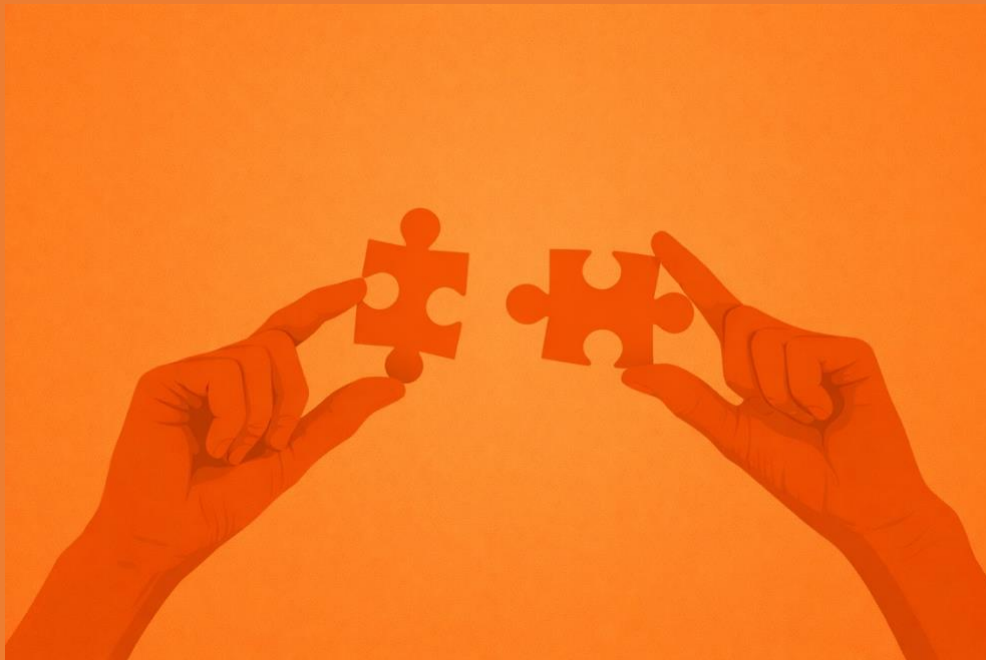




POLICY BRIEF

Indoctrination and Militarisation of Education in Belarus and Russia: Recommendations for European Partners and Belarusian Democratic Forces

Imprint



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This policy brief is based on the results of an expert discussion, “Education in Belarus and Russia: The Militarisation of Childhood, Indoctrination and Mobilisation”, held on 31 July 2026, with the participation of representatives of the Belarusian and Russian expert communities.

The discussion was held under the Chatham House Rule. The analysis therefore reflects the substance of the discussion without attributing individual assessments to named participants.

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Executive summary

Education in Belarus and Russia is being increasingly transformed by the education policies of states undergoing militarisation. This process cannot be reduced simply to an expansion of ideological and military-patriotic activities. Different parts of the education system are increasingly performing distinct mobilisation functions. Schools normalise state militarist narratives. Vocational education channels young people into sectors of the labour market prioritised by the state, including the military-industrial complex. Universities and research institutions, meanwhile, face growing political control and are being tasked with training loyal intellectual elites expected to devise a new ideology and lead a mobilised society.

At the same time, similar trends are implemented and manifested differently in the two closely related authoritarian regimes of Belarus and Russia. Russia combines centralised ideological management with considerable regional and institutional autonomy and variation, as well as the continued existence of private and non-formal education sectors. This allows a degree of relative freedom from state control to survive at local level. Belarus has a smaller education system subject to much tighter and more comprehensive control. In the Belarusian case, the space for private and relatively independent education has been almost entirely eliminated, leaving virtually no remaining niches for relative autonomy.

