ON THE EDGE OF FAILURE: STORIES OF FEMALE DISPLACED SCHOLARS FROM BELARUS

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Abstract: The article examines the experiences of displaced female scholars who struggle to maintain their professional identities due to the challenges of forced migration. It draws on the stories of women who have involuntarily emigrated and experienced setbacks in their success, achievements, and overall happiness — whether through a complete loss of professional status or significant changes to their identities. Notably, the paper focuses on female scholars from Belarus, who were forced to leave the country after 2020. Through semi-structured interviews conducted with these scholars, representatives of host institutions, and the Scholars at Risk program, the author argues that, rather than viewing lack of success as a personal failure, this perspective helps to highlight the complexities of the integration process and reveals existing structural and institutional gaps in the support programs designed for displaced female academics from peripheral societies.

Keywords: scholars-at-risk, displacement, gender, Belarus, Western academia.

Introduction

In July 2024, I began my research as part of the collective project "Protecting Academia at Risk: Towards a New Policy Agenda for a Thriving

Culture of Higher Education in Europe".[1] Specifically, my contributions focus on the experiences of displaced and migrant female scholars from Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia, aiming to explore the epistemological changes resulting from this displacement.[2] Since the project's primary sources are interviews with these scholars, I started creating a contact list of potential interviewees. I sought this information publicly or asked colleagues for contacts. I realised that the status of *a scholar at risk* — defined as a scholar who is unable to continue their academic work in their home country due to war or persecution (FAQs, Scholars at Risk Network) — refers to visibility and is associated with success in some sense, as these individuals have managed to remain in the academic market while maintaining their professional identities. But what about missing data, specifically concerning those scholars who have lost their scholarly status and, therefore, whose narratives which are not included in scholarship on displaced academics? (Vatansever 2020; Burlyuk and Rahbari 2023). According to the scholarship, missing data is not merely about "the number of subjects for whom data are missing" but also about the "number of missing observations" (McKnight et al. 2007: 61). It pertains to cases that remain invisible and unrecognised by scholars but should be considered in data analysis.

1 The project is implemented by CEU Vienna, LSE London, SNSPA Bucharest, University of Erfurt and supported by the Gerda Henkel Foundation (2024–2026). Generally, this project explores the conditions for displaced scholars who had to leave their home country and adapt to Western host universities. More: https://shorturl.at/q2U1n.

2 I identify the scholars from Belarus I spoke with as displaced, differentiating them from migrants in accordance with definitions provided by international law. According to UNESCO, migrants are defined as people who move voluntarily or involuntarily across borders for any reason, without specific legal protections attached to migrant status. In contrast, a displaced person is defined as someone who is forced to leave their home due to armed conflict, violence, persecution, or disasters (Migrants, refugees, or displaced persons? 2021). If Ukrainian scholars are considered displaced, then both Belarusians and Russians can be identified as either displaced or migrants. However, Belarusians, including displaced academics, often cannot obtain legal protection and are even refused it in some cases (Addressing the specific challenges faced by the Belarusians in exile, 2023). Therefore, when referring to scholars from Belarus, I will use the definition of displacement to describe their status, highlighting the ongoing political violence and persecution that pose a real threat to these individuals, who have no choice but to leave. This approach should also problematise these definitions, which often do not accurately reflect the real situation. Additionally, I will use "migration" instead of "immigration", as the former refers to the act of moving and settling in one country. This choice highlights the state of uncertainty that most displaced scholars experience regarding their future residency.

The missing data approach raises the question of why this data is absent, revealing the potential limitations of research.

