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Restricted learning, engaged students. Understanding the effects of academic freedom violations on youth education and activism

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the relationship between student academic freedom, educational experiences, and activism within authoritarian contexts, adopting a socio anthropological lens. Drawing on an ex-post comparative analysis of studies on Turkey and Belarus, the research is grounded in in-depth interviews with 47 students (29 from Turkey, 18 from Belarus). First, the study develops a typology of academic freedom violations that students encounter, identifying variations along two critical axes: the source of the violations and their visibility. Each type significantly yet differently impacts students' capability development and membership to the academic community. Secondly, the article examines the resultant forms of student mobilization, fruitfully distinguishing between activism as academic freedom and activism for academic freedom. Student experiences reveal how these interrelated strategies, employed both nationally and transnationally, evolve across time and contexts. Ultimately, this article advocates for a holistic and relational understanding of academic freedom. Such an approach acknowledges the mutual dependencies and potential discrepancies between diverse members of university communities (students, faculty, staff, governance) and recognizes the significance of experiences and responses that transcend national borders. It underscores the need to consider student perspectives and transnational dimensions in defense of academic freedom, particularly in restrictive political environments.

1. Introduction

Current studies reaffirm the centrality of academic freedom for higher education (HE), examining its key challenges (Karran 2009; Aarrevaara 2010; Lott 2024), measurements (Spannagel and Kinzelbach, 2023), and transferability beyond the Global North (Zain-Al-Dien 2016; Appiagyei-Atua 2019; Oleksiyenko 2021). Despite pioneer work and international reports highlighting violations against their educational rights (MacFarlane 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2018; SAR, 2024), students remain marginal within debates on academic freedom.

This article analyses student academic freedom in authoritarian contexts by focusing on Turkey and Belarus, both marked by recent state repression that had a profound impact on academia. In Turkey, the purges that followed the 2016-attempted state coup led to the dismissal of around 6,000 scholars in 115 public institutions, the closing of 17 private universities, the persecution of 2880 university members due to alleged ties to the Fethullah Gülen movement (Özkirimli 2017). Nearly 65,000 university students were affected (Hünler et al. 2024). In Belarus, the 2020 crackdown on protests directly affected at least 1694 students and professors: university staff

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expelled 289 students, dismissed 186 professors without just cause, and perpetrated intimidating activities in more than 1400 documented cases¹.

Drawing on an ex-post comparative analysis of two qualitative case studies, we explore the connection between student academic freedom, educational experiences, and activism from a socio-anthropological perspective. We identify the commonalities and differences of student academic freedom violations, and we propose a typology that analyses their main features, sources and impact on students' educational experiences and activism. Our contribution is threefold. Firstly, the article develops a student-centered understanding of how attacks against HE transform student capabilities. Secondly, it explores how students attempt to exercise their agency in the face of these violations and what this reveals about their engagement with academic freedom. Third, the analysis complements existing educational, legal and philosophical approaches with a much-needed socio-anthropological understanding of the experiential dimension of academic freedom.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Defining student academic freedom

Scholarship concurs that "academic freedom for the university, academics and students is indivisible, interdependent, and interconnected" (Appiagyei-Atua 2019:154). It protects the unrestricted inquiry of both students and scholars while also upholding university autonomy from external bodies (Karran 2009; Butler 2017). This autonomy is vital for advancing democracy and social justice (Quinn and Levine 2014; Cole 2017). Restricting the freedom of any HE member affects the entire academic and societal sphere (Haskell 1996; De Gennaro et al. 2022). However, the debate largely focuses on scholars and frequently neglects students, viewing their freedom as a "collateral product" of faculty rights (Macfarlane 2012; Zain-Al-Dien, 2016). Rare studies stress the need for a broader understanding of student academic freedom as a distinct, yet complementary, principle (Monypenny, 1963; Popović, 2023; Mazzero, 2025a).

The capabilities approach fruitfully overcomes these shortcomings (Nordal, 2016; Macfarlane 2012, 2017; Jackson, 2020; Mazzero, 2025a). Capabilities address the real opportunities available to individuals in determining their aspirations in valuable ways (Owens et al., 2022). While focused on the individual, they are also shaped by the structures, relationships, and circumstances involving individuals (Ibid., 92). Applied to academic freedom, we argue that understanding students' rights in terms of capabilities is relevant to underscore the liberties they are entitled to and how these liberties are embedded within the relational and communitarian nature of HE. Consequently, student academic freedom encompasses not only the absence of restrictions on freedom of expression, research, and discussion (*negative liberties*), but also the proactive cultivation of critical thinking and empowerment through student-centered learning (*positive liberties*) (Nordal, 2016; Macfarlane, 2017). Throughout this article, we adopt a capabilities-based understanding of academic freedom to go beyond a mere descriptive list of infringements and to uncover their substantial implications in terms of students' empowerment and agency development.

Academic freedom also encompasses students' political rights, including the right to assembly, peacefully demonstrate, and debate political issues within the university and the public sphere (Nussbaum, 2018). Student university politics is a specific form of political participation, embedded within HE institutions at the local, national and transnational level, and expressed through student representation and/or activism outside formal HE bodies (Altbach 2006; Klemenčič 2024). Student politics reflects their agency, that is their capabilities to influence the broader learning and social environment. Klemenčič (2015) distinguishes between *student political agency* - more oriented towards influencing HE policies through direct interaction with authorities - and *student civic agency* - which reflects student engagement with university or local communities through volunteering or civic initiatives. While the latter may not primarily aim to promote changes in HE, it is still relevant for student university relations, daily life and future prospects.

Therefore, student academic freedom can be conceptualized as the combination of the individual rights to education, political engagement and self-development, with the collective right (and duty) to actively contribute to the academic community and its protection (Appiagyei-Atua, 2019; Mazzero, 2025a).

2.2. Connecting student academic freedom, capabilities and activism

Scholarly work on student activism within HE offers a valuable entry point for further exploring the connections between academic freedom, student capabilities, and political rights.

The literature considers both visible and organized expressions of student political and civic activism, as well as less visible actions mirroring "backstage intimate work" (Kamal 2023: 523) through care and daily support (Stewart and Williams 2019; Klemenčič 2024). Indeed, also 'surviving in a space that was not designed for them' (Cheuk et al. 2022:522) and maintaining a peripheral position in relation to core activism are important strategies for resisting marginalization (Curnow 2022). It is equally important to consider student engagement as a dynamic process with antecedents and consequences that may, over time, transform episodic participation into more structured advocacy or, conversely, lead students to withdraw into under-track practices (Kahu 2013; Klemenčič 2024; Efimov 2024). Importantly, current work highlights how belonging to a community can increase student engagement (Kahu 2013; Zhao and Kuh 2004) and encourage activism, which can help students overcome isolation on campus (Faragol et al. 2018).

¹ Data by Honest University: <https://hu-repressions.honestby.org/en> (last visit 24.04.2025)

While our analysis draws heavily on debates surrounding academic freedom and student activism, we also acknowledge their two main limitations. Firstly, academic freedom remains peripheral in the literature on student activism. This disconnection may be due to the traditional association of this concept with academics (Rahbari et al. 2025) or, from a Eurocentric perspective, it may be because student representative bodies and university associations have only recently incorporated academic freedom into their agendas (Westa 2017; Darmanin et al. 2024). The European Student Union (ESU)² - an umbrella organization gathering delegations from national students' unions and a consultative member of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) - has recently emphasized the need to move beyond the one-sided debate on academic freedom in Europe. This can be achieved by fostering students' perspectives and actions (Kimizoğlu and Vespa 2023), and by incorporating academic freedom into the Student Rights Charter.

