Advocating for Academic Freedom in Belarus

Alena Buinskaya, G3, Social Sciences
1991: independence

- Repressions against the academic community were widespread in the USSR

- July 1990: Belarus (at the time, Byelorussian Socialist Soviet Republic, or BSSR) declares independence

- August 1991: The BSSR Supreme Soviet (parliament) votes to give the Declaration of Independence a constitutional status.

At this time, despite economic hardship following the collapse of the Soviet union, a vibrant academic community is developing.
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Dec 1993:
I was born! :)}
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1994: A new Constitution is adopted, creating the office of the president; Aliaksandr Lukashenka (often spelled Alexander Lukashenko) is elected the first president of the Republic of Belarus.
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• **1995**: The first referendum to replace the national symbols with the Soviet-era ones and designate the Russian language as the second official language of the Republic

• **1996**: The second referendum to amend the Constitution

The proposed amendments limit the powers of the parliament and expand the powers of the president. This leads to a constitutional crisis and a failed impeachment attempt. With Russia’s backing, Lukashenka prevails, the proposed amendments pass, and the parliament is dissolved. This leads to...
Minsk Spring '96
The first large scale anti-Lukashenka protests in Belarus 1996-1997

10,000 in Belarus Protest Moves by President

MINSK, Belarus, March 15

At least 10,000 demonstrators marched through central Minsk today, chanting slogans hostile to President Alexander Lukashenka and waving black and red independence flags. Security was tight.

The march, called in mark Constitution Day, was organized by the nationalist opposition National Front, many of whose leaders are in jail. The authorities allowed the protest to go ahead despite the arrest of about 100 people during an anti-Constitution demonstration on Friday. Marchers chanted, "Down with Lukashenka!" and "Freedom! Independence!"

During the march, the police blocked the way to the presidential buildings, forcing the marchers to take a different route. One witness said there were no violent incidents. At a later rally outside a sports arena, demonstrators removed Soviet-era flags and replaced them with the red-and-white flags, to enthusiastic cheers.

On March 6, President Lukashenka restricted the right to demonstrate, banning slogans that "humiliate the authorities," along with the red and white independence flag, which he replaced with the country's Soviet-era flag.

Belarusian police officers entered the National Front's headquarters on Thursday and arrested its vice president, Yury Khudyak.

As the rally ended, Birzey Stackinsky, who was speaker of the disbanded Parliament, said the 1984 Constitution had been "adopted democratically, but through his actions in November 1996, Lukashenka trampled on this democratic law, introducing a de facto one-man dictatorship."

President Lukashenka, an authoritarian former collective farm boss, acquired sweeping powers in a referendum in November and disbanded the Parliament, replacing it with an assembly staffed with loyal deputies.

Conrad Karpinsky, deputy speaker of the disbanded Parliament, said Mr. Lukashenka had changed the Constitution "illegally, because the Constitutional Court had ruled that the referendum was consultative, not binding." "The old Parliament continues to function de jure," he said.

Under the new Constitution, Mr. Lukashenka has the right to dissolve Parliament, veto its decisions, hire and fire the heads of a raft of key bodies, including the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court and the Central Bank.
imprisoned human rights defenders

#FreeViasna

ALES BIALIATSKI
MARFA RABKOVA
VALIANTSIN STEFANOVICH
ULADZIMIR LABKOVICH
LEANID SUDALENKA
TATSIANA LASITSA
ANDREI CHAPIUK
1999-2002: forced disappearances

- Viktar Hanchar, former deputy Prime Minister, the chairman of the Central Electoral Committee & former member of Lukashenka’s first presidential campaign
- Anatol Krasouski, a businessman & Hanchar’s friend
- Major General Yury Zakharanka, former Interior Minister & member of Lukashenka’s first presidential campaign
- Dzmitry Zavadski, cameraman, worked in the president’s press pool. His friend & colleague Pavel Sheremet was later murdered in Kyiv, Ukraine

Crackdown on academic freedoms begins

- 2003: Belarusian Humanities Lyceum closed & goes underground & into semi-exile in Gdansk, Poland
- 2004: European Humanities University (private university est. in 1992) closed & forced into exile in Vilnius, Lithuania

Meanwhile, constitutional safeguards continue to be stripped

- 2004: Another referendum to amend the Constitution. The proposed amendment removes the term limit for the president
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Today
2006 presidential election & "Jeans revolution"

- In March 2006, Lukashenka declares a landslide victory in the election, allegedly receiving 84.4% of the total vote.
- Despite the freezing March weather, it provokes weeks-long students-led protests.
- The square where the protesters gather, officially named the October Square (in honor of the 1917 October Revolution), is re-named Kalinouski Square after the leader of the January Uprising against the Russian Empire in Belarus in 1863-64.

Following the crackdown on students, the Polish government establishes the K. Kalinowski Scholarship Program.

Kanstancin Kalinoŭski
also spelled Konstanty Kalinowski
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2010 election is followed by protests & another crackdown

As Lukashenka jails all challengers and claims another landslide victory with 80% of vote
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Nothing major happened in 2012 in Belarus, but...

- I started college in 2011
- In 2012, there was a House of Representatives election
- As a student at Belarusian State University, I experienced first-hand the pressure (including threats of academic retribution) to vote early
- That made me seek opportunities to study abroad
- In 2013, I started college all over again in South Korea
- Incidentally, I was in the last cohort of Belarusian students who could quit leave college to study abroad without serious financial repercussions

Enjoying jjim-dak
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The "Parasite" Protests of 2017

- In 2017, the government levies a tax on unemployment, dubbed the "(social) parasite" tax
- The tax affects many low-income people employed in the informal sector (like care givers or stay-at-home spouses with no children under 3 y.o.) and, notably, Belarusian students abroad
- As a result of these protests, the tax is substituted by a much milder measure less likely to affect low-income families and students
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2020-2021 Pro-Democracy Movement

Brutalised Minsk: how Belarusian police beat protesters

Amnesty Belarus, Maxim Liberis, Yegor Skornyak, David Perel
31 October 2021, 10:31
1 minute

«Student Case»

Our friends found themselves behind bars on 12 November 2020. They are held hostage by the regime for not tolerating silence, criticism and less of the authorities.

Find out how you can support our heroes now.

About us · Donate · Sen/Pys·

23.
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What now?

- Unfortunately, unlike many E.U. countries and despite having a vibrant academic community, there hasn't been much support for affected students and faculty from the United States.
- Many available programs (e.g., Fulbright) offer opportunities for currently employed early career scholars only—more flexibility needed.
- Urge your institutions to establish undergraduate and graduate scholarships, post-doc & visiting faculty positions for members of academia (from Belarus & elsewhere) affected by political persecution.
- Call your Representatives, Senators & other elected officials.
- Spread the word!
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1989
1994
1999-2004
2006
2010
2012
2017
2020-21
Today