

Syllabus/Programme

Exile, Activism and the University

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When & Where:	Wednesdays, 10:00–12:00 CET	Off University Moodle
Hosted by:	Bonn University	
Department	Center for Reconciliation Studies	

*How to count your Off university course towards credit?

Successful completion of a course at Off University is certified by the host university. This means that you are able to use these credits at any university in the EHEA in a programme you are enrolled in, or you may count this as previous knowledge in a future study programme. In order to be sure that you can transfer the credits, we suggest you get written confirmation by your home university's students' office. And if you are not enrolled in any university programme: You are very welcome to join! All our courses are free of charge and open to anyone: students, scholars, activists.

The course is hosted by the Centre for Reconciliation Studies at Bonn University and delivered in collaboration with the Centre for Applied Human Rights and UNESCO Chair on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space, University of York.

Description:

This course examines the role of universities in contexts of political repression, forced migration, and exile, with a particular focus on human rights defenders, activists, and academics displaced by authoritarian regimes. It proposes to reimagine universities as elements of protection infrastructure that contribute to sustaining agency in exile. The course is multidisciplinary and draws on social theory, migration studies, law, and human rights studies. The course analyzes how activism is reshaped under conditions of displacement and how academic institutions engage with issues of solidarity, meritocracy, and security.

Empirically, the course draws on a comparative research project of Russia and Myanmar. Both countries are autocracies and persecute activists. In the case of Russia, we interviewed activists in exile in the Czech Republic and Germany; for Myanmar, activists in Thailand.

The course aims to bring together academics, activists, and students to share and exchange knowledge. It aims to equip participants with analytical tools to critically assess the social role of universities in times of democratic crisis and to reflect on the ethical and institutional challenges for universities in supporting activists in exile.

Digital Self Defense

Our platform is dedicated to spread knowledge threatened by authoritarian and right-wing populist regimes and to put measures in place that enable people to practice digital self-defense.

We encourage all users to sign up for the platform anonymously and respect others' preferences for staying anonymous. **Please do not force anyone to share personal information or take screenshots of others without their knowledge.**

The courses take place on Off University's Moodle. The platform includes an encrypted video-call option, a cloud storage, as well as a messaging system. We would like to remind all users that communication with other users outside of the platform (i.e. e-mail, Instagram, Facebook, Whatsapp or other video conferencing tools) may put them at risk.

Timeline of the Course Schedule

Week	Date	Topic	Tutor
Week 1	15. Apr	Introduction.	Alex and Magnolia
Week 2	22. Apr	Theoretical frameworks of activism in exile	Paul and Rosario
Week 3	29. Apr	Navigating proximity with precarity	Magnolia
Week 4	06. May	Universities as sites of activism and protection	Paul
Week 5	13. May	Transnational repressions and activist solidarity	Galina Selivanova, Tatiana Golova
Week 6	20. May	Civic engagement and challenges for academic autonomy and academic freedom	Dmitry Dubrovskiy
Week 7	27. May	----- <i>Holiday week</i> -----	-----
Week 8	3. Jun	Case - Russia, Germany and the Czech Republic	Alex
Week 9	10. Jun	Russian Activists in Germany	Tatiana Gazarian, Anna Eroshenko Tatiana Kasimova
Week 10	17. Jun	Case – Available forms of protection in Universities of Thailand	Magnolia
Week 11	24. Jun	The lived experiences of Myanmar activists in Thailand	Kham Mai (Magnolia coordinates)
Week 12	01. Jul	Presentation of cases (Students)	Alex/Magnolia moderate
Week 13	08. Jul	Presentation of cases (Students)	Alex/Magnolia moderate
Week 14	15. July	Discussion week	Alex/Magnolia
Week 15	22. July	Exam	Alex/Magnolia

Aimed Outcomes

A general understanding of:

- How universities (may) protect and support activists in exile.
- Core theoretical approaches to agency, activism, and exile under authoritarian regimes.
- Comparative cases of academic and activist displacement in Europe and Southeast Asia.

The skills to be gained upon active participation:

- Acquaintance with key literature on activism in exile.
- Skills in comparative analysis of country cases and different protection regimes.

- The capacity to clearly present analytical arguments in written and oral form.

Course components

The methodology includes:

- Lectures
- Readings
- Debates
- Presentations (groupwork, country case)

The final grade for the course will be based on the following:

- Final exam - oral: 100%
- In order to be admitted to the exam, you need to make a group present on a country case of your choice.

