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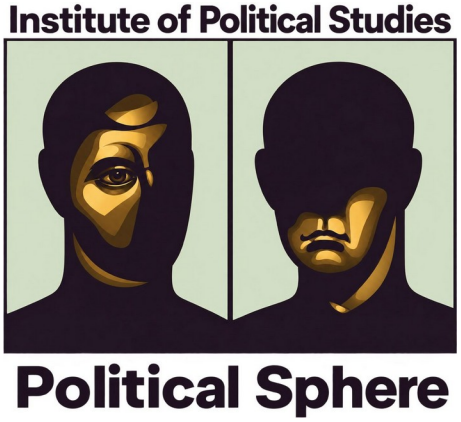

Palitsfera Working Papers No. 10/2026

BELARUSIAN SCIENCE UNDER PRESSURE

The Transformation of Belarus's Research Sector after 2020

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Belarusian Science under Pressure

The Transformation of Belarus's Research Sector after 2020

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Institute of Political Studies
"Political Sphere"

A major consequence of the suppression of the democratic protests of 2020 and the Belarusian authorities' support for Russia's aggression against Ukraine has been a profound transformation of the academic environment in Belarus. Hundreds of scholars and lecturers have faced repression, and dozens have been imprisoned. Hundreds have been forced to leave the country, while perhaps as many as a thousand have lost the opportunity to continue their customary professional work.

Universities and research centres have also been subjected to direct ideological control, involving systematic propaganda in support of the authoritarian system and repression, as well as the dissemination of Russian political narratives. Meanwhile, many research topics and fields have effectively disappeared or become marginalised. Anti-European and anti-Western narratives, the cult of A. Lukashenka's authoritarian rule, rejection of democracy and justification of the totalitarian Soviet past have become the foundations of the new ideology. The authorities pay particular attention to reinforcing Soviet identity and presenting Soviet achievements as an ideal to emulate.

Under these conditions, EU support aimed at preserving and developing the Belarusian academic community and research on Belarus is critically important for Belarusian society. It would enable the development of a democratic and European alternative for society's future and reduce the destructive influence of authoritarian and Russian imperial narratives.

Developing a democratic and European alternative expands the capacity to counter disinformation and radical anti-European ideas. It also increases the prospects of a stable and friendly Belarusian state emerging in the future, connected to the EU through cooperation and partnership.

Systematic knowledge about Belarus is also important for developing effective EU foreign and security policy in Eastern Europe, since it enables more accurate assessments of developments and, consequently, better-informed decisions.

It should be noted that, in the author's assessment, virtually no systematic research on Belarus is currently conducted in the EU or the United States. The pool of specialists is extremely small, numbering no more than ten people, most of whom also work in related fields.

The European Union should become a leader in Belarusian studies and a unique space for accumulating knowledge about the country free from the control of authoritarian power and Russian imperial narratives.

This analysis provides a brief overview of the state of Belarus's research field, the principal trends in ideological control, militarisation and growing Russian influence, and practices of repression. It also offers recommendations for EU policy aimed at preserving the Belarusian academic community and knowledge about Belarus.

General Characteristics of the Research Field

Since the beginning of the post-Soviet period, Belarus's research sector, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, has faced substantial constraints on its development. The political crisis of 2020 and the outbreak of war in 2022 further damaged a research community already weakened by many years of authoritarian rule. Chronic underfunding, persistent isolation, state ideological control and the imposition of pro-Russian narratives characterised the sector.

For the Belarusian authorities, research in the social sciences and humanities is primarily a matter of ideology. Since the mid-1990s, many Soviet practices of political control over universities and research have continued to be reproduced. Many sensitive topics, particularly in history and politics, along with researchers who demonstrated disloyalty to the authorities, were pushed out of state institutions. This research continued either within civil society organisations or outside the country. Following the political crisis of 2020, most civil society structures, including those engaged in research, were destroyed, while political and ideological control over academia intensified further.

