

An Appeal for Support for Independent Scholars from and in Belarus

Quelle: <https://chng.it/w9Lz6whmbs>

On February 24, 2022, war broke out, Russia attacked Ukraine, civilians died and many became refugees. Unexpectedly for its inhabitants, Belarus was turned into a platform for the Russian attack on its southern neighbor. Few imagined that the two dictators, Putin and Lukashenko, would want to try in such a bloody way to destroy the space of freedom that is the state of Ukraine. We share the pain of Ukrainians and we are deeply ashamed of the fact that death is being delivered directly from the territory of Belarus.

Ukraine remains resilient in preserving democracy and civil liberty, fighting for them to the last. At the present time, Belarus is an occupied state and cannot preserve its sovereignty. The pro-Ukrainian position of civil society in Belarus is ignored by the forces which have appropriated state power.

The crushing of civil society structures in Belarus and severe political repression in 2020-2022 has led to there now being more than 1,000 political prisoners in the country, including several dozen students. In 2021, the regime forcibly closed down over 500 NGOs. Many people have been dismissed from their jobs because of their disloyalty to the regime. Hundreds of thousands of Belarusians have left the country.

The 2020 protests changed the situation in the academic and research sphere in Belarus. Independent Belarusian scholars who resisted the repressive policy of Lukashenko's regime through their work and activism are also deprived of work; a considerable part of them have been forced out of the country; some are in Belarusian prisons (more in the report <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/2022/02/submission-to-the-un-special-rapporteur-on-the-situation-of-human-rights-in-belarus-to-the-human-rights-council/>).

The system of repression is well established and difficult to counteract. This is why we are proud of the Belarusians who took to the streets with anti-war slogans on February 27, the day of the so-called "referendum" to change the constitution, as well as the following day. More than 900 people were detained, including Belarusian scholars and teachers (e.g., Irina Kuchvalskaya, PhD in law, and Natalia Dulina, former associate professor at the Moscow State Linguistic University).

Against the background of the events in Ukraine, however, initiatives have appeared that draw a parallel between independent Belarusian scholars and scientific organizations that work inside Belarus and support the Lukashenko regime. There have been calls to punish all Belarusian academics indiscriminately, even though people have already suffered and do not associate themselves with the Belarusian system.

It has been proposed to "cut off" the Belarusian scholarly community as a representative of the aggressor country. Specialists who have already suffered for their fight for the freedom of research, with ideological restrictions, are inflexibly brought into the same frame with those who support the Russian and Belarusian autocracies.

Thus, Belarusian independent scholarship is not being given a chance to survive. The resulting prospects are exclusively negative: besides the absence of democracy in this discriminatory approach, it will be difficult for the repressed scholars of Belarus, who are trying to find a place in European academic space, to stay in the profession. This will create a void in the place of Belarus on the mental map of Europe.

It is important, even in the current crisis situation, to understand the difference between Belarusian state and society: civil society is not the same as the supporters of Lukashenko's regime, and the regime does not represent the people. The same concerns the academic community. Academics who do not agree with Lukashenko, either inside Belarus or in forced exile, should not be subjected to new repressions, neither from the EU nor the rest of the democratic world.

We would like to outline once again our arguments in support of the repressed Belarusian scholars:

1. The position of Belarusian researchers is not equal to the position of official Belarusian state institutions. Under Lukashenko, there has been a crisis in the social sciences and humanities. Independent research institutes have been liquidated - for example, the European Humanities University was expelled from Belarus back in 2004. Universities and research institutes inside Belarus are no longer places of freedom. But the same cannot be said about all Belarusian scholars as a community.

We call upon European and western academic institutions to cease cooperation with official Belarusian academic institutions until the political situation in Belarus improves, with a return to the principles of democratic government. But we urge the international community not to break off relations with individual Belarusian scholars, inside and outside Belarus, who do not support Lukashenko's criminal regime.

2. Belarusian scholars regularly went out to protest against Lukashenko's regime, signing collective letters and recording video appeals against the use of violence, in support of their colleagues and students. Belarusian academics also joined new political democratic bodies, such as the Coordinating Council in 2020, independent trade unions, and other structures. The activities of Belarusian scholars within and in cooperation with Belarusian NGOs, which have been liquidated en masse starting in 2021, are maximally fraught and come with a very real danger of criminal prosecution.

Those who emigrate often cannot return home, because they are threatened with prison. Laws do not work in Belarus, and it is impossible to defend one's rights and seek justice. Thus, the Lukashenko regime has declared "war" on independent Belarusian scholars. If European academic institutions prohibit them from expressing themselves in public scientific space, these Belarusian academics will be double victims.

3. For the representatives of the social sciences and humanities, there exists a double threat, because specialists are persecuted not only for their political beliefs, but also for their professional activities. Belarusian academics are against the use of scholarship for propaganda and war. Therefore, it is especially important to counter Lukashenko's authoritarian regime by allowing scholars in exile to work within the framework of the global

academy, together with academics from other countries. Today, independent research in Belarus is virtually impossible because of repressive and ideological control over the content of research. Their research outside of Belarus should help to counteract these tendencies. This should and will be the contribution of Belarusian scholars to a peaceful future.

4. It is also important that those representatives of the academy and the scientific community who remain in Belarus, after being dismissed from their posts, are able to feel international support despite their situation and an incentive to continue their work. After all, only some of them dared to be admitted to a number of institutions inside the country after their dismissal.

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