Therefore, while reviewing the profiles of *at risk* scholars, I reflected on those who are placed outside of this visibility. This does not include academics who are unrepresented in public due to security reasons (e.g. those from Belarus who receive temporary scholarly support but prefer not to announce it in public). However, there may be numerous stories of academics who, due to migration, must radically alter their professional paths. In discussing the migration of academics from ex-Yugoslavia in the 1990s during the Yugoslav Wars, Milena Dragićević Šešić, a professor at the University of Arts in Belgrade, she was about 40 years old at that time, notes that "[academics who left] are working on very low-level jobs [in migration], in factories [...] Being a professor of the Faculty of Music in Sarajevo, he ended up in a small village in Germany as a director of a choral choir" (Interview with Milena Dragićević Šešić, EI 2024). Dragićević Šešić mentions successful stories as well, but these are rather exceptions and mainly involve younger scholars who have obtained their PhDs at Western universities, while there have been almost no opportunities for skilled professionals to maintain their previous status. Indeed, the data on scholars in at-risk (SAR) communities are represented only by a corpus of successful stories that creates a particular positive image of how academic discourse functions globally, even under conditions of forced migration.[3]

According to the scholarship, female academics remain more vulnerable in global academia (Le Feuvre 2015; Coleman et al. 2023; Zhao et al. 2023). This vulnerability, characterised by heightened risks and limited agency, intensifies during forced migration, surpassing the common uncertainties faced by all migrants and displaced persons, particularly those related to legalisation and integration developed further (Zuccarelli et al. 2025; Chulitskaya et al. 2022). For instance, the intersection of gender, age, and foreignness/ethnicity creates a significant barrier for female scholars in their professional progress, limiting their agency and often resulting in career interruptions or changes (Sang and Calvard 2019; Strauβ and Boncori 2020; Coleman et al. 2023). Additionally, women often assume primary responsibility for unpaid reproductive work when they relocate with their families

3 According to the SAR Network Annual Report, in 2023–2024, host organisations established positions only for 149 scholars. Access mode: https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/annual-report-2024/#section3. See also, Monthly Newsletter from SAR Network, Access mode: https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/category/news/monthly-newsletter/.

(Gan and Shin 2024). When discussing the differences in the needs of female and male displaced scholars, one host notes that caregiving infrastructure is central to the needs of female scholars, whereas it is almost absent from the requests of their male counterparts (Interview with Andrei, HI 2025). As one interviewee states, "There are two big differences between moving alone and moving with a child" (here and further, Interview with Nastassia, DI 2024).

There are many different programs to support scholars at risk. All these descriptions are mainly gender-neutral. In reality, these programs most likely address male scholars, as they imply a high level of mobility that is problematic for female scholars who, as was mentioned, remain primarily responsible for unpaid reproductive work (Zhao et al. 2023). In most SAR programs, the notion of care infrastructure is typically either absent or only vaguely acknowledged. There are many stories of families where both partners are scholars, yet it is primarily men who apply for the scholarship, while women are responsible for the family infrastructure.[4] Indeed, the relationships between gender, migration, and academic discourse require particular attention.

Therefore, this article focuses on the stories of displaced female academics from Belarus who have faced challenges in academic integration — whether these women have completely lost their status or radically changed their professional identity. The aim is to explore the relationships between gender, migration, academic discourse, and the peripheral context of Belarus — both politically and scholarly. The main corpus of the study's sources consists of 11 semi-structured interviews I conducted with displaced female scholars from Belarus between July 2024 and July 2025 (marked as DI). These interviews are anonymised and based on the preliminary questionnaire (narratives of past, present and future) created by the PROAC team as part of a common methodology. The corpus includes interviews with displaced female scholars who, at the time of our meeting, had changed their professional fields, as well as those who managed to maintain their professional identities. I include all of them in the analyses because, as they themselves

4 For example, Alexei, a scholar from Russia, left the country with his family after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. He mentions that, despite his wife's professional background in education, he is applying for various short-term scholarships while she takes care of the children and manages their living situation in one place due to school commitments. Alexei explains that his wife accepts this arrangement because there are no other options: "If something happens to me, then the family budget collapses". This is notable even though there were times in their lives when she earned more than he did. Interview with Alexei, DI 2024.

mention, the boundary between "change" and "manage" is elusive and non-permanent, and the situation could change drastically over time. Those who currently have scholarships may find themselves without any, and vice versa.

