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The Belarusian University in Exile

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Belarus is a country that has recently become widely known as the last dictatorship in Central Europe. Sandwiched between Europe and Russia, Belarus has regularly been a victim of wars and bloody social experiments. The country first gained independence in 1991, and just a few years later, in 1994, having voted against the communist nomenclature, Belarus elected a populist dictator as president.

The university system in Belarus began to take shape only in the 1920s, and therefore had neither pre-Soviet history nor pre-Soviet academic traditions. This made it easy for President Lukashenko to suppress liberal tendencies in education and to encroach on the feeble rudiments of academic freedoms and university autonomy that had been only just born in the first years of the country's independence. The hardest time for the academia, however, began after the 2001 presidential election, when the authorities realized that students represent an opposition force. That year marked the beginning of the return to the Soviet totalitarianism in higher education and the conversion of the universities into institutions of political control.

Under threat of dismissal, faculty members of all educational institutions, either state-owned or private ones, are not allowed to openly express their views in the classroom. The course content and curriculum are limited and reflective of the state ideology. Responsibility for meeting ideological requirements rests upon both the administration, including rectors' and department heads' deputies for ideology, and the lecturers' fellow faculty members.

Universities are used as an instrument of political control for harassing students and teachers, prohibiting opposition opinions and actions, controlling voting results by compelling students in dormitories to vote early and participating in forging vote results (university administrations set up counting committees in dormitories and hold responsibility for the election results up to the dismissal of rectors and department heads in case the authorities find the results unsatisfactory). University administration prohibits participation in unauthorized actions and meetings, cultural and professional events and reports on the participants to the police and KGB (Belarus is the

only country on the territory of the former Soviet Union to have preserved the Soviet name for the state security service, KGB).

Scholars cannot fully exercise their right to conduct research, particularly in social sciences, and to freely publish the results. State-owned media and publishers are subject to censorship, whereas publications abroad or in the few remaining independent media can entail dismissal, charges of defamation, or disrespect for authority. Independent research institutions are closed down; among them, a respected institute for sociological research is closed for publishing, the results of an independent exit poll (international research) disclosing the falsification of the results of the 2004 parliamentary elections and referendum on removing presidential term limits. Complete dependence of the judicial system on the will of the president leads to scholars' imprisonment on false accusations of corruption and the like. Universities are to abide by the government policy aimed at limiting scholars' international contacts and student mobility. The sad thing is that universities humbly agree to undertake these repressive functions. They do not even try to resist either the restriction of university autonomy or the repressive function of limiting academic freedoms imposed by the authorities on the university administrations and academics.

Against this background, the case of the European Humanities University (EHU) looks particularly striking. Founded as a private university in Minsk in 1992, EHU soon gained the highest international recognition among Belarusian universities. The government had to recognize not only the high quality of the EHU academic programs, but also its leading role in the internationalization of the Belarusian higher education sector. The situation changed, however, after the 2001 presidential election, when President Lukashenko adopted an anti-West policy and led the country's higher education toward self-isolation. He publicly declared that EHU represented a threat to his regime because the university educated a new elite that would lead the country to the West.

Like in other cases, when he was confronted with student opposition, Lukashenko first decided to put EHU under his control by replacing its administration, starting with the rector, Professor Anatoli Mikhailov, who was highly respected in Europe and the United States. To the surprise of Lukashenko and the Belarusian Ministry of Education, however, the methods successfully applied in other universities, including private ones, completely failed with EHU. They failed, first of all, because EHU was the only university in Belarus that enjoyed university autonomy. The university autonomy does not have roots in Belarus, which makes the sovietization of higher education today such an easy process. Furthermore, the authorities suddenly faced resistance by the whole university corporation that refused to submit to their dictate. Students and faculty realized that they opposed the

dictatorship, but they could not voluntarily give up their academic rights and freedoms. The opposition lasted six months and ended with the closure of the university by Lukashenko despite a high-profile international scandal.

There was no other solution to the problem for Lukashenko; having a breeding ground of freedom in the country was a challenge to the dictatorial regime. Nothing even remotely similar to the EHU phenomenon has ever happened in the territory of the former Soviet Union, and nowhere in the CIS have academic freedoms and university autonomy been so strongly supported by the university corporation.

