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Reimagining Academic Freedom – through students' eyes

Edited by Milica Popović / 2023



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Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Academic freedom as revolution? Student activism in contemporary Belarus and its challenge to Fish's typology	7
Introduction	7
Academic freedom: from particularism to universalism	8
Fish's five schools of academic freedom	8
The struggle of academic freedom between universalism and particularism	9
Methods	10
Violated academic freedoms in past and contemporary Belarus	11
The revolutionary nature of academic freedom in Belarus	13
Academic freedom or political activism? The voice of the students	13
Collective practices of academic freedom: the Belarusian Student Association	16
Conclusions	18
References	20
Durable repression against sudden resistance. The case of the School of Advanced Studies in Tyumen – the only surviving Liberal Arts college in Russia	22
Introduction	22
Methodological framework and self-reflection	23
Theoretical framework: political opportunity structure	24
How they skewed the playing field	24
Power structures	24
Targeted repression	27
The post-invasion contention	29
Professors and administration	29
Protesting students	30
Establishment of the SAS Student Union	33
Conclusion	34
References	35
Exploring students' perceptions of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and academic integrity in European Higher Education	37
Introduction	37
Method	37
Results	38
Academic freedom	38
Freedom of choice regarding one's educational pathway	38
Freedom of expression	39
Institutional autonomy	40
Higher education institutions' self-governance and institutional autonomy	40
Student association and student self-governance	40
Academic integrity	41
Concluding remarks	42
References	44
Authors	46

Introduction

By MILICA POPOVIĆ / Global Observatory on Academic Freedom

Following on from the prime theme of the Global Observatory on Academic Freedom (GOAF) work over the past two years – that of reconceptualizing and reimagining academic freedom (AF) – in 2022, with an intentional reference to our partner's European Students' Union (ESU) flagship publication "Bologna with Student Eyes", we launched a student essay competition. GOAF being a young initiative, founded only a year earlier, it proved a not a straightforward task to reach a wide student population. However, it has been yet again proven that students see AF as an issue of the utmost importance for their student experience and learning years; acting as true partners in the process of the creation of knowledge. Students are not mere recipients of knowledge in universities, they continue to tirelessly contribute to knowledge creation, to participate in HE governance creating better communities in universities and challenging the old ways of the world. It would be impossible to imagine progress in universities, or even societies, without fully accepting students as equal partners and inspiring *spiritus movens* in the world of higher education. As our aim was to provide a space for students to engage in reflections on AF from a diversity of disciplinary approaches, regional outlooks, and epistemological understandings, we especially welcomed interdisciplinary work and innovative theoretical contributions. A dozen essays were received and, through a double-blind peer review process, three were selected as winners. The winning essays were published on GOAF's [webpage](#), and the students were given an opportunity to join our Research Network on Academic Freedom and receive a small research grant. First prize winner was Cristina Mazzero, a PhD student in Sociology and Social Research at the University of Trento in Italy, for her essay entitled "*Reimagining academic freedom through the lens of students' experiences: reflections from the Belarusian case*". The second prize winner Vladislav Siiutkin, an MA student of Political Science at Central European University in Austria and a researcher at the Public Sociology Laboratory, won the award for his essay "University systems in Russia and France: political autonomy and scientific efficiency". Our third winner was David Sebastian Urrego

Cardenas, an undergraduate student in Languages and Sociocultural Studies at Los Andes University in Colombia for his work "Academic freedom, a right reimagined outside of the colonial cognizance".

While we invite you to read the winning essays on our webpage, this edited volume brings further cooperation with the students in question. Cristina Mazzero and Vladislav Siiutkin joined the effort and accepted the research grants, producing inspiring work that builds this publication. In addition to their insightful contributions, we have invited Iris Kimizoglu, an MA student in Political Management, Public Policy, and Public Administration at the University of Duisburg-Essen's NRW School of Governance in Germany, also a member of the Executive Committee from the European Students' Union, to present ESU's recent research on students' perceptions of AF.

Starting with two theoretical contributions based on elaborate empirical research, the publication leads us into the two most authoritarian regimes in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA): Belarus and the Russian Federation. Mazzero's article in this volume "Academic freedom as revolution? Student activism in contemporary Belarus and its challenge to Fish's typology" challenges Stanley Fish's typology of schools of thought on academic freedom from his seminal work *Versions of Academic Freedom: From Professionalism to Revolution* (2014), arguing that if we understand AF as a universal value, the only approach possible to the practice of AF in authoritarian contexts is the one of "academic freedom as a revolution". Based on 13 semi-structured interviews with Belarusian student activists, Mazzero concludes: "Indeed, any action aimed at restoring this principle becomes 'intrinsically political' when pursued in a situation of academic and human rights violations, as it challenges existing power structures" and thus, demands from Fish's typology to take into account socio-political conditions whenever attempting to theorize academic freedom. Mazzero's nuanced understanding of a universal approach

to AF, as well as the boldness of her more than well substantiated arguments, show us that AF is a socially and politically situated concept. Limiting AF to a “professional standard” or a special privilege of academics does not do justice to the embeddedness of the production of knowledge in each specific society and in a global context. Mazzero demonstrates how Belarusian student activists, with and through the Belarusian Student Association (BSA), conceive AF as revolution – becoming, being and remaining engaged citizens fighting for a democratic society. Mazzero makes a compelling argument to go beyond academic contributions, but as scholars to stand in solidarity with all members of the global academic community.

Vladislav Siiutkin joins the volume with a significant contribution, “Durable repression against sudden resistance. The case of the School of Advanced Studies in Tyumen – the only surviving Liberal Arts college in Russia”, on the current situation regarding AF and resistance in the Russian Federation. Siiutkin’s article, through auto-ethnography of Siiutkin himself being a former student and qualitative data collected through personal correspondence and interviews in a very sensitive context, successfully shows how the authoritarian grip on Russian universities has been slowly developing over a number of years prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in a manner sufficiently violent that the concrete measures undertaken after February 2022 were more easily implemented and met with less resistance than expected. Using the theoretical concepts of the political process approach structure of political opportunity, as well as mechanisms of co-optation and legitimation and incremental democratic backsliding, Siiutkin unravels a burning political topic without falling into the dangers of a partisan essay. As disturbing as it might be to read about the calculating and open repressions of the scholarly and student body in Tyumen, Siiutkin demonstrates well how the silencing of dissenting voices never happens overnight, and how more often than not we tend to miss it until it is too late.

Zooming out of the Eastern European region, the volume ends with a macro-outlook on students’ perceptions on AF throughout the European continent. Kimizoglu’s contribution “Exploring students’ perceptions of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and academic integrity in European Higher Education” provides us with a comprehensive overview of the results of ESU survey among students with the aim of gathering further insight into

students’ perceptions of AF, institutional autonomy, academic integrity and student participation in higher education governance. While the survey was distributed throughout the EHEA, 78% of respondents came from five EU member states: Hungary, Austria, Romania, France and Czech Republic. Taking into consideration these methodological limitations, Kimizoglu presents us with the highs and lows of the student relationship with AF and other fundamental values of higher education. The survey results raise concern over apparent high levels of self-censorship, and increasing limitations – especially in some European Higher Education Area countries – to students’ access to higher education and knowledge as such. In parallel, there remains a need for awareness of possible participation paths in higher education governance, and on the challenges of ever decreasing public funding of higher education throughout the continent. Campus integrity has been endangered in many countries, both through direct attacks by security forces, but also through legislative efforts to limit students’ right to peaceful protest and association. While the relationship of trust remains between students and academic staff, the survey has shown a need to expand the debates on academic integrity beyond plagiarism, with students as the usual culprits.

Looking into the – even if only partial – results of a European-wide survey, and two important case studies on the relationship between AF and students, we are faced with two urgent reflections. One is the continuing deteriorating state of affairs regarding AF in Europe, highlighting the need to continue research in the field and to advocate relentlessly for the improvement and safeguarding of rights of academic staff (permanent and contractual, full time and part time, including unaffiliated scholars in between contracts) and students. Second is that without accounting for students as full members of the academic community we will not be able to fully grasp today’s realities of the need to adapt the concept of AF. This volume proves to us the urgency of the need to include the students in the conversation, as equal partners and subjects of academic freedom, but also as producers of knowledge on AF. We hope that the journey will continue and that we will inspire you to further widen the scope of cooperation in research, and in a common struggle for academic freedom and democracy – with students.

Academic freedom as revolution? Student activism in contemporary Belarus and its challenge to Fish’s typology

By CRISTINA MAZZERO / University of Trento

*To Professor Natalia Dulina,
for her inspiring commitment to Belarus and its students,
and to all the exiled Belarusian students*

Introduction

According to the document entitled “Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel” approved by UNESCO in 1997, academic freedom is defined as

the right, without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies.
(UNESCO 1997)

Because of its ability to capture different dimensions of the principle, this definition is certainly recognized as a reference point by several contemporary scholars. However, for those readers who are familiar with the literature on academic freedom, it is well-known that this official document by UNESCO could not exhaust the long-standing debate on this principle (Altbach 2001; Karran 2009; Kinzelbach 2020; Quinn and Levine 2014).

In particular, one of the areas of this debate that I found of crucial importance is concerned with identifying the limits of the academic protection for the

members of the academic community. This issue is not only a theoretical puzzle, it also presents very practical implications when it comes to evaluating concrete cases of possible violation of academic freedom. For instance, is a scholar protected by academic freedom when s/he expresses opinions on political matters in the public arena? Is academic freedom granted to those students who engage in political activities inside the university campuses? To what extent is the discussion on politically relevant contents in the university classrooms allowed in accordance with this principle?

Given the serious and real implications of the problem, these questions have shaped the debate on academic freedom since its very origins, and they have found—especially in the United States—a fertile ground.¹ For instance, the identification of the boundaries of academic protection has been a critical issue for the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) since its very foundation: in particular, this debate was centered around the relationship between academic freedom and freedom of speech, an issue generally identified in the terms of “freedom of extramural utterance”. On this regard, the last part of the 1915 “Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure”, states that academic teachers have the right to publicly express their opinion on controversial issues and to support organized movements that, in their opinion, act for the public interest (AAUP 1915).

¹ Especially in relation to the First Amendment of the US Constitution.

However, the complexity of the matter did not allow for a univocal resolution, and it still remains the object of vigorous academic discussion today. Among the most recent contributions, the book *Versions of Academic Freedom. From Professionalism to Revolution* by Stanley Fish (2014) is an interesting attempt to provide a comprehensive review of the various positions on the matter that animate US debate. In particular, the author identifies five schools of thought ranging from a narrower to a broader conceptualization of the instances that fall under the remit of academic protection.

Drawing on a critical overview of the typology suggested by Fish, this article aims to continue his theoretical enterprise by testing the applicability of the categorization in contexts that are substantially different from US academia. Indeed, I strongly believe that the universalistic nature of academic freedom (Altbach 2001; Karran 2009) urges us to overcome any particularistic (or nationalistic) conceptualization and develop a comprehensive understanding of this principle.

In support of this argument, I will provide some reflections that derive from my own research on Belarusian student activists, which I consider an emblematic case in questioning the inner limitations of Fish's approach. In particular, the case will show that any action aimed at restoring this principle becomes "intrinsically political" when pursued in a situation of academic and human rights violations, as it challenges existing power structures. Thus, in line with Fish's typology, we can talk about "Academic freedom as revolution".

In light of these considerations, the article is structured as follows. The first part, organized in two sections, provides the theoretical foundation of my argument by analyzing Fish's typology and its main limitations; the second part draws a brief picture of the methodology of my research and the Belarusian socio-political context; finally, the third part covers the direct experiences of the Belarusian student activists, which constitute the backbone of my arguments, in order to understand how this revolutionary nature of academic freedom is defined and enacted.

Academic freedom: from particularism to universalism

Fish's five schools of academic freedom

The book *Versions of Academic Freedom: From Professionalism to Revolution* was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2014 and, according to the author, aims at developing a taxonomy of the approaches on academic freedom that differ for the conceptualization of the academic profession and, consequently, for the limits of academic protection. In doing so, Fish makes two important clarifications in the Preface (that I will resume later in the discussion): first, such taxonomy "is at once philosophical and political, and only occasionally historical and empirical" (2014: ix); secondly, it applies only to the US context, and it does not have the ambition to be generalized. The result of this analysis is the identification of five distinct approaches, called "five schools" by Fish, positioned along a spectrum of understandings that ranges from a narrower to a broader definition of the principle.

[1] The first one, called the "It's just a job" school, presents a narrow and "deflationary" view of the principle which sees higher education as a "service that offers knowledge and skills to students" (Fish 2014: 10). Thus, professors' freedom is circumscribed to their job as instructors and does not include any special protection.

[2] Following this gradient of understanding, the second approach is the "For the common good" school. It finds its root in the 1915 "Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure"² published by the AAUP and it overcomes the idea that the academic enterprise finds its only purpose in the advancing of knowledge. Indeed, it claims that academic freedom is not a value that is meaningful only in the academic sphere, but is also a means to strengthen and promote democracy.

[3] Building upon this idea, we find the "Academic exceptionalism or uncommon beings" school, classi-

fied as the third approach. It argues that, in virtue of their role as advocates of both academic and democratic values within the realm of higher education, academics should be recognized as individuals of "high gift and character" (AAUP 1915).

[4] This civic role of scholars is further developed by the "Academic freedom as critique" school, which identifies critical thinking as not only the essence of the academic profession, but also a crucial element of the struggle for social justice (see also Butler 2017; Scott 2017). According to this approach, academic freedom becomes a sort of "protection for dissent" for the members of the academic community (Fish 2014: 13) who engage with socially relevant topics both within and outside the university institutions.