Drawing on the literature and our own empirical research, we have identified two interconnected and mutually constitutive ways in which analyzing activism contributes to an experience-based understanding of academic freedom: *activism as academic freedom* and *activism for academic freedom*. In the former, student political/civic agency forms an integral part of academic freedom and serves as a litmus test for the extent to which HE institutions and the state respect students' negative and positive liberties. Student nonviolent extramural utterance for democratization and human rights expresses their right to promote social change for the common good (Daloz 2004; Harrison and Mather 2017). Concerning the latter, students have criticized the neoliberal university (Della Porta et al. 2020; Ojwang 2024), the transformation of learning into training (Ntokozo and Violet 2024) or the rising cost of housing and university fees (Barnhardt et al. 2015). All these instances express their active engagement with academic freedom as well as key components of contemporary HE systems, like institutional autonomy and universities' social responsibility (cf. Hall and Tandon 2021)³. In this respect, we can say that activism is a 'purposive learning endeavor' through which academic freedom is expressed, negotiated and practiced (Pradhan et al., 2024:9).

Secondly, little work exists on the fate and trajectories of activist students whose position within universities was interrupted through expulsion, deportation or forced migration. While the impact of coercive displacement on academic pathways and identities is beyond the scope of this article (Gallo, 2024; Mazzero, 2025b), it is essential to explore how violations compromise students' capabilities within HE communities. This requires moving beyond an analysis of academic freedom focused on localized/national communities. Indeed, social movement studies underline the significance of transnational mobilization in collective actions (Della Porta and Tarrow 2004; Tarrow 2005; Phattharathanasut 2024) and the pivotal role of displaced communities in fostering cross-border solidarity (Abiyaghi and Younes 2018; Selim 2021; McKeever 2021). Nevertheless, little is known about how violations against student academic freedom transform their education and activism, both locally and across borders.

To address these shortcomings, a socio-anthropological approach is crucial. By this, we refer to a perspective that interrogates how social actors interpret specific components of HE principles differently and experientially (A°kerlind & Kayrooz, 2003). This perspective is necessary to understand how students make sense of, and react to, academic freedom violations, and the extent to which this process leads to changes in their activism over time. Developing a student-centered, socio-anthropological approach enables us to gain a deeper analysis of the tensions between activism *as* and *for* academic freedom. This distinction emerges through student experiences and concrete actions, thus eluding purely legalistic lenses. More broadly, it responds to the need to complement a recognition of academic freedom as a global, cross-contextual value with attention paid to its socio-cultural variability and the voices that tend to remain marginal in the debate (cf. Hao 2020; Matei and D'Aquila 2024). Furthermore, this approach grasps the situated and relational nature of academic freedom. Classical and more recent studies across law, HE and philosophy acknowledge the communitarian nature of academic freedom: the interdependence of its members - of their responsibilities and competencies - alongside the unity of interest that ideally shapes their relationships (Menand 1996; Rajagopal 2003; Post and Pujol 2024). Yet, few studies have empirically investigated what this interdependence means for students' daily and longer-term understanding of academic freedom, and what are the implications of violations for the way they relate to other HE members.

2.3. Driving questions

Drawing on these considerations, this article explores the relationship between academic freedom, educational experiences and student activism in the context of authoritarian regimes. Adopting a socio-anthropological perspective, it addresses the following research questions:

1. What types of violations of student academic freedom can be identified in the Turkish and Belarusian academic communities?
2. What impact do these violations have on students' educational experiences and activism?
3. How can a socio-anthropological perspective enhance our understanding of student academic freedom?

Answering these questions leads us to a twofold argument. Firstly, violations erode students' negative and positive liberties not only

² ESU Website: <https://esu-online.org/> (last visit 17.08.2025).

³ The six fundamental values of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) are academic freedom, academic integrity, institutional autonomy, student and staff participation in higher education governance, and the public responsibility *for* and *of* higher education. While universities' social responsibility is not formally included as a value of the EHEA, it is indirectly addressed and substantially subsumed in the public responsibility *of* higher education and the academic community to contribute to society and to address societal concerns. Furthermore, in the 2018 in the Rome Ministerial Communiqué, a key EHEA document on academic freedom, it is stated that academic freedom can only be realised in combination with public and social responsibility.

as individuals, but crucially as part of a learning community. Building on empirical data, we introduce the concept of de-membership to describe the systematic marginalization and exclusion of students from HE communities, a process enacted through the erosion of their capabilities and (negative and positive) liberties. Secondly, violations constrain students' political agency as an expression of academic freedom. In the face of repression and displacement, students more openly engage in activism for academic freedom, aimed at rebuilding fragmented community relations and restoring educational possibilities.

3. Research contexts

Since the early 2000s, the HE systems of Turkey and Belarus have been shaped by contrasting dynamics. On the one hand, they witnessed an increase in internationalization, neoliberal reforms, foreign investment, transnational scientific collaborations, and student mobility programs (Aba 2013; Bülbül 2017; Efe and Ozer 2022; Gille-Belova, 2015; Gille-Belova and Titarenko, 2018; Loher et al., 2019). On the other hand, recurrent waves of censorship and state repression have progressively compromised academic freedom and institutional autonomy (Aktas et al. 2018; Dubrovsky and Kaczmarek, 2021), in contrast with the countries' formal commitment to key international pacts (ICESCR, ICCPR and ECHR).

Importantly, both countries were, at the time of the research, members of the European Higher Education Area⁴. This specification is relevant because the EHEA, in particular through the 2018 Paris Ministerial Communiqué and the 2020 Rome Ministerial Communiqué (Annex I, Statement of Academic Freedom), has asserted how academic freedom and integrity, institutional autonomy, and student and staff participation in governance are the "backbone" of the EHEA, fostering a shared understanding of academic freedom⁵. Nevertheless, the development of a common conceptual and policy framework has often been hindered by contrasting interpretations and limited implementation of this value within specific national contexts (Matei and D'Aquila 2024), particularly those affected by democratic backsliding (Dang et al. 2023). Therefore, the analysis of the two countries can fruitfully contribute to empirically understand this underpinning tension in academic freedom debates within the EHEA. The distinct features of Turkey and Belarus are examined below.

3.1. The Turkish context

The 1982 Anayasa Constitution protects freedom of research (Art.27) and the right to education (Art.42), while entrusting the Council of Higher Education (CoHE-YÖK) to oversee HE for the sake of national security, thereby limiting university autonomy (Kandiyoti and Emanet 2017). HE expansion since the 1980s led to the growth of state universities and private foundation institutions, the latter subsidized by prominent business families (Hünler 2023), with controversial effects (Hünler et al. 2024). Some scholars emphasize that rising enrolment reflects the democratization of tertiary education through the inclusion of previously marginalized strata (Özoglu et al. 2016; Polat 2017), whereas others cite the lowering quality of education (Bayram 2018; Çelik 2023), and how neoliberal policies allowed the Gülen Movement's growing religious influence (Kandiyoti and Emanet 2017).