This does not, however, mean that the scale, thoroughness and depth of institutional control automatically result in more effective indoctrination and militarisation of participants in the Belarusian education system. Expert discussion points to an important distinction between the two countries. In Russia, certain forms of militarisation are more aggressive and are more often accompanied by initiatives from below. In Belarus, administrative control is denser, but participants in the discussion assessed public receptiveness to militarist narratives as lower. At the same time, there is insufficient representative evidence to measure reliably the actual effectiveness of indoctrination and militarisation in Belarus. This conclusion should therefore be treated as an expert interpretation rather than an established fact.

European policy could focus on supporting, preserving and developing the pro-democratic academic capacity of both countries while taking account of their country-specific circumstances. The strategic principle underlying such support should reflect the challenges, risks and opportunities faced by members of academic communities both within the countries and in their diasporas. This means combining long-term institutional support for academic infrastructure in exile with individual support for democratically minded members of academic communities inside Belarus and Russia. The academic communities of Belarus and Russia constitute a repository of the knowledge, expertise and skills required by a democratic society, as well as a potential vanguard of future democratic transformation.

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Introduction

This policy brief is based on analytical materials from a discussion among Belarusian and Russian experts entitled “Education in Belarus and Russia: The Militarisation of Childhood, Indoctrination and Mobilisation”, held on 31 July 2026 and organised by the Institute for Development and Social Market for Belarus and Eastern Europe (see: <https://idsmbee.org>), with the support of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (Vilnius, Lithuania).

The discussion examined the transformation of secondary, vocational and higher education in Belarus and Russia since 2022, when aggressive indoctrination and militarisation began to dominate state education policy in both countries. At the same time, international isolation and the self-isolation of educational institutions initiated a process of “sovereignisation” and attempts to compensate for the loss of the European dimension of international cooperation through a “pivot to the East”, primarily by expanding cooperation with China and India.

This policy brief is not a comprehensive study of the education systems of Belarus and Russia. It is a decision-oriented analytical synthesis intended for European institutions, EU Member State governments, diplomatic missions, think tanks, donors, foundations, public policy experts, and Belarusian and Russian democratic forces.

The central problem lies in the asymmetry between two processes taking place simultaneously. Indoctrination and militarisation of education are intensifying in both countries, while autonomous institutions, professional communities and international networks capable of constraining these processes are weakening. For Belarus, this creates a particular strategic risk because Russian institutional and cultural influence is increasing at the same time as links with the European academic area are weakening.

In this context, it is essential to distinguish between the situations in Belarus and Russia despite similarities in a number of trends. If European policy focuses only on the visible manifestations of militarisation, or treats the Belarusian education system as an extension of the Russian one, it risks overlooking Belarus's specific institutional vulnerability and losing the academic capacity, professional networks and independent knowledge required for the country's future democratic transformation.

Key Findings

- **Educational institutions continue to perform a dual role.** On the one hand, certain segments and practices retain some capacity to constrain aggressive militarisation. On the other, educational institutions are increasingly being used as instruments of indoctrination, militarisation and mobilisation-oriented governance.
- **The militarisation of education is becoming increasingly differentiated and systemic.** Schools normalise state militarist narratives. Vocational education institutions channel young people towards sectors of the labour market prioritised by the state, including industries linked to the military-industrial complex. Universities and research institutions face increasing political control and pressure to prioritise content and personnel loyal to the state.