[5] Finally, on the other extreme of this continuum, Fish positions the "Academic freedom as revolution" school, which interprets (higher) education as an intrinsic political activity because it does not have only a value *per se*, but education is the main tool to produce informed and responsible citizens. Thus, professors have the right to engage in current political debates and to take public positions even on matters that go beyond the academic sphere as narrowly defined. In other words, this last school substantially switches the focus from the "academic" to the "freedom" part of the principle, disrupting all the divisions between higher education institutions and the rest of society and advocating for a politically engaged academic work that involves both students and professors.

The struggle of academic freedom between universalism and particularism

All these things considered, and in line with previous commentators (Pedersen 2015; Robertson 2016) it is my opinion that the book presents a notable analytical effort that should not go unnoticed. Drawing on both open theoretical issues and concrete episodes that occurred in US academia, Fish was able to develop the analysis in the direction of a higher level of abstraction and to elaborate a comprehensive typology of the different schools of thought. Aware of such theoretical richness, the author does not hide his ambition of inaugurating a new field called "Academic Freedom Studies"

(Fish 2014: 7) starting from this very publication. However, although I recognize the theoretical value of Fish's typology, I find the premises of his work quite problematic.

As mentioned before, he developed this typology limiting the analysis to the US debate, without adequately motivating this theoretical choice. Here, I argue that this restrictive approach is problematic for two main reasons.

The *first* is that the universalistic nature of academic freedom and of the academic enterprise urges us to adopt a broader perspective than the one provided by any nationalistic horizons. As Fish himself states in the book, the goal of the academic work is "the advancement of knowledge and the search for truth" (Fish 2014: 132), a goal that, for its inner characteristics, cannot be confined within national borders but is nurtured by international collaborations and exchanges (Altbach 2001). Thus, if academic freedom is meant to protect and favor the academic work, then it must be theoretically founded on a universalistic basis (Altbach 2001; Karran 2009). On a side note, I personally find this nation-based perspective to be also in contrast with his own intention of building this new field of "Academic Freedom Studies", which by definition should be inclusive of different socio-political contexts.

The *second* reason has more to do with the epistemological foundations of the concept of academic freedom: indeed, an increasing number of scholars are acknowledging the pervasive influence of the specific philosophical legacy and the democratic values of the Western tradition (Lynch and Ivancheva 2016). The result is that such Western predominance leaves no space for different epistemological traditions to contribute to the understanding of academic freedom. For this reason, a process of "decolonization of knowledge" has been recently promoted also in this field, and from this perspective Fish's premise seems to be just an easy shortcut that actually avoids a true reflection on how our knowledge and our understanding of the issue are created and influenced. For instance, as briefly mentioned in the introduction, his work is deeply rooted in the longstanding discussion in US academia on the limits of academic freedom and the relationship with freedom of speech. Lynch and Ivancheva, among others, seem to reply directly to Fish's position by claiming that

² Freely available at: <https://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/A6520A9D-0A9A-47B3-B550-C006B5B224E7/0/1915Declaration.pdf>.

A rethinking of academic freedom therefore means recognising the lack of freedom of others geopolitically. It means recognising the cultural biases of dominant Western intellectual traditions, and the limitations they impose on our understanding of the world outside the linguistic, philosophical and paradigmatic frameworks of Cartesian, Eurocentric/Western thought.

(Lynch and Ivancheva 2016: 79)

Moreover, this nationalistic lens through which Fish analyzes the issue inevitably shapes his own opinion on the subject. Indeed, from the beginning of the book, the author does not hide his support for the “It’s just a job” school, a position that he recognizes as unpopular and minoritarian in the literature, since a broader definition of the principle seems to be generally preferred nowadays. In sustaining his idea, Fish primarily defines academic freedom in terms of defending the authority of a “community of competents” (Haskell 1996: 45), where the figure of the “competent” is defined by shared, precise standards: the completion of a doctoral degree program, and the submission of the research to a peer review process, aiming at certifying its scientific value (Menand 1996: 8). The consequence is that only peers can judge others’ publications and academic performances, but at the same time scholars are protected by academic freedom only when they remain within these specific academic requirements.

Now, does it mean that, in his opinion, political or socially sensitive issues should be excluded from the university classrooms? Not exactly. In this regard, Fish argues that such contents can enter the classroom debates, but only if inserted into “an academic context where inquiries into its structure, history, significance and value are conducted by means of the traditional methods [...] of humanities, social science, and physical science scholarship” (2014: 31). In other words, these topics need to be subjected to the “imperative of academicizing” (*ibid.*). When this rule is followed, then scholars are protected by academic freedom; yet, if they decide to adopt a political perspective (even when it is in the interests of promoting democratic values), they find themselves outside the realm of the legitimate academic protection, and therefore cannot be shielded from potential harmful consequences.

Once again, I find myself disagreeing with Fish’ position, and my argument is partially linked to my previous considerations. Indeed, it seems to me that Fish’s focus on professionalism as the foundation of academic protection can work effectively only in contexts in which academic rights and institutional autonomy are granted both *de jure* and *de facto*. This means that, in situations of violations of academic freedom, but also of human rights, the distinction between political issues and “academicized” content does not hold anymore. In addition, Fish’s position has the problematic consequence of emphasizing the role of scholars and downplaying the contribution of university students, who instead are full members of the academic community (Jackson 2020; Macfarlane 2016; Monypenny 1963; Silitiski 2005).

In light of all these considerations, I claim that Fish’s typology becomes very fragile when it is confronted with different socio-political contexts; besides, the very nature of academic freedom, generally intended as a universal principle, does not provide a valid justification for his “deflationary” view on the guarantees and the limits of academic protection. Thus, a new theoretical question arises: can Fish’s typology be a valid analytical tool of inquiry into understanding academic freedom in contexts outside the US?

The current article aims to provide a first answer to this question by applying Fish’s typology to the case of Belarusian student activists. In my opinion, the authoritarian nature of the Belarusian regime, together with the central role of students in the protest movement that arose in the country in 2020, makes Belarus a significant case study for disentangling this complex issue.

Before going into the detail of my argument, I first want to clarify some methodological aspects and to delineate a short but informative picture of the Belarusian context.

Methods

The considerations and the direct testimonies discussed in the next section derive from a broader qualitative case study research design I conducted for my Master’s Thesis in Sociology and that aimed at exploring the experiences of Belarusian students related to three main domains: higher education, (forced) migration and academic freedom (Mazzerro 2022). The participants were

selected through a snowballing sampling procedure. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews that took place online between August 2021 and May 2022; these interviews were recorded and transcribed and subsequently analyzed thematically (*ibid.*).

For the purpose of the current article, I specifically selected interviews of 13 students who actively engaged in political activities in Belarusian universities after the Presidential election in August 2020, and who present a good balance between male and female participants (7 male and 6 female students). The majority of them were members of the Belarusian Student Association (BSA). Because of their activism, all of them were subsequently forced to leave the country for safety reasons and were abroad at the time of the interview; in that period, many of them were still collaborating with BSA to support other exiled students around the world.

Besides this main corpus of interviews, I also refer to five expert interviews and two interviews with Belarusian students who have been abroad now for many years in order to gain additional information on the Belarusian political context and the higher education system.

Violated academic freedoms in past and contemporary Belarus

Positioned at the border between Western Europe and the East, the Republic of Belarus is a post-Soviet country that gained independence in 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite the democratic values stated in the Constitution,³ Belarus is often called “the last dictatorship in Europe” because of the univocally recognized authoritarian nature of the regime established by Alyaksandr Lukashenka. He first won the democratic elections in 1994 and has governed the country since then thanks to targeted policies and reforms that Silitiski (2005) has classified as *pre-emptive authoritarianism*. Indeed, a series of amendments approved by referendum (in 1996, 2004 and 2022), together with complete

control over the state bureaucracy, the military structure, the electoral process and the media, have transformed Belarus into an authoritarian regime. The result being that Lukashenka was able to anesthetize almost all the democratic apparatuses in order to secure his power.

Within this process, it comes as no surprise that the higher education system did not remain unscathed by Lukashenka’s authoritarian ambitions. Before going into details on this aspect, it should be acknowledged that the Soviet model of higher education is still rooted in the country and, according to Kuraev (2016), finds its expression in three main organizational principles: uniformity, top-down administration, and one-man management. Consequently, this long tradition of stringent dependence on the ministerial level has undermined the capacity of contemporary university institutions to resist the external pressure of the government, corroding the bases of the development of a true institutional autonomy. In this already compromised situation, the authoritarian turn promoted by Lukashenka further emptied the spaces of academic freedom for the Belarusian academic community. Especially after 2001, new regulations were approved by the government to limit professors’ contacts with Western institutions and freedom to travel abroad; moreover, further restrictions to their intramural and extramural activities were introduced (Dounaev 2007; Shaton 2009; Silitiski 2005). The result was the consolidation of a highly centralized higher education system, where all levels of education depend on the Ministry of Education and on the approval of the Presidential administration. In parallel, a process of progressive undermining of academic freedom took place, in spite of national and international laws that the country signed over the years and that legally protect academic freedom and the related human rights.⁴

This brief historical overview is useful to better frame the events that characterized Belarus after the Presidential Elections on August 9th, 2020, considered by many observers a pivotal moment for the country. Indeed,

³ Art. 1: “The Republic of Belarus is a unitary, democratic, social state governed by the rule of law” (<https://president.gov.by/en/gosudarstvo/constitution>)

⁴ According to Scholars at Risk (2021), Belarus joined the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), both of which protect academic freedom, freedom of opinion and expression, and also the Bologna Process, which clearly defends the integrity and autonomy of the academic institutions. Moreover, the Belarusian constitution itself recognizes the value of academic freedom, and Article 51 states that “freedom of artistic, scientific and creativity and teaching shall be guaranteed” (SAR 2021: 49).

the period preceding the election was characterized by increasing repressive measures and the arrest of the main opposition candidates, while the Election Day was acknowledged by many international observers as lacking the minimal democratic standards. Thus, when at the end of the day the Electoral Office announced Lukashenko's victory with over 80% of the votes, the result was immediately contested by Belarusians who organized peaceful and spontaneous mass protests all over the country to denounce irregularities. The reaction of the regime was extremely hard: police forces attacked with violence not only the protesters, but also journalists and bystanders, using tear gas, water cannons and flash grenades (Kolarzik and Terzyan 2020; Lavrinenko, 2015).

According to official data, over 6,000 people were arrested between August 9th and 11th (Moshes and Nizhnikau 2021: 173), and Amnesty International defined this situation as "the most extensive and particularly brutal crackdown on human rights in the country's post-independence history".⁵ After this initial nation-wide breakout, the protest movement managed to last for several months and was able to gain the attention of the European Union and other international organizations. However, the harshness of the repressions eventually undermined the forces of the protesters, as the majority of the activists were either in prison or forced to relocate abroad, and at the beginning of 2021 it was already clear that Lukashenko's dictatorial powers were still solid thanks to the irreplaceable support of Putin and the Russian Federation.

During this whole pivotal period for the country, the Belarusian student community played a leading role in undermining the authority of the regime. Since the day after the fraudulent presidential elections, HE students (but also professors) joined anti-government protests, embracing only political demands at first, but later on, in some cases, they started asking for academic reforms (BSA 2020). At the beginning of the academic year, students organized themselves into Strike Committees within the university institutions to continue their peaceful protest activity. However, these groups soon encoun-

tered hostility, not only from government forces, but also from the university administrations. Indeed, the lack of institutional autonomy, that was already evident before the protests, reduced universities to mere executive arms of the Belarusian regime, and they ended up collaborating with the police to silence the protesters. The situation dramatically escalated after November 12th, when "a massive, targeted attack was carried out on students", a day that is now called "Black Thursday" (BSA 2020: 14). On that day, 12 students, aged between 18 and 22, were arrested by the police while at home and detained. Their trial, defined by the media as "the Student Case", started on May 14th; on July 16th, 2021, 11 students were sentenced to two years and six months of prison, while one student (the only one who pleaded guilty) was sentenced to two years in a general regime penal colony.⁶ After these events, in November the student protest activities dramatically declined, as many students, forced by circumstances, decided to stop the actions for safety reasons or relocate abroad to avoid criminal proceedings.

To conclude this brief overview, I would like to give a quantitative account by quoting the work of the independent association Honest University,⁷ which provided quite dramatic statistics. Indeed, until now, at least 1,615 students and professors have been subjected to form of pressure at the university. As for students, Honest University registered 284 expulsions, 60 recognized political prisoners, 481 students who received reprimands and 906 who were subjected to "prophylactic conversations", meaning threatening meetings with members of the university administration. Furthermore, activists and independent organizations claim that many students were forced to leave the country because of direct or indirect threats from the police and the university administrations, although, to my knowledge, an accurate statistic of the phenomenon does not exist.

The revolutionary nature of academic freedom in Belarus

As stated in the previous paragraphs, the analytical exercise that I want to pursue with this article is to assess the applicability of Fish's typology of academic freedom to contexts other than the US, an instance that I think is required by the universalistic nature of the principle.

Focusing on the Belarusian case, I argue that the practice of academic freedom in authoritarian contexts falls under the category that Fish named "Academic freedom as revolution", and thus we need to apply a broader understanding of academic protection. Briefly recalling his categorization, this approach combines two main elements of the previous schools: the first is the idea of academic freedom as a contribution to the common good, in the sense that it strengthens and promotes democratic values (the "For the common good" school); the second is the idea of critique towards existing power structures as the foundation of the main expression and at the same time realization of academic freedom (the "Academic freedom as critique" school). From the analysis of the data collected, I argue that students' experiences and understandings of academic freedom in Belarus embrace both these instances, which can be identified as core elements for the practice of this principle in authoritarian contexts. The result is that, according to this school of thought, "education 'in the broadest sense' demands a positive political action on the part of those engaged in it" (Fish 2014: 14).

In order to better support my argument, I will now analyze the most significant themes that emerged on this aspect from the interviews with my participants. In particular, the findings are organized into two levels: an individual level, which focuses on the personal experiences of the student activists, and a more collective level that refers to the experience of the Belarusian Student Association (BSA), the independent student union. On a last note, is it worth mentioning that, even though the analysis focuses on the period after the protest movement that started in 2020, several traces of this approach to academic freedom can also be found before that moment, showing that the context of structural violation of academic and human rights play a crucial role.

