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Supporting Belarusian Democracy: Five Priorities for the EU

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In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale military attack against Ukraine from Belarusian territory. The long-term economic and political ties between the two strongmen, Vladimir Putin and Aliaksandr Lukashenka, had created a regional threat that moved beyond internal repression in Belarus and Russia to military aggression against another country. At a time when Ukraine should remain the absolute priority for the EU, it is crucial to provide substantive support to and enhance the capacity of Belarusian democracy-oriented stakeholders. Financial assistance, legal advice and technical expertise to support the Belarusian political opposition in exile, NGOs and independent media will be a long-term investment that can help to promote a democratic and secure Belarus as a close neighbour of the European Union and NATO.

Emigration From Belarus: Political Refugees, Business Sector, NGOs

As a result of the political crisis in Belarus, which was triggered by the fraudulent 2020 presidential election and the mass repression that followed, hundreds of thousands of Belarusians have left their country. Those under investigation or threat of criminal prosecution have often been assisted by the Belarus Solidarity Foundation (BYSOL). Thanks to its help, 798 Belarusians were safely evacuated from Belarus in 2022.

One of the most popular destinations for Belarusian emigrants had been Ukraine, where over 3,000 possess Ukrainian residence permits and many others can reside without additional documents based on a special directive. Since the escalation of the Russian military aggression against Ukraine, however, many migrants from Belarus have had to relocate for a second time. The number of Belarusian immigrants is currently estimated at 150,000, most of whom are living in EU member states such as Poland, Lithuania and Germany.

In exile, Belarusian political refugees face high rates of denial of their applications for asylum. For example, in Sweden only 2% of Belarusian applications receive a positive decision, compared to Poland where 99.5% of applicants are given protection. Poland is also the only EU member state to effectively address emigration from Belarus by introducing a specific procedure for legalization of Belarusians without the need to seek asylum.

Most Belarusian emigres in the EU face discrimination and challenges related to their individual and work status. One recent study found that 30% of Belarusians in Poland, Georgia and Lithuania face various forms of daily discrimination, such as inability to open a bank account, or refusal to rent an apartment to or employ a person with a Belarusian passport.

Over 60% of businesses in Belarusia indicated their intention to move abroad in 2021. According to the Association of Belarusian Businesses Abroad, at least 2100 different businesses have relocated from Belarus as a result of the political crisis, of which 80% moved to Poland and 10% to Lithuania. Repression of the Belarusian business sector, which mostly targeted IT companies such as Wargaming, PandaDoc, EPAM and Flo, resulted in a significant exodus of young professionals as well as a flight of capital from Belarus. According to a survey of over 3,000 Belarusian IT specialists, the top relocation destinations for the Belarusian IT sector are Poland, Georgia and Lithuania.

Repression of civil society in the aftermath of the 2020 Belarusian protests closed down about 20% of NGOs, while others are currently undergoing a process of forceful dissolution. The non-profit organizations still operating in Belarus encounter significant problems in their daily work and struggle to exist. Several women's organizations in Belarus are continuing their activities, but only one-third of them use open channels to talk about their work while the others operate underground. Dozens of significant NGOs, such as Assambleja, the Office of European Communication and Expertise, and LawTrend, have moved their staff abroad and reprofiled their activities to work online or with groups of Belarusians abroad. Civil society activists struggle to register NGOs abroad and face numerous challenges related to obtaining and reporting on financial aid.

First, long-term projects have had to adapt to the new conditions, leading to the shutdown of activities in Belarus which has affected the financial stability of NGO sector employees. Second, reporting on activities often involves security risks for participants in NGO events and new reporting routines that are not compliant with donors' requirements. Finally, obtaining donors' support for activities has become more complicated due to the problems with opening bank accounts since the start of the war.

The situation is further aggravated by recently adopted repressive laws in Belarus, one of which allows the Belarusian courts to conduct trials or hearings or charge political activists in absentia. Another gives the authorities the right to deprive those living abroad and prosecuted in Belarus of their Belarusian citizenship. It is estimated that a significant number of exiled Belarusians could lose their passports in this way in 2023.