The general framework of SAR programmes and the academic labour market is established through semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of host institutions (marked as HI), SAR programmes, and experts (marked as EI) in the field of SAR programmes and higher education systems in general. These interviews may be anonymised or not, depending on the preference of the interviewee. This corpus, also created by the PROAC team and based on a separate common questionnaire, consists of 11 interviews in English, Belarusian, and German. Although I focus on the Belarusian context, the corpus of interviews with displaced scholars from other contexts — mainly Ukraine and Russia, which consists of 25 semi-structured interviews — allows for the development of a comparative framework, thereby revealing local peculiarities (marked as DI). The study is based on the experiences of middle-aged female academics mainly with PhD degrees who migrated with or without their families and children. As mentioned, age significantly influences professional perspectives in migration, as does family status. That is why I portray several of my interviewees in detail to demonstrate the relationships between their answers and these categories. In the bibliography, there are descriptions of all the interviewees I have quoted.

My research focuses on peripheral spaces, in particular Belarus, and seeks to diversify and decentre Western discourse. On the one hand, my personal cultural background — I am a migrant scholar from Belarus — and deep understanding of the events in Belarus in 2020 caused in mass migration enable me to a) find interviewees and gain their trust, and b) comprehend the nuances of their psycho-emotional state when they express uncertainty, unsafety, or frustration during our talk.[5] On the other hand, the focus on the periphery where these stories came from allows me to disclose an additional dimension, particularly, the hierarchy within the global academic discourse resulting in inequality and disempowerment (Rahbari 2015). Due to

5 Although I identify myself as a displaced scholar, my situation is not officially recognized as 'at risk' because I completed my PhD in Germany in 2024. When I began my dissertation in 2019, I did not plan to remain in Europe; however, I am currently unable to return due to the political unrest in Belarus that began in 2020 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This inability to return is not deemed a valid reason for my status to be classified as 'at risk.' making me merely a migrant scholar. As was mentioned, it rather problematizes the boundary between migrant and displaced identifications.

the marginalisation of Belarusian academic discourse during the Soviet period and after the Soviet Union's collapse, caused by decades of authoritarian rule (Ousmanova 2020; Arcimovich and Reviaka 2026), only a small number of Belarusian scientists can qualify for international SAR programs because of their high-level requirements. "It was completely unrealistic to get into [these programs] with [Belarusian] CVs and our PhDs ... [because] we existed behind the iron curtain absolutely", the host of the EHU Fellowships for Scholars and Teachers from Belarus and Ukraine program, argues (here and further, Interview with EHU Fellowships host, HI 2024). In this context, I will refer to a specific Belarusian situation, avoiding generalisations such as *post-Soviet marginalisation*. The current circumstances for displaced academics from Ukraine and Belarus illustrate that they experience completely different forms of marginalisation and have varying access to resources, primarily due to differing historical developments following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Lavruhin 2012).

Given the broad field of migration studies, I focus on research that has emerged at the intersection of migration and higher education, which has become a significant topic over the last decade. Except for the common challenges caused by migration, which I will discuss later, these studies examine the forced migration and displacement of scholars not merely as a response to "refugee crises" (Kontowski and Leitsberger 2018) but also in relation to threats to academic freedom and democracy that may impact the field of higher education globally (Rahbari and Burlyuk 2023; Slowey and Taylor 2024). The investigation of various SAR programmes and their impact on the integration of displaced scholars and the reshaping of the educational field is one of the primary topics of these studies, along with the development of new concepts that can describe this new process, for instance, "'academic humanitarianism' as a new regime of governance" (Betül and Karakaşoğlu 2023: 2). Nonetheless, my paper focuses on the side of the stories of female displaced academics that remains "behind every story of success" and may be overlooked as 'missing data' (Halberstam 2011: 88). I analyse these stories from the perspective of their potential to reveal the mechanisms of power discourse and its channels for marginalisation and inequality. My main argument is that it is not the failure of these women, who had to change their professional identity. Instead of viewing their experiences of marginalisation and stigmatisation as a subject's failure, I argue that this approach allows us to identify the complexities of integration and uncover existing structural and institutional gaps in Western academia.

