



Exile as an Institutional Response to Authoritarian Interference

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In August 2021, as Kabul fell to the Taliban, administrators of the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) burned sensitive documents to protect staff and students. The Taliban would target anyone associated with this private university partially funded by the United States government, because it championed free expression, pluralistic ideas, and gender equality. Fortunately, that was not the end of AUAF. The government of Qatar invited the university to reopen in Doha, where it now serves Afghan students in person and online. AUAF has joined the small but growing cohort of institutions operating as universities in exile around the world. In the past 20 years, at least five universities in different parts of the world have gone into exile.

How are they able to survive abroad when so many universities impacted by war and strife either succumb to new regimes or shutter? What does it even mean to be a university in exile? We define a university in exile as a higher education institution (HEI) physically displaced under duress that resumes academic activities elsewhere yet maintains a strong commitment to the national or cultural community it originally served. We hope contributing to a better understanding of this phenomenon can guide HEIs facing similar challenges in the future, encourage interventions and collaborations to reduce the dangers of exile, and generate further research on this emerging and important aspect of higher education in the modern world.

In today's increasingly volatile world order—one more and more hostile to democratic institutions—political leaders seek to exert more control over higher education. University exile occurs amid these broader geopolitical conditions. Of the cases we examine, two come from post-Soviet countries rebounding towards authoritarianism after a period of relative liberalism, another comes from a country invaded by its neighbor, and two more emerged from countries whose governments were overthrown by internal military groups.

Universities in Exile

European Humanities University (EHU) and Central European University (CEU) were private institutions founded in Belarus and Czechoslovakia (later relocating to Hungary), respectively, in the early 1990s. Their purposes were to orient the next generation towards European values, liberalism, and democracy following the fall of the Soviet Union.

Abstract

This article introduces the concept of “university in exile” and situates this phenomenon in the context of rising authoritarianism around the world. The authors examine the causes and consequences of HEIs going into exile by considering five examples. They conclude that democratically-oriented HEIs with strong global partnerships are the most likely both to go into exile and to survive it, and argue that defenders of democracy around the world should support these institutions.

However, in 2004, Belarus' president and aspiring dictator Alexander Lukashenko revoked EHU's license on a legal technicality after university leadership refused to succumb to governmental control. Likewise, Hungarian autocrat Viktor Orbán ousted CEU in 2018 in a similar manner. Shortly thereafter, the government of Lithuania invited EHU to reopen in Vilnius, where many Belarusian students can commute across the border to attend. CEU moved to Vienna, Austria, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, where it expanded its offerings to include undergraduate programs and helped found the Open Society University Network to promote open societies and access to humanities and social science education. Both universities received financial and logistical support from international organizations, the European Union, and liberal philanthropist George Soros, which helped them overcome the challenges of relocation.

Nearby in Ukraine, Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea led Russian separatist militias to overtake campuses and other infrastructure in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. Donetsk National University was the first of 18 institutions to relocate into Ukraine's interior, with the assistance of Ukraine's ministry of education. It was renamed Vasyl Stus National University of Donetsk to pay homage to its origin while avoiding confusion with the now Russian-controlled former campus. With its new lease on life, Vasyl Stus National University committed to disseminating information about the Russian incursion, advocating for Ukrainian sovereignty, and highlighting the role higher education can play in advancing world peace.

The American University of Afghanistan was also physically overrun, in this case by Taliban insurgents in 2021. In addition to support from the governments of Qatar and the United States, online learning technology advanced by the pandemic has helped it maintain cohesion with its global diaspora of students and staff. A partnership with Bard College in New York ensures its diplomas remain relevant and internationally recognized. 2021 also saw a military coup in Myanmar endanger that country's academic community. A long history of student participation in civil protest rendered academics persona non grata to the country's military leaders. After the last coup, Parami University, a private nonprofit HEI founded in 2017, elected to move entirely online to preserve safety and maintain its values of diversity and critical thinking. Bard College and Open Society University Network were instrumental to its transition.

Preserving Democratic Ideals

These examples show that a critical factor precipitating a university's displacement is a liberal democratic orientation amid mounting nationalism. However, the qualities of a steadfast mission promoting academic freedom and strong connections to international partners are also what allow institutions to successfully move to a new location when remaining becomes untenable.

Universities in exile do more than provide continuity of teaching, learning, and research. They keep hope alive for the future among those with marginalized national identities aligned with democratic values. Instances of institutional exile have risen over the past 20 years, and we can reasonably expect this phenomenon to continue. It is therefore imperative that allies of democracy around the world proactively develop strategies for response. The Open Society University Network has emerged as a key organization. But other defenders of democracy in government, academia, and the non-profit sector should supplement their work by considering key questions such as how can diplomatic interventions upstream mitigate such extreme measures? What role should governments play in strengthening democracy in other nations? And to what extent should universities in exile orient themselves back towards their home countries with the hope to return?

Universities in exile provide value to both their original and host communities. For example, AUAF enables Afghan students to continue learning in safety, whether in Qatar, remotely (and secretly) from Afghanistan, or elsewhere amid the global diaspora. AUAF preserves networks of Afghan intellectuals and connects them to supporters around the world. It lays the groundwork for an eventual return to Afghanistan. Should the day ever come, AUAF will be poised to contribute to rebuilding the nation's educational infrastructure. Meanwhile, AUAF brings diverse perspectives and bright minds to Qatar. In turn, Qatar's generosity in providing a home for AUAF raises the country's image in the eyes of the democratic world. Supporting universities pressured into exile is a key way for the global higher education community to fight back against rising authoritarianism. ▲

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