

Briefing: Belarusian Students in Exile

- *Challenges and Solutions for Advocacy*

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1. Introduction

This document was prepared by the Belarusian Students' Association and the European Students' Union in order to describe in detail current problems of Belarusian students who were forced to leave Belarus and now live and study in exile. In addition, the document proposes possible actions to support Belarusian students in the European Higher Education Area.

2. Background information on the situation in Belarus

The falsification of the 2020 presidential election in Belarus caused a huge wave of protests across the country. These protests became the largest in the history of independent Belarus and during the presidency of Alexander Lukashenko, who at that time had already been in power in the country for 26 years. The peculiarity of these protests was that they united absolutely different groups of the society: doctors, workers, teachers, cultural and sports workers, and many others. Students were no exception, and from the very beginning, along with organising student marches in the streets, they became active participants of various independent associations, defending their freedom and the principle of democracy. Higher education institution students of Belarus began to organise independent unions to provide mutual assistance and documentation of violations of their rights by the Lukashenko regime in suppressing the aspirations of the people of Belarus for democratic change, freedom from authoritarianism and rapprochement with the European Union.

After suppressing the street protests, the regime began a systematic repression of students. Working together with higher education institution administrations, the police and the KGB began searching for active students. Along with expulsions and pressure from higher education institution administrators and professors, many students were subjected to arrests, fines, and imprisonment. The most high-profile case was the so-called **"Students' Case"** when 12 students were convicted on July 16, 2021 on the same day. One of them received two years of arrest, all the others received two and a half years each.

After Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine, students and teachers actively resisted military aggression and were subjected to various degrees of reprisals, from detention and administrative arrest to criminal prosecution and lengthy sentences. Since the Belarusian government supports the Russian military on the ground by assisting the troops and making the territory available for missile attacks, Lukashenko is indirectly involved in the war. There is still compulsory military service in Belarus. Every man over the age of 18 has to do between 1 and 1.5 years of military service. Students have to do it directly after their studies. In recent years, military service has been used as an instrument of repression against students. After being expelled for political reasons, male students must immediately join the military. There they are often forced to support the aggressor's troops and to get "ideologically re-educated". The most common way to escape this is to break off their studies and flee the country.

3. Challenges in Europe

Most students who have left Belarus and had to stop their studies are looking for an opportunity to continue or restart their studies abroad. However, the application process to European higher education institutions is usually very bureaucratic and imposes strict regulations on international applicants which are hard to meet. Many of these problems are related to the lack of specific regulations for Belarus or the fact that many students cannot return to their country to obtain the documents required for the application. The main issues relate to: 1) Visa/passports, 2) previous educational certificates, and 3) the financial situation.

3.1. Admission to higher education

Most recently, Alexander Lukashenka's Decree No. 278, has significantly complicated the process for Belarusian citizens to apply to foreign higher education institutions. The decree

alters procedures for obtaining various official documents, including those related to education. Now, citizens are required to apply for education documents exclusively in person or through a representative with power of attorney issued **solely in Belarus**. Every European higher education institution requires proof of previous obtained qualifications for applications. This poses significant challenges for individuals fleeing political persecution, as it compels them to return to Belarus for document authentication or entrust representatives, which may involve risks of arrest by Belarusian authorities. The decree also impacts the apostilling process (i.e. the confirmation of the authenticity of a public document) for educational diplomas, further hindering Belarusians from enrolling at foreign higher education institutions, jeopardising the ability to have qualifications recognized abroad.

3.2. Obtaining visa and passports (ID documents)

Since Belarus is not a member of the European Union or the Schengen area, students fleeing the country must first obtain a visa to cross the border legally or they must find illegal ways and risk their lives and freedom. If a person obtains a visa, which has become extremely problematic in recent times, it is usually a short-term tourist visa that does not entitle them to study.

After entering the country, a person must obtain legal status, and the only way to do this is to obtain a residence permit from the country in which they are staying. Residence permits can be granted to foreigners on the basis of work, study or family reunification. Alternatively, every person has the right to seek international protection (asylum). For many Belarusians, this is the only way to obtain legal status abroad. However, the procedure is usually complicated and takes a long time. Those affected are not permitted to work for the first six months after submitting their application. Applicants also need to prove financial stability, entailing usually several thousand euros to be parked on blocked accounts.

