

The misery of Belarusian academia

On 8 October, Vital Ašejčyk, an archaeologist at the Institute of History of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, posted his payslip for September on Facebook.

His salary of \$124 a month came as a surprise to many. In fact, salaries of this size remain a standard pay rate for many in Belarusian academia. Dramatic under-financing discourages young people from pursuing an academic career, and the Belarusian sciences show increasing signs of wear, ageing, and isolated from global trends.

To improve the situation, the government could at least remove all the existing barriers for Belarusian academics in receiving foreign grants and scholarships, as well as participating in academic mobility schemes.

The pauperdom of Belarusian science

The salary of a research fellow, according to the payslip, is \$124 after tax. This is the standard rate for a 40-hour work week of a researcher in Belarus, which is a few dollars less than the Belarusian minimum wage. The employer has to pay these extra few dollars to cover the difference. Senior fellows can get \$40-50 more if they have a PhD or habilitation—a higher doctorate degree. “And this we have in 2017, the year declared by the Belarusian government as the Year of Science,” notes the researcher in his post.



Archaeologist Vital Ašejčyk. Photo: euroradio.fm

The story quickly went viral as an example of the current state of Belarusian science. Answering a journalist's question about whether he might change profession, Vital Ašejčyk admitted that he and many of his colleagues think that at some point they will do it. They simply cannot survive on such salaries and have no prospects of career growth. Many remain at their workplaces only because of the possibility to live in a dormitory together with their families. Dormitory lodging costs only \$20 per month. By contrast, monthly rent for a 2 room flat runs around \$300.

The Academy press service notes that average salary among all of its 115 organisations equals \$390. It depends on the scientists' ability to find grants and extra-budgetary projects. However, all young scientists questioned by TUT.BY, an online news portal, answered they never received this level of salary.

Scholars thus have one of the lowest salaries in Belarus, along with workers in the fields of education, culture, social services, and agriculture. This is about eight times less than the best paid sector in the Belarusian economy—[information technology](#).

Ageing and lack of funds

The amount of state support for the sciences serves as evidence of its peripheral importance for the Belarusian government. According to Aliaksandr Vajtovič, the ex-president of the National Academy of Sciences, Belarus dedicates \$23,000 per researcher per year, which is two-times less than countries in North Africa, and three times less than the average CIS country. As a result, the backbone of the Belarusian sciences today largely consists of people at the age of retirement and preretirement.

The Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS), a think tank, conducted a study in 2013 that analysed human resource capacities for Belarusian science institutions. The results showed that over the past 20 years, the number of scientists in Belarus has decreased by 30 per cent. It also showed that in 1988, the proportion of PhDs older than 60 did not exceed 6 per cent. In 2009, the proportion of 60-year-old doctorates had grown to 30 per cent.

BISS also found that, among the directors of science institutes and the heads of research centres under the auspices of the Presidential Academy of Public Administration, as well as among members of the Council for Thesis Defense at certain institutes of the National Academy of Sciences, not one among these significant positions has a Hirsch Index. The Hirsch Index attempts to measure the productivity and citation impact a scientist's research publications. It is widely used in the global science community.

The system does not encourage

research and mobility

According to [Andrej Kazakievič](#), head of the organising committee for the International Congress of Belarusian Studies, existing conditions in official academia do not stimulate research. If a person wants to have high academic status at an American university, they must do research. In Belarus, administrative or ideological positions bring much higher incomes and influence than doing real science.

In addition, social sciences and the humanities have almost no quality assessment. Academics in these fields tend to publish monographs of little popularity. They often contain plagiarism and lack proper research. Nevertheless, many such publications are recognised as scientific and can even lead to degrees and institutional positions, says Kazakievič.

