



Belarusians in Exile: Countries of the EU, Council of Europe Seek to Support Repressed Abroad

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Up to half a million Belarusians remain in exile to avoid repression—exacerbated from 2020 after the rigged presidential election—by Alexander Lukashenka’s regime. Leaving the country has proven to be only a partial solution, as the Belarusian authorities are adopting regulations aimed at worsening the living situation of emigrants, for example, by making it impossible to obtain a passport abroad. Host countries are gradually liberalising residence rules for Belarusians, but in practice it is reactive, patchwork, and based on short-term solutions.

The regime represses mainly the opposition, but among the reasons for the persecution are “extremism” or “disloyalty”, including for using independent media, wearing the colours of democratic Belarus, or expressing signs of solidarity with Ukraine. According to democratic circles, there are more than 1,300 political prisoners in Belarus while 300,000–500,000 people left after [the rigged presidential elections in 2020](#). Most of them emigrated to avoid political persecution, and later also out of fear of possible conscription for military service due to Russia’s war in Ukraine, which is supported by the Belarusian regime. They made their way mainly to the EU, with more than 62,000 settled in Lithuania and tens of thousands in Poland and Czechia. Ukraine was also a popular destination until 2022, followed by Georgia and Armenia.

Persecution. In 2022, the Belarusian authorities called on their citizens to declare their residency status in EU countries, first voluntarily, then under threat of a fine. Such an obligation facilitates the issuing of sentences *in absentia* and the application of legislation adopted last year allowing the deprivation of citizenship for expatriates convicted of “extremist” activities or conduct to the detriment of Belarus. To harass opponents abroad, the regime also uses Interpol red notes, which are international arrest warrants. In November, for example, Vietnam handed over to Belarus an opposition figure, Vasyl Veramechik, who had fought against

Russia in Ukraine and who had been denied residency by Lithuania because of his previous military service in Belarus. In addition, the regime has been targeting relatives of expatriates, including provoking dismissals from work and forcing them to testify about the allegedly harmful activities of family members residing abroad.

While the regime initially forced dissidents to leave, it is now encouraging them to return. In recent weeks, it has released some political prisoners, and in media campaigns it expresses a desire for reconciliation, but which in fact leads to arrest after the person crosses the border, including those who have publicly apologised for their criticism of the regime. The authorities have also introduced legislation making return compulsory. Lukashenka’s decree of 4 September 2023 made it impossible to renew passports at consulates. Copies of civil status certificates, criminal record certificates, and other important documents began to be issued only in the country, and an applicant may only act through a proxy with the power of attorney drawn up before a notary in Belarus. In practice, this has made it impossible to sell property left in Belarus or conduct other necessary affairs.

Response from Host Countries. On 19 February, the Council of the EU adopted its “Conclusions on Belarus”, at times also

referred to, together with [the 2020 “Conclusions”](#) in which the Council pointed to limitations in cooperation with Belarus following the rigged elections, as the EU’s strategy towards the country. It distinguishes between the EU’s approach to the regime, which it condemns, and the democratic opposition and civil society, which it supports. It also recognises the need for states to coordinate their assistance to persecuted Belarusians residing in the EU, but in practice this is difficult due to the retention of national competence in this area. Initially, assistance consisted of, among other things, issuing humanitarian visas or simplifying the conditions for legalising residence. In response to Lukashenka’s decree of 4 September, some countries (e.g., Poland, Austria, Lithuania, Slovenia, Sweden) began to introduce “alien passports”, which can be applied for by Belarusians with residence rights who are unable to produce a Belarusian passport. This is simpler than obtaining asylum, but both cases require proving a risk of return to the country and the fulfilment of other conditions set by the respective host country.

Unequal opportunities to enjoy the privileges of being in the EU are also a problem. For example, the friendly business environment has attracted IT and finance professionals to Cyprus, but it is not part of the Schengen area, which sometimes makes it difficult to develop business in other parts of the EU. In many countries, the opening of a bank account or the recognition of qualifications are problematic, leading to taking lesser-skilled jobs. The granted facilitations can also be curtailed at any time. For example, Lithuania, with few exceptions, has suspended the processing of visa and temporary residence permit applications submitted by Belarusians. In addition, there have been cases of Belarusians deported to their home country with tragic consequences, for which Sweden, among others, has been criticised.

In contrast to the EU, the Council of Europe (CoE) proposed more precise guidelines on assistance in last year’s Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) resolution and in the Luxembourg Solutions published this year. PACE proposes to extend the possibility of issuing humanitarian visas and for states to waive the requirement to submit documents that applicants can only obtain from the Belarusian authorities. It encourages CoE members to cooperate with the Belarusian Transitional Cabinet in exile, for example, on migration, verification of Interpol red notes, and the creation of a parliamentary groups of friends. The Luxembourg Solutions call on states to, among others, recognise expired Belarusian passports, liberalise visa requirements and access to the labour market, suspend the requirement to legalise (*apostille*) documents, and create a network of consultation centres for Belarusians abroad. These proposals resonate

with the demands of the [head of the Transitional Cabinet Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya](#), who calls for the recognition of the New Belarus passports to be issued by the Cabinet and the “People’s Embassies” of Belarus established by it, functioning from December 2020 in 24 countries, including Poland. It also encourages states to support education in the Belarusian language and cultural activities of the diaspora, organising training for the New Belarusian personnel reserve, the future democratic public service.

The integration of the Belarusian diaspora in host countries is not unproblematic. Belarus is considered co-responsible for the attack on Ukraine, which affects the situation of the opposition abroad. Businesses and some states tend to treat them analogously to Russians, thus without distinguishing between opposition and regime supporters. Migration also poses a security risk, for example, due to infiltration by Lukashenka’s functionaries, and exacerbates social tensions, especially in Lithuania. In September, Tsikhanouskaya accused the regime of vandalising gathering places of Belarusians in Lithuania to intimidate them and exacerbate existing historical and linguistic tensions. People who support the diaspora have also been the victims of attacks, such as one in Warsaw in December on Prof. Jan Malicki, the director of the Centre for East European Studies (where many refugees from Belarus are educated).

Conclusions and Recommendations. The change in the regime’s policy towards dissidents—from banishment to encouraging their return—can be explained by the initial underestimation of the level of organisation and involvement of alternative democratic structures in exile. However, in view of Lukashenka’s probable continuation in power and the improved economic situation of the host countries, the return of migrants to the country is less likely than the continuing emigration trend. Given that, especially in recent years, migration from Belarus is not so much economic as political in nature, it can be assumed that this movement will be partly reversible once the regime changes. However, when that will happen is difficult to estimate.

Poland may encourage other EU states to uniformly implement selected CoE proposals and develop on their basis an EU medium-term strategy for Belarus and the Belarusian diaspora. Although, for reasons of security and legal certainty, some solutions proposed by the CoE will be difficult to implement, it is important, for example, to adopt some minimum common facilitations of access to the labour market and standards for verification of Interpol red notes (Poland can share its good practices from recent months in this respect). Training for future Belarusian government staff, for example, on the rule of law, good governance, fighting corruption, is also an important form of building partnership with the Belarusian democratic forces.