Education without fear: Standing with Belarusian students in exile in Lithuania

The European Students' Union's (ESU), Belarusian Students' Association's (BSA) and Lithuanian Students' Union's (LSS) statement on the situation of Belarusian students in exile in Lithuania

The European Students' Union (ESU), the Belarusian Students' Association (BSA) and the Lithuanian National Union of Students (LSS) stand in solidarity with Belarusian students and academic staff seeking to access and continue participation in higher education in Lithuania. Following the decision of the authorities in Belarus to declare the European Humanities University (EHU) as an "extremist organisation" - which ESU has strongly condemned in a previous statement - the rights and interests of Belarusian students and scholars require heightened attention, as their safety, educational opportunities and academic freedom are at risk.

Belarusian students face barriers to higher education in Lithuania even before they become students. From application deadlines and documentation requirements to visa procedures, tuition payments and restrictions based on citizenship, these obstacles can prevent qualified students from accessing education despite their academic achievements and determination to continue their studies.

Students affected by political repression and forced displacement have already overcome extraordinary barriers to pursue their education. For many, studying abroad is a significant pathway towards dignity, independence and the continuation of their educational and professional lives.

It is therefore deeply concerning that administrative procedures and institutional restrictions can create additional barriers for Belarusian students, including those who cannot safely return to Belarus or obtain the necessary documents from Belarusian authorities.

ESU, BSA and LSS call for:

- **Flexible application deadlines and documentation procedures:** Lithuanian higher education institutions (HEIs) should introduce more flexible application deadlines, or establish a stable application date after graduation periods in other countries, allowing applicants to submit final documents later when circumstances prevent them from meeting standard requirements. Some HEIs allow applicants to submit transcripts of marks instead of a high school diploma, if the date of the graduation is after the application deadline. However, this alternative does not apply to Belarusian students, as it is illegal to issue such documentation in Belarus. Public authorities and HEIs should ensure that students are not excluded because they cannot safely or legally obtain documents from Belarusian authorities by following recommendations outlined in the Lithuanian White Paper on admitting refugees' or persons in a refugee like situation to Higher Education.
- **A review of apostille requirements:** Lithuanian HEIs should review the necessity and proportionality of apostille requirements for Belarusian students. Such practices already exist, for example, exemptions are provided by the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC) and Kaunas University of Technology (KTU) for Belarusian and Ukrainian students. These standards should be considered as a basis for wider accessible procedures.
- **Transparent review of citizenship-based restrictions:** Lithuanian HEIs and relevant authorities should regularly review study programme admission restrictions for students based on citizenship, clearly explain their legal and security basis, and consider whether less restrictive alternatives are possible. Qualified students should not be prevented from applying to study programmes without transparent and proportionate justification.
- **Flexible tuition payment arrangements:** Lithuanian HEIs should allow students facing financial or migration barriers to postpone tuition payments until after arrival or divide payments into instalments. Existing

scholarships and financial-support programmes should be made accessible to students at risk, and additional support should be created where necessary. Revival of previously existing funding initiatives, such as state-funded placements for 100 (later 110) Belarusian students or free admission of politically persecuted students, could be reviewed.

- **Support for the continuity of education for EHU students:** the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport in Lithuania has encouraged HEIs to collaborate in supporting EHU students at risk, however, this remains limited in practice. Many EHU students report not being aware of alternative possibilities to continue their education. Lithuanian HEIs, together with relevant authorities, should systematically work with EHU to establish safe and sustainable educational pathways for students affected by the repression against the university and ensure that this measure is clearly communicated to students.
- **Protection of academic staff:** Lithuanian HEIs should also explore opportunities for EHU academic staff to continue their academic work in Lithuania, including by offering positions at other HEIs where appropriate, and ensuring the continuity of teaching, research and academic life.
- **Free basic Lithuanian language education:** Lithuanian HEIs and relevant public authorities have to provide free and accessible basic Lithuanian language courses for students, aiming for approximately A2 level within a study period. Such courses should be incorporated into students' study schedules and support their integration into Lithuanian society and the labour market.

Conclusion

At a time when political repression and displacement have already taken so much from Belarusian students, access to education should represent hope and the possibility of a future. HEIs must remain places where students can learn, develop their potential and participate in academic life without fear of persecution or discrimination.

ESU, BSA and LSS stand in full solidarity with Belarusian students and academic staff affected by political repression, including the students and staff of EHU, while reiterating their commitment to defending the universal right to education, academic freedom, human rights and the protection of students at risk.

Every student must have the right to pursue their education in safety, dignity and freedom.