Academic freedom or political activism? The voice of the students

During the interviews that I conducted with the Belarusian students, I did not limit myself to only collecting their experiences of activism in the Belarusian universities after the Presidential Election, but I also had the chance to ask them what meaning they attributed to academic freedom. In particular, I always reserved the last part of my interview for the following question: what does academic freedom mean to you? From this "triangulation" of information between concrete experiences and personal understandings, it emerged that this idea of academic freedom as "revolution" is deeply rooted in the majority of the interviewees.

In particular, the first element that arises from the analysis is the profound interrelation between academic freedom and individual rights, in particular with the freedom of expression and association. In fact, many participants define this principle as the right to express one's own opinions and ideas without external interference, to discuss even the most sensitive issues without fear of being persecuted. As many recognized, the limitation of this right in Belarus is not confined to academia, but rather is the consequence of the authoritarian regime; therefore, the status of academic freedom in the country is inevitably linked with the political dimension.

A first example is provided by the case of a male student activist who was among the main promoters of the Strike Committee in his university. Because of his political activity, he was arrested for 15 days and later on was forced to leave the country to avoid facing heavy criminal charges. Thus, his understanding of academic freedom was deeply shaped by the consequences of his political activity, as emerges from his reply:

In fact, [academic freedom] is a freedom of speech, when I can speak about everything I want and I will be not criticized and I will be not persecuted for this, and ...because we all have different opinions and opinions should be respected and students' opinion, of course, too. Because students are the future of the country and if you oppress students, if you oppress the...their opinion, you oppress the future, so the country wants to have this future.

[Exiled student activist and BSA member, male, 23 years old]

⁵ <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR4917812020ENGLISH.PDF>

⁶ Source: Voices of Belarus (https://www.instagram.com/p/CRdZhsHhEw?utm_medium=copy_link)

⁷ <https://hu-repressions.honest-people.by/en>

I think that this excerpt is significant because we find both the elements discussed above. In the first part, the emphasis is on the importance of freedom of speech and of critique about academic as well as non-academic topics (“about everything”), and on the respect of divergent opinions. In the second part, the student shifts the focus towards a more comprehensive understanding of the principle, framing the role of students within the bigger picture of the civil society of a nation; in his view, student academic freedom becomes even more valuable because it protects “the future of the country”, a generation of citizens who reclaim their role in the political sphere.

This linking of academic freedom to political (democratic) values is evident also in the words of a second student, who has been a BSA member for many years. To my direct question on the meaning of academic freedom, he replied:

Well, there are several understandings of academic freedom and uhm, for me, academic freedom is... when you can...freely share your opinion within university and within academia on different topics, not only...content-wise, not only relating, I don't know, student life, but also your life as a citizen and as, I don't know, a part of a civil society, and also about topics concerning more over abstract matters: I don't know, the state, economy, the politics in the end. I think this is the first thing which comes to my mind uhm when I think about academic freedom.
[BSA activist, male, 24 years old]

Here, I think that a key aspect is that sentence “not only relating, I don't know, student life, but also your life as a citizen and as [...] a part of a civil society”. From his perspective, membership of the academic community must not translate into a disengagement from the relevant issues experienced by the society at large; rather, these topics should be freely discussed within the university spaces because the university itself is part of, and an expression of, that specific social context. Once again, this excerpt reminds us that the academic activity of both students and professors does not happen in a vacuum, or in an aseptic university classroom, rather it is in constant exchange with the outside world. Moreover, this testimony is of particular relevance because it explicates that the two dimensions of students and citizens cannot be separated, rather they affect and nurture each other.

As expected, the consequence of this kind of understanding is that, among all the participants, there is also an awareness that academic freedom cannot be restored without a radical change in the political apparatus. The following student, for instance, after expressing his understanding of academic freedom as the freedom to speak up in the university and be heard by the administrative apparatus, claims in a quite disillusioned way:

But it's just nonsense, the main part of our fighting, the first thing that we have to do is to change government and then....
[Exiled student activist, male, 21 years old]

By this he is suggesting that academic freedom will come as a consequence of the establishment of a democratic political system, so that the struggle for democracy and for academic freedom are two sides of the same coin.

Another crucial aspect that emerges from the interviews, and that is in line with Fish's categorization, is that this “Academic freedom as revolution” is also practiced in terms of critique of and radical challenge to the authority of the university institutions.

Indeed, as briefly covered in the previous section, with the beginning of the academic year students brought the political struggle back to the university campuses, reclaiming these as legitimate spaces for their demands of academic rights and democratic values. In a first phase, several students from different universities reported that they tried to open a dialogue with the administrations, asking them to respect their right to bring political instances into the university in support of the broader struggle for democracy. In other words, they were urging their own universities to shield their actions and to safeguard their academic freedom. One student, for instance, admitted that they were hoping to convince the administrative apparatuses to side with them; however they were soon disillusioned:

First of all, we wanted to set up a dialogue with administration, we wanted to cooperate with them because at that moment we thought that, well, we are all, we all have one goal, and maybe even people like in administrations or faculties of universities are also for us, and so we thought that we can persuade them to join us. But it appeared that well, most of

these directors, rectors and deans are for the government, pro-government, so they just don't need to, to protest.
[Exiled student activist and BSA member, male, 23 years old]

Similarly, another student activist truly believed at the beginning that a sort of collaboration was possible, but she ended up regretting this action because the Rector used the information to collaborate with the police department in repressing the protest actions organized at the university level:

At that time, we decided that it was really a good time to speak with our rector and we tried to get a conversation with her, but she wants from us the lists of our names and faculties, and also, she wants a list of questions. And we give it to her. And in maybe a month after that, we regret about that, because they tried to do everything to, I don't know, to make our lives...as a hell, seriously.
[Exiled student activist, female, 22 years old]

Once it was clear that the institutional autonomy was irremediably compromised, the protestation assumed the features of an open confrontation with the university administration, in an atmosphere characterized by general hostility and conflict. According to the report published by the independent student union BSA (2020), several peaceful actions were pursued by the different Strike Committees: in particular, the actions that took place right outside the universities were mainly marches, picketing and solidarity chains, while song and silent protests, demonstrations with the red-and-white colors and petitions were organized within the university campuses. But the activities of the student activists were not limited to these visible actions, as the following excerpt shows:

And besides those actions, we would just uhm work as (*small laugh*) like journalists, I don't know, just to write about what's happening...I don't know: someone like professors who were also supporting protests, they would reach for us and, for example, tell us ‘You know, today at the director's office, they were talking about dismissing these students’ and we would just [write] ‘Hello, everyone. We got the news’, and we were like the main source of your information which

was not pro-government in our university. So, yeah, we were like journalists, slash organizers of the protests.
[Exiled student activist, female, 20 years old]

Indeed, the practice of critique was also pursued through counter-information activities aiming at keeping students informed on the main developments of the situation; moreover, this also helped to counter the mainstream narratives of the government and the university administrations which depicted the participants in the protest actions as a danger for the country.

Besides the political value, these initiatives appeared also to be relevant for the students from a personal perspective: indeed, the enthusiasm that emerged from the interviews indicate that students were happy to finally be active members of the academic community, and to take concrete actions towards the reaffirmation of their own rights. Just to provide a few examples, the tone is usually similar to the following excerpts.

On the 26th of October, there was a, like a national strike [...] and our main goal was to get as many students and...professors as possible to not go to the university and just go on the streets. And we had like, roughly 300 of students. So it was, it was like the biggest to action we...made, I don't know, organized. It was really good. It was probably the best day at the university for me, in my three years. Yeah, it was really good.
[Exiled student activist, female, 20 years old]

After protests, it was really surprising and exciting that so many people who...who care about this in the university, like, because as I've said, there wasn't any feeling of community. [...] But there, there was this real moment in which a lot of people who...were ready to do something, we realized that there are a lot of people except for like several less who have some stands, who care about this, so yeah this was wonderful of course.
[Exiled student activist, male, 21 years old]

However, very soon this general excitement gave way to the fear of the harsh repressions enacted by the government at all levels of society, universities included. On this matter, students' experiences tend to confirm what international monitoring reports have already

outlined: in almost all the cases, the university administrations worked in close collaboration with the Belarusian police departments to stop the protests and even arrest the students, for instance by giving out information on the strike committee members and by calling the police *inside* the university campuses. Moreover, in the most active institutions, the government nominated new Rectors loyal to the regime, and KGB agents in disguise assumed the role of Vice-rectors for security to tighten the grip on student activism.

In an attempt to explain how this deep fracture occurred between the academic community and the university administrative staff, one Belarusian student, whom I had the chance to interview and has been following the situation from abroad, explained to me:

Basically, what's happened is, you know, years...of like replacing. So, like, you know, like the administration that used to be there, [...] like faculty members they were like connected to their students and their faculty. But these like years of replacing these administrators with administrators that are faithful to Lukashenko only instead of being faithful to this college or connected to this college, it really played its role. Like you can see that they did not care about the well-being of the students. They only cared about their own careers. And that was quite upsetting to, to see that like... [...] like they literally called in the police into the university. That was like really bad. *[Belarusian student living abroad, female, 28 years old]*

University administrations adopted a variety of strategies to pressure student activists. In some cases, they decided to use milder warnings, such as conversations in the principal's office over the gravity of their actions, or informal threats on possible consequences on their academic career. In other cases, these strategies included stronger forms of repression, like formal reprimands and, in the most extreme cases, the expulsion of the students from the university, in complete violation of their rights.

The tragic consequence of all these measures is under-

lined by the numbers of expulsions, detainment or administrative fines reported in the previous section. In this regard, the personal experiences of my interviewees are representative of this more general situation: indeed, out of 13 participants who were active in protest actions, 6 students have been arrested for a period that varied from 1 to 15 days, and 2 students were arrested by the police and had to pay a fine; further, 6 of them were expelled from their universities in retaliation for their activism. Thus, it is evident that students had to pay a very high price for practicing this "Academic freedom as revolution".

Collective practices of academic freedom: the Belarusian Student Association

Besides the experiences of individual student activists, the idea of academic freedom as revolution was also practiced at the level of associationism, and its main expression is the experience of the Belarusian Student Association.

The Belarusian Student Association⁸ (BSA) is an independent student association which represents different student unions in many Belarusian universities aiming "to motivate Belarusian students to stand for their rights and interests, improve the higher education system, struggle for academic freedom and implement European principles into the system of higher education".⁹ It was initially founded in 1989 as a student journal, and was registered as a union later in 1992, after the dissolution of the USSR. In the same period, it also joined the European Student Union (ESU), with whom it is still collaborating.

Throughout its troubled history, the activities pursued by BSA have always been deeply intertwined with the political dimension, and the ideas of academic freedom "as critique" and "for the common good" have always been translated into concrete actions. Because of this, the union experienced harsh confrontations with the government: in particular, in the early 2000s, when Lukashenka's authoritarian ambitions became more evident, its official registration was revoked and BSA

became an illegal organization, with the consequence that its members were liable to criminal prosecution. In parallel with the repression of BSA, the regime empowered the pro-government student union, the Belarusian Republican Youth Union,¹⁰ the only one officially recognized by the State and into which all the Belarusian students were forced to enroll. Despite these obstacles, in 2015 BSA was relaunched by some activists and resumed its role of independent union for Belarusian students, even though without official registration. Currently, its organizational structure is composed of six annually elected members who equally represent the union in the different national and international contexts.

Before 2020, BSA activities were mainly focused on fostering awareness among Belarusian students on the issues of academic freedom and the Bologna process, which the country decided to join in 2015. In particular, the association aimed to provide students with the information and tools to monitor the application of the Bologna recommendations in their university institutions, and to favor a real change in university policies. However, the eruption of the protest movement in 2020 forced BSA to radically change its nature and to assume the role of coordinator of the different Strike Committees that were emerging in many universities across the country, with the purpose of making the political actions more effective. One of the members explains those crucial moments in the following way:

We had different people in different universities, our activists just joined this chat, sometimes even creating this chat, inviting new people and we were like, you know...we were helping the newcomers people who really have this fire, you know, inside, who wanted to protest, but they didn't know how and what to do first. So the people were in different chats explaining what to do, so I don't know, how not to get arrested, or how to be very organized, what to start with, and so on... *[BSA activist, male, 24 years old]*

Still, the organization also managed to keep the focus on the issues of students' rights and freedom, as another student, who was an activist but not a member of the association, recognizes:

This organization, BSA, it was always pushing for academic freedoms, like...for instance, these demands of students during the course of protests were only political, but this organization is inclined towards even, yeah, these students' things, students' demands, students' problems.

[Exiled student activist, male, 21 years old]

Despite working in the shadows, BSA members were directly targeted by the police agents of the regime, and when in November 2020 the country saw the peak of the repression wave, the majority of them decided to leave Belarus for safety reasons, together with many other student activists. In this context of exile, the role of the BSA for the Belarusian student community changed once again, and it became a reference point for all those exiled students who were looking for safe places to live and for educational opportunities abroad. Moreover, it also engaged in advocacy activities at the European level to raise awareness on the Belarusian case and ask political and university institutions to take a strong position against the repressions.

As we can see from this brief overview, in this context of systematic violation of academic and human rights, it emerges that reaffirming student academic freedom requires a "revolutionary" act, in the sense that it challenges the existing authoritarian structure not only at the university level, but also at the government level. Thus, the Belarusian Student Association shows itself to be a key actor in Belarus because of its ability to merge the issue of students' rights with the broader struggle for democracy that the country was experiencing.