Organization of the course

Topic of the week & Reading List

Mandatory readings are indicated with a *

Week 1: Introduction.

This opening session introduces the topic of the course, assessment, and the team. We outline the global context in which we are going to discuss activism in exile and the role of universities in supporting activists. We introduce the team of tutors and make a round of introductions of the students.

Key points:

- Activism
- Exile (global context of mass displacement)
- Universities as human rights actors.

Reading materials:

- This section does not require prior reading

Week 2: Theoretical frameworks of activism in exile

This session will look at the work of a range of theorists of exile – Arendt, Shklar, Banki, etc. It will explore a central tension between exile as inherently difficult, marked by a lack of resources, disrupted networks, and challenges to sustain activism, and exile as capable of creating new possibilities ("natality") unconstrained by previous methods or strategies. Discussion points:

- Is the latter potential purely for elites?
- What preconditions are needed for exile to be generative for activism?
- How can such activism be sustained, and how can it navigate the ambiguous and partial architectures of protection.
- Does the prevalence of exile among activists currently necessitate rethinking prevailing models of translational advocacy?

Reading materials:

- Arendt H (2007 [1943]) We refugees. In: Kohn J and Feldman RH (eds) *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books.
- * Banki, S. (2024). *The Ecosystem of Exile Politics: Why Proximity and Precarity Matter for Bhutan's Homeland Activists*. Cornell University Press (introduction).

- Keck, M. E., & Sikkink, K. (1999). Transnational Advocacy Networks in International and Regional Politics. *International Social Science Journal*, 51(159), 89–101.
- Shklar JN (1998a) Obligation, Loyalty, Exile. In: Hoffmann S (ed.) *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Week 3: Navigating Proximity with Precarity

- This session will focus on exile politics through the everyday lives of migrants and refugees. This section focuses on how physical location and legal vulnerability change how migrants live and fight for their rights. The main idea is based on the "precarity of place", with the examples of Myanmar exiled in Thailand, where there is the constant risk of being detained, deported, or forced to move simply because of one's immigration status or lack of documents. Rather than focusing only on job insecurity, the section highlights how migrant life often feels like walking a tightrope, where even the act of staying in one place can be uncertain and politically charged. This section will use the real-world research findings of Susan Banki. The students can explore how cities, border regions, and everyday social spaces interact with restrictive state policies and how migrants/ refugees navigate, resist, and survive within these precarious environments. The following are the discussion points of the session.

Discussion Points

- The Precarity of Place - the fear of being removed
Question: In what ways does 'precarity of place' dictate the daily movements and long-term survival strategies of exiled populations?
- The exile ecosystem & the paradox of proximity
Question: What tensions arise in an 'exile ecosystem' where political hope is high, but legal protections are non-existent?
- Hiding and Working in the Big City
Question: Can a city be both a refuge and a trap? How do urban social spaces help or hinder the resistance of the undocumented?
- The circuit board for border crossing
Question: What are the 'circuits' of migration—the hidden networks and pathways—that allow for movement when official channels are closed?

Group Discussion (30 minutes)

If digital tools allow us to be 'virtually proximate' to a conflict from anywhere in the world, does the physical border still matter for human rights defenders?

Reading materials:

- * Susan Banki (2013), Urbanity, precarity and homeland activism: Burmese migrants in global cities, Journal of Open Edition, See: <https://journals.openedition.org/moussons/2325>

- Susan Banki (2025) Porosity on the Thailand-Myanmar border: before and after Myanmar's 2021 coup, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 51:2, 526-545, DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2024.2371233
- Butler, Judith (2004). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. <https://www.wkv-stuttgart.de/uploads/media/butler-judith-precious-life.pdf>
- Rachel Sharple (2019), Territory and mobility for human rights activists in the Thai-Burma borderlands

Week 4: Universities as Sites of Activism and Protection

This session will look at the role of universities, both historically and in the contemporary context, as host for exile communities, including activists. It will assess four ways in which universities can collaborate to support civil society - as instigators, incubators, collaborators and protectors - and the relevance of each for activists in exile. In relation to protection, the session will explore the intersecting ways in which universities can protect people, values and different forms of knowledge. Key discussion points will include:

- What are the advantages and limitations of universities as sites of activism - for example, in relation to Gaza or the Ukraine?
- What roles do student-activists and scholar-activists, including students and scholars in exile, play in campus and societal protests?
- How can universities activate their protective functions to effectively protect activists, including activists in exile?