- **Belarus and Russia share a broad trend towards the militarisation of education, but differ in its institutional form and intensity.** Russia retains considerable variation between regions, universities and schools, as well as niches of relative autonomy due to the existence of private education and informal practices. At the same time, some forms of militarisation are more aggressive and radical. In Belarus, state control is more uniform and denser, following the near-total disappearance of the independent private education sector. Participants in the discussion assessed Belarusian society as less receptive to militarist and imperial narratives. However, there is insufficient reliable representative evidence to measure the extent to which such narratives are actually internalised by participants in the education system.
- **Higher education has suffered the most.** In both countries, the severing or substantial weakening of links with the European academic area has been accompanied by stronger political control, restrictions on international mobility and growing risks for independent academic activity. In Russia, this process is associated, among other things, with the abandonment of the previous model of integration into the Bologna Process and a reorientation of international academic links. In Belarus, it is associated with post-2020 repression, institutional isolation and restrictions on academic freedom. Belarus has additionally experienced a substantial reduction in academic staffing capacity, declining student numbers, stronger Russification trends and growing dependence on the Russian education system.
- **The growth of vocational education cannot be explained by militarisation alone.** Genuine labour shortages and strong demand for scarce occupational skills are important factors in both Belarus and Russia. However, where economic priorities themselves are shaped by a prolonged war, a militarising economy and security requirements, vocational education becomes part of the apparatus of a militarising state. This is particularly characteristic of Russia, where the military-industrial complex accounts for a substantial share of the economy and the degree of economic militarisation increasingly resembles “war capitalism”.
- **The effects of state-driven militarisation through educational institutions remain poorly understood.** Publicly available evidence of increased repression, indoctrination and militarisation in education does not in itself demonstrate that these measures are effective in influencing citizens. Careful longitudinal research is required to establish the relationship between repressive, indoctrinatory and militarist practices and changes in public attitudes.

Why this matters for European policy

Education policy is often treated separately from security, democratic resilience and foreign policy. The materials analysed in preparing this policy brief suggest that maintaining such a separation is becoming increasingly difficult.

The first issue concerns the potentially long-term and self-reinforcing impact of indoctrination and militarisation through educational institutions. Schools and universities do more than transmit knowledge: they also help shape interpretative frameworks and social

norms. If militarising practices become an established part of the educational environment and are genuinely internalised by students, their effects may persist over the medium and long term. The available evidence does not, however, allow the scale of such internalisation to be measured directly. Long-term consequences should therefore be regarded as a substantiated risk rather than as an already demonstrated outcome.

The second issue concerns risks to Belarusian sovereignty, national identity and the predominantly anti-war attitudes that experts observe in Belarusian society. In conditions of isolation from the European academic world, the younger generation has fewer alternatives to Russian cultural and educational influence. This increases the risk of further Russification, militarisation and the spread of Russkiy Mir ideological narratives. The scale and depth of this influence, however, require separate empirical measurement.

The third issue concerns the erosion of educational human capital that will be needed for future democratic transformation. Should a window of opportunity for democratic change emerge, reforms will require the participation of the most highly educated sections of society. Without their involvement, reforms may once again prove insufficiently far-reaching or successful. This makes support for and development of pro-democratic research and academic communities an important priority. These communities can form an innovative vanguard of a future democratic society.

The fourth issue concerns inconsistencies in European policy towards Belarus and Russia, which depend substantially on the quality of expert knowledge about developments within these countries and on the level of interaction between expert and policy communities. Participants in the discussion pointed to the insufficient institutionalisation of such interaction and the poor retention of expert knowledge within decision-making structures themselves.

This problem is particularly acute in the case of Belarus, where expertise remains dispersed and often depends on short-term project funding. Yet decisions concerning the mobility of Belarusians and Russians, sanctions policy and restrictions affecting education require reliable, continuously updated and institutionally accessible knowledge of the sector.

The fifth, structural, issue concerns funding criteria. The SCEEUS report “Belarusian Civil Society Inside and Outside of the Country” (2024) documents a systemic deadlock: Belarusian organisations mostly have access only to short-term funding, for a maximum of one to one and a half years and, more often, for just several months. This traps them in a permanent cycle of preparing new funding applications.

Organisations whose leaders remain in Belarus and/or which do not have relocated staff face the most difficult financial circumstances and are often forced to rely on voluntary work. Such organisations become trapped by a “Matthew effect”: the criterion of “financial sustainability”, borrowed from the practices of stable European institutions, excludes precisely those organisations for which instability is not evidence of weak management but a direct consequence of repression, forced relocation and banking restrictions in EU countries.