Critical events, such as the 2013 Gezi Park protests, sparked a 'discernible trend towards authoritarianism' and the AKP adoption of a 'polarizing discourse' between loyalists and enemies (Baser and Öztürk 2022: 401-2). Hostility towards dissenting HE members increased in 2016, when 1128 scholars of 'Academics for Peace - AfP' signed a petition urging the state to end violence against the Kurdish population. The public prosecutor and the CoHE-YÖK took legal actions against signatories for alleged terrorist propaganda, resulting in job losses (Özkirimli 2017; Aktas et al. 2018). In the same year, the failed state-coup attributed to the Gülen Movement led to the declaration of a state of emergency (OHAL) and to massive purges within universities. Academic freedom violations targeted HE communities across the public/private, urban/rural and political/ideological divides (Özatalay 2020), leading to the loss of institutional autonomy (Hünler 2023), indoctrination (Özkirimli 2017), declining internationalization (Doğan 2023), and exile (Baser and Öztürk 2022; Vatansever 2020). Students were the largest demographic group of HE members affected, yet they are the least visible in existing studies (Hünler et al. 2024).

3.2. The Belarusian context

Rooted in the Soviet model, the Belarusian HE operates under a highly centralized framework characterized by strict control over university administration, uniformity in curricula, and one-man management (Kuraev 2016). The Ministry of Education, directly

⁴ Belarus was suspended from the EHEA only in 2022, following its support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine (EHEA, full members: https://ehea.info/page-full_members). The Bologna Follow-up Group justified the decision by stating that "the Russian Federation invasion of Ukraine disregards the values and goals of the EHEA" (EHEA, statement: <https://ehea.info/page-ADOPTION-OF-THE-STATEMENT>). However, the authors support existing critics noting that this response came with significant delay and overlooked the long-standing crackdown on academic freedom in Belarus prior to 2022. Since the beginning, Belarus's membership in the EHEA has been controversial and strongly contested by the European Students' Union (i.e., ESU statement: <https://esu-online.org/esu-belarus-is-not-eligible-to-become-bologna-country/>).

⁵ In the last few years, the European University Association (EUA) – a consultative member of the EHEA – have produced position papers and guidelines on protecting and promoting academic freedom, offering practical guidance to universities and aligning with EHEA principles. The most recent document is the 2025 EUA Position Paper and Guidelines 'How universities can protect and promote academic freedom EUA principles and guidelines. With more specific reference to EU member states, the European Parliament launched since 2022 a yearly EP Academic Freedom Monitor to help improve the promotion and protection of academic freedom in the European Union.

influenced by the presidential administration, dictates degree programs and course content, leaving little room for institutional and academic innovation (Gille-Belova, 2015; Gille-Belova and Titarenko, 2018). University rectorship is subject to presidential elections without meaningful input from academic communities. Structural constraints undermine institutional autonomy and severely limit freedom of research and teaching. Over the past two decades, Lukashenko's government has used universities to promote state ideology and to administratively restrict scholars' activities (Gille-Belova, 2015; Shaton, 2009). Notable examples include the criminalization of the independent Belarusian Student Association in 2001 (Dounaev, 2007) and the closure of the European Humanities University in 2004 (relocated to Lithuania)⁶.

The already limited academic freedom cracked down following the 2020 Presidential Election, deemed fraudulent by Belarusian activists and international observers⁷. As citizens joined mass protests, the regime responded with unprecedented repression, detaining thousands of people who reported physical abuse and inhumane treatment (Kolarzik and Terzyan, 2020; Moshes and Nizhnikau 2021). Students organized marches, boycotts, and silent protests, challenging state authority within and outside the university campuses⁸ (SAR, 2021; Popović, 2023). In response, government forces arrested students and professors, threatening them with expulsion and degree revocation. Repression peaked on 12th November 2020 (the "Black Thursday"), when 12 student activists were arrested and sentenced to two years and six months in prison⁹. This led to a drastic decrease in protest actions. Many activists were either arrested or forced to leave the country to avoid criminal charges or compulsory military service (Popović, 2023; Mazzero, 2023).

4. Methodology

The article builds on two separate qualitative studies on Turkey (Gallo) and Belarus (Mazzero). Both studies focused on students who had been differently targeted by state authorities and university members and had been displaced from their university communities, either remaining in the country or moving abroad (Table 1).

4.1. Research on Turkey

The first research phase started with accidental ethnography during Ester Gallo's work as a professor at a private university in Turkey (closed in 2016), followed by a relocation to Europe. This involved unplanned moments of observation and conversation outside of formal interviews (Fujii 2015) which occurred within university and public spaces. These moments offered insights into how students related to ongoing or past violations of academic freedom in their daily lives. Longer-term acquaintanceship enhanced trust relations and framed the second research stage, which involved collecting interviews. Gallo conducted twenty-nine life-history interviews, partly with the help of a research assistant, which were structured around six themes: background; educational trajectories; activism; migration; care; academic freedom. This tool allows for a holistic view of student lives (Goodson and Sikes, 2001), offering insights into how academic freedom violations affected and were acted upon by research participants (Adriansen 2012). Case variation captured heterogeneity in class, ethnicity, religion, and geographic origin (Table 2).

4.2. Research on Belarus

Cristina Mazzero conducted research on Belarus from June 2021 to April 2022, exploring how experiences of academic freedom shaped students' migration trajectories in destination countries. This involved conducting a total of eighteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with students who had experienced educational/forced migration (Table 2), as well as expert interviews, informal conversations with diasporic Belarusian associations, and documentary research. Due to differences in nationality, language, and migratory background, Mazzero's positionalities (Fedjuk and Zentai 2018) created significant distance from the participants. However, similarities in age and educational stage facilitated open communication. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and participants' geographical dispersion in Western countries, interviews were conducted online (Zadkowska et al. 2022). They were structured around four interrelated themes: educational experiences in Belarus and abroad; activism in relation to the 2020 Elections; migration trajectories; meanings of academic freedom.

4.3. Cross-study comparison

This work develops a new integrated analysis to uncover unexpected findings through the lens of each other's work and the

⁶ Although a more detailed overview is not possible due to space constraints, it is important to note that the 2020 Presidential Election is the most recent case of a longer history of activism and subsequent exile for Belarusian students. Indeed, at each electoral turn, youth mobilization has been followed by government repression and forced relocation abroad, usually in neighbouring countries. One clear example of this recurring pattern is the Kalinowski Scholarship Programme in Poland, established in 2006 to support exiled Belarusian activists studying at Polish universities. Notably, the programme has been in place ever since. More information can be found here: <https://english.studium.uw.edu.pl/k-kalinowski-scholarship-program/>.

⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2022/civic-mobilizations-authoritarian-contexts/Belarus-main-report>

⁸ BSA report on academic protests and repression in Belarus (2021). <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1eMrnD-BLd5d1yF1zUSMSk2zoyUtmLR9Z/view>

⁹ BSA 2020, p.14

Table 1
Comparison of the two studies.

	Research on Turkey	Research on Belarus
Researcher	Ester Gallo	Cristina Mazzero
Period of research	2015-2023	2021-2022
Research design	Qualitative case study research design	Qualitative case study research design
Logic of inquiry	Abduction	Abduction
Methods of data collection	Accidental ethnography; life-history interviews (29); and semi-structured interviews 11).	Documentary research, in depth, semi-structured interviews (17); expert interviews (5).

Table 2
Participants' characteristics of the two studies.

