

VisiBYlity

For Belarusian democratic actors

The situation and challenges of the Belarusian diaspora in different countries

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Migration from Belarus did not start in 2020. Since the Soviet Union collapsed, many Belarusians chose to leave for the EU and other countries to pursue studies or better career opportunities. As per the UN report in 2020, more than 1.4 million Belarusians lived abroad.¹ After the start of the repressions in 2020 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, according to the communication by Special Rapporteur Anais Marin, up to 1 million Belarusians left the country to evade persecution and repression.² This means that right now, up to 2 million Belarusians live outside Belarus.

Legalization

In 2020, to be able to move abroad, Belarusians were presented with several options. The first option is to get a humanitarian visa on the grounds of politically motivated persecution. Though seemingly the best and easiest way, it was still not a solution for everyone. Not every EU country provides such visas and those who do often have complicated and lengthy procedures to acquire further residence permits on humanitarian grounds or apply for asylum.

Some Belarusians, fearing they would not have sufficient grounds to apply for this type of visa, decided to proceed

with the second option, namely relocation with work permits.

However, it is important to note that both options worked well until this year's introduction of Lukashenka's Decree 278. The decree barred embassies from issuing essential documents, such as new passports, police clearances, and registry office certificates. Once their passports expire, Belarusians will not be able to apply for any kind of residence permit, and this is just one example of how the Belarusian regime is making life for the Belarusian diaspora more difficult.

Passports, travel, and identification documents

Decree 278, enacted by the Lukashenka regime on September 4, 2023, has exacerbated the predicament for Belarusians abroad by mandating that new passports and other crucial documents, like apostilles or certificates of absence of marriage, can only be issued upon their return to Belarus. This stipulation effectively strips many exiles of their ability to procure essential documents. There have already been documented instances of individuals detained upon returning to Belarus for the purpose of passport renewal, illustrating the grave risks involved.³ Without the ability to receive

¹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2020): International Migration 2020 Highlights. URL: https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/undesa_pd_2020_international_migration_highlights.pdf (last accessed 17.11.2023).

² United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (20.09.2023): Belarus: Presidential decree denying consular services puts Belarusians abroad at risk. Press Release. URL: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/09/belarus-presidential-decree-denying-consular-services-puts-belarusians> (last accessed 17.11.2023).

³ Zerkalo (27.09.2023): Начали задерживать белорусов, вернувшихся в страну за новым паспортом. Подробности от BYSOL. URL: <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/49951.html> (last accessed 17.11.2023).

renewed passports and other documents in the embassies, the decree leaves many without documentation, hindering their ability to travel, access healthcare, banking, and education, renew residence permits, or engage in family legal matters.

To address the immediate crisis of travel documents, we look to the examples set by Lithuania and Poland, which issue "Foreigner/Alien" passports to those unable to obtain them from Belarus. They can be issued if the person holds a residence permit in the respective host country and cannot acquire the passport of their own country.

Identification is another critical issue. In Poland, foreigner passports are used solely as travel documents. This leaves people with valid travel documents but without their proper IDs. In Lithuania, on the other hand, foreigner passports are accepted as IDs which allows Belarusians to access the public and private services they need.

Procedural issues

Another recurring problem for Belarusians is the need to provide police clearance to apply for residence permits and other documents. Before the adoption of Decree 278, the problem was that some Belarusians were subjected to politically motivated administrative and criminal cases. With the introduction of the decree, Belarusians are unable to get a police clearance abroad at all. Thus, the only option to obtain it is to travel to Belarus. Those travels often result in detention.

Documents for children

The plight of undocumented Belarusian children born in exile is exceptionally pressing. In 2022, over 700 were born in Poland alone.⁴ Their parents are at risk if they return to Belarus and cannot secure passports for their newborns. Returning to Belarus is, however, the only way to get passports for those kids. Without passports, those young Belarusians cannot get proper documents – residence permits – to stay in the EU.

Healthcare

Belarusians seeking refuge from the regime of Lukashenka often face significant hurdles in accessing public healthcare in their host countries. Language barriers and unfamiliarity with the medical systems in these new environments prevent people from visiting needed medical professionals, particularly during their initial period with visas that do not provide social security benefits. Humanitarian visas, often issued to Belarusian refugees, further restrict access to public

healthcare by exempting individuals from social security contributions.