Reasons for Migration: Postponed Until "the Last Moment"

When I texted Nastassia and asked if she would be willing to share her experience with me, she replied that her profile was not suitable because she no longer worked in academia. "Yes, I know", I responded, as our mutual friend, who had given me Nastassia's contact, had informed me of this. "Okay then, — Nastassia said, — see for yourself". A few days later, we called each other via Signal, a platform Nastassia specifically requested to use. It quickly became apparent that she was very cautious and knowledgeable about the safety protocols that had become common for many Belarusians who left the country after 2020.[6] As we spoke, I could hear children's voices in the background — there was a playground nearby. Until that moment, I had not known that she had a child. I immediately asked, and she confirmed that she had a 9-year-old son.

We began our conversation. Nastassia was open about her experiences but tried as much as possible to maintain anonymity. This was one more characteristic of interviews with Belarusians. Each time I asked the interviewees about their previous professional experience, the reasons for migration, and the received assistance, I clarified that I did not need names or specific details, as those questions could be alarming for them. All the more, my primary interest was not the period before migration (as I was familiar with the context and the aftermath of the protests in Belarus in 2020), but the transformation that occurred afterwards, particularly why she no longer sees her future career in academia. "At the moment, I don't believe I'll be able to continue my profession here", she says.

Nastassia is 40 years old. She defended her PhD in art history in Belarus and worked at a Belarusian academic institution for a long time. In 2020, she participated in protest actions in Minsk and donated to support political prisoners. After the violent suppression of the protests, all these activities were criminalised. By the beginning of 2025, when this article was written, the search for protest participants was still ongoing, with the security service analysing all visual materials from the protests and gaining access to platforms to identify those who had donated. In 2023, Nastassia was invited to the security service, which discovered her name among those who had donated. She decided immediately to leave, as she was afraid that they had obtained more information about her protest activities. "I became so scared [...]

6 The political persecution or threat of political persecution remains the primary reason for migration for Belarusians after 2020 (Kazakou and Thomas 2025).

I could have gone to jail for a long time, and I have a child". She had already left her academic institution in 2020 because she didn't want the direction of the institution to manipulate her as she participated in the protest movements. However, she was unable to find a job in either the academic or NGO sectors. "And I decided to try [migration]".

Nastassia, like other interviewees, did not plan to move. Another scholar, Janina, 50 years old, who previously worked as a researcher, clarifies, "It was a forced migration. [...] I worked in a museum and thought that I would spend my whole life there" (here and further, Interview with Janina, DI 2024). That might explain why they were not ready—in terms of language competences and other requirements — to the academic market in the West. "This is really when a person has had this desire [to make a career at Western academia] from the earliest years at school [...] to strive, to break through, to want, to dream", Nastassia notices. Andreas, the host at one Western university develops, "They didn't need to learn German or English before. Why would they? You know they function perfectly well in Belarusian and Russian in Belarus" (Interview with Andreas, HI 2024). The lack of required competencies should not be attributed to provinciality, but rather to a fundamentally different function of academic discourse in Belarus, which remains influenced by its Soviet heritage and is oriented towards the Russian model. Ironically, these scholars often describe themselves as "classical Soviet Belarusian" or "provincial" scholars. The integration and communication of Belarusian scholars with their Western colleagues did not receive any support from government universities. They must find their own resources to attend conferences or to develop language skills and are better off not informing their institutions about this collaboration.

"[Migration] was delayed until the last moment", Nastassia says. And "the last moment" occurred when it was no longer a risk but a threat of being detained. Somebody left after being labelled "the country's enemies" by pro-government media. Others, like Nastassia, left following a call from the security service. Typically, they departed with just one suitcase, unprepared for a long stay. As it was a spontaneous decision, they had no time to research any SAR programs or apply for scholarships. At the same time, there are only three programs for Belarusian scholars at risk, but no assistance is provided with visas.[7] As a result, visa issues are typically addressed through other aid organizations. Nearly all of them highlight Belarusian solidarity as an

7 SCIENCE AT RISK Emergency Office; Fellowships for Scholars and Teachers from Belarus and Ukraine from European Humanities University; EU4Belarus — SALT II Program to support Belarusian scholars and science.

important factor. Janina states, "These words are very encompassing, you know? If it hadn't happened, most likely, nothing would have occurred".

Nastassia tried to find scholarly support and to apply for an international SAR program, but she could not afford the requirements.