	Research on Turkey	Research on Belarus
Total number of interviews	29 students	18 students
Language of the interviews	15 Turkish (subsequently translated); 10 English; 4 Italian.	3 in Italian; 13 in English; 2 in Russian with English translation
Mode and duration of the interviews	Online; between 90 and 180 minutes	Online; between 90 and 180 minutes
Gender composition	Female: 12; Male: 17	Female: 11; Male: 7
Age range	Between 25 and 38	Between 20 and 28
Place of residence at the time of the interview	Turkey: 5; EU countries: 20; Non-EU Countries: 4.	Belarus: 1; EU countries: 15; Non-EU countries: 2.
Migration status (where applicable)	Refugee status: 12; Student permit: 6; Work permit: 6; Double/New Citizenship: 3; Return to home country: 2.	International students with Student permit: 4; Return to Belarus: 1; Displaced students with Student permit: xx; Polish Humanitarian Visa: xx; Asylum seeker: xx; Other/not identified:
Relevant elements of sample variability	Moment of migration: Between the Gezi Protest (2013) and the State Coup (2016): 9; After the State Coup (2016): 20. Level of education: BA: 15 MSc: 4 MA: 8 PhD: 2 National students: (23) International students: 6 (Central and South Asia; MENA).	Moment of migration: Before August 2020: 5. After August 2020: 13 Level of education: BA: 13; MSc: 2; MA: 1; PhD: 2

abductive logic. The latter requires moving from the initial puzzlement (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012) raised by the complex interconnection between (violations of) academic freedom, student activism and displacement in two different contexts. This involved constantly de/re-familiarizing with the data through an additional phase of thematic analysis to identify similar or dissimilar patterns (Braun and Clarke 2006). Combining the findings highlights the benefits of interdisciplinary and collaborative research. Gallo is an anthropologist with research experience on skilled migration, whereas Mazzero is a sociologist working on the interconnections between displacement and HE. Similarities in research design enhanced the coherence of data interpretation, and the authors' long-standing and interdisciplinary collaboration fostered deep understanding of each other's work. Concerning research ethics, both studies comply with informed consent and data processing regulations. Participants were given detailed information about the contents, purposes and risks of the study, as well as their right to withdraw at any time. They provided oral/written consent and, upon request, were informed about the final research findings. To prevent harm (Ulrich, 2017), names and affiliations are kept confidential, with only pseudonyms used in the text.

5. Typology of violations of student academic freedom

The comparative analysis revealed commonalities in the types of student academic freedom violations across cases (Table 3). Below, we examine how these violations impact students' (interconnected) educational, political, and civic capabilities.

¹⁰ The categories listed in Table 3 were identified through a double strategy. Firstly, they were identified deductively by drawing on the yearly reports of Scholars at Risk (SAR) (Free to Think, 2024: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2024/>) which broadly document types of violations against HE members (i.e.: arrest, prosecution, campus violence). Secondly, they were identified inductively from our data analysis (e.g. deportation, forced relocation, dorm search and fellowship cancellation).

5.1. Violations in Turkey

Data shows that post-2016 violations are embedded within two longer-term processes. Firstly, students' broader educational experiences are shaped by their socio-economic background and their ideological and political orientations. Secondly, the fear and divisiveness generated by the repression of the 2013 Gezi Park protests, the 2015 blasts and civil deaths in Ankara and Suruç (South-East Turkey) and the deteriorating relations between the AKP and the Gülen movement. Rather than being exceptional occurrences, academic freedom limitations/violations are cumulative events that leave a mark on students' biographies across time and educational contexts. While being evident across all cases, this element forcefully emerges in relation to students from lower-classes and/or ethnic minorities, as well as middle/lower-class religious students who were perceived as Gülenists. Rivin, a Kurdish Law student currently in Northern Europe, recalls the trauma of moving from the Southeast Turkey to Ankara for his BA:

'I think it was the second week on campus, and another student asked me if I was a terrorist. He broke my nose, no one helped me. A year later, this happened again and I left the university. I was then accepted again in Istanbul and gave it a second try' (Rivin, 31, MA student in Law, forced migrant)

Rivin's educational experience went through a second interruption in 2013, when he participated in the Gezi Park protest and was taken into custody for a week. He returned to the university a few months later and felt completely isolated:

'My university in Istanbul is known as secular and progressive...but one thing is when you protest as a student from a good family and when, like me, you come from an almost illiterate Kurdish family with thirteen children from the countryside, and you are looked upon as violent or a loutish'

In 2016, after the police came to his house Rivin left Turkey and sought political asylum in Northern Europe. For several participants (*n*.18), longer-term engagement with social distancing, administrative ostracism or policing meant that the 2016 purges were somehow familiar, as they reiterated past discrimination and pre-existing stigma. Similarly, Beyza, a 28-year MA student with a refugee status recalls how she was often discriminated against and seen as less capable during her undergraduate years in Turkey because she came from an Imam Hatip school and wore the veil. This occurred frequently during class debates, when her views were dismissed by professors and peers as unfounded, or through ostracism enacted by administrative offices. 'What are you doing in a secular university?' was a question she was frequently asked. Beyza was disappointed with the projection of a conservative identity on her, that did not reflect her longstanding activism to support girls from disadvantaged families. She often claimed to be a gender right defender as much as her secular peers.

Academic freedom violations exacerbated between 2013 and 2016. Zümra, a 29-year-old, middle-class student from Northwestern Turkey, discussed her decision to withdraw from her university association in these terms:

'It was a bitter decision. For the first time we created a group organizing debate activities on such different topics: migration, ethnic discrimination, human rights. We were a mixed group of students, with different views, which was not common before. After all the violence in 2015 meetings became rarer. There were spying students reporting to the dean and the two of us had troubles. I guess many of us lost trust in each other and started avoiding, slowly, common activities.' (Zümra, 29, Doctoral student in Law, forced migrant)

Like other students, Zümra stressed that, despite students' polarization, the university opened a debating space that partly overcame social and ideological divisions. Yet, the deteriorating political environment weakened ties within the student community and created an environment in which derogatory attitudes delegitimized their maturity and knowledge. Several students reported that administrative staff and some professors started calling them *çapulcu*¹¹ and invited them to 'focus on taking exams and graduating rather than wasting time in nonsense activities', to quote one participant. While many students reappropriated the term, emphasizing its association with students' fight for their rights, participants also reported increasing difficulties in dealing with the growing climate of silence, spying and social distancing, which eroded reciprocal trust and increased campus insecurity.

The 2016 purges transformed growing, less visible limitations into systematic repression. As one participant put it 'all our education was up in the air', leaving students in a prolonged state of uncertainty. Several lost their fellowships and, after the closure of 17 universities, a space where to continue their education. International students were deported to their home countries, while national students were forcibly relocated to other universities. Some participants with good grade point average (GPA) found themselves transferred to low-ranking universities on the country's borders, a fact that was often interpreted as a downgrading of their educational career. Metin confronted the choice of dropping out or being transferred from a top-ranking university to one located in the country's border with Iran, away from his family and friends:

'I believe they did so because I was quite outspoken during the protests. My grades were not bad and there was no reason for moving me so far away. I tried to adjust, but due to the accusations against the university where I came from, no one talked to me, I failed two exams. I could not cope with it and decided to quit.' (Metin, 31, precarious workers. Interview 2022).

Coercive relocation marked a sudden eradication of students from their community of learners and daily campus life, as well as lost contacts with professors. Students recall feeling disoriented from not knowing for several weeks what had happened to fellow students

¹¹ Prime Minister Erdoğan called Gezi Park protesters *çapulcu*, meaning raiders conducting activities against state's security.

