

Briefing: Belarus and Academic Freedom

July 2023

Academic freedom¹ violations in Belarus are not a new development but since the August 2020 elections and subsequent protests, they have become more pronounced, more frequent, and more egregious. Today the rights to academic freedom, freedom of expression, association, and assembly, all of which are essential to a democratic society, remain severely restricted across Belarus.

The overall situation for human rights in Belarus remains critical. Lukashenko's aggressive campaign of repressive practices against human rights defenders, journalists, scholars, students, and independent critical voices, shows no signs of abating, and as a consequence, demands the international community's full attention.

Key Facts:

- The Academic Freedom Index which assesses levels of respect for academic freedom in 175 countries and territories based on surveys of more than 2000 country experts around the globe, has documented a steady decline in academic freedom levels from 0.6 in 1994, 0.19 in 2019, 0.03 in 2022, placing Belarus in the bottom 10% of all countries covered.
- Scholars at Risk's Academic Freedom Monitoring Project continues to document attacks on the higher education community in Belarus, including for example, attacks that have resulted in imprisonment/prosecution (October 26, 2022, April 22, 2022, April 12, 2022, June 29, 2021, June 28, 2021), loss of position (April 18, 2022, June 10, 2021, April 17, 2021), and much more. SAR's annual report, *Free to Think*, dedicated a chapter of the 2021 report to attacks on the higher education community in Belarus, while the 2022 report highted further incidents (See Appendix 2: Table of Incidents).
- The 2023 Freedom House Belarus Country Report concludes that academic freedom "remains subject to intense state ideological pressures" with new laws mandating adherence to a particular historical narrative, imposing criminal sanctions for those that express contrary views (Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, Anaïs Marin, (May, 2022)(A/HRC/50/58))(para. 24 and para. 49).
- According to the human rights centre Viasna, as of March 1, 2023, there are 1461 political prisoners in Belarus. Numbered among them is Ms. Marfa Rabkova, a third-year student at the International Law and European Union Law program at European Humanities University (EHU), Lithuania, who has been imprisoned in Belarus since September 17, 2020. On September 6, 2022, Ms. Rabkova was sentenced to 15 years in prison in apparent retaliation for her nonviolent participation in nationwide protests over the re-election of Lukashenko. SAR continues to advocate for her release.
- Lukashenko's complicity in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has only served to further isolate Belarus's academic community. In April 2022, the Bologna Process Follow-Up Group moved to suspend the representation of Russia and Belarus in the Bologna Process, as well as in working groups, all other structures and the European Higher Education Area. This marked the beginning in a series of successive suspensions from academic networks, associations and formal collaborations. (For example, Statement by the ALLEA Board on the Suspension of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, 4 March 2022).

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- Honest University is a project under the non-governmental organisation Honest People. To date the project has catalogued 1,634 incidents of students and professors subjected to repression or pressure at universities.
- The Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee was established to help support Belarusian higher education integration into the Bologna process. They now document pressure on academia in Belarus, and have catalogued, amongst other transgressions, the dismissal of 12 rectors of universities and academies.
- The Belarusian Students' Association are a coalition of student unions for the revival of the principles of democracy, legality and respect for human rights and liberties. They published a report about the state of Belarusian academia in the year 2022.
- A curated digest of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office on Education and Science documents *news about educational institutions and government departments, including repressions and pressure from authorities*.
- The Index on Censorship's new global ranking index tracking the state of free expression across the globe, including academic freedom, featured Belarus amongst the poorest performing countries across all metrics, placing it in the 10th decile of the Index, measuring "closed".

About Scholars at Risk Europe: Scholars at Risk Europe is the European office of the global Scholars at Risk network. Scholars at Risk was founded in 2000 and is an international network of over 650 higher education institutions in 43 countries working to protect threatened scholars and to promote academic freedom. SAR's European office, hosted by Maynooth University, Ireland, supports and coordinates the activities of 13 Scholars at Risk sections and 11 partner networks across Europe to strengthen our collective voice at the European level and contribute to informed policymaking for the greater protection of scholars and increased respect for academic freedom worldwide. SAR Europe coordinates Inspireurope+ an EU-funded, multi-partner initiative to support researchers at risk, as well as MSCA4Ukraine, an EU-funded fellowship scheme for displaced researchers from Ukraine. 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. SAR Europe has Observer Status with the Council of Europe Steering Committee for Education (CDEDU), and is a member of the Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE) and the Human Rights and Democracy Network (HRDN). For additional resources on academic freedom please consult our website. SAR Europe is ready to help with follow-up to these recommendations, as appropriate. Please contact Denise Roche, Advocacy Manager, at denise.roche@mu.ie with any questions.

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UNESCO's 1997 "Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel" articulates academic freedom to include, among other things, the

"freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom [of higher education personnel] to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies".

See UNESCO, "Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel," November 11, 1997, para. 27, available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/recommendation-concerning-status-higher-education-teaching-personnel>