Moreover, the high cost of private healthcare places an additional strain on Belarusians, particularly those requiring specialized examinations for chronic conditions like cancer. This lack of access to timely and adequate medical care can have dire consequences, potentially exacerbating health conditions and hindering integration into new communities.

Language barriers

Belarusian exiles, while navigating the complexities of securing their legal status and accessing healthcare, face another formidable challenge: overcoming language barriers for integration and preserving their cultural heritage. This linguistic hurdle is not just about communication but also about maintaining a sense of identity and community in unfamiliar surroundings.

Belarusians living abroad face the dual challenge of learning a new language for integration and preserving their native Belarusian language and culture. The language barrier significantly hinders their ability to find qualified jobs or access education. Moreover, the struggle to find schools that support their children's linguistic needs adds to their burden, with some facing discrimination in educational settings.

At the same time, maintaining the Belarusian language and culture is crucial. Historically overshadowed by Russian, the Belarusian language has seen a renewed interest among the diaspora, especially since the political turmoil post-2020. Efforts to promote Belarusian language learning and cultural awareness are underway, with initiatives like the Pranciskaus Skorinos Gymnasium in Lithuania, which stands as a testament to preserving Belarusian identity through education.

Support for these initiatives is strong among civil society and member states, with calls to aid the establishment of Belarusian cultural and educational institutions. Such support is vital for the integration and cultural preservation of the Belarusian diaspora in order to ensure that their unique heritage continues flourishing while they build new lives abroad.

Employment

For Belarusian exiles, the struggle extends beyond securing a legal foothold and accessing vital services in their host countries as they also face formidable barriers to employment. These obstacles not only hinder their economic assimilation but also profoundly affect their autonomy.

Belarusian professionals seeking refuge are often caught in a bind due to the absence of crucial documentation.

⁴ Statistics Poland (04.09.2023): Demographic Situation of Poland up to 2022. URL: <https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/population/population/demographic-situation-in-poland-up-to-2022.13.3.html> (last accessed 17.11.2023).

Apostilled diplomas and professional certificates, which serve as the standard proof of qualifications, are frequently left behind amidst the chaos of fleeing their home. This gap in their paperwork places them at a considerable disadvantage in the job market as they deal with the challenge of proving their skills and educational achievements to potential employers. The result is a labor market that seems closed off to them, not because they lack talent or the desire to work, but because they need the necessary documents that validate their professional background.

Adding to this difficulty is the discrimination which many Belarusians face in the workforce. According to the Council of Europe report “Addressing the specific challenges faced by the Belarusians in exile” (published in 2023), those who secure employment often report being subjected to heavier workloads or other biases linked to their nationality.⁵ This treatment affects not only their employment prospects but also their physical and psychological working conditions. The journey towards economic and professional integration for Belarusian exiles is thus fraught with obstacles, significantly curtailing their ability to contribute to and thrive in the economies of their new communities.

Family separation

The professional obstacles faced by Belarusian exiles are compounded by a profound emotional burden – the pain of family separation. The simple act of reaching out to loved ones in Belarus is dangerous, as even the slightest communication can draw the regime's scrutiny, severing the ties that bind them to those who remain. This reality casts a long shadow over the Belarusian diaspora, creating a poignant conflict within their hearts. The deep longing to embrace their relatives and homeland again is constantly in conflict with the dread of the grave consequences that such a return could entail. It is this distressing emotional conflict that underscores the urgency of the international community's response to support the Belarusian exiles, ensuring that the hope of reunion and a life free from fear can someday be more than just a distant dream.

Conclusion

Considering the previously mentioned topics, it is clear that Belarusians form a unique group of migrants with special needs. These needs should be recognized globally by the European Union, the Council of Europe, the United Nations, and within the national laws of the countries where Belarusians now live. They face specific challenges with legal status, healthcare access, employment, language barriers, and obtaining

necessary documents. These issues should be addressed to help Belarusians rebuild their lives with the dignity and support they deserve.

⁵ Council of Europe (05.06.2023): Addressing the specific challenges faced by the Belarusians in exile, Doc. 15783. URL: <https://pace.coe.int/pdf/f642667955ddf49b26c9de664ae81def1b426182d687f9977f05e5b9b064e258/doc.%2015783.pdf> (last accessed 17.11.2023).

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About VisiBYlity

The project supports Belarusian democratic actors in diaspora by supporting their projects and increasing outreach in the German public. The background papers give context and explanations on current development in the Belarusian diaspora communities. They serve as a basis for discussion during public debates.

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