisis in the country. Since Belarusian territory was used by Russia to launch the attack in February 2022, Belarus has been seen as a co-aggressor and supporter of the full-scale aggression against Ukraine.⁶² Western sanctions imposed after the invasion and international isolation have increased structural dependence of Belarus on Russia.⁶³ In response to the war, the Belarusian government has intensified information manipulation and ideological indoctrination in all educational institutions. The full-scale war in Ukraine marked the second wave of forced displacement for Belarusian scientists.

The parliamentary elections in 2024 and the upcoming presidential elections in January 2025 put additional pressure on the regime to deliver predictable and uncontested results. In this context, the Belarusian authorities continued to persecute political dissent and extended the reach of their repressive measures to target the Belarusian diaspora and expatriate researchers. Centralised state control over higher education institutions has also increased over the past two years through financial, administrative and ideological means. By closing private educational institutions and initiatives, the government has actively restricted access to alternative educational and cultural opportunities and established the dominance of the Russian language in public institutions.

62 Tatsiana Chulitskaya and Elena Korosteleva, 'Why the Belarusian War for Freedom Matters,' 20 June 2023. <https://carnegeendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2023/06/why-the-belarusian-war-for-freedom-matters?lang=en> (accessed 2.12.2024).

63 Manfred Huterer and Astrid Sahm, 'Belarus: Sovereignty under Threat,' 12 June 2024. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2024C22/> (accessed 2.12.2024).

Given the complexity of structural and political issues in Belarusian higher education institutions, Belarusian scientists and the wider research community in exile need financial and political support from the European Union and individual member states. The previous period of financial assistance for Belarusian researchers focused on emergency needs and short-term support for scientists forced into exile during the first years of the post-election crackdown. Currently, there is an urgent need to formulate new strategies to address the financial and administrative challenges of Belarusian researchers who remain in long-term political exile. In response to Russia's growing influence in science and education, including information manipulation and forced Russification, funding opportunities should be expanded to support alternative educational initiatives and research projects to preserve and sustain Belarusian studies. Continued financial support for Belarusian scholars through a variety of targeted measures outlined below is a strategic investment in the future of Belarusian higher education, science, civil society and its democratisation.

1) Develop long-term strategies that address the specific needs of Belarusian scientists

It is essential to formulate funding strategies to support Belarusian scientists that take into account the long-term impact of political repression in Belarus and address country-specific issues affecting academic mobility. Representatives of Belarusian human rights and civil society organisations must be invited to co-design funding opportunities for Belarusian scientists to ensure that funding programmes respond to complex legal and administrative challenges.

2) Support Belarusian scholarship on socially and politically relevant issues

There is a need to counterbalance Russia's growing influence on education by supporting Belarusian research that is most affected by changes in legislation and government policy. In particular, research in areas crucial to Belarusian national identity, such as linguistics, arts and humanities, history and social sciences, must be supported in order to preserve and promote Belarusian studies and scholarship.

3) Promote sustainability in Belarusian scholarship

Priority should be given to long-term support for training and research activities of early career researchers. Support must be provided through funding programmes for activities led by outstanding researchers and research managers in established research institutions. Mentoring services and academic partnerships for Belarusian scientists can foster their professional growth and improve their research output.

4) Empower Belarusian scholars at different career stages

Funding opportunities should better support Belarusian scientists with non-linear academic careers. Therefore, funding opportunities for Belarusian scholars should be available at different stages (early career, transitioning, and consolidation) of their academic careers. Funding support that addresses the mental health of scientists in relation to stress and trauma associated with displacement can strengthen the quality of programmes and promote well-being. In addition, specialised support to access employment opportunities, such as application assistance, language training, and networking support, can facilitate career continuity.

5) Improve student and research mobility

It is crucial to maintain academic exchanges by supporting educational initiatives that offer different modes of learning and enable Belarusian students to gain access to independent information and academic libraries. Advocating for national policies that remove administrative barriers to academic exchange can facilitate the mobility of Belarusian scholars to countries that uphold and promote academic freedom.



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