The problem is compounded by barriers to accessing bank accounts and transfers resulting from anti-money laundering requirements affecting Belarusian and Russian NGOs both inside their countries and in exile, including in Georgia, Poland and Lithuania. A sharper and more polemical version of this criticism can be found in the Give Democracy a Chance discourse (see: belarusfreedom.eu), according to which Western assistance has created a system of dependence on national grant intermediaries, operators and facilitators of financial assistance, generating bureaucratic obstacles and hindering the development of grassroots movements.

Overall, education and science should not be treated as marginal institutions within the social sector, but as major drivers of human capital development and a necessary precondition for the possibility of democratising Belarusian and Russian societies.

Recommendations and policy proposals

1. Establish a Permanent Expert Advisory Body on Education and Research in Belarus within EU Institutions

DG NEAR and the European External Action Service (EEAS) should establish a permanent expert body on education, research and human capital in Belarus rather than relying exclusively on fragmented project operators and occasional expert consultations that are poorly connected to one another.

Such a mechanism could maintain regular contact with independent Belarusian researchers and experts, academic initiatives, representatives of democratic forces and, where security conditions permit, confidential professional networks inside Belarus. This would enable European institutions to develop a more accurate understanding of the current situation in the country and take more relevant and effective policy decisions.

Such a body would also strengthen institutional memory in the development of European policy towards the Belarusian education and research sectors, including decisions concerning sanctions, academic mobility and engagement with individual researchers and organisations. This could reduce the risk of inconsistent or contradictory decisions affecting independent members of the Belarusian academic and research community.

2. Make Education and Research a Distinct Long-Term Priority of European Assistance

The European Commission, EU Member States and major European donors should consider treating Belarusian educational and research infrastructure in the diaspora as a distinct priority linked to preserving human capital capable of resisting indoctrination, militarisation and Russification and, in the future, contributing to democratic transformation in Belarus.

To increase the effectiveness and durability of such support, priority areas and key recipients should be identified for long-term direct institutional support for education and research projects, with funding cycles of between two and five years.

3. Fund an Independent Research Programme on Attitudes and the Effects of Indoctrination and Militarisation in Education

European research-funding organisations and foundations, think tanks and expert organisations should develop a secure programme of longitudinal research into the effects of indoctrination and militarisation in education on citizens of Belarus.

Such research would make it possible to understand changes in the attitudes of students, parents and teachers and differences between regions and social groups; assess the scope for manoeuvre between formal reporting requirements and actual classroom practice; measure the effects of indoctrination, militarisation and Russification on language and identity; examine teachers' behaviour and parents' motivations when choosing educational services inside the country and abroad, including online education and informal alternatives.

This would provide more relevant and representative evidence on the actual social consequences of the transformation of the Belarusian education system.

4. Preserve Individual Academic Mobility and Do Not Equate Belarusian Citizenship with Loyalty to the Lukashenka Regime

EU Member State governments, universities and relevant European programmes should maintain accessible opportunities for Belarusian students and researchers to study, teach and conduct research in democratic European countries and other countries with advanced academic environments.

Security screening is necessary, particularly in sensitive research fields. It should, however, be proportionate and individualised. Belarusian citizenship alone should not substitute for an assessment of a person's institutional role or conduct.

Belarusian citizens should not automatically be treated as representatives of state institutions or as politically loyal to the regime solely on the basis of their citizenship.

The aim should be to ensure that independent members of the Belarusian academic community retain professional opportunities, are not subjected to unjustified stigmatisation, do not become academically isolated either inside or outside the country, and do not lose their qualifications as a result of professional downward mobility in exile.

5. Establish Secure Cross-Border Academic Infrastructure Linking Members of the Belarusian Democratic Academic Community in the Diaspora and Inside the Country

European donors, universities and academic organisations in exile should support distance education and academic supervision, joint research, secure online teaching, publication opportunities, digital archives, visiting researcher programmes and other forms of distributed academic work.