The State of Belarus's Research Sector and Its Main Development Trends

Research Expenditure

The overall condition of Belarus's research sector remains difficult. Belarus lags far behind developed countries in research expenditure as a share of GDP. While this figure stands at 2–3% in the EU and the United States, around 1–1.5% in Poland and Lithuania, and around 1% in Russia, in Belarus it was only about 0.59% in 2024. This is considerably below the Soviet-era level, when research expenditure reached 2% of GDP. Expenditure also falls significantly short of planned targets. Under government plans in the 2000s and 2010s, research spending was supposed to reach 2–3% of GDP. The Programme for the Socioeconomic Development of Belarus for 2021–2025 set a minimum target of 1%. These plans were not implemented, however, and the sector has experienced a prolonged decline over the past fifteen years, interrupted only by short-lived improvements.

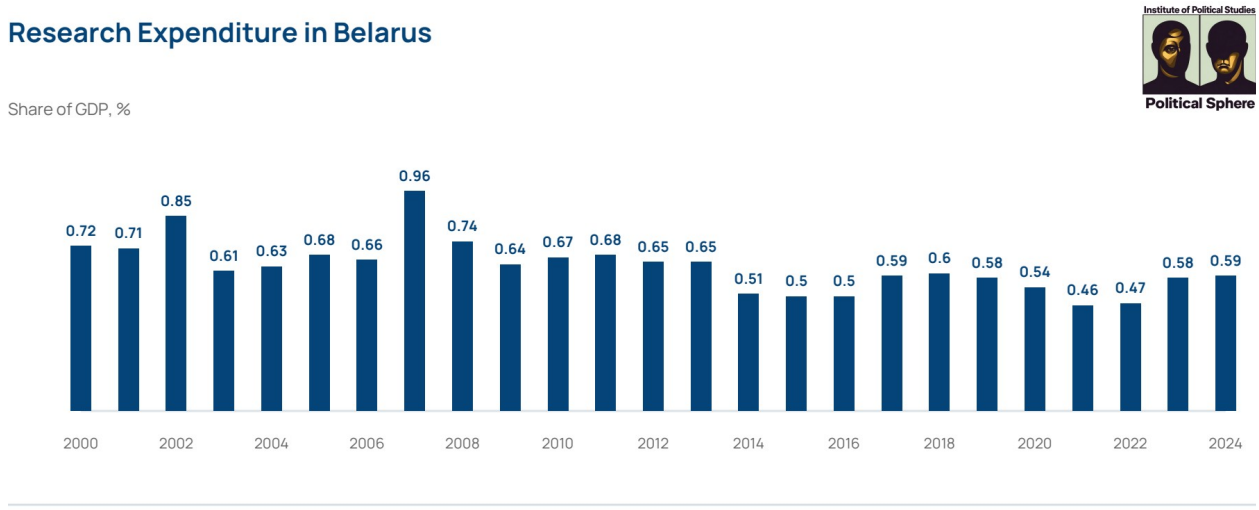

Figure 1. Research expenditure as a share of Belarus's GDP, 2000–2024

Employment in the Sector

The situation is also unfavourable with regard to the number of people employed in research, which has steadily declined over the past ten to fifteen years. Some growth has been observed only since 2023, possibly linked to a considerable extent to investment in the defence sector following the start of Russia's war against Ukraine. In any event, this is insufficient to offset the losses of the past decade. Belarus has a total of 17,700 researchers by head count, fewer than Finland.

Social Sciences and Humanities

The social sciences and humanities sector is even smaller. Employment in humanities research amounts to around 600 people by head count, and in the social sciences to 1,100. Annual expenditure on humanities research is only about EUR 5 million, while spending on the social sciences and humanities combined is around EUR 16 million per year.

Number of Scholarly Books

The general crisis in the research sector is accompanied by a substantial reduction in research output. In particular, the number of scholarly books published has fallen by 30% over the past decade, reaching 972 in 2023 compared with 1,360 in 2012. The figure first dropped below 1,000 in 2020, when the political crisis began.