After the official closure of the university in Belarus in August 2004, many EHU faculty members and students continued academic activities via the Internet. Already in the fall of that year, the university provided its students with an opportunity to complete their studies in the distance-learning (DL) format. Hundreds of former EHU students joined these programs, although EHU degrees and diplomas had no formal recognition. Academic solidarity was important as ever. Thus, at the end of 2004, a Polish rectors' conference passed a resolution on the recognition of degrees awarded by EHU and on providing EHU graduates with an opportunity to continue their education in Polish universities. A number of German universities, such as European University Viadrina, admitted EHU graduates to M.A. degree programs, even when the graduates did not have officially recognized Belarusian diplomas.

The most important task for the university corporation, however, was to reopen EHU in exile. The university found refuge in Lithuania, a neighboring country that had recently joined the European Union but still remembered the Soviet occupation and was therefore responsive to instances of political repressions. Moreover, Lithuania and Belarus share common history: the two countries were once one state, the Great Duchy of Lithuania. The neighbors' sympathy and political support on the part of the Lithuanian government, whose head had become a *doctor honoris* cause at EHU prior to the university's closure, helped EHU make important steps toward reopening. It did so in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, located at only a 170 km distance from Minsk, the capital of Belarus.

In June 2005, the EHU inauguration conference in Vilnius, attended by government representatives and diplomats from Europe and the United States, official representatives of the European Union, the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM), and the biggest U.S. donor foundations, passed a decision to support the reestablishment of EHU in Lithuania as a university in exile and, at the same time, as a formally accredited Lithuanian university. According to the conference decisions, classes were to begin in the fall of 2005, prior to the completion of the registration procedure.

The Lithuanian government undertook to provide EHU with teaching premises, whereas the European Commission (EC) and NCM provided a grant starting January 1, 2006, for three years of study for students admitted in 2005 to the EHU B.A. and M.A. degree programs. To bridge the gap between the beginning of the academic year in October 2005 and the launch of the EC/NCM grant, the governments of Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, and Sweden, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (U.S.), the Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund (U.S.), and other organizations provided grants for EHU to cover its start-up costs. A number of U.S. donors such as the State Department, American Councils for International Education, Eurasia Foundation, and Open Society Institute supported the EHU distance-learning programs. This support was particularly important for former EHU students who wished to continue their studies at the university even after its official closure in Belarus. Education via EHU DL programs, however, was open to all Belarusians seeking education in an academic environment free from ideological pressure and suppression of dissent.

History knows few, if any, examples of the successful reopening of universities in exile. Inevitably, these universities found themselves in between the cultural identities of their home country and a country that provided them refuge. According to Edward Said, to survive in new conditions, such a university should undertake a Socratic role of the restless opposition to all orthodoxies. It should also establish and keep a critical distance in regard to both its home traditions and experience in the new country. So far, the European Humanities University has managed to keep the balance between the Belarusian national environment and openness to the European educational perspective.

Despite the constantly growing pressure from the Belarusian authorities on the EHU students and faculty, EHU succeeded in admitting promising students from Belarus to its academic programs in 2005. For some of them, admission to EHU was a serious challenge because it risked the careers of their parents who were threatened with dismissal by the authorities. For others, it meant the need to start their higher education anew, because the newly reopened university could admit students only to the first year of studies in order to be formally recognized as a full-fledged university in Lithuania. EHU attracted not only those young people who were persecuted in Belarus for their political views, but also those who could not put up with the repressive academic system and aspired to receive liberal education.

After the 2006 presidential election, Belarus witnessed escalation of repressions against students who had participated in protest actions against the forged election results. According to *Solidarnost*, the Committee for

the Protection of the Repressed, over 500 students were expelled from Belarusian universities for political reasons and applied to Solidarnost for help. International support gave the repressed students an opportunity to continue their education in universities of the neighboring countries, and first of all, Poland. In the fall of 2006, some of these students were admitted to EHU in Vilnius. The 2006 intake of students to EHU was supported by a new three-year grant from EC and NCM that covers not only tuition fees for all students admitted in 2006, but also scholarships for all undergraduate students admitted both in 2005 and 2006. Together with the MacArthur Foundation and Sida (Sweden), these donors also provided support for the admission and studies of 120 students at the EHU graduate programs. The Canadian government joined the U.S. donors in supporting the EHU DL programs.

