

Politically Imprisoned Students in Belarus

Nordic Conservative Student Union

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Millions of Belarusians refused to put up with the rigged presidential elections in August 2020 and the staged results announced by the Central Election Commission. Hundreds of thousands of Belarusians participated in peaceful demonstrations against the Belarusian government and President Alexander Lukashenko, but the police response was aggressive and brutal: several people were killed, hundreds were maimed, thousands were brutally beaten and tortured in prisons^[1]. Bloggers, businessmen, activists of the headquarters of other presidential candidates, and protesters are in places of detention, away from their relatives and friends because they were not afraid to express their rights - the right to participate in peaceful assemblies, to express their opinions and to participate in the political life of the country. Most of these people came under politically motivated criminal prosecution in connection with the events that unfolded during and after the presidential campaign in Belarus. The regime has opened more than two thousand and five hundred criminal cases against citizens who have expressed their disagreement with the actions of the authorities. Five hundred and twenty-six prisoners have been recognised as prisoners of conscience^[2], and many more are under long-term arrest awaiting trial. Each week there are more and more of them (on average eleven prisoners of conscience per week). More than fifty thousand Belarusians went through administrative arrests, where they were tortured for several weeks or fined an amount equivalent to several average monthly salaries.

All over the country there are massive repercussions, including layoffs, expulsions and discrimination, which is done for any expression of their civic position: signing a petition, participating in a video message against violence, participating in peaceful protests, or membership in an independent trade union.

Belarusian universities also actively protested against falsifications, violence and torture. Hundreds of professors and students have faced discrimination, layoffs, fines, violence, harassment, arrests and various forms of intimidation due to the peaceful expression of their civil position. Terror in universities has become unprecedented - in some of them the administration called a special police unit which forcibly detained students and blocked them in the premises against their will.

As of March 5, there are by official figures at least 160 illegally expelled students in Belarus for political reasons. Contrary to official data, there are more than 180 such students which have been expelled for political reasons. Hundreds of students have

left their studies, because of the threat to their safety. In September and October 251 students have left just one university (the Belarusian State University, which is the biggest university of the country), due to concerns for their safety. Tracking the expulsions and dismissals is very difficult, because in order to hide the number of expulsions victims are arrested or intimidated^[3]. Many students and teachers are forced to withdraw applications and petitions. Students are forced to write voluntary expulsion applications. Expelled male students are often immediately drafted into the military, thereby violating all laws and procedures.

Universities prevent the creation of independent trade unions that provide social and economic assistance to victims of repression. On March 2, 2021, the Chairman and Secretary of the primary student union of the Belarusian State University were abducted. The Secretary was subjected to administrative arrest, and the union's telegram channel was hacked by the authorities. On March 5, the Congress of the primary student union was disrupted. More than 30 people were abducted from the scene, and 4 were subjected to administrative arrests. On May 20, the Chairman of the biggest trade union of the Academy of Sciences was abducted. She was subjected to administrative arrest, and her phone is still in the hands of the security forces.

The administrative and criminal codes were changed, at the sole discretion of the state, it is obvious that both codes have become much more extensive, restricting citizens rights even further. The labour code was also changed, where workers were deprived of a number of rights, including the right to strike. Every time someone organises a strike a criminal penalty is given. Preparations are also underway for changes to the educational code, again at the sole discretion of the state.

It is almost impossible to leave the country. Air traffic is open only towards Russia. By land, travel to the countries of the European Union and Ukraine is practically impossible. Citizens have to pay the state in order to leave the country. In a way the population of the Republic of Belarus is being held hostage.

The conditions of detention of prisoners are getting worse every day. Prisoners are tortured, they are not provided with adequate medical care and lawyers are not allowed to see them. Under pressure, prisoners are forced to confess and are forced to participate in the filming of propaganda videos, where they repent and confess to committing illegal actions^[4]. For example, due to torture and threats in the courtroom, Stepan Latypov tried to cut his throat with a pen and is now hospital. Furthermore, on May 22, another political prisoner, Vitold Ashurok, has sadly died.

The worst part of this saga is that the most active students are persecuted for their social activities. At the moment, at least 41 criminal cases have been initiated

against students, many of them are awaiting an unfair trial and have been under arrest since November. Some of them have already been sentenced to many years in prison: Ilya Migno (4.5 years), Maxim Tuzhik (4 years), Evgeny Kalinovsky (4 years), Ivan Datsishin (4 years), Denis Khazei (3 years), Viktor Aktistov (2.5 years), Sofia Milosevic (2 years), Ilya Bychkovsky (2 years), Ilya Tananko (1.5 years), Tikhon Klyukach (1.5 years), some of the convicted are underage. 12 students face up to 3 years in prison for allegedly organising riots, although they collected signatures on open petitions, participated in student strikes and operated social networks. Their trial is already underway, and from the first court session there are many violations, inconsistencies and contradictions. There is no doubt that the outcome will be biased and unfair. As a result of all this, each of them needs support and attention from the international community.

The EU has been applying progressively larger sanctions on Belarus since October 2020. It is very good to see the further increased economic sanctions at the latest European Council meeting of 24 June. Considering the continued persecution and escalation of violence against Belarusian students this needs to continue and more needs to be done to directly support civil society and especially the students of Belarus both by the EU, as well as by individual countries and by higher education institutions.

We the Nordic Conservative Student Union (NKSU):

- Condemn the persecution of peacefully demonstrating Belarusian citizens and the abuse of their fundamental rights;
- Support Belarusians' human rights of freedom of expression, freedom of speech and peaceful assembly;
- Strongly express solidarity with teachers and students who have become victims of academic repression and those who continue to express solidarity with dismissed and detained students and colleagues;
- Acknowledge the political motives behind decisions made at the Belarusian courts, universities and other institutions implementing the sanctions against politically active citizens.

We, NKSU, call on the European Commission, European Council, European countries and European universities to:

- Initiate a review and adjustment of the existing agreements with the administration of Belarusian universities, and the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, in order to protect fundamental academic values and the rights of Belarusian academics and students;
- Strengthen support programs for dismissed workers and expelled students so that they can continue to participate in the learning process;
- Consider the possibility of bringing individuals involved in violating academic freedoms to personal sanctions;
- Refuse to cooperate with governmental trade unions which participate in repression;
- Support independent trade unions.

[1] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/15/belarus-systematic-beatings-torture-protesters>

[2] <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/>

[3] <https://belsat.eu/en/news/04-06-2021-minsk-mathematics-student-expelled-from-university-detained-on-same-day/>

[4] <https://belsat.eu/en/news/01-06-2021-minsk-protester-stsyapan-latypau-tries-to-cut-throat-in-court-he-reports-torture-threats-in-jail/>