Table 3
Type and frequency of academic freedom violations¹⁰ experienced by participants.

Types of violations	Research on Turkey	Research on Belarus
Arrest and/or criminal charges	11	6
Physical and verbal assaults on campus	8	n.a.
Physical injury during protests	7	2
Forced university relocation in Turkey	16	n.a.
Deportation	6	n.a.
Cancellation of fellowships, degrees or exams	17	n.a.
Discrimination in daily university activities/relations	21	n.a.
Expulsion from the university	9	6
Threats from the university administration	12	9
Threats from the police	14	4
Dorm search	5	2

or teachers.

The erosion of community relations is crucially connected with the theme of betrayal. The university authorities handed over students' names to the government, thereby opening the way to mass arrests and trials for terrorism. This dramatically created an antagonistic relationship between students and universities:

'I cannot forget the day I went to my friend's trial. The rector and one person from the communication office were sitting there, and they had no hesitation in stating that the student was involved in harmful activities. There was no evidence for this...they made up the story to please ruling politicians' (Aysegül, 31, former MA student in Engineering, forced migrant).

Like many other research participants (*n.*21), Aysegül emphasized that the complicity between the university and the government in exposing students to police surveillance and unfair trials marked a turning point in her educational experience and her decision to leave Turkey. Overall, academic freedom violations occurred in a context marked by tension between the increasing diversification of the student population, which enabled student political agency, and growing government hostility, which exacerbated on-campus polarization and discrimination.

5.2. Violations in Belarus

The 2020 regime's crackdown severely impacted student academic freedom. Visible, state-perpetrated violations included the judicial harassment of dissident students (e.g., arrests, charges) and the systematic erosion of institutional autonomy, the appointment of regime-loyal rectors and the creation of the role of "Vice-Rector for Security". This was accompanied by widespread surveillance by security services on and off campus. University administrations frequently supported these top-down measures alongside threatening conversations, disciplinary procedures and expulsions. This institutional attitude exhibited a deeply rooted culture of complicity, effectively turning universities into arms of the regime against dissent. Pavel, a key member of his university's strike committee and one of the first students to be expelled, vividly recounted how he was given disciplinary written warnings to stop his political activities, which were later used to justify his expulsion. The official document read aloud the following words (translated): "order to expel Pavel for systematic improper performance of the students' duties... [even] if disciplinary measures were previously applied to him".

Beyond visible forms, interview data reveals more subtle violations within universities. One such dynamic is the systematic infantilization of students, which involves the structural denial of their right to be treated as adults (Macfarlane, 2017). Rather than recognizing students' dignified and proactive participation in university life, HE institutions adopted paternalistic behaviors. A key example of this are the "prophylactic conversations": closed-door meetings held in campus offices where high-ranking administrative figures (rectors, vice-rectors, faculty deans and professors) would confront activist students individually. These interactions were overtly threatening and deliberately structured to humiliate students, casting them in the role of disobedient children rather than responsible adults. The frequent involvement of students' parents, who were contacted by university officials to discuss their child's "misconduct", reinforced this infantilization. Ksenia, who was heavily involved in on-campus protest activities, was repeatedly targeted by the university administration through these prophylactic conversations:

"They would make you feel like a small child doing some stupid things. And the thing I feel bad about is that you also didn't really express any kind of objection. You just stood there, feeling like a helpless child, like a total loser, not saying anything. They would make you feel bad for doing the good thing, which is actually scary." (Ksenia, 20, Medicine, MSc, forced migrant)

As Ksenia recalls these moments of powerlessness, her frustration is evident, and her final laugh carries a bitter tone. The fact that she remained silent during those confrontations clearly angers her, not just at the system, but at herself, because she understands that her silence was precisely what they were trying to provoke.

The infantilization of students is closely connected to the erosion of communitarian relationships within the academic environment. In students' accounts, the Belarusian academic community appears highly fragmented, particularly along the lines separating university administration, academic staff, and students. The former are seen as the ones responsible for carrying out restrictive measures and passing information about politically active students to the police, which creates a strong sense of an 'us versus them'. This perception mainly includes high-ranking figures—such as rectors, vice-rectors, deans, and heads of departments—but also

administrative office staff. When asked to explain how such a deep rift had emerged, Lilia, a PhD student who had moved abroad to pursue HE in a more independent and meritocratic environment, explained:

“What happened over the years is a complete replacement of the administration. Before, the administrators were often elected by the faculty, and they had real connections with the students and the academic community. But over time, they were replaced with administrators loyal only to Lukashenko, not to the university. And that shift really made a difference. You could tell they didn’t care about students’ well-being at all, it was really upsetting. Not only were students being detained during the protests, but the administration actually brought the police into campus themselves” (Lilia, 28, Economics, PhD student, educational migrant).

Students’ evaluations of professors presented a more nuanced picture. While many participants acknowledged that some professors expressed opposition to the regime in private conversations, they were generally perceived as trapped within the system, deterred from taking a public stance out of fear for their professional security. With few exceptions, professors were described as passive actors within the broader authoritarian HE system.

“Some of the teachers were not really active, but they supported students. But some teachers preferred to ignore everything happening because they said: ‘Well, we are teachers, we give you some knowledge, and that’s it’.” (Roman, 23, International Relations, BA, forced migrant)

Although participants did not report any direct threat coming from professors, they still experienced their silence and inaction as meaningful, which contributed to their sense of isolation. Caught between the active repression imposed by university administrators and the passive stance of professors, politically active students found themselves increasingly isolated within their institutions, leading to the formation of strong peer bonds. However, rather than fostering a broader oppositional community, this inward-facing solidarity ultimately contributed to the gradual weakening of collective protest efforts.

6. Impact of violations on students’ HE experiences and activism

6.1. The Turkish case

Until 2016, activism among participants was quite heterogeneous. It involved students (*n.* 13) protesting against urban planning, human rights violations, and democratic values, particularly among those with a secular orientation. Although academic freedom was not an explicit aim of their activism, many students reflected on how the university environment had inspired their political engagement:

“The Gezi Park was the first protest for me. In the class we started to debate with students and those professors who were closer to the protest and with some friends decided that it was time to do something” (Afra, 31, MA student in Development Studies, forced migrant)

Other students shared how their activism transformed their educational experiences by creating associational and debating activities on campus. However, this synergy between political activism and educational engagement largely depended on the university type and location. Students coming from lower-class and/or religious families and who lost their educational status when universities closed in 2016 were reluctant to discuss their involvement in the Gülen movement for fear of being stigmatized. Several participants (*n.*9) shared how their closeness with the movement stemmed from studying in the *dershane* (private schools), as well as from being active in student dorms and associational activities as a way of serving the movement without being politically active in it.

Despite these differences, student accounts converge in highlighting how the months between the 2015 Ankara blasts and the 2016 state coup eroded their self-confidence and sense of safety. The killing and arrest of their peers, combined with a climate of mutual suspicion, led to their gradual withdrawal from political and civic activism. One account tellingly illustrates how divisiveness and fear affected their capabilities:

“What was for me the most difficult thing is to be scared to go to the university. You could cut the air with a knife as everyone avoided talking about sensitive issues, some professors were fired, and the student office was treating us as troublemakers. You did not know what to expect, what could go wrong, when, and how. Most of us were walking with our heads down.” (Ece, 32, MA in English and Turkish literature, forced migrant).