Besides these concrete activities, critical engagement with the political sphere is mirrored also in the way in which the association understands academic freedom. Indeed, when I asked one of its long-time members how BSA defines academic freedom, he replied that the organization very much applies the principles stated in the Bologna Declaration:

We are basing everything on those guidelines of Bologna process implementation, so I'm afraid I would just repeat those things from Bologna Process. Aca-

⁸ In Belarusian, ZBS – Zadzinočarñie Bielaruskich Studentaŭ. <https://zbsunion.by/en>.

⁹ <https://zbsunion.by/en/about>.

¹⁰ Official website here: <https://president.gov.by/en/belarus/society/public-associations/brsm-youth-union>.

democratic freedom was for us as a union, it's just to...have the freedom to choose the topic, for example if you want to do some research you can do it without any fear. [BSA activist, male, 24 years old]

Yet, the specificities of the Belarusian context emerged immediately after, as the continuation of the excerpt shows below:

In Belarus it's really hard to tell about other aspects of academic freedom because it's really...the university are not places for freedom, so university are fully controlled by the government, and there is no university autonomy in the first place, and as a...just consequence of that, there is no academic freedom as well. [...] No one has any freedom to tell what they think. Yeah. If we go further like freedom of expression or freedom of assembly within academia – I think it's also some kind of academic freedom – [...] in some cases it's just that the state doesn't want you to say this kind of thing. [BSA activist, male, 24 years old]

Here, academic freedom is defined in the terms of its interaction with broader freedoms in society at large, such as the freedom of expression and the freedom of association. Thus, from the BSA side there is no doubt: the struggles for academic rights and political freedoms must be pursued together, both within and outside the universities.

Conclusions

In his famous paper “Academic Freedom: In Justification of a Universal Ideal” (2009), Terrence Karran claims:

In addition to being important to universities and their academics, academic freedom is an indicative facet of freedom within wider society, such that where academic freedom is limited, other freedoms, like freedom of speech and expression, are likely to be in jeopardy. / (2009: 265)

On similar bases, Robert Quinn (current director of the international network Scholars at Risk) and Jesse Levine, in a publication entitled “Intellectual-HRDs and Claims for Academic Freedom under Human Rights Law”, make the following statement:

At their best, higher education communities are models and teachers of democratic values. They model and pass into society the skills and knowledge necessary for democratic value systems to function properly [...]. But to serve in this role, higher education communities must be grounded in core values including access, accountability, academic freedom, autonomy and social responsibility. Where these are respected, higher education communities not only play a utilitarian role of developing valuable skills and services, but they maximise individual capacity to make informed, creative contributions to society. / (2014: 901–902)

These are just two significant examples of an increasingly popular perspective in the literature on academic freedom that argues that this principle is not only a cornerstone within academia, but it is also a determinant contributor to the development and protection of democratic values. However, I do believe that this assertion, to be properly justifiable, needs to be grounded in a solid work of analytical theorization that should be able to take into account all the diverse perspectives and approaches on the subject. A work that, unfortunately, is not always present in the literature on academic freedom.

Among the most notable efforts in this regard, the book by Stanley Fish (2014) seems to indicate a possible direction by conceptualizing academic freedom as a continuum of positions that goes from more “deflationary” to more comprehensive views: while the former perspective tends to barricade the limits of academic protection within the thick and solid walls of the university classrooms, the latter approach completely breaks down those walls and embraces the idea of academic community as a (politically) engaged community at its fullest. Within these two extremes, a variety of declinations on what should be the limits of academic protection can be found.

In addressing the main theoretical shortcomings of his work, I have argued that Fish's typology can constitute a fruitful theoretical tool for the analysis of academic freedom only if we lose his nation-based interpretative framework (which grounds the typology only in the US debate) in favor of a universalistic approach to academic freedom. With the term “universalistic”, however, I do not mean to assume that all socio-political contexts are the same and thus that academic protection can work

in the same way everywhere. Rather, I do use this term to stress the fact that academic freedom aspires to be a universally recognized right of all the academic communities that, worldwide, pursue the common enterprise of the production of knowledge (Altbach 2001; Karran 2009). In other words, Fish's typology faces the strong risk of being sterile because it is circumscribed within the US nationalistic borders.

In line with these considerations, in this paper I have demonstrated the applicability of this typology by using it as an interpretative lens to read the experiences and understandings of academic freedom of 13 Belarusian student activists. The data show that, in authoritarian contexts such as the Belarusian one, the understanding and the practice of academic freedom cannot be anything other than “revolutionary”. Indeed, in these socio-political contexts, the violations of academic freedom are deeply entrenched with the violation of other individual freedoms. Besides, such violations come from both the government and the university administrations, as the latter, in the absence of institutional autonomy, is the direct expression of the former. In this scenario, the revindication of academic freedom from the members of the academic community takes the form of a revolutionary act in the following sense: it combines together the elements, already established by the other schools of thought, of the *academic work as critique* and the *civic role of education*. In doing so, it advocates for the integration of the dimension of citizenship into the academic sphere. The result is that the figures of the “academic as professional” and of the “student as the last beneficiary of education” are replaced by a community of engaged scholars and students.

Narrowing down these considerations to the specificity of the Belarusian case, in this article I have claimed that this idea of “Academic freedom as revolution” among the group of Belarusian student activists can be found both in the way in which they understand academic freedom and in the way they practice it. In terms of understandings, students emphasize the interdependence of academic freedom with other individual rights such as the freedom of association and freedom of expression, and reclaim their right (and duty) to play their role as members of civil society also within the academic environment. In terms of practices, the restoration of academic freedom in the university campuses took the form

of peaceful protest actions in order to show their support for the common democratic struggle and to urge university administrations to assume a clear position in favor of their students and their fight.

Besides the individual, personal level, these instances also find confirmation at the level of the associationism with the activity of the Belarusian Student Association, which for many years has been the expression of the independent voices of the Belarusian students and the main representative of their academic rights. Here, the revolutionary nature of academic freedom manifests itself in the changing role of the association, which adapts its mission according to the new needs of students and the evolution of the Belarusian political context. Thus, the promotion of academic freedom practiced by BSA can be divided into three main periods: a first period characterized by the demand for accelerating the implementation of the Bologna Declaration in the Belarusian universities; a second period concerned with the coordination of the democratic protest movements within the academic institutions; and a third period, as the reference point for exiled activists and their reintegration in hosting academic communities abroad.

Concluding with one last reflection, I think that it would be wrong to classify this attempt to assess the validity of a comprehensive typology of academic freedom, such as the one developed by Fish, as just a mere theoretical exercise for its own sake. Rather, we should reframe the issue within the broad questions outlined in the introduction to this article: what are the limits of academic protection? In this regard, I hope that this universalistic approach to academic freedom (in the terms specified above) can further stimulate the debate toward a broader understanding of these boundaries, which should be more inclusive, rather than exclusive, especially in situations of structural violations of individual freedoms and academic rights. In particular, in my opinion, the case of the Belarusian students effectively shows that, if we adopt a narrow definition of protection, we end up excluding the needs and the opinions of the members of those academic communities which have to navigate within authoritarian power structures. Thus, the shift towards the understanding of academic freedom as “Revolution” is not only a theoretical stance, but first of all it is an action of solidarity that we, as members of the same global academic community, must pursue.

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Durable repression against sudden resistance.

The case of the School of Advanced Studies in Tyumen – the only surviving Liberal Arts college in Russia

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Introduction

This essay argues that the measures taken by the authorities in Russian universities to suppress academic freedom and the anti-war movement in 2022 were much less important than the gradual disruption of the collective power of students and professors unfolding several years prior to the invasion of Ukraine. When the war began, the political opportunity structure – a set of institutional and cultural power-relations including pluralism, use of repression, and consolidation of authority – was already extremely inconducive to a strong and durable collective resistance. While it would be more appealing to focus on the brutality of repressions and the bravery of protesters in Russian universities – and both took place extensively – this approach may be misleading. First of all, in political science, we are used to talking about incremental democratic backsliding when analyzing the regimes of Putin, Erdogan, or Orban (Bermeo 2016). The incremental disruption of core democratic institutions is often more influential than sudden repression because institutional settings shape the structure for the actions of challengers. Second, to explain the stability of autocratic regimes, political scientists focus not merely on repressions, but also on the mechanisms of co-optation and legitimation (Gerschewski 2018). Using repression only is too costly, plus, while suppressing challengers, the autocratic regime cuts the channels of feedback necessary for its sustain-

ability. With some degree of consideration, the approach which focuses on incremental autocratization shaping political opportunity structure may be well-suited for the analysis of a micro-level contention as well.

The structure of the essay is threefold. First, I will sketch out the “political process approach” (McAdam 1999; Ritzer 2007) as a theoretical framework that helps to incorporate structure and agency, institutions and coalitions, interests, and interactions. Then, I will outline the institutional set-up and its dynamics to define the structure of opportunities for potential challengers before February 2022. In this part, I will discuss the structure of power on different levels, as well as the composition of the key actors. Finally, I will analyze the challengers–authorities’ interactions, since neither contention nor repressions are limited to a single episode; and I will focus on the stories of challengers – anti-war students and professors – and the system’s response, which was not necessarily repressive. Contrary to voluntaristic views on political actions that focus on actor’s skill and will, I will demonstrate how the struggle over structures shaped the playing field before the actual contention started in 2022. This approach contributes to already existing, mostly institutionalist debates¹¹ about the power relations in Russian universities, by adding an interactive perspective on the contentious activities (Sokolov, Lopatina, and Yakovlev 2018).

Methodological framework and self-reflection

The case under consideration is the School of Advanced Studies (SAS) – an interdisciplinary institute within Tyumen State University (UTMN). Formally, the management of SAS decided to stop referring to the institute as a liberal arts college to avoid the risks associated with the term “liberal” in Russia. Yet, the design of its curriculum, international board of faculty, and mission statement remained untouched. The case of SAS is important to analyze for several reasons. Firstly, in contrast to other bachelor programs implementing the Liberal Arts model – namely, Smolny college in Saint-Petersburg and the Liberal Arts program in the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration in Moscow (RANEPA), SAS was not closed in 2022. Formally, that might have happened because programs in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg did not remove the brand of “Liberal Arts” from their name. Politically, however, the key difference between them and SAS was in the composition of the faculty board. Whereas SAS management had fired all the contentious faculty, both Smolny and RANEPA soundly criticised the authorities. Secondly, SAS is located very far from the capital, in the Siberian city of Tyumen. The physical distance and geographical location, in the Russian context, could be associated with more autonomy in comparison to the institutes based in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg. Thirdly, SAS was established in 2017 with the support of the former rector of Tyumen State University, who was appointed to Minister of Higher Education in 2020. This might have granted a certain degree of protection from the Minister, who was personally engaged in the establishment of the institution. Overall, one might expect that the opportunity structure for contentious mobilization at SAS would be more open than in the case of other institutes. Although testing this expectation would require a large-scale comparative analysis, this project aims to make a preliminary step towards this, by analyzing the contentious actions at SAS and describing the prevailing strategies of university management in response.

The argument of this paper is primarily built on the empirical data obtained through interviews and exchanges

with the (former) students and faculty members of SAS. I interviewed a former faculty member who took part in the struggle for the institutionalization of collective governing bodies in 2017–2019; a student whose thesis was censored in 2021 by the SAS administration; the only faculty member who publicly opposed the invasion in 2022; and several students who attracted the administration’s attention because of their anti-war activity. I also used the Order of the university rector establishing SAS¹² and articles published about SAS by its former professors as the primary sources (Bluszewicz 2023; Save-lyeva 2020; Zhuravlev 2021). The analysis was aided by the contention-related personal correspondence with professors and administration of SAS in 2017–2022.

The fact that I am an alumni of SAS could be considered as an element affecting the analysis. As a student, I was initially sympathetic toward the college as a whole. Later on, I could not avoid the escalating conflict between faculty and students on the one side and the administration on the other. After most of my favorite professors were fired or left voluntarily, I joined the anti-administration camp and together with other students launched an independent student media (Studgazeta Shpil’ 2021) and several protests. After that, in 2021 my bachelor research was censored by SAS management, and I was forced to rewrite it entirely. Acknowledging the value of reflexivity in qualitative research, I used “reflective exercises” to minimize the bias originating in my experience (Watt 2007). Firstly, I examined my reasons for conducting this study. On the one hand, my intention was to apply the theories of contentious politics and autocratization that I had learned. On the other hand, I wished to demonstrate the influence of structural and contextual factors on what seems to be spontaneous individual actions to combat popular, yet misleading perceptions of contention. Secondly, I wrote reflective memos at every stage of research, from the inception of idea to the concluding remarks. Thirdly and finally, I used the iterative approach to the research, reestablishing arguments after analyzing new data and reviewing literature in several stages (Yom 2015).

¹² Falkov, Valery. 2016. “Order establishing the School of Advanced Studies.” Tyumen State University. https://sas.utmn.ru/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/510_1.pdf.

¹¹ See the publications of the Center for Institutional Analysis of Science & Education, European University at St.Petersburg at <http://ciase.ru/output/science/>.

Theoretical framework: political opportunity structure

In the structurally minded research of seemingly agent-led contentious episodes there is a need for a theory that would help to reconstruct the entire picture yet omit no spontaneous incidents. The eternal question in the field is – in what way do deep structural shifts affect the emergence, repertoire, and outcome of an episode of contention? To balance structural over-determinism and voluntaristic, agent-centered approaches, the mediating role of the so-called “political opportunity structures” has been advanced in the past few decades (Eisinger 1973; Kriesi 2007; McAdam 1999; Ritzer 2007). This approach has three fundamental components: structures (including political institutions, culture, and consequent “prevailing strategy” of authorities), interaction context (including institutional and discursive opportunities), and configuration of power (coalitions and their interests). Of course, these components are not set in stone. Rather, the contentious activities put them into motion. For example, the challengers often aim to split the governing coalition to generate dissensus amongst the elite. At the same time, the “prevailing strategy” used by the elite might be more or less repressive, depending on what opportunities challengers perceive and use. In short, this approach takes into analysis not only the relative strength of the elite and opposition but also their interaction, which in turn depends on institutional and cultural context.

