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Belarusian exiles facing transnational persecutions

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This article explores the various forms of repression faced by Belarusian exiles and the ways in which it is exercised across borders. It emphasizes the fear instilled by operations conducted abroad by Belarusian security services, the targeting of protest mobilizations abroad, the threats encountered while seeking refuge abroad, the pressure exerted on relatives remaining in Belarus, the trials in absentia as well as the non-issuance of expired passports and other official documents abroad. One of the effects of these multiple forms of persecution is to encourage a distancing from political forms of activism.

Keywords: cross borders persecution, Belarusian exiles

The fraudulent re-election of Aliaksandr Lukashenka on August 9, 2020, for his sixth consecutive presidential term, sparked off protests that were unprecedented for this country in terms of their scale, duration, and the diversity of mobilized social groups¹, which the regime crushed with violence that was also unprecedented. Since then, the repression has intensified and taken on new forms, prompting many Belarusians to flee their country. According to various estimates, between 300,000 and 500,000 people, out of a population of around 9.3 million, have left Belarus since 2020². The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, supported by Belarus, has further intensified existing migration flows and has led a significant number of Belarusians to seek refuge in Georgia³, Poland⁴, Lithuania⁵, and other countries of European Union. According to Eurostat, between 2021 and 2023, Belarusians represented the second-largest national group to receive the highest number of first residence permits within the EU⁶.

The repression within the country continues to this day. Various studies document its extent and used methods⁷. Persecution doesn't only target Belarusian citizens living in their country, but also those who found refuge abroad. This paper aims to describe and characterize the different forms of repression faced by Belarusian exiles and how it is exercised across borders. It is based on research projects, conducted since 2021 by the two authors⁸, focusing on Belarusian exiles in Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Ukraine, and Georgia. This research draws on over a hundred in-depth interviews collected between 2021 and 2025 and explores

various dimensions of exile such as the reasons for departure, the route taken, the settling and administrative challenges encountered in host countries, the ties maintained with relatives remaining in Belarus, and the potential continuation of various forms of politicization. While this research does not focus exclusively on cross-border persecution, this issue has recurrently appeared in the collected testimonies, not only in 2021 but throughout the years up to 2025. The collected materials, though scattered and fragmentary, reveal how exiles are confronted with different forms and modalities of repression and persecution.

The demonstration of Belarusian security service's ability to operate beyond national borders

The Minsk regime stages more or less spectacular operations demonstrating its capacity to operate beyond Belarusian borders. According to the State security department of Lithuania (VSD), A. Lukashenka himself ordered the KGB in October 2020 to "increase the effectiveness of foreign intelligence" and to find "other methods and forms of espionage"⁹. The year 2021 is marked by several statements and operations. In January 2021, an investigation revealed that, according to an audio recording provided to a Brussels media outlet by a Belarusian high-ranking official who had defected to the opposition, Lukashenko had, years earlier, paid 1.2 million euros to eliminate exiled opponents abroad¹⁰. Operations against three targets based in Germany failed, however, Belarusian journalist Pavel Sheremet was killed in July 2016 in a car bomb explosion in Kyiv, where he had sought refuge. A few weeks after this investigation was published, Lukashenko explicitly threatened Belarusian exiles, publicly declaring on May 26, 2021: "We know your faces, and it's only a matter of time before you are brought to account before the Belarusian people"¹¹. In June 2021, Polish authorities advised opposition activists based in Warsaw to be cautious. The Belarusian KGB reportedly distributed addresses and photos within Polish neo-Nazi groups, leaving them responsible for a brutal beating¹². On August 3, 2021, Vital Shyshou was found hanged in a park in Kyiv. In 2020, he had participated in protests, before fleeing to Kyiv. At the time of his death, he was leading the Belarusian House in Ukraine, organization supporting Belarusian citizens fleeing repression. While some exiles suggested the possibility of settling scores related to this organization's ties with Ukrainian far-right circles, others saw it as the signature of the Belarusian KGB¹³. In September 2021, opposition in exile announced that, following the arrest of Raman Pratasevich, they had discovered that they had been infiltrated since the beginning of the year by a mole. The person considered a reliable source within Minsk's security services had actually remained loyal to the regime¹⁴. In November 2021, the press reported how Minsk police sought to rely on Interpol to track down protesters who had fled the country, despite Article 3 of its charter prohibiting the organization's use for political reasons. BYPOL, association of former Belarusian security officers having defected to the regime, released a recording in which a member of Interpol national bureau in Minsk explains to a police officer how to maneuver with Interpol: "For a man who painted white-red-white flags on walls, for example, you shouldn't mention the flag, or they'll understand it's political. Better to talk about property damage. Framing it this way, it might pass"¹⁵.