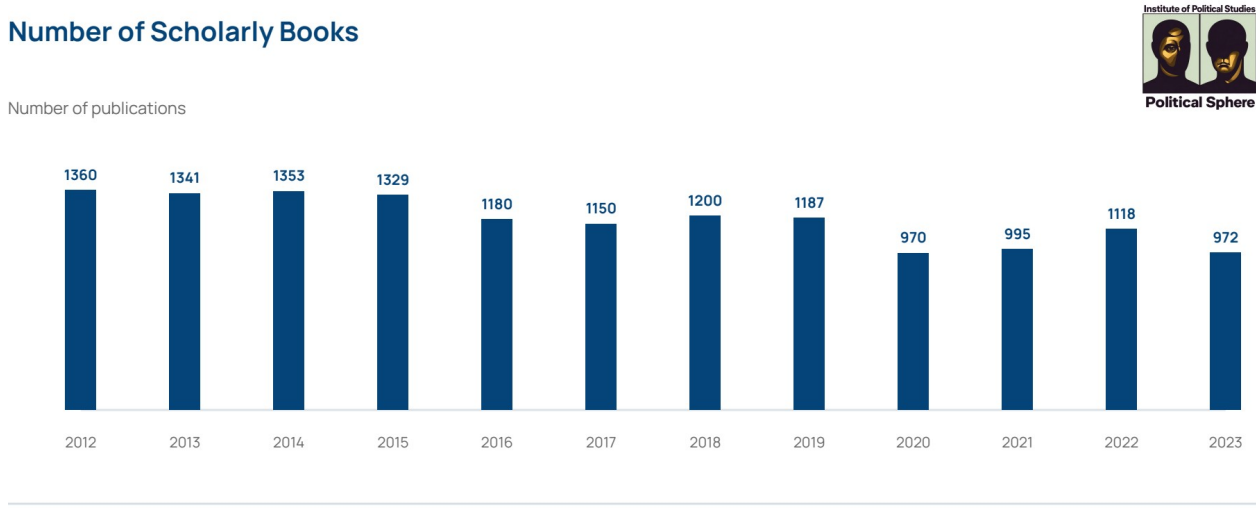

Figure 2. Number of scholarly books published in Belarus, 2012–2023

Number of Dissertations

A similar situation can be observed in the number of published dissertations, also reflecting the sector's decline and the deterioration of the political climate after 2020. Over the past decade, the number of published dissertations fell by almost 40%, from 574 in 2013 to 362 in 2023. The sharpest decline occurred in 2020–2021, when the figure fell below 400 for the first time.

Dissertation numbers also provide an indication of the size of professional communities in individual disciplines. On average, about seven dissertations are defended annually in sociology, around five in political science and around four in philosophy, which is insufficient to sustain these communities effectively. Among humanities disciplines, a relatively stable renewal of research personnel is observed only in history and philology, with around 25 dissertations a year in history. Among the social sciences, only economics maintains a comparatively strong position, with around 40 dissertations a year.