Programmes involving people located inside Belarus must strictly follow the “do no harm” principle. Publicly identifying an individual's organisational affiliation, visible participation or formal membership should not be required where this would create risks to the life, health or security of members of the academic community.

Members of the Belarusian academic diaspora can preserve knowledge, professional standards, networks and skills that will be needed in the future to restore a fully functioning academic environment in Belarus and reintegrate it into the European and international academic area.

6. Develop in Advance a Framework for the Transition of Belarusian Education When a “Window of Opportunity” Emerges

Belarusian democratic forces, independent academic associations and expert organisations, with the support of European partners, should prepare a modular transition framework for Belarusian educational institutions.

Several issues require advance preparation:

- rehabilitation of members of the academic community who were dismissed or persecuted for political reasons;
- academic lustration;
- dismantling repressive and censorship units and bodies within educational institutions;
- establishing fully functioning academic self-government bodies;
- developing scenarios and procedures for selecting democratically minded institutional leaders;
- recognition of qualifications, research and publications produced in exile;
- mechanisms for dual institutional affiliation and temporary return;
- reintegration into European academic networks; and
- other related measures.

These proposals should not amount simply to replacing one politically selected elite with another. Professional competence, transparent procedures and collegial governance should be central.

Detailed mechanisms of individual accountability will also require differentiated approaches depending on the discipline concerned. Forms of political interference in the humanities and social sciences have not been identical to those affecting technical or natural sciences. A single undifferentiated staffing policy could destroy valuable capacity without addressing the underlying institutional problem.

7. Institutional Support in the Diaspora, Individual Support Inside Belarus

Given the risks and threats facing members of the academic and research community inside Belarus, as well as the challenges to the long-term survival of Belarusian educational and research infrastructure in the diaspora, it would be reasonable to follow a strategic principle of providing institutional support to Belarusian education and research initiatives in the diaspora and individual support to members of the academic community inside Belarus.

Risks, Constraints and Mitigation

The recommended strategy faces a number of limitations and risks.

Security is paramount. Contact with professionals inside Belarus and Russia can expose participants to risks and genuine threats to life and health as repression of dissenting members of academic and research communities intensifies. Programmes should therefore be individualised and minimise data collection, publicity and the display of formal affiliation.

Long-term funding creates risks of dependency. For critical infrastructure, multi-year institutional support is preferable to an uninterrupted succession of short-term grants. However, where long-term institutional funding is provided without evaluating performance indicators, institutions risk stagnation and deterioration. Belarusian experts have raised this concern particularly in relation to the European Humanities University in Vilnius.

This risk can be substantially reduced through transparent, public and collegial governance structures in educational institutions, involving representatives of the academic and research diaspora, representatives of the democratic forces of Belarus and Russia, and members of academic communities and civil society in EU countries and the United States.

Institutions in exile cannot substitute for domestic legitimacy. Members of academic communities abroad have valuable experience and greater organisational freedom. Future reform, however, will require the participation of those who continued to work inside Belarus and Russia. European programmes should therefore preserve links rather than institutionalising a permanent division between academic communities “inside” and “outside” the countries.

Country-specific circumstances must be taken into account. Similarities in the processes of militarisation and indoctrination should not obscure existing differences between the two countries. Belarus's more limited access to financial support, smaller reserve of human and institutional capacity, institutional vulnerability and risks to national identity resulting from

Russification justify a differentiated approach and, for some instruments, priority support for the Belarusian academic and research community.

Preparation for the transition period should remain adaptive. Education reform plans developed in exile today can define possible legal and institutional options. They cannot, however, predict precisely the political conditions under which a future “window of opportunity” may open. The appropriate objective is therefore to build expertise, alternative models and implementation capacity while keeping implementation options open.



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