> They have been asking me — "Find a host organisation, write a 5–10-page project proposal". Sorry, I am with an anxious suitcase, a child, and the constant trembling uncertainty of whether [the security service] will knock on my door in the morning or evening. And yes, write in English, of course. I told them thank you, of course, but no. Unfortunately, our colleagues don't realise that we live in a different world — a Russian-speaking world — and we won't be writing them ten pages about anything. They are unlikely to be interested in anything we write, in any of our petty provincial matters.
>
> Nastassia

Gender and Vulnerability in Migration

According to the scholarship, migration does not merely create risk and uncertainty for migrants and displaced persons, but it is shaped by risk and uncertainty perceived as a liminal state (Williams and Baláž 2012). Nastassia expresses this by saying, "I'm still in a state of limbo. I can't accept it; I don't want to". The interviewees describe a complicated emotional and physical state, highlighting the profound sense of loss they experience. Janina states, "Suddenly, you lose the ground beneath your feet". Maryja is 53 years old; she defended her PhD in economics, has more than 20 years of teaching experience at a university, and moved with her two teenage children in 2023. She shares, "I've just been ripped out of my life. […] There is an endless loneliness" (here and further, Interview with Maryja, DI 2024). Their previous lives seem intense, vivid, and full of inspiration drawn from their professional experiences. In contrast, their current existence feels limited to daily survival. "I had to come to terms with the fact that life can no longer be planned. […] I can only focus on being able to pay for next month's rent", Safija adds. She is 51 years old, with PhD in history, she moved with one adult child and one teenager (here and further, Interview with Safija, DI 2024). This new reality is traumatic. Maryja reiterates several times, "It is difficult. […] I can't accept it, I resist it". The difficulty in accepting a new reality is tied not only to the act of migration itself but also to the underlying reasons that prompted it. Vera Axyonova describes this condition as "existential non-belonging",

which arises from "deeply traumatizing experiences". This state significantly complicates the process of adapting to what is considered ""normal life" in a society" (Axyonova 2023: 6).

At this point, these female scholars experience the same challenges as other displaced persons which migration studies connects with uncertainty as "a source of anxiety and fear because of the prevailing conditions of insecurity" (Whyte 2009: 214) when an individual's sense of "secure belonging" is threatened (Dromgold-Sermen 2022: 636). "Uncertainty as unexpectedness and unpredictability; uncertainty as imperfect knowledge; uncertainty as insecurity and risk of danger; and finally, uncertainty as a temporal experience of waiting and hasting", Marie Juul Petersen, Sidsel Larsen and Nikolas Feith Tan argue (2025: 2091). The scholars examine the experiences of Syrian refugees with the Danish revocation process, which they characterise as being marked by radical uncertainty. This is because even existing laws cannot guarantee protection, as they are subject to change.

Legalisation remains the primary challenge for displaced academics from Belarus as well, even though they generally have more privileges compared to some other groups, such as Syrian refugees, who often encounter racism (Kazakou and Thomas 2025). However, interviewees highlight financial vulnerability as a significant risk. The lack of income can hinder their ability to secure or extend residency permits, ultimately affecting their legal status (Navumau et al. 2024). Janina remarks, "I started looking for a job, and I realized that the level of work available to me in Poland was the most basic. [...] No matter what you do, you can work as a cleaner, and you will earn a salary every month. For me, it's just a matter of survival". Safija explains why she agreed immediately to a job in the SMM sector, "In the case of a migrant, it is impossible to refuse anything". Due to simplified legalisation processes for Belarusians (e.g., humanitarian visas) that provide a sense of security, countries such as Poland and Lithuania remain the leading destinations for Belarusian displaced persons and migrants, including my interviewees. However, the availability of jobs is an essential condition for long-term residency permits (Chulitskaya et al. 2022; Homel, Jaroszewicz and Lesińska 2023).

The fact that Belarusians, including my interviewees, describe their status as "migrants" while avoiding definitions such as "refugee" or "displaced person" signifies a reluctance to reflect on their status, as accepting these definitions can be very traumatic. This is supported by the fact that, when answering the questionnaire question, "How do you define your new legal status in a host country?", many of them also avoid the definition of migrant. When I ask how they feel about being a migrant, they often respond that they have not reflected on this at all.