Independent Media

The Lukashenka regime started to limit media freedoms in Belarus in the mid-1990s. The 2020 political crisis led to a total cleansing of the independent media sector in the country. Anti-extremism laws and the blocking or restricting of access to the independent media's web pages and social media accounts have significantly reduced audiences. Nonetheless, independent media continue to maintain a significant influence on Belarusian society. For example, one major outlet – Zerkalo.io, formerly known as Tut.by – regularly has up to 40 million monthly views, with 55% of its readership in Belarus. Pro-democracy Belarusians remain the key audience for independent media, and consume news only through messenger and YouTube. Only 1% watch the state-controlled traditional media. At the same time, worrying trends measured by independent opinion polls show that other Belarusians inside the country have begun to consume more Russian media, as well as the Belarusian state media. As a result, Belarusian independent media face a new challenge of producing new

narratives to compete with Russian and state media narratives, and to seek secure channels to disseminate their material. Fundraising and donor support are becoming a new challenge for many independent media as former major sources such as advertising and crowdfunding in Belarus are now prone to security risks.

Challenges Facing the Belarusian Political Opposition in Exile

The leadership of the Belarusian political opposition in exile, as represented by the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the Transition Cabinet and the Coordination Council, has set a goal to promote democratic change in Belarus. However, the structures of the Belarusian democratic opposition could soon face obstacles to their capacity to carry out sustainable, long-term work.

One test for the opposition will be to maintain strong horizontal structures that can remain united around a common goal and immune to attempts at infiltration by the Lukashenka regime. Another challenge concerns the process of finding the financial resources to strengthen the team with professionals. In addition, Lukashenka's decision to support Russia in the war against Ukraine means that the Belarusian opposition faces further challenges in promoting a non-aggressive and pro-democratic image of Belarus in the international arena and trying to reduce different types of discrimination against Belarusians abroad.

Finally, one of the fundamental criticisms of the Belarusian opposition concerns its lack of significant progress on the release of the political prisoners. There are currently 1443 Belarusians recognized as political prisoners, although many human rights activists put the actual number at about 4,000. Among those imprisoned are the Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Ales Bialiatski, well known opposition politicians, journalists and thousands of those who took part in the 2020–2021 protests.

The Belarusian political opposition in exile currently has only limited opportunity for dialogue with the Lukashenka regime. The EU, by contrast, has more opportunities to influence Lukashenka's decisions on the release of political prisoners, primarily through diplomacy and closed negotiations. The experience of negotiations on the release of political prisoners after the presidential election in 2010 has shown that EU sanctions alongside diplomatic negotiations can be effective.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The Belarusian political opposition in exile, NGOs, independent media and the diaspora all require support from the West, primarily the EU. Since 2020, the EU has invested over €100 million in assistance to civil society, media, youth, business and culture. An additional €30 million support package was announced at the end of 2022. In addition to this existing support, the EU should focus on the process of Belarusian emigres' legalization and the release of political prisoners. Continuing support for Belarus is an investment in the region's stability. Belarusian activists, politicians and businesses in exile are the stakeholders who will promote the development of a secure and democratic Belarus in the future. Technical and financial support targeted at these groups should therefore be a priority for the EU.

- **The EU should support the Belarusian opposition by providing financial and expert assistance and with building a resilient and sustainable democratic community abroad.** When the time comes for regime transition in Belarus, a strong political opposition will have a better chance of implementing democratic policies.

- **The EU should focus on supporting an independent media, including social media, and invest in the training and education of media professionals.** Independent outlets remain the only alternative sources of news for Belarusians inside the country and act as a link with the Belarusian diaspora.
- **The EU should develop an overarching approach to the legalization of Belarusians in EU member states,** focused on those likely to be deprived of Belarusian citizenship based on recently introduced laws, while also creating assistance programmes for the relocated. This should include creating policies on humanitarian residence permits, replacing Belarusian passports with alternative documents, and simplified procedures for asylum applications for Belarusians repressed by the regime.
- **The EU should continue to support Belarusian NGOs, including those in exile.** Assistance with relocation and legalization abroad would strengthen the organizational capacity of NGOs to conduct educational and development activities for Belarusians. Foreign aid donors should also review their long-term strategies for Belarus and replace these with short-term programmes to secure effective implementation of projects.
- **The EU should take a leading role in negotiations on the release of political prisoners,** even though foreign relations with the Belarusian regime are likely to remain strained. As Chair of the European Council, Sweden could initiate a work stream on promoting such negotiations.



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