For this study, I will focus on how the political opportunity structure was changing several years before 2022, and how the interaction between students, faculty members and SAS, and wider university management was affected by the structures. The following concepts will be applied in my research in the following way:

- Structures – the formal institutional design of SAS and informal practices of decision-making; including what bodies were responsible for what, and how the governing of the institution was conducted.
- Discursive and institutional opportunities – the limitations and opportunities resulting from the given structures and used by challengers and authorities to change the structures. For example, what kind of

argumentation, appeals, and coercive bodies were used or referred to during the stages of contention.

- Prevailing strategies – the treatment of challengers (whether students or faculty members) by the administration of the college. For example, how the challengers were repressed, co-opted, or ignored.

As a result, the interactive process will be outlined for the given case. In contrast to over-deterministic structural approaches, or over-individualized cultural ones, the political process approach allows us to look at the opportunity structure as conceived and used both by challengers and authorities.

How they skewed the playing field

SAS was launched in 2017 as one of the institutes of the Tyumen State University. It was funded by the “5-100” federal program that aimed to increase the competitiveness of Russian universities in a global arena. The project was and still is unique in Russia: students can choose among elective courses taught by foreign professors in English and define their major discipline only after the second year of their bachelor’s education. With the majority of the student body coming from Siberia, SAS provided a very unusual opportunity to taste a Western-like education, which for the first three years was also labelled as “Liberal Arts”. The promotion campaigns emphasized the difference between SAS (“greenfield” – a flexible and student-centred environment) and traditional Russian universities (“brownfield” – allegedly rigid and ineffective system). SAS director Andrey Shcherbenok claimed multiple times that SAS is not only different from the old-school university system but also, as a greenfield, quite independent from it. In practice, this meant sometimes beneficial and sometimes detrimental isolation from a larger Tyumen State University, as well as a different model of power relations.

Power structures

The sociologists from European University in Saint-Petersburg, have analyzed four hundred Russian universities’ charters¹³ (Sokolov, Lopatina, and Yakovlev 2018).

They explained, that after the period of financial hardship and political autonomy in the 1990s, there came a period of transactional relationship where universities exchanged their autonomy for special additional funding. An important example is the procedure of the appointment of a university rector. In the decade after the Soviet collapse, almost all state university employees were electing their rectors on university-wide ad hoc conferences. However, from 2006 rectors became more often than before appointed by the state, while the role of the Academic Councils diminished. This tendency reached its peak in 2010, when the two largest Russian universities – Moscow State University and Saint-Petersburg State University amended their charters, replacing the elections of rectors with the appointment by the president of Russia. In 2011, all state universities changed their charters in this way. In line with this tendency, the “5-100” financial program,¹⁴ within which SAS was launched, had a necessary precondition for participating universities: the rectors of these universities must be state-appointed. This very structure already heavily undermined the possibility for potential contentious mobilization. Thus, SAS was established in a highly hierarchical bureaucratic system in the authoritarian regime. At the same time, SAS was well-designed to serve the interests of the regime in terms of gaining international recognition through publication activity and cooperation with international professors, which was important until the isolationist Kremlin tendencies prevailed.

Unsurprisingly, the governance design¹⁵ of SAS implied that the director was to be appointed by the rector. The Director is the only power holder, exercising “direct management of the School of Advanced Studies”, as the document contains no mention of alternative power centers. If the role of collective bodies was diminishing in Russian universities overall, at SAS such a Council was not even established.

In five years, no real collective governing body was suc-

cessfully created. In fact, from the very first year of its existence, the faculty of SAS tried to institutionalize a committee that would have power in the decision-making process. They never succeeded. Here is what one of the former SAS professors, sociologist Svetlana Erpyleva,¹⁶ recalls:

At the end of the first year, the conflicts between professors and administration began, concerning the lack of structures that unite professors. We created the Academic Council, which included teachers and administration staff. For some time, this Council existed on paper. But then it gathered to resolve the issue of the dismissal of one of the employees and the majority voted against it. After that, Shcherbenok (SAS director) dismissed this Council. [...] We, of course, thought first of all about our working conditions and about decision-making at the institute. We wanted systemic changes – those that allowed collegial decisions to be made, rather than leaving decisions at the mercy of the administration. We wanted to be allowed to build research work differently, to have greater freedom in teaching and assessment.

None of this materialized – in SAS, a Liberal Arts college, they found no space for exercising liberty. Due to the lack of freedom for self-organizing, out of all faculty members employed in 2017, only one still remains at SAS. As a compromise, the director agreed to establish a “Teaching Council” in the academic year 2018–2019, comprising of elected student and faculty representatives. Its role and capacity were unclear initially. But practice clarified the Teaching Council’s subordinate position, as Svetlana Erpyleva explained:

And it so happened that the Teaching Council merely sorts out conflict situations between students and teachers. This became its main task. Of course, it was great as a practice. We discussed, and argued, we had different points of view, and we came to a

¹⁴ The program was aiming at “state support for the leading universities of the Russian Federation in order to increase their competitiveness among the world’s leading scientific and educational centers” (Medvedev 2013).

¹⁵ Falkov, Valery. 2016. “Order establishing the School of Advanced Studies.” Tyumen State University. https://sas.utmn.ru/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/510_1.pdf.

¹⁶ Svetlana Erpyleva worked at SAS from 2017 to 2020. Currently she is a researcher in the University of Bremen (Germany) and Public Sociology Laboratory (remotely).

¹³ The charter of a higher educational institution is a set of rules that regulate the activities of a higher education institution in the Russian Federation.

consensus more often than we voted. That was great! And no one interfered in this – Shcherbenok agreed with our decisions. But why were we allowed to do this? Today it seems to me that he was ready to delegate in small matters. What difference does it make to him whether a student is expelled or not? These are questions that did not make any systemic changes. It was even good for the administration to have such a body that can be shown, in which everything is collegial, everything is great, and there are teachers, students, and a discussion ... It was true, but these were minor issues – specific problems of specific students. The most significant issues were decided anyway by the director and we (and even more so the students) had no power there.

The latter is crucial: according to Svetlana Erpyleva, while students appealed to the Teaching Council with many concerns, the only thing that it could realistically have resolved is conflicting situations regarding, mostly, unfair grading and consequent expulsions. No claim for shared power was satisfied – the direct management happened to be well compatible with Liberal Arts, and with the strong dissatisfaction of professors and students.

What did “direct management” mean in practice? In his final letter to graduates,¹⁷ ex-professor of SAS, sociologist Matvey Lomonosov¹⁸ explains:

... faculty meetings (an equivalent of ‘academic councils’ in other units of Tyumen State University) have transformed into sittings where faculty members are simply notified of decisions taken by the administration on the key issues of SAS operation. The structure of the educational process, new faculty hiring, the work of research teams, new rules of attendance for students – all these issues are decided upon behind the scenes. Then ready-made decisions are either presented to professors as a *fait accompli* or talked over with the faculty having an advisory voice. These discussions do not ultimately affect the deci-

sions made by Dr. Shcherbenok. For example, at one of the last meetings, the faculty and staff collectively decided to respond approvingly to an anonymous letter from students concerning the participation of their representatives at faculty meetings. Nevertheless, Dr. Shcherbenok decided to ignore even this decision. Moreover, those few structures that consistently expressed dissenting points of view were disbanded by the administration. Now there are no internal committees and commissions of the faculty at SAS. “Talkative” people were systematically removed from the institution. In other words, I must say Dr. Shcherbenok has created a private mom-and-pop store¹⁹ in the middle of a public academic institution.

Shortly before this letter was published, Matvey Lomonosov was fired. Or, as the SAS director insisted, his contract was simply “not renewed”.²⁰ Despite the absence of any structures that students could use to mobilize against this unpopular decision, the informal students’ initiative was formed. Out of 200 students attending SAS, 50 signed a petition sent to the director demanding an explanation of the decision to fire Prof. Lomonosov. In response to the petition, the director referred to the collective decision of the anonymous “UTMN Commission”, that allegedly had decided on the issue. But no further clarification was provided because the director was “not at liberty to disclose the discussion which took part in the UTMN Commission about Matvey Lomonosov or any other candidate”. Dissatisfied with this reply, the students’ initiative decided to address the petition to the university rector, demanding a more detailed explanation. Several weeks later the university administration replied that students are not a part of this employment process and hence should not ask such questions.

As this case demonstrates, the difficulty that students and professors faced defending themselves was not only because of the absence of concrete collective structures, but also the larger neoliberal structure of employment. The contracts to professors were offered for 1–3 years,

and the decision about their “renewal” was taken behind closed doors. Sociologist Oleg Zhuravlev,²¹ another ex-professor of SAS, writes:

An effective contract, seemingly aimed at neo-liberal labor productivity, in the face of opaque rules of the game and the absence of democracy, has turned into a neo-patrimonial tool for promoting the administration’s personal preferences.

Oleg’s former colleague sociologist Natalya Savelyeva²² adds:

Although both dominators and dominated believe in the same things like “common goals” or “shared projects” or “we are the team”, the thing is that there can’t be any real common goals without shared power. In the case of SAS, the precarity of faculty members and the centralized power situation that provides them with limited decision-making capacities leaves no room for commonality.

That is, the precarity of faculty members resulting from the lack of power-sharing structures and basic employment protection left no room for healthy cooperation between professors and the management. But what is even more brutal and more apparent in the context of war is the absence of organizational and social foundation, upon which the anti-war resistance could be built. For a successful resistance or at least a prolonged one, what must be in place is a structure that can be mobilized; the resources, the connections, the shared experience of a successful struggle. Even when students managed to mobilize against the unpopular and untransparent decisions of the director, there was nothing they could rely on organizationally, and no power unit they could appeal to which could take their side.

Last but not least, the difficulty for student or student-professor mobilization is also in the highly disintegrated organization of the curriculum. The typical duration of

a course at SAS is two months and then the study groups dissolve, since the academic year is split into 4 short modules. Moreover, students are obliged to take elective courses, where they are mixed with other cohorts and specializations. Finally, students were choosing their specialization only after the 2nd year of education and hence spent time on the same core courses together only in the second part of their bachelor’s qualification. There were only a few obligatory courses attended at the same time by the entire cohort. The intense rotation of professors, of course, did not foster establishing strong connections between students and teachers either, which might have led to a jointly coordinated mobilization.

Targeted repression

The closed opportunity structure diminished the cost of repressions for the SAS director because he did not have to overcome the resistance of other governing bodies, like an Academic Council. Therefore, whenever the SAS director felt danger from the state (for example, due to repressions against the “liberalism” in academy and in politics), the direct management allowed him to violate academic freedom without hindrance. At the same time, SAS rules were highly committed to some principles of academic integrity. For example, students caught plagiarising work would be expelled from SAS. However, the SAS director and his appointee, an associate director for education, were able to censor students’ theses without clear regulations. When graduates were preparing their final theses in 2021, the SAS administration issued a rule: for the approval of a thesis topic, every student must collect signatures from their supervisor, major leader (head of specialization), ethics officer, and associate director for education. Some students faced problems when collecting the signature from the associate director for education. Former student Denis Turunov²³ recalls how two of his thesis topics were blocked:

I took the theme “Smart voting” – the electoral strategy

¹⁷ Lomonosov, Matvey. 2021. “SAS 1st Graduation Ceremony,” July 12, 2021.

¹⁸ Matvey Lomonosov worked at SAS from 2018 to 2021. Currently he is a teaching at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan.

¹⁹ Family-owned shop, that is, personal enterprise, as opposed to a public and collectively governed institution.

²⁰ Shcherbenok, Andrey. 2021. “Update on SAS Faculty Employment Process,” April 20, 2021.

²¹ Oleg Zhuravlev worked at SAS from 2017 to 2020. He currently conducts his research in the Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence and with Public Sociology Laboratory (remotely).

²² Natalya Savelyeva worked at SAS from 2017 to 2019. Currently Natalya is a lecturer at Sociological Department at University Wisconsin-Madison and a researcher at Public Sociology Laboratory.

²³ At SAS, Denis Turunov studied media. Currently he studies MA in public relations at the Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia named after Patrice Lumumba also known as RUDN University in Moscow.

of the team of Alexei Navalny. I handed in all the preparatory tasks (abstract, proposal) and no professor said anything against it. My supervisor said the topic is cool. It was important for me to write a thesis in political media studies. And then it was time to collect signatures – from the supervisor, the ethics officer, and from the associate director for education. All signatures, except for the last one, I collected. The associate director of education did not sign it for a long time, until the last day of the deadline. And on the last day, he wrote: “there will be no signature, we need to talk”. At the meeting, he said that this topic was not possible, and “they” hit him on the head from above, and I urgently need to change the subject. At the same time, he said that he did not believe in me and that I would not be able to do the same amount of work again in a short time. I suggested another topic – to compare memes in the protests in Belarus and Russia. But he again said that such a topic would not work. And I started working on my final theme, which had nothing to do with political events.

What matters in this recollection is not only the violation of academic freedom as such, but also the easiness with which it happened. Three signatures, including one from a research supervisor, were not enough to defend the topic against the administration.

I have also personally experienced censorship, when I proposed a thesis topic on Russian Liberal Arts colleges.²⁴ My supervisor was the associate director for education, elsewhere an active advocate of Liberal Arts in Russia and Europe. After working on this topic for half a year with him, and defending preliminary findings at the Smolny College conference,²⁵ I found out that he would not continue being my supervisor. At the same time, I learned that the head of Sociology & Anthropology specialization received a lot of “pushback”²⁶ from him to make me change the topic. Finally, my former supervisor who also held a post as an associate director for education informed me, that the “director told him not to approve my topic”.

After I asked, “on what professional, academic, and moral ground this situation emerged”, the director intervened explaining that the reasons for this decision must be “obvious” to me.