Reading materials:

- * Gready, P., & Jackson, E. (2025). Universities Unbound: Universities as Sites of Human rights Activism and Protection in an Era of Democratic Crisis. *Journal of Human Rights*, 24(1), 57-73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2024.2439262>
- UNESCO Chair, York (2025). Guidelines for Universities Hosting Human Rights Defenders. At: <https://www.yorkunescochairhrds.org/university-guidelines-guidelines-for-universities-hosting-hrds>
- Ziadah, R (2025). Genocide, Neutrality and the University Sector. *The Sociological Review*, 73 (2), pp. 241-48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261251321336>

Week 5: Transnational repressions and activist solidarity:

This session includes two project presentations from activism scholars: Dr Galina Selivanova and Dr Tatiana Golova.

Transnational repressions:

Research on transnational repression examines how authoritarian regimes extend their control beyond borders to monitor and silence dissidents abroad. Thus, the first aim of

the project is to explore and systematise Russia's state-led transnational repression from a "top-down" perspective, i.e. tactics and strategies employed by authoritarian regime to control their populations abroad, while also adopting a "bottom-up" approach, examining how exiled activists perceive transnational repression and their strategies for resisting it. The project aims to provide a nuanced perspective on transnational repression, contributing to academic discourse while providing policymakers with valuable insights into improving protection for exiled activists and countering authoritarian influence.

Activist solidarity:

This session explores how migrant activists in Germany have been working to help civil society actors, who are fleeing their authoritarian home countries, gain access to protection in democratic host countries. Tatiana Golova examines how activists, working through informal networks, became pivotal in implementing the humanitarian visa program. Their engagement, grounded in moral commitment and political solidarity, also contributed to the performance-based construction of deservingness.

Reading materials:

- Darieva, T., Golova, T., & Skibo, D. (2023). Russian Migrants in Georgia and Germany: Activism in the Context of Russia's War against Ukraine. *ZOIS Report*, 3, 2023.
- * Golova, T. (2025). Migration assistance activism and the German humanitarian visa: Framing deservingness, enacting solidarity. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2025.2564044>
- Golova, T., & Selivanova, G. (2024). Intergenerational Dynamics among Russian-Speaking Anti-War and Pro-Democracy Activists in Germany. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 316, 19–23.

Week 6: Civic engagement and challenges for academic autonomy and academic freedom

This lecture explores the ongoing controversy around academic neutrality, the social mission of universities, and academic freedom. It examines competing understandings of whether scholars should remain politically neutral or actively engage with societal problems, including injustice, inequality, and authoritarian pressure. The lecture traces how claims of "neutrality" can function both as a professional norm and as a tool of depoliticization, while social-mission approaches risk politicization and external control. By analyzing contemporary debates, institutional practices, and concrete cases, the lecture highlights how academic freedom is negotiated at the intersection of knowledge production, ethical responsibility, and power.

Reading materials:

- * Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure ("1940 Statement"), in Policy Documents and Reports 3 (AAUP, 1984).
- Reichman, Henry. Reichman, Henry. Understanding academic freedom. JHU Press, 2025.
- Post, Robert C. Democracy, expertise, and academic freedom: a First amendment jurisprudence for the modern state. Yale University Press, 2012.
- * Weber, Max. "Science as a Vocation." In Science and the Quest for Reality, pp. 382-394. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1946.

Week 7 – Holiday week

Week 8: Case – Russia, Czech Republic, and Germany

This session examines the exile of Russian activists and the conditions of two host countries: the Czech Republic and Germany. Activists have been forced to leave Russia after 2022 due to escalating repressions, including criminalization of dissent and all forms of opposition activism, censorship, and targeted persecution of HRDs and activists. These repressions intensified after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Czech Republic represents a precarious and semi-safe host country: while it has a historical legacy of supporting Russian political émigrés and offers some targeted humanitarian programmes, recent visa bans and restrictions on citizenship for Russians have sharply limited protection and long-term integration for Russians, including activists. Germany, by contrast, has become a major hub of Russian opposition activism, hosting activist networks, offering humanitarian visas and access to NGOs and civil society. However, Germany has also become a less welcoming environment over time, as political changes have led to more restrictive emigration policies. In both countries, universities have served as stabilizers, providing student visas and scholarships, but otherwise have been almost inactive in their support for activists.