In this context, some exiles express their concern that close collaborations between Belarusian and Russian security services may compromise their security abroad, even within the European Union. Ihar Loban, a member of BYPOL and a refugee in Warsaw, who is listed as an "extremist" by the regime since April 2021, stated to the press: "I do not believe that Belarusian authorities could come after me in Poland, but if they collaborate with Russia, nothing seems

impossible, especially since Russia has far more spies than Belarus"¹⁶. The large-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, supported by Belarus, raises fears of a tighter cooperation between the security services of the two allied countries. During interviews conducted in Lithuania in spring 2024, several exiles expressed their concerns following the hammer attack on Leonid Volkov, a close associate of Alexei Navalny, which occurred in the city center of Vilnius. In 2025, Lithuanian security services accused Russian and Belarusian agencies of orchestrating assaults against Belarusian residents in Lithuania¹⁷.

Targeting Protest Mobilizations Abroad

Operations and statements aimed at demonstrating the capacity of security services to act beyond borders are accompanied by more targeted procedures concerning openly political activities. Since 2021, several exiles expressed in interviews their fear of participating in rallies promoting a democratic Belarus (such as Freedom Day on March 25, Political Prisoners Day on May 21, etc.). They fear being photographed, identified, and reported. They say having identified men in civilian clothes ostensibly filming participants at these events. Masha¹⁸, who settled in Poznań in July 2021 with her husband and young son, initially participated in actions supporting Belarusian opposition. However, she did not feel safe at rallies organized by Belarusians in Poznań. During an interview conducted in December 2021, she explained: "I had imagined that when I got there, I would wave a flag and move among the protesters. In fact, I was scared, even there. I thought there might be undercover agents among them. They could take my photo, and if I ever wanted to return to Belarus, I could be arrested for participating in that rally. When I arrived in Poland in July, I commented a lot, reposted, and liked content on social media. But I stopped from September. For the past three months, I haven't posted or written anything. I no longer express my opinions, nor 'like'. I hope to be able to return to Belarus someday to see my family."

This fear intensifies over the months and years that follow, as the movement within Belarus is muzzled and repression increases and spreads beyond borders. Since 2024, the Investigative Committee of Belarus has threatened to prosecute participants of rallies organized abroad and to seize their real estate left in the country¹⁹ in order to persuade Belarusians to keep a low profile and to stay away from any protest mobilization.

Thus, many Belarusians who protested in 2020, despite having found refuge abroad, come to believe that continuing the struggle abroad is dangerous. For instance, an exile confided in May 2024 during an interview in Vilnius: "It's in your interest not to get involved to try to save your skin." This feeling is echoed in interviews concerning various moments of opposition mobilization in exile. For example, in interviews conducted in Vilnius on the eve of the online elections held from May 24 to 27, 2024, to renew the Coordination Council created by the initiative of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, several exiles explained that they would not participate, fearing that digital data could be hacked and that their participation in these election—denounced and condemned by the Minsk regime—could lead to legal action against them. The 2025 presidential elections also reflected this disengagement and distancing from political action. While the opposition leaders managed to organize a rally in Warsaw, the number of participants (though difficult to quantify precisely) seems relatively low²⁰. The masked faces of many protesters, along with the organizers' call for caution to avoid publicly revealing their identities, demonstrate how persistent the fear of persecution remains, even when protests take place abroad. The claims of the Investigative Committee of Belarus to have identified 365 people who protested against the election results in various countries (203 in Warsaw, 29 in

Vilnius, 18 in Bialystok, 39 in New York)²¹ and have initiated criminal proceedings against them, may further reinforce this trend of disengagement.