Apparently, this vulnerability increases if they move with children.

> I was constantly trying to work part-time. But with a child... well, actually without a child you go to a hostel and work for 12 hours. You won't go to a hostel with a child, you won't be taken in, you won't rent an apartment, you have to try hard to find someone to live with. [...] there are two big differences when you drive alone and when you (sigh) have a child on you.
>
> Nastassia

Nastassia notes that, as a solo mother, her primary task was to find a school for her son and then to build an entire life infrastructure around his schedule. Therefore, instead of mobility being an essential requirement for academic excellence (Gusejnova et al. 2024), a stable environment is necessary for these displaced academics. "[The school] is connected to the address of residency, the address of residency is connected to the rented apartment, and the rented apartment is connected to (laugh) the necessity to pay for it every month", Safija explains. Some of them express gratitude to the host country "because I would be in jail right now" (Interview with Iryna, DI 2024). However, for others, the experience of migration is so traumatic that they would return despite the threat. Such a perception of migration usually depends on a lower level of integration (language and diaspora) and a lack of support (for instance, being a solo mother). Nastassia says, "I'm still thinking, and if [...] I could have known that I was only punished with the personal restraint, I would have turned back. Well, okay, I will serve a term, adjudicate these years, because [here] I see myself as nobody... no way".

They fear the question of the future, which for them becomes just about tomorrow. Primarily, they are still waiting for the moment when they can return to their home country.

> I don't know anything about the future (pause). As it will be. What can you say here, as it will be. I say, well, I can pay for the next month of life, and that's fine.
>
> Janina

> I think I will return home soon. [...] I think I am here while my young daughter is studying. [...] I am a temporary guest here. I will go home."
>
> Maryja

> I don't have the option that nothing will change, and I'll never go back there. Because [...] I have nowhere to live, I have a residence permit for

a year [...] I have no options [...] at 51 ... any job is a problem. Who needs old people?

Volha (here and further, Interview with Volha, DI 2024)

Coming from the Edge: "Who are you, Belarusian researcher?"

Despite considering the stories of these women in the context of missing data, it does not mean there is no chance they may return to research and academic activity. After overcoming the initial phase of migration, which is often the most traumatic, some of them are already learning the language, developing their CVs, and applying for scholarships. However, they mention a lack of time for self-education and feelings of exhaustion. Some do not even attempt to engage due to their age, for instance. Generally, those who are about 50 or older cite age as the primary cause of frustration. "I can go drive a tram (laughs). I can, I could. I don't have such a wild fear; of course, there is fear, uh... of age, because for some new job, a person over 50 is unlikely to be the best candidate in some fields", Safia says. Currently, Safia works as an SMM manager in the media sector, but she is also involved in a research project as part of a short-term scholarship. Safia tends to view this work more as a hobby, as there are no long-term perspectives. However, it is essential for her to maintain her research identity, as she mentions its loss as part of the academia-at-risk phenomenon.

> If we talk about science, then I don't see how uh... a Polish institution could be interested in my... what I am doing. [...] I don't think I could, in the sense of knowing the language first of all. [...] In terms of scientific achievement, I have a platform [as a hobby]. And... in terms of maintaining my financial situation, I have a job.
>
> Safia.

When asked why they did not expect support from specialized academic programs, the interviewees explained that they believed they could not afford it. A significant barrier for them was their lack of self-confidence, which prevented them from applying for these opportunities. For instance, Safija mentioned that she felt held back by her language skills, despite having a B2 level proficiency. Marija states, "I don't believe in myself, that I could afford these programs, that I could after... could report that I did something". At the same time, she was not afraid of moving into the IT sphere; in other words, changing her profession completely.

