

The EU needs to extend solidarity to Belarusian dissidents

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Belarusian civil society activists in exile in the EU need support, not restrictions and misperceptions

Belarusian activist Ann* fled her homeland for Ukraine in 2021 after her community collective was shut down by the state, along with [1,180 other non-governmental organisations](#) (NGOs) [that have been liquidated](#) since the country's post-election protests in 2020.

A year later, she was forced to leave Kyiv after Russia invaded Ukraine. Ann now lives in an EU country, where her status is precarious and she must reapply to renew her humanitarian residence permit every year.

She needs a source of income and somewhere to live – as do her NGO colleagues, less than a dozen of them, who also left Belarus. None could remain after their NGO was criticised in a social media post by Andrei Mukavozchyk, one of the country's top state propagandists.

Ann spent 150 hours writing funding applications at the end of last year, even though she's an engineer by training. Most applications are rejected due to competition (in one funding round for a grant to support work in education, culture and local governance, only four out of 57 applications succeeded) or because the work of activists in other countries is considered more essential.

Since 2021, the average period Ann's collective has had funding for is six months. As a result of this precarity, two of her colleagues have already left for jobs in the commercial sector this year.

Ann's story is, sadly, typical for many Belarusian activist organisations.

Civil society in Belarus

In the past decade, civil society began to flourish in Belarus. People used petitions and crowdfunders to raise concerns and funds without state help, and the idea of 'democracy' was becoming more popular, according to opinion polls.

But although the Belarusian government occasionally turned to foreign NGOs for expertise and education, NGOs inside the country have been met with obstacles rather than support. Although NGOs are required to register with the authorities – and face prosecution if they don't – most Belarusian activists are not formal members of an NGO; they work as volunteers or run unregistered initiatives.

The aftermath of the fraudulent election in 2020, when President Alexander Lukashenka falsified the results to remain in power, changed everything. As the Lukashenka regime imprisoned thousands of protesters, thousands more began fleeing the police terror, often for neighbouring countries. Looking at the number of non-tourist visas issued to Belaurisans, I estimate that more than 6% of the

population had left by the beginning of this year.

The crisis impacted the country's nascent NGOs. Activists who had been involved in environmental protection, human rights, sustainable development, domestic violence and other areas (and had even consulted the authorities on those topics) had to set up new operations outside Belarus, in exile.

Most people leaving Belarus headed for Ukraine - until Russia invaded the country in February 2022. Now the majority of Belarusian activists head for Poland and Lithuania - but they have to get an EU visa first. Those who cannot wait in Belarus for an EU visa frequently choose Georgia instead.

Visa regulations and restrictions

A key problem for many dissidents is the silent inertia of Europe's migration and asylum bureaucracy when it comes to Belarusians.

Despite pressure, the EU has not dropped visa regulations for Belarusian citizens, even though [most applicants are escaping persecution](#) or visiting their nearest and dearest in exile, rather than for tourism.

Given how complicated and even dangerous it is to apply for an EU visa from within Belarus, long-term and multiple-entry visas could be helpful to preserve connections. Instead, new restrictions have been discussed, with the Lithuanian interior minister [saying](#) the country is considering an entry ban for Belarusians.

Belarus is commonly equated with Russia in terms of EU policies, visa regulations, and restrictions applied on the basis of citizenship

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Belarusian citizens face virtually the same restrictions in many countries as have been imposed on Russians, due to the Lukashenka regime's [support for the war](#) and Russia's increasing political and military control over Belarus.

Yet opponents of the Lukashenka regime face forms of repression at home that don't exist in other countries, including Russia. [Belarusian dissidents](#) have been deprived of their citizenship for taking part in protests and tried in absentia; they even face the [death penalty](#). Riot policemen have also [reportedly destroyed](#) people's EU residence permits.

Germany is stricter with Belarusians than Russians when issuing humanitarian residence permits, activists claim. The website of the German Embassy in Belarus (unlike its embassy in Russia) does not even mention humanitarian visas.

The Czech Republic has established an annual quota of 500 humanitarian permits in total for citizens of both Belarus and Russia. For context, since 2020, the average number of people arrested during protests in a mid-sized city in Belarus is 500; in total, roughly 1% of the adult Belarusian population has been [detained by police](#) in a country of nine million.