Threats Faced After Departure and Pressures on Relatives Remaining in Belarus

Beyond the surveillance of overtly political activities, Belarusian exiles, especially those who had been prosecuted before fleeing Belarus, repeatedly highlight the threats and pressures they faced even after they found refuge abroad. Volha left Belarus in August 2022. Convicted for protesting against the war in Ukraine, she managed, before serving her sentence and being incarcerated, to escape to Lithuania, where she obtained refugee status. Two years later we make an interview with her, and she tells that within six months of her escape, she received repeated messages on social media from a "major" of GUBOPiK (Main Directorate for combating organized crime and corruption). He sought to know her address and activities in Lithuania, and urged her to visit the Belarusian embassy in Vilnius to complete some documents. After much hesitation, she began responding to these urgent requests, as during the same period, her family members remaining in Belarus had multiple visits from investigators questioning them about her. In early 2024, on the eve of Volha's birthday, her brother also received a phone call from security services informing him that a person resembling his sister had been involved in a traffic accident in Poland. During an exchange on social media, an officer told Volha, which she interpreted as a threat: "for now, we are only visiting your family members, but who knows what the future holds...". A few months later, Volha noticed that her brother had stopped following her on social media — where she shares only her daily life in Vilnius. She thinks he is afraid of maintaining contact with his her, in fear of persecution by the regime. Volha has not seen her parents in two years. She proposed to apply for visas so they could visit her in Vilnius, but they declined — because of fear of the consequences.

Yana was actively involved in the protests in 2020 but she left Belarus in early 2021 following KGB visits to her workplace and multiple summons to the police station. In Lithuania, she continues to receive messages from police inspectors. What affects her the most today she shares is the difficulties she faces in maintaining relationships with her former friends and colleagues remaining in Belarus. She explains these difficulties by the persistent demands from the administration of the medical institution where she worked, urging them to cease all contact with her, and by direct threats to those who would not unsubscribe from her page on social media.

Another illustrative story of how security services set pressure on individuals traveling abroad to visit relatives who are under prosecution in Belarus is the case of Alla who Ronan Hervouet interviewed in Vilnius 2024. Alla left Belarus in 2021, resided in Georgia and then Ukraine, before fleeing Russian bombardments and seeking refuge in Vilnius in March 2022, where her mother visited her. Alla tells that, following a "local initiative" within her mother's state organization, every employee returning from abroad were asked to fill out a form of 37-questions, drafted "in the spirit of the Soviet era," to inform authorities of the addresses of the people they met, any contacts with host country authorities, etc. For example, here are the formulations of question 4 ("Foreign relatives: full name, degree of kinship, residence, since when, workplace, studies") and question 5 ("Unofficial contacts with persons permanently residing abroad, excluding those mentioned in paragraph 4: full name, year of birth, country of residence, workplace, studies, contact details, mode of communication: meetings, correspondence, phone conversations, etc.)".

In some cases, pressures on family members are particularly severe. Vlad, who joined BYPOL, association of former security officers, in Warsaw in the weeks after August 9, 2020, tells in an interview in April 2022 how he interprets the imprisonment in the autumn of his brother, who remained in Belarus and was sentenced for embezzlement despite not being politically active. According to Vlad, this was a reprisal measure in response to his defection. In another interview, conducted in a Polish provincial city, Vital', an opposition activist who arrived in Warsaw in 2023, recounts his story. After being imprisoned for a month in Minsk and subjected to pressure, intimidation, and violence, he left the country (fleeing via Russia and then various countries in the Caucasus). After that, the security services visited immediately his parents' home and arrested his brother. Vital' claims that his brother was apolitical and had committed no offense justifying arrest. He believes his brother was detained because of their familial connection, and incarcerated for ten days. After his release, his brother also left Belarus to seek refuge in a Caucasus country.

While it is reasonable to assume that these police practices are a continuation of those used during the Cold War era²², it remains difficult to precisely grasp their intrinsic logic and the extent of their systematic application, except in a hypothetical manner and based on the produced effects.