For several students like Ece, distancing themselves from activism is intertwined with a growing sense of unpredictability in daily university life. The possibility of being caught or targeted even during ordinary campus life exacerbated students’ sense of vulnerability and limited not only their freedom of expression but also their proactive cultivation of education as individuals and as members of a peer community.

For most participants (*n.*21), post-2016 displacement was associated with an overall sense of disillusionment regarding their political agency, a feeling that often persisted in subsequent diasporic years. Many bitterly interpreted the events in terms of ‘hopeless struggles’, as one participant put it. Detachment from activism combined with the need to escape from the country, finding a job or alternative educational opportunities. Yet, displacement in situ or abroad also marked two interrelated changes underscoring a renewed civic agency among students. Firstly, it sparked reflection on the need to rebuild educational relationships with dispersed and trustworthy peers and faculty members. Secondly, there was a shift from activism *as* academic freedom to activism *for* academic freedom. In the face of the erosion of student capabilities, continuing or resuming education – and struggling to reassert the right to

study and learn for oneself and peers - became a key, if not the only, form of resistance. Miraç, a male student who was detained for five months and is now taking a second MA in Europe explained:

‘While I was in prison the only obsessive idea I had was to continue my education: I guess this kept me alive as I believe it was the only possibility I had after leaving my cell. No matter what, I had to start from scratch with my MA degree, that I had to work at night to fund my studies. The day I was able to pass the Turkish border to join my new university I felt so free that I could take eight classes at the same time!’ (Miraç, 33. MA student in Politics, forced migrant).

Like for other students, Miraç’s experiences led him to reflect on how the renewed opportunity to interact with other students and professors constituted an anchor to regain an identity, overcome traumatic events, and to reassert his rights in a context where his previous activism was neither possible nor desired.

Reframing educational spaces – through informal classes in public or private settings and small-scale knowledge sharing (materials, books, videos) – reflects the importance of resisting the state’s attempt to disembodiment students from their communities and of rebuilding solidarity networks. Students’ attempts to re-establish a transnational dialogue with former professors also demonstrate the reacquisition of capabilities through civic engagement. A lack of knowledge about teachers’ fate was a propulsive force behind attempts to connect with them, often through online classes, thesis supervision, recommendation letters, or educational opportunities abroad. Transnational networking and community building to restore educational rights have led to a more open reflection on academic freedom:

‘It took me a long time to get rid of this sense of guiltiness that was instilled in us, as if we had truly committed a crime. I felt like I was really a terrorist, someone to avoid, and if you stay alone this gets worse. I mean to me doing these activities with friends, to have the possibility to meet again my professors helped me a lot to realize that I am not the one who’s wrong’ (Gül, 32, former MA student in Medicine, forced migrant).

Like others, Gül reflected on how displacement resulted in a protracted feeling of un-deservingness. Abroad, students (*n.* 19) actively supported their former college peers with fundraising, fellowship information, and faculty contacts. In some European countries, this was made possible thanks to exiled Turkish scholars establishing charitable organizations, like *Off University*, which provided online education for vulnerable students. At the same time, students tried to draw international attention to violations of student rights. This involved participating in student unions and lobbying European bodies, primarily through ESU¹² as well as collaborating with NGOs in Europe working on human rights. However, these actions were secondary to immediate, grassroots mobilization for fellow students: indeed, according to our data, they often occurred at a second stage of displacement.

6.2. The Belarusian case

The 2020 Elections were the main catalyst for activism among research participants, both in Belarus and abroad. The majority had not been politically active prior to that moment, but the scale of repression prompted a strong collective response. For those in Belarus, this took the form of mass peaceful protests calling for democratic reform and societal change. For those living abroad, it involved finding ways to financially support the protests and increase awareness of the Belarusian situation through public initiatives in their country of residence.

In September, all participants who were in Belarus at the time recalled seeking ways to express their political agency within university spaces. This resulted in the grassroots formation of student striking committees in the most politically engaged universities. A common initial step was to withdraw from the government-affiliated Belarusian Youth Union as a symbolic act of dissent, followed by silent demonstrations and picketing on campus. Students also initially sought to dialogue with university administrators, urging them to distance themselves from the regime and to safeguard students’ right to protest on campus. However, dialogue soon proved impossible, as administrators used these meetings to identify and report activist students to the police.

Despite the risks and the later consequences, many participants regard these moments as some of the most meaningful of their time at university. Their accounts often use positive language emphasizing hope, empowerment, and the value of taking actions alongside fellow students. Some experiences stand out as being particularly significant, like Lilia’s. She was arrested during one of the first mass protests and spent several days in prison; after struggling with psychological distress, she immediately agreed to join the new strike committee in her faculty when asked by some friends. Recalling that period, she said:

‘That period of my time at university was the best. We organized many demonstrations, we tried to protect students, and, overall, it was very sunny, in every sense. The weather was warm, and everyone was happy and full of enthusiasm.’ (Lilia, 22, BA, Economics, forced migrant).

The warmth described by Lilia is echoed by other participants, such as Pavel, who repeatedly emphasized that there had never been a real student community at his university before the strike committee.

¹² As a response to students displacement from countries like Turkey, Belarus, Afghanistan and Palestine (to mention some), ESU has established a fellowship track for students at risk (<https://esu-online.org/call-for-participants-academic-freedom-students-at-risk-track/>) while more broadly stressing the importance to actively engage the opinions of (activist) students on the definition/implementation of the fundamental educational values, including academic freedom (<https://esu-online.org/projects/academic-freedom/>).

"It was really surprising and exciting that so many people at the university cared about this, because, as I've said, there wasn't any sense of community. There wasn't *any community* at the university, everyone was separated from everyone else. But then, there was this real moment: a lot of people were ready to do something. We realized that, apart from a few exceptions, many people actually had a stance and cared about this." (Pavel, 21, MSc, Medicine, forced migrant).

Pavel's words emphasized two crucial elements that were recurrent in individual experiences. *Firstly*, these acts of political participation enabled students to reclaim capabilities and agency within the academic sphere—elements that had been previously denied or severely limited. *Secondly*, academic activism gave students the chance to develop communitarian relationships. While before August 2020 students' experiences were characterized by disengagement and dissatisfaction with university life, many were able to feel part of a larger community through activism.

However, we should be cautious when using the framework of academic freedom to interpret Belarusian student activism. Of all the participants, only those few who were actively involved in the Belarusian Students' Association connected the protests to student rights to education, freedom of expression, or the Bologna Process. For most participants, their demands for democracy and societal change were understood as entirely separate from such issues. Many had never even considered academic freedom before the interview. Even cases that the literature identifies as clear academic freedom violations may not be perceived as such by participants, as in Yuriy's case. He was expelled in retaliation for his political activism outside the university. However, when asked if this was connected to the state of academic freedom in Belarus, he responded:

"I don't think it had much to do with my kind of... my kind of case, because I was expelled not for academic reasons, but more for my political standpoint. This was another way to repress people and keep them away from protests." (Yuriy, 21, BA, Law, forced migrant)

Thus, in its initial stage, the Belarusian case is a clear example of activism *as* academic freedom, in which students expressed their political agency to advocate for democracy and human rights within and outside university campuses.