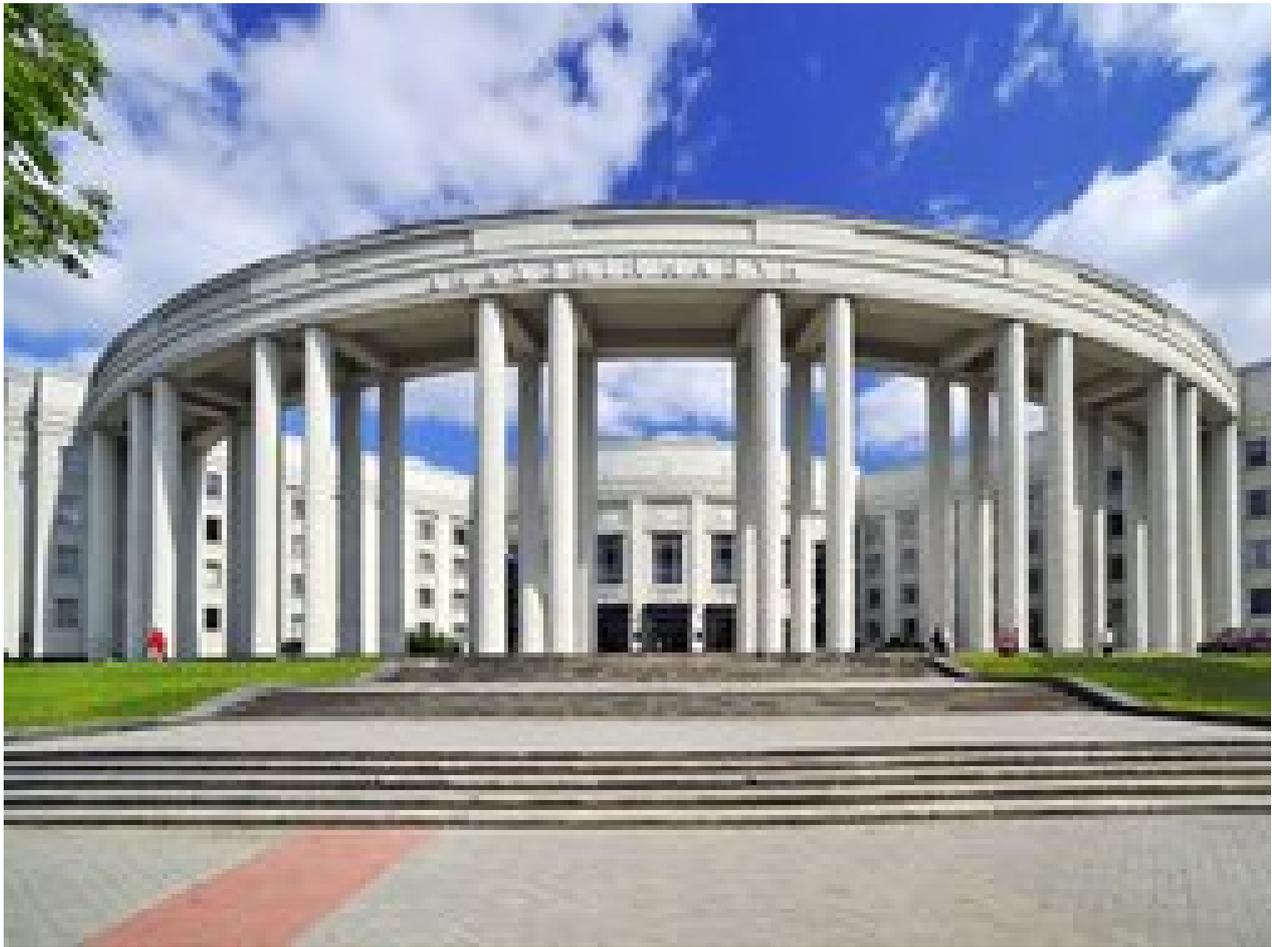
Belarusian universities have limited access to global academic databases and international journals. As the 2013 BISS study notes, the scholars publish mostly in [local or Russian journals](#), which remain unnoticed by much of the world's academia. Western journals are not recognised by Belarusian degree-granting committees and the university system does not encourage publications in foreign journals.

Belarusian researchers have few opportunities to participate in international academic mobility schemes or to gain foreign experience, because the academy still has not fully implemented the [Bologna norms](#). As a result, Belarusian academia is uncompetitive at the global level. It is relegated to exist within its local environment with Soviet-style rules.

Repressions

against

nonconformists



The main building of the National Academy of Sciences.
Photo: minsknews.by

Unfortunately, lack of finance, ageing and isolation are not the only issues within Belarusian academia. Long-lasting authoritarian rule and the uniform ideology that accompanies it have created a system that purges scholars who criticise the “official truth.” This has become particularly true for the social sciences and humanities.

For example, at least six teachers, including professors, were [fired from Hrodna State University](#) between 2012–2015 simply for their civic activity outside the university. As a result, some scholars have chosen to work in other areas, while others have gone abroad where they can conduct research in much freer and more accommodating environments.

Remove barriers, at the very least

Belarusian officials seem to understand academic science solely as a money-earning machine. Indeed, some scholarly institutions and technologies that remain from Soviet times have allowed Belarus to develop a successful [defence industry](#). The same can be said of the [domestic, skyrocketing IT sector](#).