The objections brought by me and another student were fruitless – there was no one to defend students against a decision of the director, even if this decision obviously violated academic freedom. Despite the individual support that we received from compassionate faculty members and peers, no structure would stand up against the administration. Paradoxically enough, once the Russian invasion on Ukraine started in 2022, the associate director for education²⁷ who was once participating in censorship of the theses’ topics, resigned due to his moral beliefs.

On the one hand, SAS was created within a very hierarchical structure, where ministers are appointed by the president, and rectors are appointed by ministers. On the other hand, SAS advocated the model and values of Liberal Arts education which created potentially solid discursive opportunities for exercising liberal ideals in practice. At least, SAS was committed to some principles of academic integrity like intolerance of plagiarism. However, SAS did not practice democratic management, nor did it commit to principles of academic freedom. On the contrary, SAS is much more authoritarian than the traditional public Russian university. No collective governing bodies were established in five years, no informal checks or balances appeared, making infringements on the academic freedom of students possible. The prevailing strategy of the administration was to compromise on less significant issues (internal conflicts between students and professors) and to threaten and repress when the agenda was more serious (as in the case of “dangerous” students topics). If in the first iteration SAS administration managed to combat the attempts to create alternative power centers, in the second iteration it enjoyed the results of this victory.

²⁴ The exact topic was “Learning strategies of Liberal Arts & Science students with a background in massive educational environments. Three cases of Russian colleges.”

²⁵ For details, see the webpage of the IX International Student Conference “Smolny Readings – 2021. Re:constructing a new world” at <https://events.spbu.ru/events/smolcon-2021>.

²⁶ From a personal correspondence. October 3, 2021.

²⁷ Prof. Daniel Kontowski today works as Head of Social Sciences at the Amsterdam University College.

The post-invasion contention

What can demoralized and disorganized people do when they face brutality against others? As existing research on anti-war protests in Russia demonstrates, many protesters were driven least by rational calculations. Rather the opposite: they knew that the risk of repression was very high, while the chance of stopping the war was miserable. And yet, they were protesting. Why? The confidential interviews from all over Russia show that people were driven by an “internal ethical need to go to the street because otherwise, they would feel ashamed” (Public Sociology Laboratory 2023). Only a tiny minority of interviewed protesters argued that they did indeed believe they could stop the war. This *negative motivation* – protesting because one cannot stay silent – results logically from the absence of any structure one can rely on in this protest. When the invasion started, the leader of the Russian opposition was already imprisoned after a failed poisoning attempt, and the network of his headquarters has been labeled as an “extremist organization” (Alekhina 2021). In the first weeks of the invasion, the Russian government adopted several repressive laws, including one for “discrimination of Russian army” (Criminal Code of Russian Federation 2022), which prescribes prison sentences of up to 15 years for anti-war statements.

First, I will discuss the reaction of professors and administrators to the invasion, based on the interview of an ex-professor, who stood up against the war publicly. Secondly, I will present the narratives of the students, arrested for their anti-war activity or threatened personally by the University administration. Thirdly, the analysis will conclude where it started: with a small-case description of yet another (this time successful) attempt to institutionalize an independent collective body within SAS and the reaction of the SAS administration to this body.

Professors and administration

While two senior leadership members left SAS immediately after the invasion in 2022, despite their previous implication in the authoritarian structure of SAS, the rest of the management including the director remained in

Tyumen and silent. Does that mean that everyone who did not exit or protest is supportive or careless about the invasion? Not at all. Rather, everyone was shocked, and the general impression was unquestionable disagreement with the invasion. Yet, this did not translate to any kind of mobilization. As well as in many cases of contention between faculty, students, and administration, the perceived opportunities that would trigger mobilization were very limited. This is understandable: again, there was no structure that the protesters could rely on, either inside or outside the university. The administration was undermining, year after year, any attempt at collective mobilization. And beyond SAS, in the entire country, there was no power that could stop Putin. Or at least that was the perception.

On that decision, psychoanalyst Julie Reshe,²⁸ former SAS professor notes in the interview:

When the invasion started, everyone panicked, because no one believed Putin would do that. And we had a meeting with the administration. The director tried to console us. And he, as any sensible person in Russia, decided that it is better not to voice up. My suggestion, in contrast, was to protest and I vocalized this idea at a faculty-administration meeting. I expected that in those first days, something inside Russia could emerge to resist this absurdity. But Andrey (SAS director) preferred to hide – and there was a logic there – that is, not to make any political and anti-war statements. At the same time, it was obvious that he was against the war, although he did not say that. And the faculty in general agreed with him. Why? Because it was unclear why SAS at all survived before that. Shortly after the invasion, the SAS director asked me to clear up my social media from political things (I had a photo from a meeting against Navalny’s detention), because allegedly SAS was under threat and the university was actively monitoring our professors.

It turned out that the former Liberal Arts college was not at all more contentious than the “brownfields”, traditional educational institutions. Quite the opposite – its administration and faculty undertook a conscious decision to

²⁸ Julie Reshe worked at SAS from 2019 to 2021. Currently she is a Visiting Professor at University College Cork and Director of the Institute of Psychoanalysis of the Global Center for Advanced Studies.

stay silent to appease the external authorities and eventually preserve the institute. The fact upon which all the promotion of SAS was built, namely, that it was a unique, innovative, and independent institution, one day became its Achilles' heel.

Sometime after the poisoning of Navalny in 2020, the SAS administration stopped emphasizing the Liberal Arts model that SAS was embodying. How exactly was this decision taken and was anyone resisting? Julie Reshe recalls in the interview:

When SAS ceased to position itself as a Liberal Arts, it did not provoke any resonance among us. Because it was even more absurd how Liberal Arts were even possible in Russia. Andrey came to one of the meetings and said that while it is absurd, we stopped using this label, and no one objected. If the government for some reason dislikes this word, okay, we will simply avoid it. Andrey was always caring about how to preserve SAS.

A historian Tomasz Blusiewicz,²⁹ who left SAS involuntarily in 2022, clarifies how exactly the administration managed to make SAS survive. When the war started, the professors received the letter, where the director stated: "I will do everything possible to save the institute in the current circumstances, but do not even think to publicly talk about politics. This is a risk that the university cannot afford" (Blusiewicz 2023).

But even if there was no structural opportunity for organized resistance, some forms of individual protest took place. Julie Reshe remembers how she encouraged the anti-war resistance using her teaching position:

Because my idea to protest collectively was rejected, I felt isolated. At the same time, however, I was supporting students. For example, I asked to spread a rumor that I will not check the attendance at my lecture which coincided with the anti-war demonstration. I took part in some protests as well. In my lec-

tures, I showed videos of how the Russian army destroys Ukrainian cities. No student was doubting this. No one doubted that comparing Putin and Hitler is okay.

What if every professor were to do the same thing, allowing students to go to protest instead of attending classes? As the following section shows, probably very little would change.

Protesting students

Here is the diary from the day of invasion till the day of graduation, retrospectively written for the purposes of this research by Maxim, one of the SAS former students. In most paragraphs, the diary is complemented by extracts from the interviews with other protesting students – Kristina and Olga.³⁰ The titles were added next to the dates by me for simpler navigation.

As these stories show, many students were quite active in the first days after the invasion. Yet, the pressure from the university administration, the absence of protection from the SAS administration, as well as arrests following the peaceful demonstrations, and the introduction of new repressive laws quickly discouraged any organized activity. What remained is private therapy-like conversations and small individual acts of resistance.

February 24th: Immediate reaction

Maxim: I went to SAS, where I sat at the canteen and discussed the news with my fellow students. "****" was probably the most frequent word. We were unable to believe, comprehend, or settle with the reality we'd awakened to. Everyone I met was frightened or disoriented.³¹

Kristina: Many students went out on the evening of February 24 for single actions. Several were detained, but quickly released. Personally, I, together with a number of classmates and friends, decided to engage in anti-war agitation and organized a group to put up leaflets. At some point, they tried to coordinate with the anti-war organization of Tyumen State University students to de-

velop a plan/strategy of action. I and my friend were detained when spreading leaflets for the third and last time.³²

February 25 and 26: Resistance and arrests

Maxim: After the classes (filled with failed attempts to concentrate on anything but war), I went for the protest that gathered on the central square of the city. The protesters were almost outnumbered by police. I was detained trying to break through the chaotic ring of policemen and was delivered to the police station. The rest of the evening I spent in the station, waiting, filling out the papers, and trying to come up with the narrative that I actually didn't participate in the protest.

February 27: Police in the dormitory

Maxim: I woke up to the knocking on my dormitory door. Police officers who did not introduce themselves handed me a sheet of paper that was claiming that I, as the "organizer of the mass gatherings" must be aware of the risk that such "mass gatherings" pertain. It was a paper that put all the responsibility over the upcoming February 27th protest on me.

The dormitory was not safe anymore – the concierges were allowing policemen into the building and telling them the exact room of the person the police officers sought. Somewhere around this day, I decided to leave Russia.

February 28: "Beware of politics"

Maxim: After I'd gotten to the dormitory and spent a couple more anxious days going to classes, I got an email from the SAS Head of Education saying that the Vice-Rector for Youth Politics of UTMN wanted to talk to me. Another student that was detained at the protest was CC-ed. The topic and agenda of the talk weren't mentioned, but it obviously was our participation in the protest. [...] Vice-Rector, an active middle-aged man with a fashionable haircut and a formal suit, seated by the huge table in his office, started explaining to us that the "University is not involved with politics", that we "put [ourselves] at risk" with protests, that we should "stay away from these gatherings", wherever we were going.

Kristina: After the start of the war, there were no official statements from the administration, the position of the

university for a long time was such that "the university is out of politics". What was happening was discussed only at an informal level among students and professors. That is, the war was openly discussed even in the classroom, which, it seems to me, distinguishes the SAS from other institutions.

March 1 to March 4: Two letters

Maxim: Another set of emails came in, including the one from the Education Office titled "A Message From The SAS Director, Andrey Shcherbenok". The email was faceless, bleak, and full of euphemisms, like "recent events", "such issues", and "travel difficulties", and concluded in a "we should focus on our goals" paragraph. The email was enraging, but no one responded to it.

The same day, I was contacted by a group of anti-war students from UTMN and added to the Microsoft Teams group dedicated to coordinating the protest. Fast-forward: the group went silent a week after, for whatever reasons, and never went live again.

Around that time, the Rector of UTMN signed an open letter from the executives of Russian universities supporting the war and the political changes in the country. Yes, the "University is not involved with politics" thing.

Kristina: The first official statement from Shcherbenok (SAS director) was made in the form of a March 1st letter. But an open position was not indicated there. It was only said that these times are difficult, but this can be a good experience for personal development. Around the same time, the rector of the university, Romanchuk, signed a letter in support of the war, which obviously no longer corresponded to the "university out of politics" position.

March 3: Privatization of resistance

Maxim: Open Mic is a frequent and somewhat traditional student-organized open concert. The atmosphere was quite dreadful, even though the students organizing the event tried their hardest to create at least some celebration atmosphere. The Open Mic ended with an exchange student singing a song in Ukrainian and me reading anti-war poems. There was no immediate response from SAS officials, except a letter from the Director saying we should

²⁹ Tomasz Blusiewicz taught at SAS from 2017 to 2022. Currently he is a researcher at Hoover Institute at Stanford University.

³⁰ The actual names of the students were replaced in order to protect their anonymity.

³¹ From the diary of a former student. March 2023.

³² From the interview with a student. March 2023.

be careful with what we say and do, for our own safety. But we had our share of safe grief expression, at least.

April 11: Interrogation

Olga: The administration of the Tyumen State University, of course, was completely on the side of the state. I and several other people were summoned to university administration literally just because I was in an online anti-war group, though I didn't seem to actively communicate there. We were brainwashed by the "don't do stupid things, we don't want our students to be imprisoned".³³

June: "A lack of protection"

Maxim: After three months spent in Armenia (where I kept getting calls from police officers, even after paying my fine for "breaking the rules of mass gathering"), I went back to Russia to defend my thesis. The university administration did not allow me to defend it online, and the SAS administration did not help me out. As a student, I suddenly encountered a general lack of protection from UTMN.

June 25: Official graduation ceremony

Maxim: The atmosphere at the ceremony was somewhat tense because most students were tired of SAS and wanted to express their disgust at the changes it went through even without the war influence. But the ceremony started with a long lecture by the Director of SAS, Andrey Scherbenok which was neither useful nor related to the graduation ceremony nor entertaining.

After all the diplomas were distributed, the ceremony was hurriedly cut, and everyone was urged to leave. Even though lots of students had their graduation speeches (that, we all expected, should be an integral part of the graduation ceremony), there was no place for even a single student word in the ceremony. No opportunity to say anything. Shut up and smile.

SAS went full circle – from the liberal arts institution to a regular university department.

June 30: Informal graduation ceremony

Maxim: We had an informal graduation party in a rented house. Faculty were invited too. We decided to read our graduation speeches to each other – a right we were denied at the official ceremony. We ended up with two

hours of verbal expression, quite resembling a collective psychotherapy session. It was liberating to finally let out all the anger and disgust at what had happened, but the anger at our school denying us the right to the graduation speech (probably on the ground of "protecting" us from saying something "putting us at risk") lingers nonetheless.

The epilogue of the diary

Maxim: At the beginning of July, I left for Armenia again, where I currently reside, not intending to get back to Russia until Putin's regime falls, and not intending to recommend SAS to anyone.

Kristina: And many, it seems to me, have also ceased an active open struggle. The atmosphere was heavy, many were scared, and the number of arrests and the use of cruel measures against detainees frightened and demoralized. However, individual and symbolic actions on the part of some students did not stop: someone glued up anti-war stickers, someone hung ribbons, and posted informational posts on Instagram.

Olga: Well, I can say with displeasure that the actions aimed at suppressing the protest were crowned with success. Resistance, of course, is still alive, in private conversations and social networks not controlled by the Russian Federation, we still scold the authorities and all that, but active resistance has somehow faded, to be honest.