The Western academic system is known for its high standards of excellence, which can be challenging even for established Western scholars. Additionally, Belarusian scholars face language barriers due to the isolation of Belarusian science as the country joined the Bologna Process only in 2015 (Lavruhin 2012). This lack of self-confidence is further influenced by their standing in their home country, where the humanities, along with other fields, are often regarded as having low status. These scholars work hard but earn little, with men typically occupying more advantageous positions in administration. Many of them held additional jobs. "I had part-time jobs in various fields because... how to make money from history?" (Interview with Darja, DI 2025). Despite being knowledgeable in various fields and possessing extensive competencies, female scholars often doubt their professional skills when reflecting on their experiences in their home country. Consequently, they are hesitant to pursue positions in host countries and may view low-level jobs as their only feasible option. Arlie Russell Hochschild addresses this self-perception through the concept of autodiscrimination when women tend to "sooner or later cool themselves [...therefore] inequality is conceived not as the mark of a chairperson's pen, but as the consequence of a whole constellation of disadvantages" (Hochschild 2011: 19).

Except for gender as a factor, the perception of their positionality as provincial and marginal also plays a crucial role in the formation of self-confidence and self-esteem. "At the moment, I do not think I will be able to continue my profession here or change something. [...] [I was] such a classic Soviet Belarusian art historian, Nastassia says. — And [Western academia] will hardly be interested in what we write, it is our small provincial things". Marija remembers her attempt to apply for a position at a Polish university, which required experience in managing third-party projects. "Must have experience with projects of €50,000 or more... from where at Belarusian universities?" claims Marija. Another aspect is the awareness of differences between Western academia and the academic requirements in Belarus that implies intense retraining. And age is again considered the main obstacle. "Who are you, Belarusian researcher? Why are you needed here? [...] [Retraining] at 50 is hard for me", Janina concludes.

Such a self-perception reveals the existing asymmetry caused by Eurocentrism, academic imperialism and English language domination in global science (Alatas 2000), almost entirely ignoring the historical and geopolitical context of *the rest* who just "provide empirical data" (Rahbari 2015: 156). This perception affects SAR programs, the requirements of which also align with Western academic standards, making these programs nearly inaccessible to most scholars at risk, who typically come from non-Western countries. At this point, programs that

are oriented on the particular communities of scholars, for example, EHU Fellowships for Scholars and Teachers from Belarus and Ukraine or SCIENCE AT RISK Emergency Office 2025 mentioned earlier, play a crucial role not only in providing scholars with a (short-term) opportunity to maintain their professional identity but also in integrating them into global academic discourse through mentorship and workshops for professional development.

Nonetheless, referring to the necessity of integration of these scholars and adaptation to the existing requirements that might be linked with resilience as "a normative concept, an ideal type of human agency fit for the neoliberal logic" (Rahbari and Burlyuk 2023: xiii), it is essential to keep in mind the critique on Western academia as a neoliberal industry, and therefore, to consider the refusal of these scholars to enter this field not only as a system's failure (as migrants and displaced scholars, they need a long-term job to obtain their legal status) but as a personal position (Segal 2021; Axyonova 2023: 5-6). Encountering precarity as a condition, these scholars start to doubt whether they want to be part of this academic discourse. "And you can have almost no permanent contract until retirement, jump around projects, and what about family? Children? Travel around cities and villages like a military man with two suitcases?" (Nastassia). Additionally, as Ladan Rahbari and Olga Burlyuk note, "Not everyone is afforded the same level of resilience […]. Adapting to change, resisting structural challenges, and preparing for future uncertainties is difficult in the presence of inequality, precarity and the shortage or lack of support systems" (Rahbari and Burlyuk 2023: xiii).

> I know I realise what I'm doing, I'm doing right, actually. It's not because there's something wrong with me. It's just that somehow, we were born in the wrong place, at the wrong time... and somehow, we lived in the wrong place, worked in the wrong way. That's why everyone needs a homeland.
>
> Volha.

The use of the adjective "wrong" in this context is significant and not a coincidence. For instance, Martina Vitáčková, who was born and educated in the Czech Republic, shares her experience of trying to enter Western academia. She states, "I did not consider that I did my PhD on the 'wrong' side of Europe", despite her university being part of the Bologna process (Vitáčková 2023: 43). Axyonova also refers to conducting research in the "'wrong journals' and in the 'wrong languages'" (Axyonova 2023: 6–7). Clearly, the term "wrong" underscores the awareness of the inequalities that these scholars face.

