

Dear Sir / Madam!

We, representatives of independent non-governmental organizations, express our concern at the state of rights and freedoms of students and professors at Belarusian universities and are writing to you to request your positive contribution to the adherence by the Republic of Belarus to the values enshrined in the principles of the Bologna process and the Belarus Roadmap for Higher Education Reform, namely academic freedom, university autonomy (including student participation in university management) and academic mobility.

Unfortunately, in some cases, these values are only declared by the administrations of Belarusian universities. The actual situation is considerably worse.

There are numerous facts of violations of academic freedoms, namely:

- Administrations of Belarusian universities violate the principles of the independence of universities and academic freedom, as students continue to be expelled from universities for their public activities. In 2016-2017, at least 14 students were expelled for their active involvement in peaceful protests or civil society organizations. In particular, Alena Kisiel, a final-year student of the Mahilioŭ State University, was expelled on 23 March 2017 for her participation in a peaceful assembly. The decision to expel the student was preceded by a meeting of the University's Discipline Council, which ruled to apply to the Rector to expel the student, which was confirmed by the Rector the following day. Jury Łukaševič, a student of the Department of History at the Belarusian State University, was expelled after facing charges of involvement in a protest staged to defend the Kurapaty memorial site (despite the fact that Jury was not eventually convicted of the charges, i.e. the offense was not established by a court).
- The administrations of universities are involved in propaganda among students and professors in favor of the incumbent government. The students and employees of Belarusian universities are forced to join pro-government organizations, most notably BRSM (Belarusian National Youth Union), a government-funded union and a successor of the Communist Komsomol (Young Communist League), and the public organization Belaya Rus, which constitutes a violation of the right to freedom of association, which is guaranteed by the legislation of the Republic of Belarus and the standards of international instruments on human rights, including part 2 of Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "No one may be compelled to belong to an association", as well as Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other treaties. Activities of independent NGOs are blocked by the universities: they cannot disseminate information on the premises of universities (both in physical terms and through information resources, even those managed by the student councils), while BRSM can publish information demonizing independent student NGOs and threatening with penalties to students for their involvement in the activities of these organizations.
- During the parliamentary elections in 2016, as well as during earlier elections, students of Belarusian universities were en masse forced by the university administrations to take part in the early voting, while failure to participate could entail academic sanctions. The illegal coercion was assisted, with the consent of the university administrations, by BRSM activists.
- Belarusian students are required to request approval of their abroad travels during the academic year: with a duration of less than 10 days - from the university administration, longer trips - the Ministry of Education. Internships for students and professors are only possible with the consent of the administrations of universities and the Ministry of Education, leading to unjustified refusals to allow travels and internships, which significantly limits academic mobility.

Please help bring the real state of academic freedom in Belarus to the principles of the Bologna process set out in the Belarus Roadmap, including by:

1. Urging the Belarusian side to immediately reinstate the students expelled for their public activity and abstain from applying such repressive measures in the future. All funding for the projects involving the universities should be suspended until the reinstatement of the expelled students.

2. Stop financing of pro-government organizations - BRSM, Belaya Rus (so-called government-owned NGOs) and their structures in the framework of joint projects, as well as to make impossible individual internships of professors and representatives of university administrations involved in the expulsions and harassment of students for their public activities. We also consider it inappropriate to allow these professors and officials to take part in abroad internships and conferences as part of delegations.

3. Suspending the financing of joint projects with the Belarusian universities until the reinstatement of the expelled students and providing conditions for a real improvement of academic freedom.

Requiring, when carrying out joint projects with Belarusian universities, their implementation for the sake of a real improvement of academic freedoms with zero tolerance to the facts of falsification of reports and applying independent monitoring of the progress of the projects, including in cooperation with Belarusian independent pro-democratic NGOs.

4. Readjusting the implementation of the projects currently underway in a way providing for the possibility of cooperation directly with students and representatives of the academic community without the control of the administration. This rule must be included in all future projects in order to strengthen the democratic participation of student NGOs and NGOs that bring together representatives of the academic community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Martin Uggla', with a stylized, cursive script.

Martin Uggla

Chairperson, Östgruppen – Swedish Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights