Report on the Situation of the Democratic Movement and Citizens of Belarus in Exile

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This report describes the situation that has developed within Belarus's democratic community, among citizens of Belarus living abroad, and inside the country, and proposes steps that local and regional authorities can take.

KEY FINDINGS

The structures that Western institutions recognise as representatives of the people of Belarus have no mandate from anyone and have lost public support. Donor money is distributed without open reporting, and the media depend on a single centre that influences this distribution. Hundreds of thousands of citizens of Belarus in exile work and pay taxes in European countries, yet they cannot renew their passports, wait years for visas to see their families, and are almost cut off from transport links with their homeland. This pushes the population of Belarus away from Europe and strengthens Russia's position. Six years after 2020, a fundamental rethink of how to engage with the full range of Belarus's democratic movement is needed.

CONTENTS

1. The democratic movement: representation, finances, media 1

2. Citizens of Belarus in exile 2

3. Recommendations and proposals 4

4. Sources 4

1. The democratic movement: representation, finances, media

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office has no mandate from anyone to act on behalf of all citizens of Belarus. It was never elected and was formed in Vilnius mainly of people who did not take part in the events of 2020. Nevertheless, since 2020 Western governments and international institutions have treated it and the structures created around it as the main representatives of the people of Belarus.

In 2020 the main presidential candidates were barred from the election. Viktar Babaryka collected 435,000 signatures, Valery Tsepkalo 212,000, while Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya submitted 110,000 (2024 report). Babaryka and Siarhei Tsikhanouski were arrested, and Tsepkalo was forced to leave the country. Only Tsikhanouskaya was registered, and the campaign teams united around her. After the election, the head of the Operational and Analytical Centre, Andrei Pavlyuchenko, personally escorted her to the Lithuanian border and handed her an envelope containing €15,000. She kept this silent for five years and confirmed it only in August 2025, after a video was shown on state TV (Zerkalo, Nasha Niva).

In Lithuania, Tsikhanouskaya was granted official guest status and round-the-clock protection, which according to LRT cost about €1 million a year (The Baltic Times). On airport VIP lounges alone, the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported spending €352,000 between 2021 and mid-2025 (Nasha Niva). That sum would cover roughly 1,300 passages, meaning the lounges were used not only by Tsikhanouskaya but also by an unidentified circle of people (SOTA).

The United Transitional Cabinet, which calls itself a government in exile, and the Coordination Council were created around the Office (TVN24). Like the Office itself, these structures have no mandate from anyone to represent anybody. They have been linked to a series of scandals. Tatsiana Zaretskaya, the Cabinet's former representative for finance and economy, is suspected by the European Public Prosecutor's Office of EU subsidy fraud: the damage is estimated at almost €450,000, and a court has frozen up to €1.8 million in her accounts (Zerkalo, ERR). Anzhalika Melnikava, the former speaker of the Coordination Council, disappeared in March 2025 together with $150,000 allocated to the Council's work, and then bought two flats in Minsk, including one in an upmarket residential complex (Belsat, Mediazona).

The only one of these structures that holds elections is the Coordination Council. In May 2026, despite an active information campaign and advertising by popular Russian bloggers, 2,113 people took part in its election, compared with 6,723 in 2024 (Nasha Niva, Euroradio). For a country of more than 9 million people with a diaspora of hundreds of thousands, this means there is no real mandate.

Over six years, the Office's high-profile initiatives have produced no results. The 2020 "People's Ultimatum" ended in arrests and the ruin of small businesses, the 2021 "Victory Plan" was not implemented, and the announced negotiations with the authorities never took place (2024 report). Office staff sign agreements that prohibit criticism of the Office for 10 years under a penalty of €30,000 (text of the agreement).

The release of political prisoners in 2025–2026 was made possible by the actions of the US President and his administration, as the Office itself acknowledges (Tsikhanouskaya's Office, Taipei Times). These releases were preceded by appeals from Nobel laureates to the US President and world leaders (February 2025, August 2025). Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya did not work on her husband's release. At the end of October 2026, Siarhei Tsikhanouski himself stated this: according to him, three US administration officials confirmed to him that she had done no personal work towards his release (Antikor, Rambler).

Among those released were the main leaders of 2020: Siarhei Tsikhanouski, Viktar Babaryka and Maria Kalesnikava (DW via BB.lv). Siarhei Tsikhanouski publicly challenged the Office's legitimacy and called his wife a technical candidate (UA.News citing DW). According to him, she and her team travelled the world with his portrait asking for grants (Life.ru), which were spent on lunches costing up to €900, VIP lounges, hotels and outfits, of which, he says, Tsikhanouskaya has more than 200 (Politnavigator, Gordon). In recent months, media controlled by the Office have launched a large-scale smear campaign against Siarhei Tsikhanouski and other members of the movement whose views differ from the Office's position. Tsikhanouski himself also speaks of information attacks by the Office and outlets close to it (Rambler).

Six years have passed since 2020. Belarus's democratic movement is much broader than one office: it includes former presidential candidates and their teams, former political prisoners, independent politicians and parties, opinion leaders, human rights defenders and communities in different countries. A fundamental rethink of the entire concept of engagement with this movement is needed, based on open procedures and a broad coalition.

Since 2020, more than €450 million has been allocated to support civil society in Belarus by the European Union, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Norway and other countries. The European Union alone had allocated €200 million by the end of 2025 (EU Reporter). A significant share of these funds passed through Lithuanian companies that are essentially shell firms: as a rule, they have no employees, and their founders are not publicly known.

According to the Office's representative Valery Kavaleuski, following a civil society needs assessment that he coordinated, the European Commission allocated about €65 million. The assessment was prepared without consulting the media or civic initiatives, and the results of the spending are unknown (2024 report).

Tsikhanouskaya's Office is involved in distributing the funds, although it denies this (Office FAQ). The money went to projects that have no public support and about which almost nothing is known. In 2023, the accounts of a company belonging to the Office's chief adviser Franak Viačorka held more than €1 million of unexplained origin (2024 report). The whole system remains completely opaque.

Former allies of the Office also speak of the lack of transparency: Siarhei Tsikhanouski proposed creating a council to oversee the distribution of grants (UA.News citing DW). On 27 October 2026, the European Parliament's Committee on Petitions declared admissible petition No. 1499/2026 on the opaque distribution of EU grants, abuses and personal data leaks. The European Commission has been asked to conduct a preliminary investigation, and the petition has been referred to the AFET and CONT committees and to the Delegation for relations with Belarus.

As a result, organisations, media and activists depend not on their audiences but on those who influence the distribution of money. Assistance does not reach former political prisoners and forced emigrants in sufficient volume. Citizens of Belarus see that structures they never elected receive money in their name, and this undermines trust in the whole movement and in Western support.

In Belarus's non-state media, which depend on Tsikhanouskaya's Office and have signed non-disclosure agreements with it, total censorship has taken hold. Its cause is opaque funding and the dependence of editorial offices on a single centre that decides how funds are distributed.

One condition of cooperation has been signing agreements that prohibit criticism of the Office during the cooperation and for 10 years afterwards, under a penalty of €30,000 (text of the agreement, Nasha Niva).

As a result, the media adapt their editorial policy to the interests of this centre. Criticism of it and alternative views are not allowed, opponents are discredited, the quality of journalism declines, and part of the audience in Belarus turns to Russian media (2024 report).

Agreements that prohibit criticism under threat of penalty run counter to freedom of expression under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The European Media Freedom Act (Regulation (EU) 2024/1083) requires transparency in the allocation of public funds to media. European taxpayers' money should not support a system in which such a ban operates.

2. Citizens of Belarus in exile

Since 2020, hundreds of thousands of people have left Belarus. They have become a visible part of the economies and societies of European countries, yet they face problems that other migrants do not: the regime deprives them of documents, visas for their relatives are almost unobtainable, and transport links with Belarus have been severed.

According to PACE estimates, between 200,000 and 500,000 people have left Belarus since 2020 (ALDA). In 2024 alone, citizens of Belarus received 174,790 first residence permits in EU countries, and almost one million over five years (Nasha Niva, dev.by). Most live in Poland: at the beginning of 2026, 141,290 citizens of Belarus held a valid residence permit there, compared with 4,527 in 2016 (Nasha Niva). This is the second-largest group of foreigners in Poland after citizens of Ukraine (dev.by). At the end of 2025, 50,678 citizens of Belarus lived in Lithuania, also the second-largest diaspora there (Zerkalo).

These people are not aid recipients but workers, taxpayers and entrepreneurs. At the end of 2025, 138,730 citizens of Belarus were registered in the Polish social insurance system (dev.by), and almost 8,000 companies in Poland are linked to them, most of them in IT (dev.by). According to the National Bank of Poland, about 14% of economically active citizens of Belarus there run their own business, and 67% plan to stay permanently (Zerkalo). They work in 71% of Polish firms that employ non-EU foreigners (Zerkalo).

The main difficulty is documents. Since 7 September 2023, under Decree No. 278, citizens of Belarus cannot obtain or renew a passport at embassies and consulates. To do so they must return to Belarus, where many face arrest (Zerkalo, Neg.by). The same decree stopped recognising powers of attorney issued abroad, without which people cannot obtain certificates needed for legalisation, have diplomas recognised, marry or sell property (Nasha Niva). Since 2020, Poland has issued more than 11,000 travel documents to citizens of Belarus in place of passports — 87% of all such documents issued to foreigners (dev.by). The regime also cancels the passports of those it has expelled, and in July 2026 UN experts expressed serious concern about this (UN experts).

Families have been divided. People who fled persecution cannot return to Belarus even for a few days and can meet their relatives only in the EU. However, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Czechia, Finland and Sweden do not issue tourist visas to citizens of Belarus, only visas on the invitation of an employer or a close relative (Myfin.by). At Italian visa centres, applicants wait up to 90 days for their application to be checked and then about nine months to submit their documents. For Spanish visas, people are taken to Moscow to apply, and intermediaries charge 300–600 roubles on top of the consular fee (Nasha Niva). Elderly parents go years without seeing their children and grandchildren.

Transport links between Belarus and the EU have been almost entirely severed. Since June 2021, Belarus's airlines have been banned from flying to the EU (Izvestia), and there are no passenger trains to Poland (CityDog). Since 2023–2024, Lithuania has closed four of its six border crossings, and Poland several of its own (Mail.ru). In autumn 2025, Lithuania temporarily closed the border completely, and queues to leave for Poland reached almost seven days (Zerkalo, LRT). Latvia is extending its ban on irregular bus services across the border until October 2027 (Ukraina.ru).

All of this pushes the population of Belarus away from Europe. People inside the country perceive closed visas, trains and border crossings as punishment of the whole nation. Online surveys at the end of 2023 showed that only 10–16% of people in Belarus favour a union with the EU, while 40–50% favour a union with Russia (SCEEUS). According to analyst Artyom Shraibman, one reason is the feeling that "we are not welcome there", reinforced by travel restrictions. He recommends that the EU ease its visa policy, expand exchanges and restore passenger trains (SCEEUS). Russia benefits from this isolation: people are forced to travel via Moscow, including for European visas, they receive information mainly from Russian media, and the regime uses the closed borders as proof of Western hostility.

A critical situation has developed in Lithuania, which is declaring citizens of Belarus a threat to national security on a mass scale. In 2025 there were 1,634 such decisions — almost three times more than a year earlier. Of these, 391 people were refused a first residence permit, 1,023 were refused a renewal, and 214 had their permits revoked (The Insider, Zerkalo). Decisions are based on classified information that the person cannot see or challenge. People are stripped of refugee status and prepared for deportation to Belarus, where they face persecution (Euroradio). In 2025 alone, the number of citizens of Belarus in Lithuania fell from 57,511 to 50,678 (Zerkalo). In Poland, the number of residence permits issued to them has been falling for several years in a row (dev.by).

The regime persecutes those who have left even abroad. They are tried in absentia under "special proceedings" (Current Time). In May 2026, the KGB searched the homes of relatives of activists who had taken part in protests in Warsaw and Vilnius (The Insider). A data leak from the "Belaruski Hajun" project was followed by mass detentions in Belarus (Pozirk). The 2024 report also points to other leaks linked to structures around the Office, including the "Black Book of Belarus" and the "Peramoga" plan (2024 report).

In daily life, citizens of Belarus face refusals to open bank accounts and difficulties with work and housing (2024 report). The structures that speak on their behalf to governments have not solved these problems: their work focuses on international representation rather than on people's needs.

The best examples are those where cities work with citizens of Belarus directly, as residents, rather than through a single political structure.

Since May 2026, Cyprus has been issuing and extending residence permits for citizens of Belarus with expired passports (Meduza), and Poland issues them travel documents in place of passports (dev.by). Local services can apply the same approach: when registering residents, enrolling children in school or issuing certificates, they can accept a document issued by the host country without requiring a valid Belarus passport.

In Kraków, the participatory budget, citizens' panels and local initiatives are open to citizens of Belarus (ALDA). Between September 2025 and March 2026, consultations between communities and city authorities were held in Wrocław, Vilnius, Kraków and Warsaw (ALDA), and Wrocław City Hall hosted a dialogue between civil society and municipal officials (EU Agenda). In Warsaw, a language and culture course has been launched at the university with the participation of a representative of the Ombudsman, and in Białystok a local foundation tells the stories of people from Belarus as part of the city's community (Dzieje.pl), while city authorities took part in a solidarity march (TVN24).

There are also counter-examples. Vilnius discussed a proposal under which migrant children could attend primary school only in Lithuanian (Tsikhanouskaya's Office). Such decisions should be discussed with the communities themselves in advance.

3. Recommendations and proposals

The main proposal is to fundamentally rethink the concept of engagement with Belarus's democratic movement: to work with its full range and directly with citizens of Belarus at the local level, and to accompany any support with open data on recipients and results.

1. Local authorities should accept host-country documents, travel documents and expired Belarus passports for services (registration, schools, healthcare, certificates).
2. Create consultative councils of foreign residents under Convention CETS No. 144, electing community representatives openly rather than having them appointed by a single structure.
3. Open participatory budgets, citizens' panels and local initiatives to citizens of Belarus, as Kraków does.
4. Appoint a contact person in city halls for the problems of citizens of Belarus — transnational repression, as well as the difficulties of socially vulnerable groups, above all pensioners and people on low incomes — and provide them with free legal and social assistance.
5. Ease visas for relatives of citizens of Belarus living in the EU: parents, children and spouses.
6. Restore passenger transport between Belarus and neighbouring EU countries, above all trains and buses, and keep border crossings open for ordinary citizens.
7. Introduce a single EU procedure for legalising people with expired Belarus passports.
8. Introduce safeguards when a person is declared a security threat: the right to know the substance of the allegations, an appeal that suspends deportation, and a ban on deportation to Belarus and Russia.
9. Conduct an independent audit of the use of EU funds allocated since 2020 as part of the examination of petition No. 1499/2026.
10. End the practice of treating a single structure as the sole representative of citizens of Belarus, and hold consultations with former presidential candidates, former political prisoners, independent politicians and parties, opinion leaders, human rights defenders and communities.
11. Support the creation of a broad coalition of democratic forces with open rules, rotation and accountability.
12. Include in the Congress report a section on the transparency of funding for civil society and media in Belarus.

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