As it seems from the stories of contentious students, the repression of their activity by the university and SAS administration was not especially brutal. The university rather pretended to act as a caring parent, "warning" students to avoid the dangers of politics. Yet, outside the university, students were detained, approached by police in their dormitories, and obviously threatened by the new laws prohibiting any critique of the "special military operation". In light of these facts, it becomes clear that the university was threatening students, demonstrating, for example, that the private conversations in the messengers were monitored. The latter especially was a bad sign: many students did not tie their name to their Telegram account, yet the university administration targeted the members of the chat groups very accurately. At the same time, the protesting students did not men-

tion any network that could have been mobilized to protest the invasion. The newly formed networks were monitored by the university administration and did not rely on any pre-existing connections. The absence of structures that would unite students within SAS, or the entire university, obviously played a role. Also, most of the "contentious" faculty members, who struggled for the establishment of collective bodies to counterweight the director's dictatorship, were no longer at SAS when the war began. The silence of the remaining professors and the always-silent administration was unlikely to be encouraging either.

It is nevertheless obvious that repressed, disoriented, and disorganized students did not become supporters of the invasion. Their anger is suppressed as is any collective activity in Russia. In private, they might continue hating the regime, the war, and the administration of their alma mater. But, as paradoxical as it might sound, for the next stage of protest to appear, there must be regime weakening. So far, the only public horizontal cooperation that might be allowed in Russia is the one that presents itself in a conventional form that does not threaten the regime. The section that follows describes an attempt at establishing a formal and apolitical structure for defending students against the administration at SAS.

Establishment of the SAS Student Union

As Francesca Polletta argued in her influential study of student protests, what seems to be a successful spontaneous mobilization is often a result of careful networking, organizing, and strategizing (Polletta 2009). Yet, neither the sympathetic observers nor the protest participants themselves are willing to acknowledge that. Indeed, the stress placed on spontaneity and agency is much more attractive than the "boring" elaboration on the long-term infrastructural work that makes spontaneous mobilization possible. But if contentious politics is only about will and contagious inspirational words, why do so many people fight for the establishment of inclusive structures of governance?

After the conflict between the students and administration in 2021 at SAS regarding the examination policies, which ended in fruitless spontaneous protest, the idea

to establish a student union appeared. The group of students advancing this idea were tired of the reactive, rather than proactive, nature of all previous students' protests. But this decision, to finally establish a student union, was not spontaneous at all. The students suggesting this idea were already active in the university-wide UTMN Student Union. The latter was a formal structure, controlled by the university. And yet, the university-wide formal Student Union was there, and its existence was supported by the university administration. In practice, it allowed the pretence that students had a representation in the university affairs, and at the same time distributed benefits to the most loyal activists. Theoretically speaking, SAS students grasped this *institutional opportunity* and decided to create a local student union, to be formally registered at the university.

At the same time, some of the student activists had an experience of years of political activism in (or around) one of the democratic socialist organizations in Tyumen.³⁴ When it was time to write the charter of the SAS Student Union, they adopted the charter of their socialist organization, which stated the system of representation, open meetings, and the necessity to publish minutes, among other things. This was completely in opposition to the charter of SAS itself, where all formal power belonged to one person – the director, who was accountable to no one except the university rector. As stated in the official charter, the following were the tasks of the Student Union:

- creating conditions for a systematic, regular discussion between students, teachers, and the administration of SAS based on mutual respect and mutual openness;
- formulating and defending the collective interests of students when making decisions about the educational and scientific process at SAS;
- collecting and processing of feedback from students of SAS about the educational process;
- drawing up local regulations governing the participation of students in the management of SAS.

The institutional opportunity was perceived correctly: this charter was signed by the Youth Policy university coordinator, the head of the university-wide UTMN Student Union, and the elected head of the Student Union

³³ From the interview with a student. March 2023.

³⁴ Russian Socialist Movement.

of SAS. The Union was officially registered on March 9, 2022, exactly two weeks after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The SAS administration was confused by the establishment of the Student Union, which it could not prohibit since formal registration at the university level was successful. The prevailing strategy of the SAS administration was to deny the existence of the Student Union. Some letters sent to administrators were replied to; at other times the director explicitly stated that he was unaware of such a body. When the Student Union published³⁵ the email exchange with the director where he claimed that the Union did not exist, the leader of the Student Union was called to the director's office. One of the administrators warned them that these publications might be considered a basis for opening a criminal investigation against the Student Union. In an hour-long conversation, the threats of the criminal affair were combined with encouraging passages about how the administration appreciated the work of the Student Union.

Despite being ignored and threatened by the SAS administration, the Student Union managed to organize several discussions among students and faculty, to gather feedback from students, and to change unpopular regulations of the studying process.³⁶ In autumn 2022, the Student Union had its second election, and although the mood is rather pessimistic now, there is an officially established student-led structure with an experience of self-governance. The very fact of its existence means that there are still some institutional opportunities to prepare for future protests.

Meanwhile, the hardest but crucial task that everyone in Russia is facing is to preserve the rare existing horizontal structures and, if lucky enough, to establish new ones. The less consolidated the regime becomes, the greater the importance of these structures will be.

Conclusion

This essay aimed at depicting the reaction of students, professors, and administrators of a Russian Liberal Arts

college to Putin's invasion of Ukraine. This question was tricky because the case under consideration – the School of Advanced Studies – was and is not a private college, but rather an institute within Tyumen State University. Therefore, it was hard to predict whether its reaction would be contentious (because of the Liberal Arts values), or silent (because of its firm embeddedness into the regime structure).

My argument was developed very much in line with a theory of “incremental autocratization”. Specifically, I have argued that the year of invasion was not marked by extraordinary measures taken by university authorities that would prevent student mobilization. In fact, all the “necessary” activity for undermining the collective power of students and professors was successfully implemented by the administration before the war. Even the design of this Liberal Arts college did not imply any procedures and institutions that would limit the authority of its director. This model is implemented across the entire country, where ministers are appointed by the president, university rectors are appointed by ministers, and directors of the institutions are appointed by rectors. When this model was challenged by the professors and the demands for a more inclusive power structure were formulated, the director of SAS used a two-fold strategy. On the one hand, he gradually got rid of the contentious faculty, which took three to four years after the first episode of contention. On the other hand, the director compromised on irrelevant issues and allowed the creation of collective bodies that were unable to change the system of management. This allowed the infringements on academic freedom in the form of censoring students' diploma research topics. In 2021, two students were forced to change their research topics: one on Navalny's electoral strategy, and the other on Russian Liberal Arts colleges.

Yet, the absence of structures that could be mobilized did not mean the absence of protests against the war. Many students went to anti-war demonstrations, some spread anti-war leaflets, were arrested, and after the introduction of new extremely repressive laws, stopped their collective protests. Some professors discussed the war

during their lectures, and one even encouraged students to go to demonstrations by deliberately not checking their presence in her seminar. But even these, atomized, almost individual actions of protesters were “taken care of” by the university management. The private conversations in messenger were disclosed by the top university administration and students were strongly asked to avoid politics. The reaction of SAS administrators to this pressure exercised upon their students was silence.

Silencing of the protests did not mean automatic conversion of protesters to supporters of the war. Hence, if one asks where the massive protests in Russia are, the most accurate answer will be “in the future”. The regime managed to consolidate itself in 2022, and before that had been incrementally disempowering society. Therefore, the spontaneous protests that appeared here and there did not translate into a revolution or a general strike. In the language of theory, the “opportunity structure” was inconducive for the sustained protests – there was simply no network that could be mobilized and no coordinator that everyone would follow. And the Liberal Arts college, whose one-person administration constantly compromised academic freedom and the existence of the institution, was not the right place for revolution to be born.

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³⁵ Studsovet SAS. Vkontakte. September 2022. Deleted post.

³⁶ Among other rules, students were prohibited to take sick leave.

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Exploring students’ perceptions of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and academic integrity in European Higher Education

By IRIS KIMIZOGLU / European Students’ Union

Introduction

Over the years academic freedom, institutional autonomy, student and staff participation, public responsibility, and academic integrity have been mentioned within different Ministerial Communiqués and documents of the European Higher Education Area. However, it is only in recent times that these five principles have been formally recognized and established as the fundamental values of the Bologna Process. This development comes after Europe has witnessed a worrisome decline in academic freedom in recent years with countries such as the UK, Poland, Hungary, Russia, Turkey, and Belarus leading the negative trend. (Kinzelbach et al. 2023)

Given that issues surrounding academic freedom have become a hot topic in Europe, the European Students’ Union (ESU)³⁷ set out to inquire how students in Europe perceive the status of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and academic integrity in their national contexts. ESU launched a survey in 2022 and published the results in January 2023 (European Students’ Union 2023). This article provides a summary of the key findings from the aforementioned report, accompanied by additional contextualization from the author, taking into account

more recent paradigmatic and systemic shifts in the socio-political environment in which higher education is situated.

Method

The aim of the survey was to gather student perceptions on the current state of higher education with regards to academic freedom, institutional autonomy and academic integrity. The survey also sought to gather information on how students view their individual study experiences and the role of student unions as representative bodies. In particular the survey drew inspiration in particular from the European University Association (EUA) “Autonomy Scorecard” (European University Association 2017) with regard to questions concerning institutional autonomy, and the European Network for Academic Integrity (ENAI) “General Guidelines for Academic Integrity” (Tauginienė et al. 2019) with regard to the questions regarding academic integrity.

The academic freedom section specifically looked into issues of “freedom of association”, “freedom of expression”, and “freedom of knowledge”. The three sub-themes were identified as essential elements regarding their significance for a students’ study experience.

³⁷ Founded in 1982, the European Students’ Union (ESU) is the umbrella organization of 45 national unions of students from 40 countries of the Pan-European continent. ESU promotes and represents the educational, social, economic, and cultural interests of almost 20 million students to all key European decision-making bodies: the European Union, Council of Europe, UNESCO and the Bologna Follow Up Group.

They connect to the right of student self-representation as well as the freedom to learn, encompassing both the acquisition of knowledge and the expression of individual opinions. The institutional autonomy specifically looked into the issues of “university governance”, “financial autonomy”, “campus integrity”, and “student organizations”, following already established monitoring instruments such as the Autonomy Scorecard and the Academic Freedom Index. Lastly, the questions in the academic integrity section were designed in connection to the five values “honesty”, “trust”, “fairness”, “respect”, and “responsibility” as established by ENAI, with a focus on individual student experiences.

The survey was promoted through ESU's communication channels and member unions, resulting in 645 student respondents from 30 European countries. The majority of respondents (78%) came from five EU member countries, with the highest percentage from Hungary (34%), Austria (14%), Romania and France (each 11%) and Czech Republic (8%). This can be attributed to an underlying self-selection bias, as the national student unions of these countries exhibited stronger promotion and outreach efforts for the survey compared to other unions. Half of the respondents were enrolled in bachelor's or equivalent programs, while one-third were enrolled in master's or equivalent programs. Almost one-tenth of respondents were enrolled in PhD programs, and the rest were not studying within the Bologna tertiary cycle system. The majority of respondents (63%) were between 18–24 years old, while 21% were between 25–30 and 16% were over 31, matching the average age distribution of students in the European Higher Education Area according to Eurostudent VII (Gwosc et al. 2021).

While the respondents were adequately distributed regarding gender and age, there was a bias towards students in EU member countries. The authors acknowledge that the survey results are not statistically significant due to the number of respondents and note further limits in connection to the survey design (see European Students' Union 2023 for further details), however, at the same time, they believe the results provide valuable insight into the student perception of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and academic integrity in Europe.

Results

Academic freedom

FREEDOM OF CHOICE REGARDING ONE'S EDUCATIONAL PATHWAY

From a learner's perspective the freedom to learn is a fundamental freedom which encompasses different dimensions, such as the access to (higher) education, freedom of choice regarding the study program and the freedom to express oneself within one's studies, without fear of reprisal.

Regarding the free choice of study, two-thirds of respondents answered that they totally or somewhat agreed to having been free in their choice. A majority of those who felt constrained in their choice named the prospects of employability as an important decisive factor. Others mentioned that certain study fields are stigmatized within their family and/or society and therefore highlighted pressure from their family and/or society as a constraint (especially with the humanities seen as “useless”). This reflects the general trend of commodification and commercialization of education (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2009) and the underlying paradigm shift towards the neoliberalization of higher education (Stapelfeldt 2019) which threaten academic freedom. In this context education is being increasingly viewed as a tool to serve the needs of the labor market rather than as a means of enabling individuals to expand their knowledge, develop critical thinking skills, and cultivate personal growth. A worrisome 13% of respondents answered that they had been subject to intimidation for what they study by other students. Similarly, 13% of respondents answered that they had been subject to intimidation for what they study by academic staff.

Regarding the access to higher education, respondents named admission regulations (such as admission exams, numerus clausus, limited spots) as preventing students from pursuing their intended study program. Doctoral students reported difficulties in finding suitable supervisors due to a lack of offered PhD places. In this respect, respondents elaborated that this lack was a result of higher education institutions not having the funding for project based research in which PhD places can be embedded. The problem of accessing study and PhD pro-

grams is particularly interesting as very often the right to regulate admissions is defended as part of the autonomy of higher education institutions (European University Association 2017) and the competitive nature of science. However, even if interpreted as an element of institutional autonomy, these issues are in direct tension with students' right to determine their own learning paths. Although some limitations to access to certain degrees are justified (e.g. to ensure quality of teaching through an adequate student-to-faculty ratio), they must be balanced and not subject solely to the decrease and lack of public funding of higher education (Pruvot, Estermann, and Kupriyanova 2020). Several students also mentioned financial and other socio-economic restrictions as a restricting factor. Lastly a perceived lack of appropriate programs available was indicated by some students as hindering their freedom of choice, especially in view of recent developments in several member countries of the European Higher Education Area where ideologically driven political decisions target the existence of certain study fields (e.g. gender studies) (Pető 2021).