In the 2006–2007 academic year, the EHU face-to-face and DL programs counted 1,500 students who were provided with a unique opportunity to join in the European system of higher education based on the Bologna model, while studying in their native languages—Belarusian and Russian. Belarusians, excluded by their government from the common European area of higher education, participate in it via the European Humanities University reestablished in Lithuania. The exiled university has become the European part of the national educational system and an alternative to the isolationist efforts of the Belarusian authorities aimed at restoring in Belarus the repressive Soviet model of higher education. Even though the EHU students are largely outnumbered by the 380,000-student contingent of other Belarusian universities, in terms of its significance, EHU can be regarded as an independent sector of the Belarusian higher education. As such, it is an attractive example to the whole Belarusian academia of how academic freedoms and university autonomy can be the core of life for the student and faculty corporation.

The year 2007 has brought trials and tribulations for EHU. The decreased amount of financial support from the European Union compelled the university to seek ways of preserving academic programs and faculty jobs. Insufficient funding had to be compensated by charging tuition from the majority of new students. The pessimism of skeptics who thought this would scare off prospective students was not justified; already the first stage of the admission campaign revealed the rapidly growing popularity of EHU academic programs among the Belarusian youth. Despite anti-EHU propaganda and threats on the part of the authorities, competition for some programs reached 10 persons per place. Neither students nor their parents were diverted by accusations against the university of representing a threat to the national security of Belarus, which entails criminal persecution. Charges of trafficking in human beings and terrorism are used by the Belarusian authorities to persecute

and blackmail students and faculty, and to prosecute legal entities in Belarus that collaborate with EHU.

There have been instances when EHU students had to flee Belarus and get to Lithuania via third countries, or had to submit their written assignments from prison via family and relatives. Recently, the KGB has intensified activities aimed at harassing the EHU students and faculty. This organization uses not only direct methods of pressure and intimidation, but also such instruments as tax inspections, customs and border control, and so on. Regular searches on the border or confiscations of laptops have become routines of the EHU students' lives. Despite the repressions and the authorities' efforts to politicize our academic project, however, the attractiveness of the university is steadily growing in Belarus.

Reopening the university in exile is not only a response to the isolation of Belarusian higher education from the internationalization of the Western academia and academic traditions. Not only does it mean support of students who suffered from academic repressions and, on the whole, of those young people who cannot put up with the suppression of dissent in Belarus, but it has also become an important form of supporting Belarusian academics fighting for the restoration of academic freedoms in the country.

EHU has provided shelter to a hundred Belarusian academics, most of whom taught at the university prior to its closure in 2004. These people have united to continue their academic mission and to reestablish the university in Lithuania. They have been joined by teachers from other Belarusian universities, who risk their professional careers back home to support this project. Today, up to 80 percent of the EHU faculty are Belarusian academics. Together with their Lithuanian colleagues, in a brief time span, they have managed to recreate or create completely anew 11 undergraduate and 8 graduate programs officially recognized in Lithuania. The legal status of the majority of the EHU Belarusian faculty, however, still remains vulnerable and uncertain. Half of them have no employment besides EHU. They have to regularly commute between Belarus and Vilnius to teach at EHU. Hardly any one of them has a residence permit in Lithuania and cannot benefit from the Lithuanian system of social security, because EHU has no financial resources to pay the required social taxes for them in Lithuania. In Belarus, these people can only count on a very modest pension. Those members of EHU faculty, who also work for other Belarusian universities and do not break any laws, are subject to pressure and harassment on the part of KGB and local academic administrators. They have no prospects of gaining official scientific or professional recognition, of defending doctoral theses or of being promoted in their universities. They are threatened with

dismissal or with cancellation of the foreign travel permission for collaboration with EHU.

Despite all the hardships and threats, however, more and more Belarusian academics are choosing EHU as a means of resisting the violation of their academic rights. This university has become a symbol of a different academic culture and of the European perspective for the Belarusian academia. More and more, the Belarusian authorities regard the growing strength of the European Humanities University as their political defeat and the collapse of their anti-West efforts to reestablish the Soviet totalitarianism.