Conclusion

Judith Halberstam reflects on the concepts of success and failure as primary measures of assessment in Western societies, revealing the transgressive potential of these categories. Following the ideas of Scott Sandage, Halberstam argues that instead of stigmatizing those who fail, it is more constructive to view failure as a tool for critique (Halberstam 2011: 88). This perspective can uncover "a hidden history of pessimism in a culture of optimism" (Sandage 2006: 9) and can be transformed into "the weapons of the weak" (Halberstam 2011: 88). Such an approach enables us to critique the neoliberal system represented by "meritocracy-driven Global North universities", which labels career failures as individual shortcomings rather than addressing them as systemic issues (Axyonova 2023: 6).

From this perspective, the so-called professional failure of female academics from Belarus should be recognized as a) a structural failure (e.g. SAR programs might be designed wrong as they do not achieve their goals) and b) a consequence of existing inequality in terms of gender, age and foreignness/ethnicity/citizenship. When comparing the experiences of women and men, female scholars often encounter greater challenges for several reasons. They typically bear the responsibility for their families, which limits their opportunities for self-education and leads to emotional exhaustion. Many women struggle with self-confidence and self-esteem, often doubting their ability to compete with their male counterparts, even when seeking support for Belarusian scholars, which can also be traced back to the historical and cultural disempowerment of women. As Hochschild points out, "women have acclimatized themselves" to discrimination, resulting in their needs often being overlooked (Hochschild 2011: 19)[8]. To paraphrase Axyonova, while *displaced academics are all in the same boat, their academic career prospects are not equally dim for everyone* (Axyonova 2023: 4). Especially, for those who experience multiple marginalisation, for instance, being a woman, an aged woman, a displaced person, and a displaced person from Belarus.

In conclusion, existing SAR programs play a crucial role in supporting displaced academics, particularly those formats which offer language and skills courses, including CV and application writing, mentoring and supervision. Interviewees who have benefited from

8 See, e.g. Monitoring reports from SAR AKNO for Belarus in 2024 and 2020–2023 indicate that there is a complete absence of a gender approach to addressing the needs of displaced scholars from Belarus. [online] https://science-at-risk.org/monitoring-reports/.

such support emphasized that mentoring was vital not only for their professional development but also for human and emotional guidance, which helped them maintain hope and belief in their own potential. Milena Dragićević Šešić notes that in the 1990s, such programs did not exist, and displaced scholars could rely only on their personal networks for support, if they had one which might also explain a lack of successful stories. Fortunately, the situation has improved today, with a wide range of programs now available.

Nonetheless, my analysis indicates that many of these programs are too narrow and homogeneous in their requirements, rendering them nearly inaccessible to various groups of displaced scholars, particularly concerning age, gender, and cultural background. Therefore, these programs should adopt a more gender-oriented approach, which means being aware of the needs of not only female and older scholars but also other marginalized groups. Moreover, these programs need to be adapted to the local realities of the countries from which the displaced scholars originate — realities that may differ significantly from the "normality" in the host countries. Programs such as EHU Fellowships for Scholars and Teachers from Belarus and Ukraine play a vital role in helping displaced scholars maintain their professional identities. The EHU Fellowships host refers to this program as a "local hub" because it addresses the needs of less "prominent" groups of scholars. However, such initiatives remain exceptions that highlight the general lack of success of SAR programmes and signify the need for their contextual reconfiguration.

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Russia, 51 y.o., PhD in humanities, two children of 17 and 12 y.o., moved with his wife.

Interview with Janina, DI, 2024.

Belarus, 50 y.o., MA but had a high professional position before migrating, a grown daughter remains in Belarus.

Interview with Iryna, DI, 2024.

Belarus, 50 y.o., PhD in Linguistics, a 14 y.o. son, moved with her husband.

Interview with Maryja, DI, 2024.

Belarus, 53 y.o., PhD in economics, two grown children, a single mother.

Interview with Nastassia, DI, 2024.
Belarus, 40 y. o., PhD in Art History, a 9-y.o. son, a single mother.
Interview with Safija, DI, 2024.
Belarus, 51 y.o., PhD in history, one adult child and one teenager, moved with her husband.
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Belarus, 51 y.o., PhD in Social Science, the family remains in Belarus.
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