The Belarusian Decree No.278 states that Belarusians abroad are no longer entitled to renew their passports at consulates or embassies, making it only possible in Belarus.

Coming back to Belarus would mean for many students a high risk of being arrested. For this reason, some of them have already lost their Belarusian passport or are in risk of losing it in the next few years. Generally to get a Schengen visa or a residence permit the one [must](#) have a passport, which must be valid. Thus, students with expired or nearly expired passports might legally be rejected in getting a residence permit.

3.3. Financial situation

Many students who had to flee the country are not financially prepared for life abroad. Most have to use up all their savings just to get a visa and cross the border. With a Schengen visa, which students initially receive, working hours are restricted or not even possible at all, preventing students from being able to cover their costs of living. When applying for a residence permit for students, one must always prove financial security. The amounts vary, but usually several thousands of Euros have to be parked on bank accounts, sometimes even inaccessible via blocked bank accounts. Besides, in order to apply for a work residence permit (especially if studying is not possible or needs to be interrupted to cover living expenses), the inability to obtain their documents from Belarusian higher education institutions can cause problems in accessing the labour market.

3.4. Asylum-seeking and refugee status refusal

In the majority of European countries, Belarusians face challenges in obtaining asylum or are accepted at remarkably [low rates](#), sometimes as low as 2%. This problem is exacerbated by bureaucratic hurdles in Europe. In certain countries, Belarus is categorised as a safe nation, leading to its citizens not being considered for asylum. Alternatively, their requests are left in a state of [uncertainty](#), neither rejected nor approved, leaving them vulnerable without protection or facing outright [rejection at borders](#) or instances of [mistreatment at borders](#). Additionally, migration agencies often lack comprehensive legal

documentation on Belarus, which could serve as a binding guideline for assessing the security situation in the country.

4. Solutions for national implementation

4.1. Admission to higher education

Flexibility: Higher education institutions should allow students to enrol using other methods to show their skills, like interviews or tests, rather than diplomas. Language criteria should be lowered where not necessary (e.g. english study programmes), where fees exist, waivers should be introduced.

Recognition of Qualifications: The Lisbon Recognition Convention [Recommendation on the Recognition of Refugees' Qualifications](#) should be fully implemented, including alternative ways of recognition of qualifications of applicants who are not able to obtain documents to prove their qualifications. System-level solutions (having national level agencies who take care of the recognition procedures) are to be preferred, as in countries where the procedures happen on HEI level staff are usually not knowledgeable enough resulting in unfair assessment procedures. Regardless, those who do the procedures, should be trained. As in many countries still no tools have been implemented, advocating the implementation of the LRC in regards to the proof of qualifications without documentation.

4.2. Issuing of alternative documents

In most European [countries](#) there are procedures to obtain a travel document/foreigner passport. However, the criteria and complexity of the processes vary from country to country. For example, in Norway UDI (the migration office) does not provide rigid deadlines for applicants and does not respect the deadlines by postponing them. It takes months to receive a response from them. One of the recent positive [cases](#) was in Slovenia. A

9-year-old boy received a refusal to get a foreigner passport. However, after communication with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs he received the passport for 2 years in the end. [Poland](#) also issues travel documents for Belarusians with relatively few obstacles. Moreover, Poland [approves](#) 99% of applications for international protection from Belarus. In Germany alternative identification documents are being currently rolled out in a first testing phase, but do not allow for enrollment in higher education.

4.3. Students At Risk and scholarship programmes

As Belarusian students usually look for a way to complete their educational pathway without necessarily wanting to seek asylum, scholarship programs such as students at-risk and other programmes.

