

Scholars at Risk to the Council of the EU Working Party on Human rights (COHOM):

Belarus at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC 47)

In advance of UN Human Rights Council (HRC 47), Scholars at Risk urges COHOM and the Human Rights Council to take measures to address the ongoing attacks on the higher education community in Belarus, and to support students and scholars who continue to suffer arrests, detentions, prosecutions, expulsions, and wrongful dismissals. This focus would align with commitments made under the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024 to support action to protect academic freedom, and the autonomy of education institutions, and to “[d]eepen engagement with and enhance support for pluralistic civil society, including [...] academics, [...] in order to defend their right to exercise their roles free from any form of intimidation, discrimination or violence.”¹

Summary of attacks on the Belarusian higher education community

- The aftermath of the fraudulent 2020 presidential election has unleashed an ominous pattern of arrests and detentions, prosecutions, expulsions, and wrongful dismissals, directly targeted against students and academics. These strategic pressures on Belarus’s higher education sector have triggered one of the largest annual declines in academic freedom levels among the 175 countries measured in the [Academic Freedom Index](#).
- Recognising the threat this sector bares on his control, on October 27, 2020, President Alexander Lukashenko called for the expulsion of students and faculty participating in the nationwide protests. Universities throughout Belarus responded almost immediately with widespread expulsions. As of the 21 May, the Belarusian Students’ Association and the Student Initiative Group have documented at least **480** student detentions, **154** student expulsions, and **49** students subject to criminal investigation. According to the Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee there are at least **117** cases of professors suffering pressure and intimidation, with many reportedly being forced to resign or refused extensions of employment contracts. Several rectors have been fired.

Belarusian authorities must uphold commitments to protect the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, as expressly protected by international human rights instruments including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Belarus is a party. In addition, all Bologna Process members, including Belarus, committed in the 2018 Paris Communiqué to protecting and promoting the fundamental values on the European Higher Education Area, including academic freedom and integrity and institutional autonomy. It must be ensured that they honour these commitments. University students were frequently at the forefront of the extensive demonstrations that followed the fraudulent election. They and their institutions are now at the forefront of targeted measures designed to diminish their independence, and for some their freedom. These measures will impact generations to come unless they are confronted.

SAR therefore urges Member States Representatives on the Council of the EU Working Party on Human Rights (COHOM) and the Human Rights Council to support implementation of the following recommendations:

Recommendations to state authorities and higher education leaders in Belarus

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- Refrain from the use of force when responding to student and faculty expression on and off campus, and ensure that actions by security forces are proportional and do not interfere with peaceful expressive activities;
- Refrain from detentions, prosecutions, and university disciplinary measures that retaliate against, restrict, or otherwise frustrate peaceful academic conduct, expression, or associations;
- Refrain from imposing pressures on higher education institutions to carry out disciplinary measures, and other actions that restrict academic freedom and its constituent freedoms of expression, opinion, thought, association, and travel;
- Secure the immediate release of scholars and students wrongfully imprisoned in connection to their right to freedom of assembly, their academic activity, opinions, and associations, and, pending this, to disclose the location of all detainees and uphold national and international legal obligations related to due process and the humane treatment of prisoners; and
- Protect institutional autonomy and take steps to shield higher education institutions from undue government interference.

Recommendations to the international community, in particular the European Union and its Member States, and the Ministers of the European Higher Education Area

- Demand prompt release of scholars, students and others detained for nonviolent expression or conduct, and conduct prompt, thorough, and transparent investigations of attacks on higher education communities in Belarus, as well as all reasonable efforts to hold perpetrators accountable;
- Continue targeted political and economic sanctions against individuals, state and non-state actors responsible for grave human rights abuses against students, scholars, and other citizens of Belarus;
- Provide funding to support at-risk scholars and students or the higher education institutions and NGOs seeking to help. Together with SAR Europe's [Inspireurope](#) project partners, SAR calls on the European Commission to establish a dedicated EU fellowship programme for researchers at risk,ⁱⁱ
- Exert international pressure on the authorities and provide adequate and timely support to those protecting and promoting higher education values, including academic freedom and its constituent freedoms of expression, opinion, thought, association, and travel in Belarus; and
- Offer protection for those individuals facing persecution through expediting visa applications or through the provision of free Schengen visas and/or temporary humanitarian visas where needed.

Additional Resources

1. [Joint statement by European University Association \(EUA\), the European Students' Union \(ESU\) and Scholars at Risk \(SAR\) condemning the criminalisation of students and academics in Belarus, May 28, 2021.](#)
2. [SAR's letter of concern regarding, primarily, imprisoned students in Belarus, May 27, 2021.](#)
3. [Amnesty campaign documenting the university students expelled from universities and imprisoned for peaceful protest, May 24, 2021.](#)
4. [SAR's Academic Freedom Monitoring Project: Belarus](#)
5. [Academic Freedom Index, 11 March 2021.](#)

6. [Report was prepared by Belarusian Students' Association using their own data and data collected by the Student Initiative Group and the Honest University. Academic community in the period August-December 2020.](#)
7. [SAR call for action in support of students and scholars in Belarus, November 16, 2020.](#)
8. [Joint statement of the European University Association \(EUA\) and the European Students' Union \(ESU\), November 2, 2020.](#)

About Scholars at Risk

Scholars at Risk (SAR) is an international network of institutions and individuals whose mission is to protect scholars and promote academic freedom. SAR's European office, [SAR Europe](#), is based at Maynooth University, Ireland. SAR's mission is to protect higher education communities and their members from violent and coercive attacks, and by doing so to expand the space in society for reason and evidence-based approaches to resolving conflicts and solving problems. SAR meets this mission through direct protection of individuals, advocacy aimed at preventing attacks and increasing accountability, and research and learning initiatives that promote academic freedom and related values. SAR Europe coordinates [Inspireurope](#), an EU-funded, 10-partner initiative to support researchers at risk. SAR Europe also works to expand, coordinate and support advocacy in Europe to promote academic freedom, including convening the [European Coordinating Committee for Academic Freedom Advocacy](#).

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- i EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024, para. 1.3.j and para. 3.4.a, available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:e9112a36-6e95-11ea-b735-01aa75ed71a1.0002.02/DOC_4&format=PDF.
 - ii Inspireurope's mapping report and subsequent proposal for an EU fellowship scheme can be accessed here: <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sar-europe/inspireurope/policy>