

Belarus: Academic Freedom in Europe's "Last Dictatorship"

Belarus is under the authoritarian rule of Alexander Lukashenko since 1994. The country faced significant political turmoil in 2020 after a disputed and massively manipulated presidential election. Opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya challenged the results, alleging electoral fraud. This led to wide-spread protests demanding fair elections and democratic reforms. In response, the government cracked down harshly, arresting opposition leaders and activists. Large parts of the international community condemned this repression and imposed sanctions upon the country. Despite the crackdown, protests have continued, highlighting ongoing tensions and calls for political change in Belarus.

The political persecution in Belarus also affects many people in academia whose research, teaching and opinions do not agree with the ideology and goals of the regime.

This persecution results in a complete isolation of the countries academic community. Working with international partners or being part of European projects can lead to punishment, so these activities have mostly stopped. At the same time, many researchers are leaving the country and are facing major challenges when looking for jobs abroad.

Vasil Navumau is a sociologist from Belarus, whose academic work focuses on socio-political transformation, digital government and democratic communication between the population and the government. When activists in Belarus faced increasing repression in 2020 and a citizens' initiative in which he was involved had to be shut down, he left the country to avoid imprisonment. With the support of the Philipp Schwartz-Initiative, he came to Ruhr-Universität Bochum in 2021 and works there ever since.



Listen to the podcast at
www.fragile-freiheit.de

Tasks

Listen to the interview with Vasil Navumau and answer following questions:

- 1) Why did Vasil Navumau have to flee from Belarus?
- 2) Why is academic freedom restricted in Belarus?
- 3) How do these restrictions affect the work of researchers like Vasil Navumau?
- 4) Scholars in the humanities and social sciences are particularly affected by state persecution in Belarus. Why might this be?

Fragile Freedom: Academic Freedom at Risk

What is academic freedom?

Academic freedom means that teachers, researchers, and students can explore ideas, teach, and share their thoughts without the fear of being punished or silenced by the authorities. It allows them to study and discuss any topic freely. This freedom helps to make learning and teaching more open and encourages the discovery of new knowledge, even if it puts the current government in question.

In Germany, the freedom to research and teach is protected by the constitution and an independent judiciary and researchers themselves have a major influence on which research projects are funded. But especially in countries that are under authoritarian rule, this is not the case. Scientists that do not align with state agency are being silenced, threatened and persecuted in many parts of the world. Today, around 3.6 billion people live in countries where academic freedom is completely restricted. This is the result of the Academic Freedom Index, in which researchers assess the de facto levels of academic freedom across the world.

Academic freedom is at risk for various reasons. Often, governments or political parties want to secure their power and maintain ideological control by restricting and instrumentalizing science and education. Religious beliefs and economic interests can

also lead to the censoring of scholars that oppose the ruling powers. The restriction of academic freedom is often a gradual process – which can ultimately have fatal consequences for scholars and societies as a whole.

However: Even in democratic countries academic freedom is not absolute and always comes with certain responsibilities. Scholars must adhere to ethical standards, maintain academic integrity, and respect the rights of others. Additionally, while academic freedom protects scholars from undue interference, it does not shield them from criticism or debate. And of course, it is often politicians that decide on allocating funding to certain research programs.

The importance of academic freedom goes beyond schools and universities. It helps create knowledgeable and informed citizens, advances science and technology, and supports healthy democracies. By allowing free exchange and examination of ideas, academic freedom helps us search for truth and improve society.

Discuss in groups:

- 1) How could science be restricted or misused 'for political purposes? Imagine and discuss a specific scenario. This can be a fictional scenario, a historical or recent example.
- 2) Can you imagine situations, where it would be good for society to regulate and even restrict scientific research?
- 3) Optional question: How is academic freedom and the education protected by political influences in Germany?

Academic Freedom Index (2023)