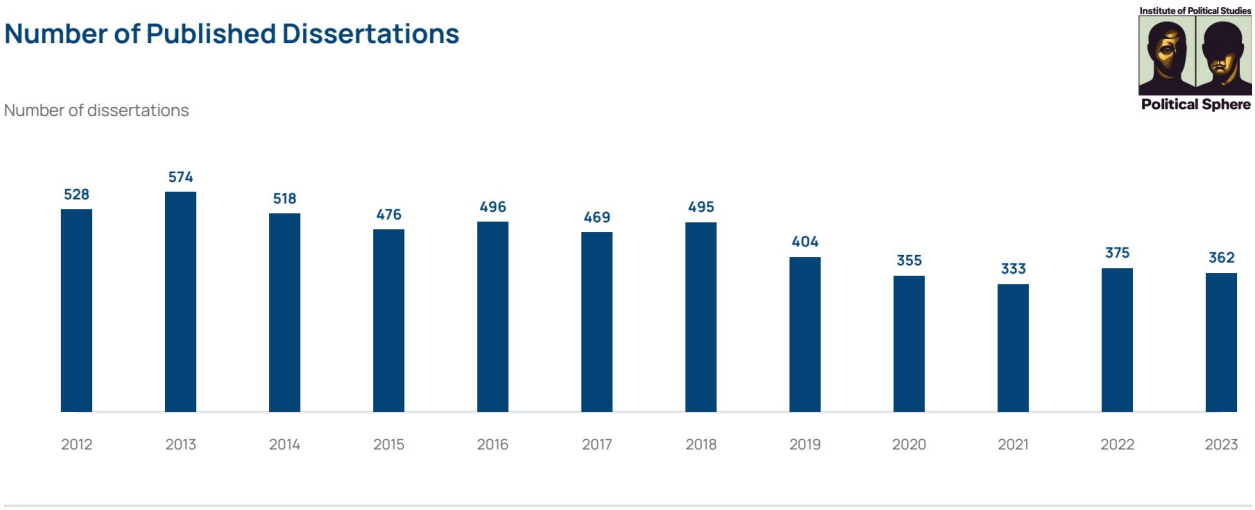

Figure 3. Number of published dissertations, 2012–2023

Repression against Critics of the Authorities

Despite the generally negative development trends of previous decades, after 2020 the research sector experienced additional repression and purges. It can be stated with reasonable confidence that repression affected hundreds of lecturers and researchers at universities and research centres; even more people lost the opportunity to continue their customary professional work. Around thirty people faced criminal prosecution.

The threat of politically motivated repression forced hundreds of researchers to leave Belarus and relocate abroad. Poland, Lithuania and Germany became the principal destinations.

The independent research sector in Belarus was also virtually destroyed. Following the establishment of authoritarian rule in the mid-1990s and the onset of political repression and pressure on universities, a sector of non-governmental organisations and think tanks began to emerge, conducting research and analysis independently of the state. It comprised several dozen organisations and engaged up to a hundred researchers on a permanent or temporary basis.

The entire sector was dismantled. Most researchers and analysts were forced to leave the country. Many faced criminal prosecution in absentia, for example in the case against Tsikhanouskaya's analysts, while around four people were imprisoned. Virtually all organisations were dissolved or forced to operate abroad.

Indoctrination and Ideological Control

Ideological and political control has been an important feature of academic life in Belarus ever since the authoritarian regime was established in 1996. Following the political crisis of 2020, however, it assumed even harsher forms.

Speaking in February 2024, Belarusian leader A. Lukashenka once again stressed that education "cannot be outside politics" and that university rectors bear direct responsibility for "national security" and "preserving the country's sovereignty". It was also openly stated that university management was

responsible for ensuring that its staff did not include “people who do not share our approaches and our policies, the state ideology”. Lukashenka also warned against hiring professionals who had participated in the protests after 2020. Students being “intoxicated” with “Western values” was cited as one of the causes of the protests. [1]

Alongside ideological control, stronger administrative control is constantly discussed. In particular, in August 2023, the “decentralisation of the management hierarchy”, meaning the preservation of even limited academic autonomy, was presented as an unacceptable risk in the governance of Belarusian State University (BSU). This was raised alongside the need to eliminate shortcomings in the organisation of “ideological and educational work”. [2]

The authorities regard interference in research and restrictions in this field, particularly in history, politics and media, as a duty of state bodies. In March 2025, I. Sergeyenko, Chair of the House of Representatives and former Head of the Presidential Administration, stated that “speculation on historical issues poses a real threat to national security”. He emphasised the important role of historical education and the academic community of Belarusian State University in ensuring “national security and ideological stability” (21 March 2025). [3]

In speeches delivered in 2022–2023, representatives of the Belarusian leadership, including I. Sergeyenko, Foreign Minister S. Aleinik, Chair of the House of Representatives U. Andreichenko and Assistant Minister of Defence for Ideological Work L. Kasinski, stressed the need to defend official historical policy and counter attempts to revise history.

In September 2023, Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Ihar Lutski also raised the issue of official historical policy, linking interpretations of the past to national interests and state security.

Representatives of official historical scholarship have likewise made numerous statements about the need to revise Belarusian history, primarily by displacing Western and “nationalist” concepts and approaches. Attempts to deny the totalitarian nature of the Soviet political system as a “hostile political-science interpretation” provide a telling example. [4]

Academic institutions actively participate in glorifying A. Lukashenka’s political role. One example is the presentation of the book Our President at the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus on 20 March 2025, attended by the Chair of its Presidium, Uladzimir Husakou. Political exhibitions provide another example, notably BelTA’s Parallel Worlds exhibition, which portrays the “world of the opposition” as a world of “destruction and degradation” (5 February 2024). [5, 6]

The Academy of Sciences has also begun work on a new multivolume History of Belarus, intended to bring the official account of the country’s history into line with the ideology that emerged after 2020 and 2022. In this context, the recently published History of Belarusian Statehood is already regarded as insufficiently acceptable ideologically (15 August 2024).