- Russia: Repressions, war censorship, criminalised activism
- Czech Republic: Semi-safe host, restrictive visa regulations
- Germany: Activist hub, growing barriers

Discussion topic: the fact that authoritarian governments force HRDs into exile suggests that exile diminishes the power of activists to challenge the regime. Can activists still influence change "back home" from abroad?

Reading materials:

- Domańska, M. (2023). Russian civil society actors in exile: An underestimated agent of change. *SWP Comment*, 26/2023. <https://doi.org/10.18449/2023C26>

- Henry, L. (2024). Movement of movements: Russian activism in exile and the porous political opportunity structure. *Mobilization*, 29(3), 375–394.
<https://doi.org/10.17813/1086-671X-29-3-375>
- * Henry, L., & Plantan, E. (2022). Activism in exile: How Russian environmentalists maintain voice after exit. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 38(4), 274–292.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2021.2002629>

Week 9: Session with Russian Activists in Germany.

- Presentation from Russian activists:
 - Feminist Antiwar Resistance (FAR), and
 - Quarteera LGBTQ+ association
 - Horizonte Exilhilfe

Week 10: Available forms of protection in the Universities of Thailand

Based on the idea of Universities as a site of human rights activism and protection, this section will discuss how the Universities in Thailand perform as a site of activism and protection, particularly for Myanmar exiled human rights defenders especially after 2021.

According to field data, the major supports that Thai Universities cover is financial aid with limited scholarships, administrative support to accommodate activists with incomplete documentation, and long-term student visas to stabilize their lives in exile. Additionally, those universities offer academic mentorship, career networking, psychosocial support and referrals to external protection organizations.

Meanwhile, there are also some challenges. First and foremost, the severe resource limitations to meet the surplus demand for scholarships. Secondly, the conservative culture of universities sometime fails to provide university level policy to protect students in need. Lastly, in some cases, significant tensions arise within the student body for accommodating Myanmar HRDs in large numbers, and fee-paying students. The tensions also cover academic responsibilities and activist missions of the students. To facilitate student discussion, this section will focus on the tension between institutional neutrality and moral responsibility for protection. The following question will be used for discussion:

"Is it possible for a university to remain strictly an 'educational organisation' when its students are human rights defenders (HRDs) at risk of transnational repression?"

Key discussion points:

- Education vs. protection roles
Question: Can a university fulfill its academic mission if it ignores the physical safety of its students, or does 'protection' now fall under the essential responsibilities of modern higher education?
- Rights based empowerment vs. Charity

Question: How does the power dynamic change when we view support not as a 'gift' from the university, but as an act of empowering a student's existing agency and rights?"

- o Neutral stance of university

Question: How can a university claim to be a 'neutral' space when the state it operates within may have conflicting political interests regarding the students being protected?

- o Practical solidarity

Question: Beyond financial aid and visas, what does 'meaningful solidarity' look like in a classroom where activist missions and academic requirements often collide?

Reading Material:

- o * Paul Gready & Emma Jackson (2025), University unbound: Universities as site of human rights activism and protection, *Journal of Human Rights*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 57-73 (click [here](#))
- o Hand-out will be delivered in advance to explore the information of the protection forms of Thai Universities

Week 11: The lived experiences of Myanmar activists in Thailand (Case)

This section will focus on the dual reality of Myanmar scholars and defenders in exile. It evaluates the legal and professional barriers to protection and employment in Thai HEIs, contrasted against the strategic advantage of physical safety. Key focus is placed on how this security enables the continuation of cross-border education and research, while amplifying the individual's capacity to connect grassroots Myanmar issues with international institutional networks.

Reading materials:

- Aung Kyaw Thein, & Lodge, E. (Eds.). (2024). *Understanding practices of protection and resilience: Co-producing knowledge among Myanmar scholars in exile*. Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University. <https://creating-safer-space.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Understanding-Practices-of-Protection-and-Resilience-1.pdf>
- Latt, T. N. (2023, November 27). *Misclassified and unprotected: Survival migration from Myanmar and the limits of Thailand's pink card system*. School of Public Policy, Chiang Mai University. <https://spp.cmu.ac.th/misclassified-and-unprotected-survival-migration-from-myanmar-and-the-limits-of-thailands-pink-card-system/>
- Rozi Binte Rahmat, Tom Porta & Kay Thwe Phyo (2026). *The role of the higher education educator in times of conflict in Myanmar*, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 31:1,

1-19, DOI: 10.1080/13562517.2025.2512334 ;
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2025.2512334>

Week 12: Group presentations

Week 13: Group presentations

Week 14: Exam

Week 15: Exam