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Despite academic freedom being grounded in rights such as the freedom of opinion and expression, the right to education, and the right to the benefits of science, and being protected by international rights regimes (Scholars At Risk 2020), students' responses regarding self-censorship were alarming. Since not every political view is also an academic view, the survey asked about self-censorship both in regard to academic and political views. For example it might occur that a pharmaceutical student self-censored political views within their role as representative in the higher education governance or while talking to their professor outside of the classroom, but since they are not academically a student of a field corresponding to politics such as political science students, it was not self-censorship of an academic view. A concerning 28.5% of respondents reported self-censoring their academic views, and an even more worrying 43% reported self-censoring their political views. These figures suggest that fear of reprisal poses a major threat to students' academic freedom, with an additional 31.8%

of respondents stating that they felt they could suffer consequences for expressing their personal beliefs (both in regard to academic and political beliefs) regarding their studies.

The chilling effects of self-censorship also pose a threat to democratic societies as “academic freedom protects not only the individual scholarship and expression but also the free functioning of academic institutions in democratic societies” (European Higher Education Area 2020). A few respondents mentioned that they self-censored views related to conservative (namely religious and right-wing) issues. While this is noteworthy, it should also be carefully contextualized against the backdrop of the rise of the far right in Europe. The far right uses the nebulous idea of a “cancel culture” as a fighting term to delegitimize any opposition against own ideological views. Therefore, further research is needed to find out under which circumstances self-censorship exists and to what extent this is actually to be problematized. In academic literature, some authors argue for absolute academic freedom, one that has the right to oppose “normative values about world politics” (Macfarlane 2017) such as global citizenship or democracy. Absolute academic freedom entails the right of learners “to exercise freedoms that will promote their personal growth as independent thinkers” (ibid.) and higher education institutions should not serve as a “platform for the preaching of ideologies” (Lingle 1990). Other authors believe in the higher education democratic mission (Council of Europe 2007; European Union 2017) and thus a responsibility to promote democratic and human rights values through education. They warn against a weaponization of the freedom of speech against inclusivity and diversity in higher education.³⁸ The survey findings do not provide an indication of the nature of the reported self-censored views nor can be determined, within this article, whether there are circumstances under which self-censorship may not be harmful to a students' academic freedom. However, it is crucial to note that the issue of de facto self-censorship among students needs to be examined further, both in addition to, and in light of a needed differentiated debate surrounding (student) free speech in academia.

³⁸ For a comprehensive overview of different lines of thoughts and publications regarding the idea of the weaponization of freedom of free speech against academia and marginalised groups see: Hackett and Rivera 2021.

Institutional autonomy

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS' SELF-GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

Significant knowledge gaps among a large proportion of students are brought to light by the survey on the issues of HEI's governance and funding. For instance, when asked about how academic leadership positions are elected in their countries, over 40% of the respondents answered that they did not know. Similarly, when asked whether students have a say in the election process of academic leadership positions, more than 32% stated that they did not know, while 26% responded negatively. These results seem particularly concerning as the majority of respondents come from the countries where, indeed, students do participate in the elections of academic leadership positions, notwithstanding the recent problematic changes to Hungary's higher education law. Over 20% of respondents do not know how higher education is funded; over 41% believe that funding comes from both public and private sources, and 31% believe that higher education in their country is solely financed by public authorities. While over 55% believe that higher education institutions are free to administer their finances freely, over 36% are uncertain.

The overall lack of knowledge about higher education governance is also reflected in the question of campus integrity, where more than 50% of the respondents stated that they do not know whether state actors such as law enforcement are allowed to perform their duty on campus without authorization of the higher education institutions. Similarly, over 25% of respondents do not know whether their higher education institutions employ their own security services. Given the growing number of violent in-

cidents and attacks against students on campuses in Europe (AP News 2022; Karakas and Bellut 2021; Freeman-Powell 2020), the lack of information and knowledge about security measures among students is particularly concerning. The findings underscore the need for better information and education about higher education governance, financial autonomy, and campus security measures among students. It is important that students are aware of their rights and the measures taken to ensure their safety on campus.

STUDENT ASSOCIATION AND STUDENT SELF-GOVERNANCE

ESU believes that academic freedom for students is linked to their rights and ability to freely associate and form representative organizations that are recognized by higher education institutions, as outlined in ESU's Student Rights Charter (European Students' Union 2021). Accordingly, respondents were surveyed with regard to student associations³⁹ and student representatives⁴⁰ in a general sense as well as specifically with regard to self-governed student representational bodies.⁴¹

In terms of freedom of association almost 84% of students answered that they feel free to associate. Negative answers are mostly and unsurprisingly regarding Belarus, as well as associations of LGBTQI+ groups in countries such as Hungary and Turkey (Karakas and Bellut 2021; Petó 2021). To delve deeper into the extent to which specifically student representative bodies (i.e. student unions/councils and the like) are integrated into the democratic governance of higher education institutions, 65% responded that their representational bodies are part of their higher education institutions' governance, while 11% responded negatively, and 20% expressed uncer-

tainty or lack of knowledge. Acknowledging that the existence of student representational bodies does not mean that student representatives are also part of all relevant formal and informal decision-making processes and relevant bodies of a higher education institution, it was further inquired whether respondents felt like student representatives are part of all relevant decision-making processes and bodies at their higher education institution. Here 17% of respondents answered negatively, compared to only 11% answering negatively towards the more general question on any kind of representation of students in higher education structures. This suggests that 6% of the respondents perceive the current involvement of their representatives in the governance structures of their higher education institutions as insufficient. Some of the respondents who answered negatively regarding the inclusion of student representatives cited tokenism, lack of (voting) power, and inadequate representation on committees compared to other status groups as reasons for their perception of student representatives being not included in all relevant decision-making processes and bodies. The survey also revealed that it is perceived that fundamental decisions are often made in settings outside of the structures in which students are involved, leading to discrepancies between de facto and de jure involvement.

Regarding the election of student representatives, nearly 78% of respondents believe that the process is democratic, while almost 13% were unsure. Additionally, nearly 71% of respondents feel that their representatives are mostly or fully able to speak and act freely within their institutions. However, when asked whether "student unions" (i.e. student representational bodies⁴²) operate independently from higher education institutions and staff, almost one-third were unsure, and 17% answered

negatively. The "I don't know" answers indicate a lack of knowledge about the daily work of student representatives and "no" answers indicate that a minority of students in Europe believe student representatives do not act independently. Finally, almost two-thirds of respondents believe that student unions are free to spend their funds, while almost one-third did not know; again, indicating a lack of knowledge about how student unions are set up and operate.

Academic integrity

Academic integrity as a concept refers to a set of principles aimed at developing and promoting an academic culture free of academic misconduct and corruption. Most commonly it is described as consisting of, but not limited to, the six values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage (Tauginienė et al. 2019; International Center for Academic Integrity 2018). As such, academic integrity designates duties in terms of good conduct for all members of the academic community. Current discourses regarding academic integrity mostly "appear to be concentrated around research integrity and disciplinary matters" (European Students' Union 2022), plagiarism and other forms of cheating, as well as corruption in academia. By especially focusing on academic integrity from the students' perspective, the survey aimed to shed light on how academic integrity in light of student rights can be improved and maintained in higher education institutions.

The survey revealed alarming results regarding academic honesty, with over 21% of respondents reporting that they had witnessed academic fraud (such as plagiarism or collusion) in their higher education institution. Even more concerning, 31% of respondents reported that

³⁹ In this article, the term "student association" encompasses the entire range of student organizations, including self-governed student representational bodies (i.e. student unions, student councils and similar structures) as well as other student-led initiatives and organizations within the context of student representation and participation in and around higher education institutions.

⁴⁰ In this article, the term "student representative" generally encompasses individuals who have been elected or appointed to participate in decision-making processes and bodies within higher education institutions. This includes those who were appointed or elected through self-governed student representational bodies (i.e. student unions, student councils, and similar structures) as well as those who have been directly elected by the student body to fulfil representational functions (i.e. without the student representational body as an intermediate). When used in the context of a "student representational body," the term exclusively refers to the representatives who serve as representatives of these bodies.

⁴¹ In this article, the term "student representational body" refers to self-governed student organisations that represent the political, social, cultural, and economic interests of the entire student body within a higher education institution. These bodies, including student unions, student councils, and similar structures, are typically recognised and regulated by higher education laws. The term is used interchangeably with the term "student union".

⁴² The different forms of student representation mentioned in the passage are:

1. Student associations: The survey included questions regarding student associations, which are organizations formed by students and recognized by higher education institutions.
2. Student representational bodies: The survey specifically inquired about student representational bodies, such as student unions and councils, which are involved in the democratic governance of higher education institutions.
3. Student representatives: The respondents were asked about the involvement and inclusion of student representatives in decision-making processes and relevant bodies of their higher education institutions.
4. Student unions: The passage discusses student unions as self-governed student representational bodies that may operate independently from higher education institutions and staff.

It is worth noting that the passage refers to student associations and student representational bodies interchangeably in some instances, highlighting their connection to student representation and participation in higher education governance.

they had witnessed corruption (such as nepotism or clientelism) within the academic community. While academic fraud may be less visible to students than corruption, both figures are worryingly high. In light of these findings, further research should be conducted to investigate the types of corruption and fraud occurring within the academic community, as well as the actors involved.

Additionally, the survey sought to determine whether a culture of trust exists between academic staff and students. Results showed a generally positive trend with 25% of respondents answering in the affirmative, while 55% somewhat agreed. Connected to discussions revolving around academic honesty and trust, the survey also explored student perceptions on proctoring software and other surveillance measures, which in recent years have become more prevalent. The survey revealed that around 60% of respondents were unsure whether their institution allowed the use of these tools or if they were being used. This lack of awareness is concerning as these tools can potentially infringe on students' rights related to privacy, data protection, and anti-discrimination (Wedermann and Stillig 2022; Gesellschaft für Freiheitsrechte 2022).

When asked about experiences with unfair treatment, almost half of the respondents answered affirmative to having had experiences with unfair treatment in higher education before. In addition, regarding a second question, 9% of the respondents reported to have witnessed blackmailing in higher education.

To determine the respondents' perceptions regarding respect from academic staff towards students, two questions were asked. The first asked about the ability to give feedback to academic staff without the fear of being a victim of discrimination retaliation. Around 43% of the respondents answered that they feel like they can express feedback without any fear and an additional almost 30% answered they can do so but did not feel like the feedback was taken seriously. This distinction in answering was made because being able to express freely does not necessarily mean that feedback will be treated in a

respectful manner, i.e., seriously instead of being discarded. A second question explored whether higher education staff are aware of the hurdles students face on a daily basis and whether they act empathetically towards students. 13% of respondents answered affirmatively and an additional almost 50% answered that they somewhat agreed. One-third of the respondents opted to answer that they believe that higher education staff are either not really or not at all aware of students' hurdles, nor acting empathetically.

Lastly, regarding the topic of responsibility three questions were posed. Asked about whether professors⁴³ take their teaching responsibility seriously, over 20% of respondents answered affirmatively, while an additional 63% answered "yes, mostly". Another set of questions investigated the presence of independent institutional bodies responsible for handling violations of academic integrity and ensuring accountability for those who engage in misconduct. The results revealed that half of the respondents lacked awareness on the matter. About 38% of students answered that there is a code of ethics at their higher education institution, whereas more than 7% answered that there were no independent institutional entities of any sorts available. Merely 10–20% of students knew of the existence of either ombudspersons, reporting points, or support for victims of academic misconduct. These findings suggest that a significant number of students may be unaware of where to report witnessed violations or seek help in such matters. In addition, more than half of the respondents were unsure about the possible consequences for academic misconduct. While around one-third of the respondents believed that verbal warnings, academic sanctions, or even suspension/firing would be likely outcomes of misconduct, over 8% thought that individuals in violation of academic integrity faced no consequences at all.

Concluding remarks

Despite the survey's low response rate, the results offer valuable insights into students' perceptions of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, academic integrity, and

student participation in higher education governance. Students in Europe appear to largely engage in self-censorship, an issue of high concern. Additionally, it is crucial to address how current trends in higher education governance can limit students' ability to exercise full academic freedom, particularly in matters of access to higher education.

Regarding institutional autonomy, higher education governance and funding, and campus integrity the survey reveals a significant lack of knowledge regarding both higher education institutions and student representational bodies. The lack of knowledge on matters of campus integrity is particularly worrisome given that incidents of infringements have been on the rise in several countries in the European Higher Education Area.

In terms of academic integrity, a significant number of respondents expressed trust in the relationship between students and academic staff, while at the same time often experiencing unfair and disrespectful treatment. In addition, the survey highlights students' lack of knowledge about proctoring and other surveillance methods, which have become increasingly prevalent in higher ed-

ucation due to the rapid advancements in technology in recent years and the pandemic.

Overall, the survey demonstrates a clear need for improved education and awareness among students about matters of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, student participation and self-governance, and academic integrity as well as student rights. Without this knowledge, students cannot defend their rights as learners or fulfil their democratic duty to protect academia against attacks which occur both from forces inside and outside of academia. If we hope to maintain a higher education system and academic community resilient against undue interference and attacks, it is imperative that we educate students on these issues and empower them to identify questionable practices both in terms of their own rights as learners and through a system-level analysis of the development in the higher education landscape. Failure to do so risks undermining the European model of academia, which is based on values such as critical thinking, self-development, co-determination, and the free pursuit of knowledge as cornerstones of knowledge-based democracies.

⁴³ The survey sought to specifically investigate the teaching responsibilities of professors, considering their enhanced role in ensuring the quality of education, excluding contractual academic staff. This enhanced role relates to the special status that professors usually enjoy in comparison to contractual academic teaching staff. Professors often hold positions as civil servants, which grants them certain rights not enjoyed by contractual staff. Additionally, professors typically receive higher compensation and have greater responsibilities in leading institutes, departments, and other academic entities.

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