Other manifestations of growing ideological control include repression and purges targeting independent tour guides; the closure, restriction of operations or forced relocation of many independent publishers; and the removal of “extremist literature” from libraries and bookshops. This category encompasses a very broad range of works, including certain works by nineteenth-century classics of Belarusian literature. [7]

History as a Tool of Militarisation and Enemy Construction

After 2020, and especially after 2022, the use of history to promote militaristic narratives and portray the political opposition and neighbouring states as enemies acquired particular importance. All politically disloyal forces are equated with “Nazis”, “enemies of the state” and agents of Western influence.

The use of history and aggressive historical narratives in propaganda has become an everyday practice in political life. In 2023–2024, for example, A. Lukashenka referred to Poland’s historical past alone at least 32 times, or an average of around 1.3 times a month. Most statements referred to the Second World War, mainly to Poland’s “ingratitude” and collaboration with the Nazis. Approximately another third portrayed interwar Poland as a repressive and nationalist state.

The image of Poland and Poles in general has become extremely negative. Since 2022, a series of acts of destruction has targeted “Polish” sites of memory associated with the Home Army, the commemoration of Stalinist repression and the uprising against the Russian Empire of 1863–1864. [8, 9]

To intensify a sense of threat and construct an image of the enemy, unsubstantiated claims that Poland seeks to annex Western Belarus are regularly voiced. Accusations that Europe and Western countries sympathise with Nazism appear even more frequently in statements by A. Lukashenka and other officials. On 27 January 2024, for example, Lukashenka declared: “It is they who today honour executioners in their parliaments. It is they who have started a war against graves and monuments in Poland, the Baltic states and Ukraine.” [10]

The contemporary West is portrayed as a new incarnation of fascism. This image appeared in speeches by Prosecutor General A. Shved and the Rector of the Academy of Public Administration, V. Danilovich, who linked contemporary European politics to the legacy of Nazism and contrasted it with Soviet memory of the Second World War.

War and the Growing Influence of Russian Historical and Political Narratives

The Belarusian authorities’ involvement on Russia’s side in the war against Ukraine has led to a substantial increase in Russian influence across all spheres, from security to the economy, information, education and research. Pro-Russian narratives have spread widely in history, culture and identity politics. This has been accompanied by a new wave of repression against social scientists and humanities scholars in state and independent institutions who produce knowledge about contemporary Belarus and its history that is independent of Russian narratives and supportive of democracy.

The main emphasis is on glorifying Russia’s role, including that of the Russian Empire, portraying the West as a historically aggressive force, discrediting democracy and praising authoritarian rule. The Second World War is beginning to be interpreted as one episode in a confrontation with the West. The role of the Soviet authoritarian and totalitarian system, including I. Stalin’s “strong-hand” policies, is assessed positively, while repression is silenced.

Numerous examples demonstrate significant changes in this area. An illustration is the Political Sphere Institute’s 2025 study of how state and non-state media represented the liberation uprising against the Russian Empire in Belarus, Poland and Lithuania in 1863–1864. The image of the uprising became an important part of Belarusian identity. The data presented show the extent to which narratives about the uprising became pro-Russian after 2020. [11]

Meanwhile, many research topics and fields have effectively disappeared or become marginalised.

