

Travel Safe, Belarusian Student



Despite having one of the highest student ratios in Europe, a virtually free higher education, and laws making study abroad difficult, the best and brightest young Belarusians continue flocking to or at least dreaming of expensive Western universities. The situation is exacerbated by Minsk's practice of closing down independent-minded educational institutions and expelling Belarusian students and Western lecturers for refusing to toe the official line.

On February 18, representatives of the Nordic Council of Ministers visited the European Humanities University (EHU) in exile. EHU was founded in Minsk in 1992 "in order to open our minds to those values constituting the basic principles of democracy," according to Professor Anatoli Mikhailov, EHU's rector and one of its founders.

EHU was closed for political reasons in Belarus in 2004. It was then reorganized in Vilnius at the invitation of the Lithuanian government. Since 2006, EHU has enjoyed the status of a private Lithuanian university. Currently, EHU is the only Belarusian university offering western-standard education. EHU is also the only Belarusian university that still retains a degree of autonomy from the authorities.

In 2008, the European Commission established the EHU Trust Fund, inviting support from the EU member states and international donors, and Lithuania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has supported the maintenance of the EHU premises

since 2007.

Students who study in their native Belarus are discriminated against all the same. Some are expelled for active participation in activities disapproved of by the Belarusian authorities. In 2005, the Belarus State Economic University expelled Tatsiana Khoma, a fourth year student, for attending the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) meeting without the university's permission.

In November 2009, Tatsiana Shaputska, press-secretary of the Young Front, was expelled from the Belarusian State University's law department for participating in the Civil Society Forum of the Eastern Partnership in Brussels without asking the dean for a required permission to leave the country.

Shaputska's case caused quite a stir. Even Swedish Foreign Affairs Minister Carl Bildt came to the rescue, saying it would be "absolutely unacceptable" if the expulsion was related to the student's participation in the Forum. Foreign Minister of Belarus Siarhej Martynau said that the main reason for expulsion is "the absence rate." He stressed that "not the government, but the university expels students."

When offered to attend EHU, Shaputska decided not to leave Belarus but continue education as a distance-learning student in the department of political science. At the same time, she is preparing a complaint to the court with the help of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee.

The EHU provides education to over one and a half thousand Belarusians and collaborates with some European and US universities. This collaboration is very important for young Belarusians. However, it is quite a challenge for the university's graduates to find a job in Belarus, especially given the fact that the EHU education certificates are not officially recognized in Belarus. So most continue their

careers abroad. Thus, in effect EHU is preparing “Belarusians for export,” and the financial support it receives to a large extent supports emigration from Belarus.

Perhaps the University’s European supporters could come up with scholarships and grants encouraging students to work in Belarus for at least a short period of time. For instance, Belarusian citizens are not eligible for the Junior Faculty Development Program that program provides university instructors with a semester-long opportunity to study and work with faculty at the US universities and is open to citizens of Moldova, Ukraine, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and many other states. A similar program could be established to encourage EHU graduates to conduct research and publish in Belarus.

You can read more about the EHU at its [web site](#)