In absentia trials

Belarusian authorities are also expanding their repertoire of repressive actions to target Belarusians living abroad and to disrupt their lives in exile. Since the amendments introduced in summer 2022, Belarusian legislation allows the criminal prosecution of individuals who have left the country through a "special criminal proceedings". Since the implementation of this procedure, the number of trials in absentia has significantly increased: in 2024, 110 individuals were prosecuted under this special proceeding, heavily criticized by UN experts²³, compared to 18 in 2023. As of November 21, 2024, 112 people have been sentenced in absentia to prison terms ranging from 10 to 25 years, some of them even twice²⁴. While first trials in absentia were mainly initiated against opposition leaders and prominent political activists, since 2024, they have also targeted journalists, bloggers, researchers, human rights defenders, and even individuals who are not public figures²⁵. The most emblematic case, named by the Investigative Committee as "Tsikhanouskaya's analysts", is the in absentia trial held in summer 2024 against 20 people—journalists, political scientists and sociologists— who were sentenced to 10 - 12 years prison terms for charges such as "conspiracy and calls to seize state power," "activities undermining national security," or "participation in an extremist formation"²⁶.

While this persecution does not directly threaten the physical safety of convicted people, it nonetheless impacts their lives, starting with their mobility. Like other Belarusian exiles who have been sentenced or are wanted by Belarusian authorities, they must carefully select their travel destinations and avoid countries that cooperate with Minsk on extradition. Some of these countries are visa-free for Belarusians and considered as potential meeting places with relatives remaining in Belarus.

Furthermore, people convicted in absentia are systematically listed as "extremists" and/or "terrorists" by the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs and KGB, which, according to human rights defenders²⁷, include over 5,000 and 500 persons respectively. Strongly criticized at international level²⁸, this instrumentalization of legislation on extremism and terrorism for persecuting critical voices, has a significant impact on the work conditions of Belarusian journalists, experts, researchers, as well as human rights defenders in exile. How can they

continue their professional activities, conduct interviews, or communicate with Belarusians remaining in the country when contact with individuals placed on these lists exposes them to repression? Human right defenders report cases of people being prosecuted for giving interviews to independent Belarusian media, that the Belarusian authorities consider to be "extremist formations"²⁹.

Finally, in addition to prison sentences, some people convicted in absentia are also required to pay fines, the amounts of which often correspond to the value of the real estate and other assets they had and which were seized in Belarus. In other words, in practice, this type of trials makes it possible to expropriate the property of Belarusians who have fled. For some exiles, this represents much more than material capital that they could have used to rebuild their lives abroad. One of the convicted people in the aforementioned case, interviewed in autumn 2024, provides a poignant reflection on how this cross-border repression weighs on life in exile: "I feel like a ghost hovering over my apartment in Belarus, caught between two worlds. He cannot return there, nor can he move on to another world because he remains deeply attached to that life. (...) At first, I was very worried about my plants dying on the windowsills. No one could water them, because the apartment has been seized and sealed by police... Until now, I haven't been able to move forward. The Belarusian state largely contributes to this. It doesn't forget you. It doesn't let you go and start a new life elsewhere. Instead, it constantly harasses you with prosecutions, introduces new measures, and finds ways to cause trouble and make your life difficult."

The non-issuance of passport abroad

Another of these repressive measures is the presidential decree n°278, which came into force in September 2023. It requires Belarusian citizens to return to the country in order to renew passports or obtain various official documents, such as birth certificates, civil status records, diplomas, etc.; it also instructs consular services to cease providing these services abroad. Furthermore, it requires the physical presence of individuals for any real estate or cars sale transactions in Belarus, making such transactions impossible under power of attorney established abroad. While this measure affects all Belarusians living abroad, regardless of their attitude to Lukashenka's regime, it particularly targets and penalizes exiles for whom returning to Belarus is impossible due to significant risks for their safety. In this regard, it can be seen as a form of "vengeance" (according to the expression used by Anaïs Marin, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus³⁰) by the regime against those who protested against it in 2020 or continue to denounce it from abroad.

Accounts from Belarusian exiles illustrate how this policy impacts multiple aspects of their daily lives in host countries: from the inability to legalize their status with an expiring passport to travel restrictions (non-European citizens must possess a passport that is not only valid but also contains sufficient blank pages for visas and border stamps), and difficulties in providing documents for marriage or diploma verification. As many Belarusians fled urgently, they were unable, before their departure, to gather these documents essential for various administrative procedures in host countries.