But despite a few success stories, most of academic institutions are likely to continue to degrade, because they cannot bring immediate profits. To improve the situation, the government could at least remove all the existing barriers for Belarusian academics. Opportunities to receive foreign grants and scholarships, as well as to participate in academic mobility schemes, could keep many academics afloat in conditions where the national government cannot offer sufficient funding.

Belarusian Academics Sacked for Writing Books and Fairy Tales

In Belarus, being an academic means that you work in an institution controlled by the state. Sometimes you cannot be a true scholar because you have to produce the "official truth". Otherwise you risk being repressed for disloyalty.

A good illustration of that is last month's case of Hrodna University in western Belarus, where a number of prominent

university teachers were put under pressure for fulfilling their professional as well as civil activity. A number of solidarity initiatives emerged to support repressed academics. Such campaigns may indicate the emergence of genuine civil society in Belarus.

Ban on Profession in Belarus

Under Lukashenka hundreds of scholars have been fired from universities for being in open opposition to the regime or just unwilling to follow its ideological line. These days such cases are rare because people who remain at universities try to avoid ideological confrontations and to be politically careful in their teaching and research, let alone any political or civil engagement.

While in Minsk, where most Belarusian universities are concentrated, the situation seems a little better, the regional institutions have been almost fully purged of the "unreliable element". This situation has received the name "ban on profession". Since all universities, including the few private ones, are controlled by the authorities, dismissed academics have no possibility to carry out their professional activity. In such circumstances, people either have to continue their work abroad or change occupation to make their living.

"Hrodna Studies" textbook causes a wave of repressions

"Hrodna Studies" is a comprehensive guide to the 1,000-year old history of one of Belarus' culturally and historically richest cities. A number of famous researchers of Hrodna history authored the book. After some effort, they even managed to publish the book with Hrodna University Press in 2009.

Moreover, the book was officially recommended for teaching at schools and universities. However, the first edition was of

bad quality, so the authors decided to publish a new edition, supplemented with pictures and a coloured cover.

All of a sudden, the authors of the book were summoned to the rector's office where they faced representatives of the university administration and the KGB. They asked the academics to explain why the book was published in Poland, why Pahonia and the national flag were depicted on the cover, and why the narrative finished in 1991 and no description of present times was given.

Apparently, the authors decided simply not to touch the period of independence, as it needs much more time to be evaluated by historians. Concerning Pahonia and the flag, they were the first symbols of independent Belarus and due to this fact only have the right to be respected and depicted in historical literature. The authorities, however, regarded unwillingness to describe the glorious rule of Alexander Lukashenka as a sign of disloyalty, which was supported by the use of the "wrong" [national symbols](#).

Most of the university-employed authors subsequently did not give any comments on the situation as they feared losing their positions at the university. Soon, two of them were restricted in their teaching. The only one who dared to openly speak on the issue and defend his position was Andrei Charniakevich.

Andrei Charniakevich: Academic Fired for Civil Activity

Andrei Charniakevich, a docent from Hrodna University, had worked there for 11 years. He had a reputation as a distinguished researcher and teacher as well as active citizen, who had never committed any offences at work. On 14 September the university administration fired him for being late for by a few minutes, then returned him to his position but fired him once again for another minor and clearly false accusation.

Andrei himself believes that the real reasons behind the

dismissal are his authorship of the “Hrodna Studies” book as well as his long-standing civil activity. Andrei was one of the active participants in the campaigns which tried to defend Hrodna’s architectural and natural heritage from the unprofessional and indifferent approach of the urban policy implemented by local authorities. Andrei had also commented on historical issues on Belsat, the opposition TV channel which broadcasts from Poland.

The Limits of the Absurd: Fairy Tales Threaten the Regime

Then another famous figure from Hrodna University fell under threat of dismissal. Ihar Kuzminich was a Deputy Head of Law Department and director of the Innovation Centre for Legal Education. He was also famous for his civic activity and popularisation of the Belarusian language. According to information from anonymous university workers which appeared on 8 October, the administration pressed Ihar to resign.

The reason seems totally absurd: they accused him of publishing fairy tales about Pahonia and the white-red-white flag in his online blog. Ihar creates fairy tales in the Belarusian language for kids and short video clips based on them, and publishes them online. Notably, a story about Ihar’s tales was showed on the official TV-channel ANT in winter 2012. Now, the tales seem to pose a real threat to the Belarusian authorities.

Civil Society Resists the Pressure: Solidarity Campaigns Launched

In response to these repressions, a big group of Belarusian and foreign historians and intellectuals published an open letter to the Minister of Education and Rector of Hrodna University. Since 5 October, a large number of people signed the letter via the *Nasha Niva* newspaper website.

