

## Attacks on academic freedom in Belarus State and higher education community must act now

The 2020 presidential election campaign in Belarus and its aftermath have been marked by an unprecedented atmosphere of fear, intimidation and massive human rights violations, compounded by a complete disregard for the rule of law, resulting in the dismantling of legal order. This has been the subject of multiple resolutions, reports and statements from international organizations, including the UN Human Rights Council (see [here](#)) and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). Repressions against those expressing their opinion began almost immediately after the start of the election campaign and have not stopped ever since. Widespread mass protests opposing the result of the fraudulent elections were violently dispersed across Belarus. The police used firearms and excessive force, and resorted to torture and murder. Civil society organizations and the UN, referenced to above, estimate that since May 2020 government authorities have detained **well over 30,000** persons on politically motivated grounds. According to human rights defenders, **more than 2,300 criminal cases** have been initiated against peaceful protesters that could lead to up to 10 years' imprisonment, and no legal action has been taken against the security forces.

All parts of the society have been subject to repression, including academia and students who voiced their views and participated in peaceful protests. The administrations of universities and other academic institutions have become part of the repressive machine unraveling a severe attack on academic freedoms.

Belarus has seen the largest declines in academic freedom levels along with Hong Kong, Sri Lanka and Zambia. The latest report of the Scholars at Risks Network gives Belarus the lowest E status under the Academic Freedom Index.

The repression that the academic community has seen after the 2020 elections is unprecedented in their scale and severity. The Scholars at Risk report details incidents of politically-motivated persecution of representatives of the Belarusian academia (including expulsion, administrative pressure, threats of criminal persecution and real criminal cases), forcing many students and professors to flee the country. On 27 October 2020, Alexandr Lukashenko publicly called for the expulsion of students and termination of the employment of professors for participating in the protests.

The Belarusian Students' Association and the Student Initiative Group have collected evidence of at least **480** cases of student detentions, **154** student expulsions and **49** students subject to criminal investigation. Some of the students were sentenced to extremely severe terms of imprisonment for speaking out and participating in peaceful demonstrations. On 12 November 2020, a group of student activists (including members of the Belarusian Students' Association) and one professor were detained and placed in the KGB detention facilities and are now charged with the organization and coordination of "Student Marches". Currently eleven students and one professor from universities in Minsk, who participated in

the peaceful protests, are standing trial, facing charges under Article 342 of the country's Criminal Code for the "organization and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order". Six students have already been sentenced to terms of imprisonment of 1.5 to 4 years for their nonviolent expressive activity, including participating in peaceful demonstrations.

There are at least **117** publicly reported cases of various kinds of pressure and intimidation on professors from different universities either directly by law enforcement or through university administrations, which are typically followed by forced resignations or discriminatory non-extension of contracts. Moreover, **12 rectors** of universities and academies have been fired. A new position of "vice-rector on security matters" has been introduced in almost every university to operationalize the mechanisms of repression inside the academic institutions and to monitor the staff. Reportedly, the candidates hired for these positions are directly affiliated with state security and special services.

A further point of deep concern, which significantly contributes to the irreversible loss of credibility and trust towards the current academic leadership is the participation of law professors in repressive procedures against lawyers. For example, the Dean of the Law Faculty of the Belarusian State University (the leading university in the country, which is to celebrate a centenary this year) Tatiana Mikhailiova, and the director of the University's Law College Oleg Starovoitov are members of the Ministry of Justice Commission, that is responsible for disbarment of lawyers for their professional activities in political cases. The unprecedented scales of politically motivated disbarment of lawyers in Belarus has been recognized and strongly condemned by the international community, including the American Bar Association and the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute. The fact that university officials who are responsible for legal studies, keep obediently participating in such a mechanism without disclosing the illegal and discriminatory character of its current activities is unacceptable and devalues the law degree as such and the rule of law in the country.

One of the Academic Freedoms Index indicators is the level of governmental engagement in controlling and restricting academia. It must be noted that such government intervention, control and restriction is the main and most serious area of concern regarding academia in Belarus, despite its commitments to uphold academic freedom in multiple international instruments. The rights of freedom of expression, opinion and belief as well as the right to education and academic freedom are protected by international human rights instruments to which Belarus is a party and has a legal obligation to comply with.

We **express solidarity** with students, scholars, professors and other staff of Belarusian higher education institutions, who continue to suffer targeted and broad-based attacks, and **we call on** policy-makers, academic institutions, education leaders and academic colleagues to:

- **Actively support, in any practicable way, the academic community in Belarus which is under pressure for the expression of their views;**
- **Develop a dedicated fellowship programme for Belarusian students and academics at risk;**

- Pay special attention to due diligence in relations with Belarusian academic partners both on institutional and personal level in order not to be associated with repressions and violation of academic freedom;
- Communicate with the academic institutions partnered with Belarusian institutions about the lack of academic freedom in Belarus;
- Leverage your partnerships and networks for advocacy and prevention;
- Promote among your Belarusian academic partners the understanding that the cooperation of the academic community with a repressive regime has a severe negative impact on their reputation, international academic cooperation and global university rankings;
- Communicate to your decision-making institutions in the field of research and education the necessity to take all necessary, decisive, and active measures to support and uphold academic freedoms and the rule of law in Belarus.

See also the [\*joint call\*](#) by the European University Association (EUA), the European Students Union (ESU) and Scholars at Risk (SAR) to take action against criminalisation of students and academics in Belarus

Support the [\*call by Scholars at Risk\*](#) to send letters of appeal urging Belarusian authorities to secure the immediate release of the detained students