By the end of 2020, student activism had undergone a significant change: intensified government repressions had forced many participants to flee Belarus to avoid criminal charges and imprisonment. This led to a second phase of civic agency directed toward providing information, financial support, and access to educational opportunities for displaced students in host countries and communities. A variety of less visible activities were undertaken to address the practical needs of displaced students, such as finding safe routes out of Belarus, securing entry into host countries, and identifying university programs that would enable them to continue their studies. Thus, the transnational dimension became the predominant one: Belarusians already living abroad, including international students, were instrumental in providing assistance, helping to find housing and educational opportunities. Those forced to leave Belarus first became bridges for those who arrived in the following months, also thanks to the Belarusian Students' Association, which coordinated both practical support and international advocacy. As in the Turkish case, this latter form of supra-national activism involved crucial collaboration with ESU and various NGOs working on human rights. Consequently, student civic agency was primarily focused on restoring a sense of empowerment amidst displacement, including the reclamation of students' rights.

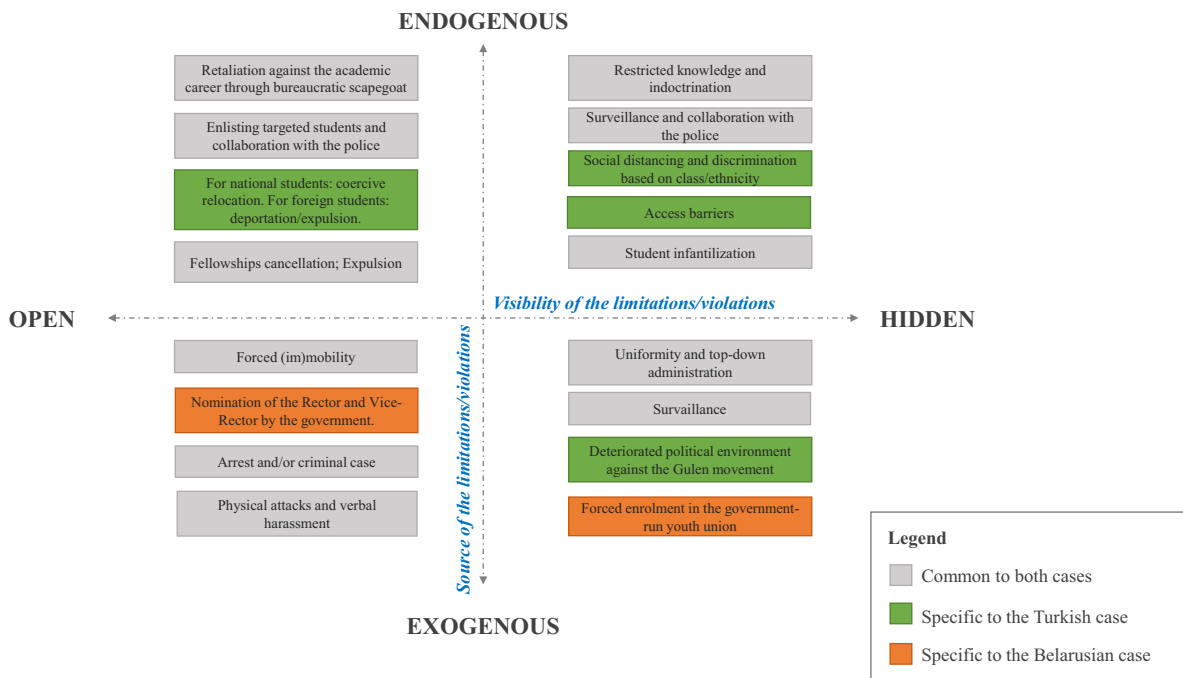


Fig. 1. Descriptive typology of limitations/violations of student academic freedom.

7. Comparative discussion

Building on these findings and connected to our first question, we propose that violations of student academic freedom can be conceptualized through a typology structured along two axes: visibility and source (Fig. 1).

The visibility of the limitations/violations refers to the degree to which acts undermining academic freedom are identifiable or publicly acknowledged, and it builds on the often-blurred distinction between *violations* and *limitations*. This axis highlights whether such limitations/violations are clearly observable and openly executed, such as public dismissals or government censorship (*open violations*), or whether they are less apparent and subtle, like informal pressures, self-censorship, social distancing, or the quiet and unjustified denial of opportunities (*hidden limitations*). The source of the limitations/violations refers to the identification of where the attacks originate, independently of their degree of visibility. When discussing the infringements of academic freedom, we need to consider a multiplicity of actors (Kronfeldner 2023). Academic freedom limitations/violations often come from actors that are external to the university, such as national governments or the police (*exogenous*). However, empirical evidence confirms that limitations/violations also originate from university leadership, fellow academics, and students (*endogenous*). Importantly, as the analysis developed here shows, infringements of student academic freedom often reflect a complicity between exogenous and endogenous agents. In both Turkey and Belarus, universities’ institutional responses to student activism through targeting and persecution reveal a collaboration between university governance, administration, authoritarian governments and the police. The combination of the two axes of visibility and source identifies four broad categories of limitations/violations: endogenous-open; endogenous-hidden; exogenous-open; exogenous-hidden. Yet, these categories should not be considered as separate boxes, as limitations/violations move along the two axes, occupying different positions across contexts and over time, along a continuum of possibilities.

Although overlapping, these categories are also differently linked to the erosion of student capabilities (Fig. 2), with important cross-case similarities. Open violations, both exogenous and endogenous, have a more direct connection to the criminalization of students’ political agency, affecting their negative liberties with regard to freedom of expression, assembly, and discussion. They are based on the enforced marginalization of students who are deemed unloyal, which often produces overlapping forms of displacement in situ and abroad. Complementarily, hidden limitations permeate students’ daily university life and relations through subtle expectations of uniformity and infantilizing attitudes. This, in turn, inhibits the proactive achievement of autonomy and critical thinking by delegitimizing student knowledge, as well as by eroding trust and solidarity with peers and faculty. Indeed, endogenous and exogenous violations frame relations among students themselves, and between them and universities (governance, scholars, administration) in antagonist terms, by casting suspicion on their activities and delegitimizing their educational careers (Fig. 2).

The cross-study comparison reveals one important difference in the nature of the two student communities before and during the critical events analysed here. Data from Turkey highlights students’ polarization, reflecting the pre-existing stigma based on socio-economic backgrounds or ideological orientations. As a relational dimension rather than an inherent personal quality (Goffman 1963), the attribution of negative identitarian attributes to students created tangible boundaries in university life. This process legitimized limitations to student rights, cumulatively creating the ground for enacting more visible violations. This element appears to be less prevalent in Belarus, where polarization occurred between the government-affiliated university governance and those students