[Students at Risk in Norway](#)

Candidates must be nominated by one of the designated institutions, embassies, higher education institutions and human rights organisations and cannot apply directly to the programme. The candidates nominated to the programme must be actively involved in activism aimed at improving the conditions for one or more human rights in a country on the the DAC List of ODA Recipients or in Russia, at a level deemed to entail personal risk (e.g. of physical violence, arrest, denial of civil rights, etc.). Candidates that are accepted under the programme will be enrolled in Bachelor's or Master's degree programmes at Norwegian Higher Education Institutions participating in the programme. The students will receive a scholarship from HK-dir during their stay in Norway. **The program is flexible when it comes to the academic documents of applicants.**

[Students at Risk in Germany](#)

The programme serves to support students and doctoral candidates from across the globe, who are at risk of being formally or de facto denied educational or other rights in their country of origin, and to provide these students and doctoral candidates with an opportunity to begin or complete a study or research degree at a higher education

institution in Germany. Students and doctoral candidates nominated and accepted under the programme will receive a scholarship for a degree course of personal choice and according to individual qualifications. **The scholarship is** connected to the highest eligible sum under the general study-loan system of national students (appx. 1000 EUR) and thus **sufficient to cover the necessary costs incurred during their study and includes money for health insurance.** It also covers integration and language courses and other extracurricular activities. As in the Norwegian program, candidates cannot apply themselves, but have to be nominated by a higher education institution, an affiliated educational institution (incl. student unions) or human rights organisations.

The Konstanty Kalinowski Scholarship Program of the Republic of Poland under the Patronage of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland

It is a **Polish state aid program specifically for Belarusian youth** established in March 2006. Initially intended for students expelled from Belarusian higher education institutions for political reasons, over time it also included individuals who cannot study in Belarus due to their political views and involvement in defending democracy and human rights. It is the largest program of its kind in Europe. The duration of the scholarship depends on the year the student enrolled. For those enrolled in their first year, the scholarship can last up to 5 years. Participants of the Program receive a monthly stipend of 1,240 PLN (appx. 285 EUR) to cover living expenses and accommodation costs. Higher education institutions offer students paid places in dormitories. Additionally, scholarship recipients receive dictionaries, encyclopaedias, books on culture and history, as well as a sum of 400 PLN (appx. 92 EUR) for miscellaneous expenses at the beginning of the preparatory course. During the first year of studies, students are under the care of tutors assigned to them from the junior academic staff. Tutors assist them in adapting during the initial period of their studies. Scholarship delays are observed.

EU4BELARUS

The European Union within the EU4Belarus - SALT (Support for Advanced Learning and Training) program provides scholarships to study at higher education institutions in

Lithuania, Latvia, Czechia and Poland for Belarusian Students who are at risk of persecution because of their social and political position or who have suffered repression. The scholarships are distributed through national agencies in respective countries. The amount of scholarship is 450 Euros per month for 10 months in a year. Due to the fact that the distribution of scholarships is done through national agencies, horrific scholarship delays are observed. Furthermore the programme is not accepting new students but can serve as a model programme for possible new efforts.

[The Innsbruck Management Center](#) launched a scholarship program for Belarusians and residents of other Eastern European countries under the patronage of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. This scholarship supports non-EU nationals from Belarus and other Eastern European countries engaged in activities related to this important task by allowing them to study at a reduced tuition fee of EUR 1,500.- per year.

5. How to advocate: Building national alliances and advocacy

Given the special circumstances most Belarusian students are in, given that they try to finish their educational pathways through regular ways rather than asylum seeking, advocacy is needed as usual regulations and support measures for refugees do not apply to them. As the situation in Belarus is fading from the public memory and many people are not aware of the situation of Belarusian students in Europe, we encourage **national student unions** to advocate for change at the local and national level for:

- Alternative documents to be issued to Belarusian nationals, also allowing for enrollment and continuation of studies in higher education
- National scholarship programs to support Belarusian students financially
- Recognition of qualifications through alternative ways (in case of absence of documents), in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention

5.1. Building networks, finding partnerships

Belarusians usually have strong **diasporal structures**. In many countries there are NGOs and so-called “Peoples Embassies” of the Belarusian diaspora. Reach out to them, set up a meeting and look into how to cooperate, as they might not be aware of the problems of students. They also might be able to pinpoint you to relevant persons to advocate towards as they are knowledgeable about the who-is-who in the context of your country relating to Belarus. ESU and BSA are happy to collaborate with you / support your work!