By ending passport renewals abroad and prohibiting real estate transactions without the owner's physical presence, Belarusian authorities aim to force Belarusians to return to the country despite the risks they may face crossing the border. Maryna, who fled to Lithuania in early 2021, decides, after much hesitation, to take this risk in order to sell her apartment in Minsk. During the interview conducted in 2023, she says that she was aware of the increasing

number people arrested when they had returned to Belarus. As her name appears in police database due to her arrest in 2020, she meticulously prepares to pass the border control. For two weeks, she reviews her social media accounts, deletes comments and likes she has left, unsubscribes from Belarusian medias (her main sources of information) and unfollows pages of many friends more or less involved in protest activities, feeling uncomfortable doing so, and cleans her phone. “I was so anxious that I started having nightmares and my hands trembled all the time.” After thorough searches of her luggage and car at the border, and an interrogation by a KGB officer, she managed to cross it. In Minsk, she fears leaving her home and immediately departs once her apartment sale is finalized. She claims that this experience convinced her never to return to Belarus and to take such risks again. While Marina has managed to leave the country, this is far from being the case for other Belarusians. Human rights defenders regularly report cases of people arrested after their return to Belarus. As for October 2024, at least 66 of them had been criminally prosecuted and imprisoned³¹.

The disruptive power of this presidential decree, however, varies depending on the migration policies of host countries. In Poland and Lithuania, local authorities issue special travel documents to Belarusian exiles who have obtained residence permits on humanitarian grounds or are under international protection. In Poland, this document not only allows them to cross borders, but is even recognized as a valid proof of identity for various administrative procedures. However, such solution does not exist in other countries, particularly outside Europe, where the conditions for staying have until now been considered to be very attractive for Belarusians. For example, Georgia has become one of the main destinations for Belarusians fleeing after the full-scale Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Maintained air connection between Minsk and Tbilisi (unlike with other EU capitals) and one-year visa-free stay which can be restarted simply by re-entering the country strongly influence this choice. Nevertheless, the impossibility to renew an expiring passport makes the situation of many Belarusian exiles more precarious and raises doubts about the possibility to continue their lives in Georgia, as highlighted by Dasha. Coming to Tbilisi in 2021 to participate in a workshop, she learns that criminal proceedings have been initiated against her organization and colleagues, making her return to Belarus impossible. During an interview conducted in 2024, she explains: “The expiration date of my passport now determines the timeframe of my stay in Georgia. I would like to stay here, but I’m aware that I’ll have to leave again. It is almost impossible to obtain political refugee status in Georgia (which could have resolved the passport issue). I see no other options but to go to countries like Poland, where several legalization options are available for Belarusians with expiring passports”. As other accounts from exiles met in Georgia reveal, more and more Belarusians — for whom returning to home is out of question — are obliged to continue their wandering and change host countries. In other words, this measure on passport renewal is used by the regime as a leverage to maintain control over lives of Belarusians who have found refuge abroad. Coupled with the specificities of migration policies in countries like Georgia, it also contributes to shape their exile trajectories and forces to engage in new circulations in search of more secure, stable administrative statuses offering a better protection against transnational repression.

These multiple forms and mechanisms of persecution sustain a constant state of fear, both for the exiles themselves and for their relatives in Belarus. They foster to take distance from political engagement, making it difficult for the political opposition in exile to maintain protest mobilization abroad. They also contribute to weakening links with those who remain in the country. They instill despair and spread the idea that any action is not only useless but can

also complicate or worsen the situation of the exiles, who have been made more vulnerable by the changes in migration policies within European countries since February 2022.

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⁴ Anastasia Luzgina and Vladislav Koreyvo, « Analysis of the migrant flow from Belarus to Poland, Lithuania and other EU countries in 2021–2022 », *BEROC Working Paper Series*, n°84, 2023

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¹⁸ All names of interviewees have been anonymised

¹⁹ In 2024, he stated that he had launched criminal proceedings against 104 Belarusians who took part in demonstrations celebrating Freedom Day (25 March) around the world.

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