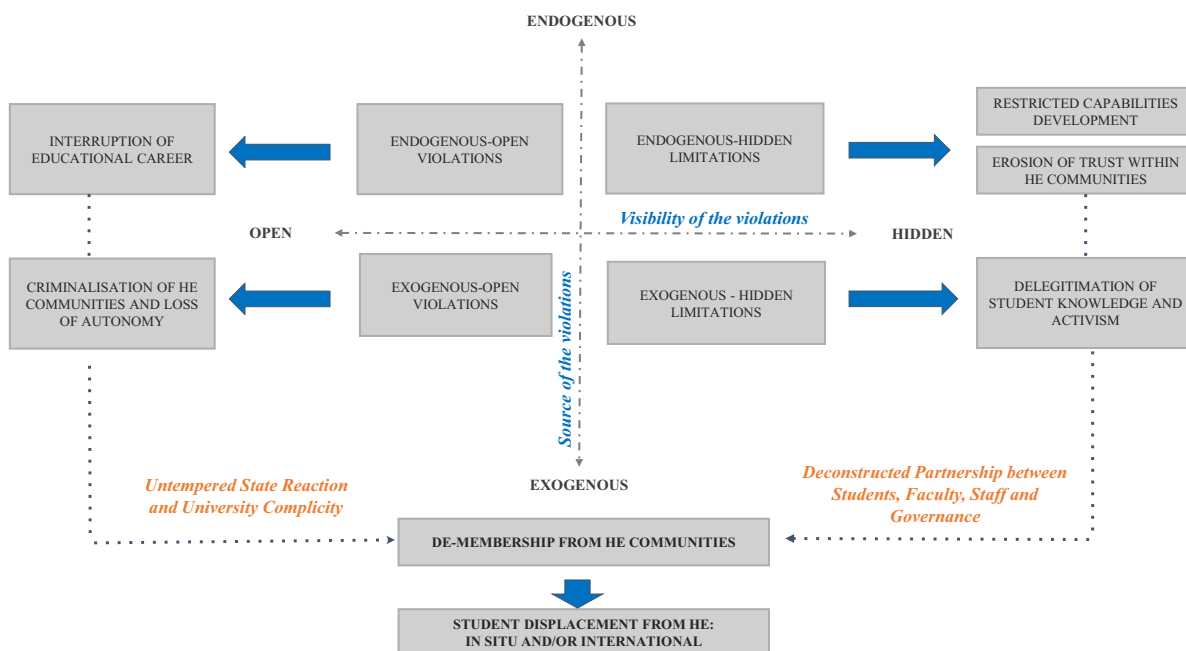


Fig. 2. Analytical typology of the effects of limitations/violations on student academic freedom.

who opposed this institutional complicity by participating in public demonstrations.

Despite these different communitarian fractures, the elements identified in Fig. 2 result in what we identify as de-membership from the HE community. Our argument builds on the premise that a cohesive HE community requires a structured partnership among its members. Scholarship indeed emphasizes the positive correlation between, on the one hand, the de jure/de facto respect of students' rights by the university and, on the other, the possibility of building alliances between students, administrative staff, faculty members, and university governance (Hoffman and Mitchell 2016; Morgan and Davis 2019; Cheuk et al., 2022). Community relations necessitate what Cho (2018: 89) calls a 'tempered approach', which involves balancing institutional commitments, state relations and students/faculty demands. A tempered approach enhances students' aspirations and demands, as well as their membership within HE communities (Cho 2018). As discussed, in Turkey and Belarus the complicity of the state and university governance compromised the (already weak) alliance between students, faculty and governance. Students were exposed to an environment where community relations were simultaneously undermined by the short-tempered actions of academic and non-academic actors, and by a growing climate of fear and mutual distrust.

Therefore, in the context of this article, the concept of de-membership indicates the systematic marginalization and exclusion of students from HE communities, a process enacted through the exogenous/endogenous infringements of their negative and positive liberties. Specifically, it implies the erosion of four interrelated elements encompassing student capabilities as members of educational communities: the fostering of learning opportunities, the consideration of students' demands/aspirations, the possibility to develop social capital, and the recognition of student rights to civic and political activism. Encompassing educational, relational, spatial and symbolic dimensions, de-membership occurred through open/visible violations (expulsion, forced deportation or unjustified fellowship cancellations), as well as through hidden/invisible limitations (surveillance, induced self-censorship or social distancing), differently leading to the invalidation of meaningful social relations. Crucially, it led to both in-situ and international displacement, processes differently marked by the prolonged difficulty in maintaining connections with peers and professors and in finding new HE opportunities. Of course, this focus on students is not intended to ignore the multi-pronged attacks targeting other members of the HE community or their interconnected nature. Instead, it highlights the often-vulnerable membership that students hold, and how de-membership involves the weakening of their relations with other HE members.

Moving to our second question, a key difference between the two cases is the temporal relationship between academic freedom violations and student activism. In Turkey, student accounts reflect a shift from a period (2013-2016) during which the escalation of state repression generated both activism and fearful retreat, to a post-2016 during which student political agency was, to some extent, paralyzed¹³. By contrast, in Belarus, student political agency, expressed through solidarity networks, was initially generated by the 2020 presidential elections and continued for several months. In both cases, however, prolonged repression progressively undermined students' capabilities to express political agency in the public sphere and at university. Furthermore, data indicate that while activism as academic freedom was deeply compromised, student de-membership generated a renewed form of activism for academic freedom. This connects student civic engagement with rebuilding social and economic capital to support themselves and their peers in regaining educational rights and opportunities, although this often implied displacement. Solidarity networks across borders demonstrate how an active search for care relationships with peers and faculty coexisted ambivalently with distrust and distancing. The analysis unravels how continuing with HE in displacement holds dual significance for students from both Turkey and Belarus. Not only does it allow them to reassert a certain degree of academic freedom by rebuilding fragmented community relations, but it also constitutes an important strategy for resisting their silencing as both citizens and learners.

8. Conclusions

Building on an ex-post comparative analysis, we identify patterns of (dis)similarities concerning student academic freedom violations and their dynamic impact on education and activism. The findings revealed the multidimensionality of limitations/violations in terms of visibility, source, relationality, temporal development and outcomes (Fig. 2), which undermine students' capabilities and community membership in different ways.

These findings support the analytical fruitfulness of distinguishing between activism *as* academic freedom and activism *for* academic freedom. Academic freedom does not necessarily enter students' political and civic activism as a stand-alone or explicit demand; rather, it is often implicitly asserted through their political and civic agency on and off campus. However, the consequences of open violations and de-membership may also prompt displaced students to explicitly question the importance of this principle and direct their agency towards restoring it (i.e. freedom to learn and study). This cautions us against projecting 'academic freedom' as a framework onto students without interrogating what this principle means in their experience. Moving to the disciplinary standpoint implied by our third question, we argue that our socio-anthropological approach is not limited to assuming the presence or absence of community ties in contexts where academic freedom is, respectively, protected or violated. Rather, it sheds light on the process through which community relations are framed, contested or denied by HE members. This lens also reveals the dynamic tension in which structural constraints and individual agency simultaneously influence educational and activism pathways.

This work is not without its limitations. When discussing authoritarian contexts, the countries' specificities may result in significant variations in the dynamics of academic freedom—and its erosion—in other authoritarian or semi-liberal states. Additionally, the limited dataset and observation period restrict our ability to assess long-term shifts in student activism and engagement with HE. More

¹³ Until at least 2021, when the Boğaziçi University protests against rector's nomination spurred new waves of anti-government mobilisation.

substantively, the predominant presence of student activists in both studies might overshadow the experiences of non-active students, whose perspectives could challenge or nuance our findings on de-membership and capability development. Nevertheless, the article suggests new directions for future research. Firstly, additional comparative research is required to validate our conceptualization across political regimes. Secondly, the countries' past and current EHEA membership compels a broader investigation into the regional development (and crisis) of academic freedom in Europe, a topic that warrants its own dedicated analysis. Lastly, the concept of de-membership sheds light on the intricate relationship between displacement, HE and academic freedom. Both studies showed that expulsion is highly associated with subsequent forced migration, exacerbating the dissolution of communitarian relationships and hindering capability development. Further research, also through a transnational perspective, is thus needed to unpack the nexus between academic freedom and academic displacement.

Data statement

Data not available. The data that has been used is confidential.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ester Gallo: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Cristina Mazzero:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

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