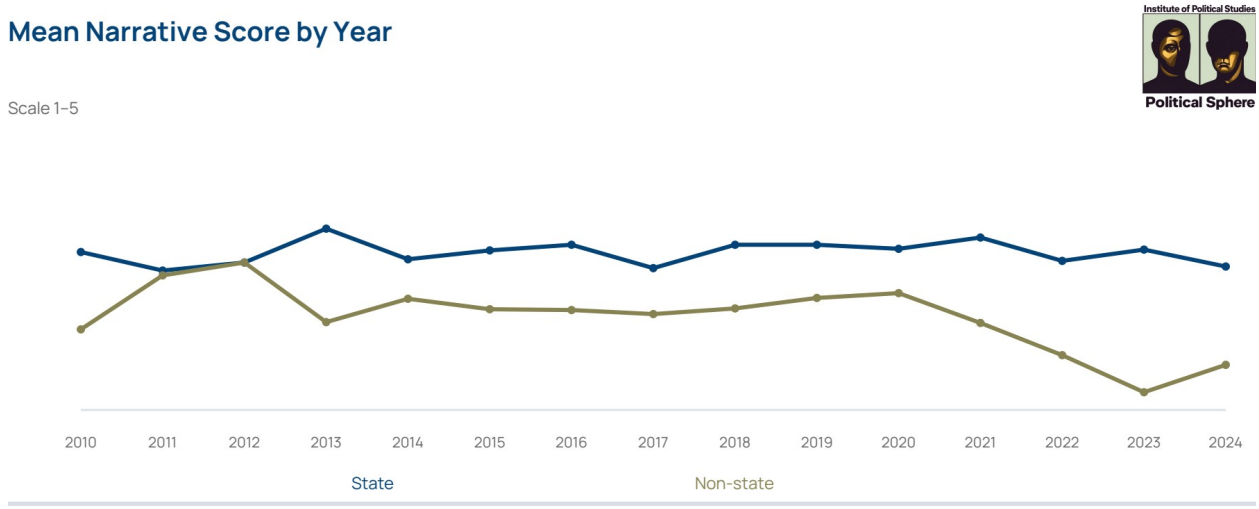

Figure 4. Mean narrative score by year and sector, 2010–2024

Academic research is also experiencing stronger interaction with Russia and greater Russian influence. Official statements emphasise the need to jointly defend historical interpretations and develop mechanisms to counter alleged falsification of history. Additional initiatives include forming a common scientific and technological space with Russia (Shchotkina), publishing a textbook on the history of the Union State (Historical Memory Foundation), the first meeting of the Russian–Belarusian Expert Advisory Council on History (15 November 2023), the signing of a memorandum establishing a Joint Russian–Belarusian Commission on History (25 January 2024), and Union State youth forums described as "patriotic" (19 March 2025). Proposals have also been made to seek international recognition of the "genocide of the Soviet people during the Great Patriotic War" (Liliya Ananich, Deputy Chair of a House of Representatives commission, 14 December 2022). A telling symbolic gesture was BSU's award of an honorary professorship to Russian Foreign Minister S. Lavrov (1 July 2022). [12, 13, 14]

Attempts are also being made to develop relations with other non-Western countries. Official statements contain frequent praise of China, ranging from Lukashenka's statements to the publication of Xi Jinping's works in Belarusian. Other examples include the opening of a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation research centre at BSU (27 October 2023) and less familiar initiatives such as expanding cooperation with universities in Zimbabwe. These efforts, however, do nothing to reduce dependence on Russia.

Brief Conclusions

Throughout almost the entire period of independence, Belarusian academia has developed under difficult conditions marked by limited resources, the sector's general decline, particularly over the past fifteen years, and strong ideological and administrative control. Following the political crisis of 2020 and the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022, conditions for development became even less favourable.

Politically motivated repression has affected hundreds of researchers and lecturers. Many have been forced to leave the country, even more have lost the opportunity to pursue academic careers, and dozens have faced criminal prosecution.

At the same time, ideological and administrative pressure on academia has intensified. Control over the content of social sciences and humanities research has effectively become a duty and everyday practice of executive bodies. Historical, foreign-policy and other social sciences and humanities narratives have been actively used to justify war and repression and to portray neighbouring peoples and the Belarusian political opposition as enemies. The influence of Russian historical and political narratives has grown substantially. Anti-European and anti-Western narratives have become the foundations of the new ideology. Meanwhile, many research topics and fields have effectively disappeared or become marginalised.