In many countries, contacting the consular offices of Belarus for help - with renewing a passport, for example, or giving a relative back home power of attorney to sell your house - is problematic. Staff in the embassies often refuse to help and suggest Belarusians travel to Belarus instead, an impossibility for activists who have fled and [cannot return](#) for fear of landing in prison.

As a result, many people are immobilised, awaiting decisions on their case for months, or they have to move to countries outside Europe where their activist connection to Belarus is effectively broken.

Direct action, not skilled work

Now, out of necessity, the exiled Belarusian NGO community in Europe is prioritising direct action.

As well as helping colleagues to leave Belarus, initiatives often relate to political prisoners at home – crowdfunding for their families, who often have trouble finding work; writing and passing letters to them; finding ways to get medication to them; looking for a temporary host for their pets.

Important though this work is, the situation normalises unpaid labour, doesn't make use of people's specialist knowledge and means that they start losing their skills. Many activists, especially younger ones, face unemployment and leave for commercial sectors such as IT.

Even if they try to continue their NGO work, they often can't find grant funding for it. A frequent reason for rejection, even though the applicants are displaced Belarusians, is that the project doesn't include activities inside Belarus.

The democratic states that Belarusian activists look to for inspiration and support would benefit from differentiating between Belarusians and their oppressors

Grassroots activists who have stayed behind in Belarus lack institutional support and are unable to speak about their activism publicly. It's virtually impossible to carry out common NGO activities such as organising public events, running a media outlet, making cultural products or running support hubs.

The few who do manage to continue their activities in a partisan mode (for instance, some LGBTIQ+ initiatives or domestic violence shelters located outside urban areas) are often dependent on informal support from their colleagues in exile. They're also at constant risk of criminal persecution.

Indeed, the very notion of activism is different inside Belarus, where people have been arrested for wearing red-and-white socks (colours used in anti-government protests), bringing flowers to the Ukrainian embassy or [singing a song in Ukrainian](#).

What's happening in Lithuania

Lithuania is one of several countries where Belarusians in exile can preserve their connection to their homeland and consolidate their efforts against the repressive regime. Like Poland and Latvia, it has launched a support programme for those fleeing persecution in Belarus.

The capital, Vilnius, now has a Belarusian community centre, a school that provides education in the Belarusian language, a university-in-exile and other venues of civil society. Some say it's easier to hear Belarusian spoken on the streets of Vilnius than in Minsk, where speaking it (rather than Russian) [can get you imprisoned](#).

Some connections with Belarus are maintained quite literally: parents arrive from Belarus to visit their exiled children, and those returning to Belarus carry documents, letters and donations with them because these can't be sent by international post or bank transfer.

From time to time, Lithuanian politicians have suggested that Belarusian citizens should face the same visa restrictions as Russians. That would mean people couldn't use a tourist visa to get into the Baltic states.

This move would decrease movement between Belarus and Lithuania, which would hit activists and their families. It would also narrow the spectrum of officially available visas, putting the activists

who apply for them under even greater scrutiny.

Belarus is commonly equated with Russia in terms of EU policies, visa regulations, and restrictions applied on the basis of citizenship. Whether the result of colonial thinking or a reluctance to develop two sets of regulations instead of one, this presents a dangerous precedent for civil societies in non-democratic countries.

Currently, civil society actors are subject to the same policies regardless of whether their country is controlled by an internationally recognised leader (such as Putin) or by a person whom the EU and US do not recognise as president (such as Lukashenka).

The policies overlook the fact that the prospect of losing sovereignty to Russia remains unpopular among Belarusians, while the suppression of protests in Belarus was and is backed by the Kremlin – meaning that Belarusian resistance faces additional challenges.

Today, it is not only bureaucratic and financial obstacles that push Belarusians away from activism. It is also the feeling of utter injustice and futility that comes as their country suffers one of the most massive campaigns of repression in Europe since the break-up of the Soviet Union.

The democratic states that Belarusian activists look to for inspiration and support would benefit from differentiating between Belarusians and their oppressors.

**Names have been changed*

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