The letter says that the dismissal of Charniakevich is based on false reasons and should be regarded as persecution for

academic impartiality. It also condemns the widespread practice of dismissals of academics on the grounds of professional duties and urges the authorities to reinstate Andrei in his university position.

Another form of the initiative emerged at the local level. A group of Hrodna intellectuals established the Juzaf Jadcouski Award. It will be awarded to academics and intellectuals who have made a considerable contribution to the study of the past of Hrodna and to the development of historical urban studies.

Importantly, the problem received thorough attention at the Second Congress of Belarusian Studies, the main academic event of the year in social sciences and humanities, which was held on 28-30 September in Lithuania. Organisers and participants expressed their protest against the “ban on profession” and the exclusion of teachers with an active civil position from Belarusian universities.

They suggested that the Congress can become one of the platforms to support repressed academics by providing infrastructure, possibilities to carry out their professional activities abroad and provide other possible assistance.

The case of Hrodna University shows that emerging solidarity campaigns can provide a real way out for the repressed academics and, potentially, other active citizens. Such initiatives lay the foundations for more autonomy of society from the state and a reduction in its control over citizens.

Vadzim Smok

The Idea of Belarus at the Crossroads of Philosophy and History



In the world dominated by the “clash of civilizations” rhetoric and memories of bloody nationalist wars, nationalism is considered dangerous. However, the sentiment has become a highly positive phenomenon, and even, to an extent, a requirement at the international summer school “Belarus in the European Context: Current Discussions on Nation-Building,” organized by the Institute for Historical Research on Belarus and Philosophy Department of the European Humanities University ([EHU](#)) last week. Opening the school on August 2, Zahar Sybeka of Belarusian State Economic University said, tongue-in check, that all school participants were “nationalists.” The following six days proved him right as they showed their passion for the Belarusian culture and history and their concern about the country’s future.

Fittingly, the school was held in “[Kernavės](#) Bajorynė”, next to the highly symbolic UNESCO World Heritage Site that has become a treasure trove for archeologists. The event brought together intellectuals from Belarus, Poland, Latvia, Russia, and Lithuania to debate the development of Belarusian identity and the Belarusian national idea. The researchers also discussed the role of social groups in cities and villages, the role of history and memory in Belarus’ national identity, as well as the issues of nationalism, Europeization, and democratization.

Although the school guests were divided into experts/tutors and participants, their roles have merged in heated discussions. Everybody had an opportunity to present and defend his/her work and comment on the others' research.

While historians and philosophers were the majority, the gathering also included political scientists, a journalist, and a jurist. The schools represented at summer school included Belarusian State University (BSU), Harvard University, Metropolitan University Prague, Polish Academy of Sciences, European Humanities University, the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, University of Bremen, Samara State University, Hrodna State University, Polotsk State University, and University of Latvia.

Many interesting views were expressed during the school sessions. Olga Shparaga, EHU professor of philosophy, argued that for Belarusians "the question about the idea of Europe" is, first and foremost, a question about themselves. In contrast, University of Białystok professor Aleh Latyshonak said Belarusians lack "Europeanness." While Latyshonak said he views Belarusians as a Eurasian civilization, he believes Belarus could pass a Byzantine civilization in a best-case scenario.

In his turn, Belarusian philosopher and writer Ihar Babkou presented identity as a "battlefield" of power and knowledge. Interestingly, Valentin Akudovich, who teaches at the Belarusian Collegium, argued that Belarusian ethno nationalism has no future and will be very soon superceded by civic nationalism. In her presentation, Elena Temper of the University of Leipzig discussed the meaning of memory for the national self-identification and argued that the two most vivid examples of collective memory for Belarusians are the Great Patriotic War and Kurapaty.

Other prominent participants included editor-in-chief of Belarusian magazine ARCHE Valer Bulgakau; Poland-based

Belarusian historian Yauhen Miranovich; EHU lecturer Piotr Rudkouski; Hrodna State University professor Siarhei Tokts; Alvydas Nikzentaitis of Vilnius Pedagogical University; and EHU professor Ales Smalianchuk.

At the final banquet, the school guests were united by signing Polish, Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Russian songs. The school materials will be published by the EHU in the fall, and the organizers hope to make the summer school an annual tradition.

Listening to each other has allowed the researchers to share their views and learn from each other. As philosopher Alyaksei Dzermant [summed up](#), the event has left the participants with an impression “that a lot more unites rather than divides” them.

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