Under these conditions, preserving and developing a Belarusian academic community independent of the authorities, as well as research on Belarus free from ideological control, becomes particularly important. The EU can play a decisive role by creating opportunities to develop a democratic and European identity for Belarus and to obtain information about Belarusian society and politics. This can help strengthen security in the eastern part of the EU. Work is needed in three principal areas: supporting Belarusian research independent of the state, developing research on Belarus and preserving the research community.

Tasks and Opportunities for the EU

Given the highly unfavourable conditions for research in Belarus, particularly research free from the authorities' ideological control and Russian imperial narratives, the EU can and should play an important role in this field. Such support serves not only the interests of Belarusian society but also the EU's strategic interests: ensuring security, reducing Russian influence and strengthening political resilience in Eastern Europe.

Progress is possible in three main areas: supporting researchers who have faced repression; supporting programmes of research on Belarus in the social sciences and humanities; and supporting communication and community-building initiatives for researchers of Belarusian origin in the EU.

Supporting Researchers

Short-term fellowships lasting one to two years are an important mechanism for assisting researchers who have faced repression or lost the opportunity to pursue their profession in Belarus. After 2020, the EU and individual member-state governments assisted several hundred scholars affected by repression, enabling many to remain in their profession and adapt to exile. Poland, Lithuania and Germany, as well as the SALT programme, provided such assistance.

While acknowledging the scale of support already provided, it should be noted that repression in Belarus continues and opportunities for research independent of authoritarian control remain absent. Support programmes must therefore continue. The number of fellowships awarded should reflect actual needs. In the current situation, an estimated fifteen to twenty-five fellowships a year, lasting nine to twelve months, may be appropriate. However, the regularity of provision is more important than the number of fellowships.

A significant weakness of existing support mechanisms is their uneven, wave-like nature. Many fellowships may be available in some years, while none may be offered in subsequent years. It is important to establish a support system based on an annual competition with a planning horizon of four to five years.

Supporting Research

As noted above, Belarus offers virtually no opportunity to develop social sciences and humanities research grounded in scholarly principles and democratic values. Professional progress remains possible in certain disciplines, including archaeology, economic history, many aspects of cultural history and non-political sociological research. However, many research fields effectively cannot exist or must develop under strict ideological control from Minsk and Moscow. These include studies of the Second World War, Bolshevik repression, nineteenth-century liberation uprisings, democratic institutions of the modern era, the national movement and attempts to establish an independent state in the twentieth century.

Research on history since 1991, analysis of Belarus's political institutions and foreign policy, post-Soviet integration processes and public opinion in the country are subject to even more complete political control.

As noted above, developing these fields is important not only for creating a democratic alternative for Belarusian society. Such research is also important for countering pro-Russian propaganda. This information matters to the EU as well, enabling it to understand developments in Belarus better and enhance its own security.

A systematic programme supporting Belarusian Studies should be developed within the EU, with research grants available to both Belarusian and European scholars.

At present, relatively systematic research on Belarus is conducted only in Poland. Its focus is often determined primarily by a Polish perspective: the history of Belarus and its regions within interwar Poland, the history of the Polish movement in Belarus, analysis of interstate relations and similar topics. Nevertheless, up to several dozen people are engaged in such research, with up to ten articles and several monographs published annually. In other countries, including Germany, only individual specialists work on Belarus, and publications are irregular and scattered.

A research support programme could operate within SALT or as a targeted annual competition administered by one of the national institutions. It is proposed that five to ten EU-funded group research grants lasting one to two years be awarded annually.

Supporting the Community

The disintegration of the national academic community poses a significant challenge to preserving Belarus's research capacity. The Belarusian authorities are effectively pursuing a policy of division, prohibiting contacts between scholars who have left and those who remain, or making such contacts risky, and restricting interaction between employees of state institutions and other researchers.

Researchers who have relocated to the EU, in turn, are dispersed across different countries, leading to severed ties and the effective disintegration of professional communities. This adversely affects the capacity to produce knowledge about Belarus and exchange findings. Support for initiatives that preserve and develop the community is therefore important, particularly the International Congress of Belarusian Studies and other forms of professional communication. A dedicated strand could be established within SALT and similar projects, including Science at Risk. This infrastructure must be preserved. [15]

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