Higher education

- Reach out to the **international office** of your HEI to discuss the issue, especially as to how they can better support Belarusian students (especially regarding visa issues and awareness raising within the HEI)
- Reach out to the **rectorate and deans** to discuss the issue, especially regarding the recognition of qualifications and flexibility in admission (e.g. enrolment through skills, interviews, tests, etc. rather than diplomas); also discuss waivers of study fees → also reach out to the **national rectors conference**
- Bring up the topic in the **HEIs senate** and faculty councils, e.g. by having a resolution passed with demands towards public authorities
- Reach out to the **ENIC-NARICS network** of your country regarding recognition of qualifications

Public authorities

- Advocate towards the **Ministry for Higher Education** regarding scholarships, financial support and flexibilisation in admission, as well as fee waivers
- Advocate towards the **Ministry for Immigration/Foreign Affairs** for easier obtainment of visa (incl. exemptions regarding the proof of financial security), the issuance of alternative documents (incl. usability to enrol in HEIs) and more flexible rules to be able to work. In some countries scholarship programs like students at-risk can also be successfully lobbied towards them, rather than the Ministry for Higher Education.

- Embassies of European countries in Belarus can be advocated towards to help students at-risk in Belarus to obtain a Schengen visa faster and with more flexible requirements so that they can leave the country.
- **National Agencies regarding academic exchanges** can be reached out to in order to make them aware of problems, but also to look for avenues to support Belarusian students by providing scholarships and other means of financial support, especially for the first time of their stay in the country.
- Reach out to **European parliamentarians (MEPs)** from your country to make them aware of issues, especially members of: CULT (education), AFET (foreign affairs), DROI (human rights), EMPL (employment), LIBE (civil liberties) ([list](#)).
- Reach out to **EU Commissioners** from your country ([list](#)).

Other stakeholders

- Political party foundations sometimes have persons working on Belarus and/or youth/student issues
- Scholarship providers (to make them aware especially on the visa issues)
- Academic societies and/or NGOs dedicated to eastern partnerships, incl. Belarus (which sometimes also provide scholarships)

6. About BSA

The Belarusian Students' Association (BSA) is the oldest youth organisation of Belarus with the self-proclaimed goal of "consolidation of the Belarusian student movement for the revival of the principles of democracy, legality and fulfilment of human rights and freedoms in Belarus". BSA documented cases of repression against students during the 2020–2021 Belarusian protests. As of 17 May 2021, according to BSA, at least 466 students have been detained, almost a third of whom are women. Many were put under administrative detention or fined. BSA regularly publishes reports of the situation of academia and students (s. resources).

The association itself also became the target of repression. On November 12, 2020, Belarusian authorities detained leaders and activists of the Belarusian Students' Association, and the apartments of members of the student union and the organisation's office were searched. In 2023 BSA was declared as an "extremist organisation" and the social media of BSA as "extremist materials", endangering not only its members but also their extended families.

The Belarusian students union regularly posts updates via its various social media channels (Instagram, Facebook, X, Telegram channel, TikTok etc.). Its website has been deleted by the Belarusian state authorities. Furthermore the association is dependent on financial support, for which a Patreon has been established. <https://linktr.ee/zbsunion>

7. Ressources

- ESU resolution [Defending the Rights and Educational Opportunities of Belarusian Citizens Abroad](#) → BSA together with ESU urges National Students Unions to inform national higher education institutions about the potential bureaucratic challenges with the academic documents of Belarusian students, urges the European higher education institutions to design a flexible mechanism to enable the admission of Belarusian students; and urges national migration office or any other respective institutions to design a procedural framework for issuance of a foreigner passport or/and continued recognition of the expired passports.
- BSA has published four editions of its "[State of Belarusian Academia](#)" report (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023), which aim to give an understanding of infringements of academic freedom and repressions against students and teachers. It also highlights problems regarding European scholarship programs for Belarusian students.