



A displaced civil society

2020-2022

ADDRESSING
PSYCHOLOGICAL
TRAUMA AND
SUPPORTING
THE RECOVERY
OF RELOCATED
ACTIVISTS
FROM BELARUS

Imprint



**German Association of Psychosocial Centres
for Refugees and Victims of Torture – BAFf e.V**

Paulsenstraße 55–56, 12163 Berlin, Germany
Tel.: +49 (0)30-310 124 63
E-Mail: info@baff-zentren.org
www.baff-zentren.org



**Project Partner
Conflict Analysis
and Prevention Centre
(CAPC)**

©BAFf 2023

Editors: Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, Elise Bittenbinder
Layout and illustrations by Ekaterina Kozhukhova

This product received support from the German Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs



Federal Foreign Office



**CIVIL
SOCIETY
COOPERATION**

CONTRIBUTORS:

Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, Elise Bittenbinder, Katja Mériaux, Elisa Steinfurth, and another Belarusian contributor whose name we cannot publish at this time for security reasons. We hope to do so when the situation in Belarus permits. Interviews in Lithuania, Georgia, Ukraine and Poland were conducted by Belarusian relocants in these countries.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank everybody who has collaborated in developing and preparing this publication. We would like to express our special gratitude to the Belarusian activists, journalists, experts, helpers, social workers, and psychologists who agreed to be interviewed under circumstances which are extremely difficult and who shared their very personal stories, emotions and experiences with us. We thank them for their sincerity, openness, and trust.

We would like to thank the Belarusian activists and journalists who opened up their networks and helped us find the interviewees.

Special thanks to Barys Haretsky, Tacciana Gatsura-Yavorska, Maria Savushkina, Michael Lawton, Natasha Warcholak, and Elena Gribanova for their invaluable feedback and comments on earlier drafts of this report. We also extend our heartfelt thanks to those of our Belarusian colleagues who prefer to stay anonymous.

The views reflected in the quoted interviews do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors, contributors or the publishing organizations.

The editors cannot take responsibility for the content of websites, internet pages or documents linked in this publication.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS:

The German Association of Psychosocial Centres for Refugees and Victims of Torture (BAfF e.V.) is the umbrella organization of 47 treatment centres and initiatives in Germany offering medical, psychotherapeutic and psychosocial treatment and rehabilitation of victims of torture and human rights violations. For 25 years BAfF has been offering qualification and awareness raising measures for governmental and non-governmental actors aimed at achieving a trauma-sensitive approach in the treatment of traumatized individuals.

Elise Bittenbinder is the President of BAfF.

Conflict Analysis and Prevention Center (CAPC) is a think-and-do tank founded in 2017 to provide field-based analysis of violent conflicts and human rights crises in post-Soviet countries and to implement practical interventions aimed at conflict prevention and rehabilitation of victims of violence. In the past four years CAPC has implemented projects aimed at providing psychosocial support to activists and raising awareness of psychological trauma in crises and of the need for a psychosocial approach.

Ekaterina Sokirianskaia is CAPC's founder and director.



A displaced civil society

Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, Elise Bittenbinder

**ADDRESSING
PSYCHOLOGICAL
TRAUMA AND
SUPPORTING
THE RECOVERY
OF RELOCATED
ACTIVISTS
FROM BELARUS**

2020-2022



From the editor Elise Bittenbinder

TESTIMONIALS OF BELARUSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISTS AND WHY IT IS IN OUR INTEREST TO SUPPORT THEIR STRUGGLE

Having worked as a psychotherapist with survivors of human rights violations for over 30 years I know how important it is for them not only that ‘their truth’ be told and listened to, but also how important it is to provide a secure space for those who want to give testimony ‘so that such suffering caused by horrific atrocities should stop and not happen ago,’ as a survivor put it to me many years ago. We know that survivors are very often unable to access appropriate support, care and rehabilitation: this is the gap we try to fill and to which we persistently draw attention.

We are seen as social and health professionals – but we are also human rights activists. We are trusted with the stories told by survivors and so it falls to us to help preserve these collective memories of violation of human rights and to make them accessible to current and future generations.

The report you have in front tries to provide a space for such testimonials and was only possible due to certain circumstances.

It is the result of a joint project by BAfF and CAPC that brought together activists, human rights defenders and social and care professionals who are supporting others even while some of them are living under permanent risk of persecution because of their activities. Some are in hiding, others have survived violations, interrogations, imprisonment or torture themselves, and many have been uprooted and now live in exile.

What made this possible was the high level of awareness on the part of psychologists and NGOs about the role of trauma among survivors and the need for psychological support for those affected – as well as the fact that many psychologists in Belarus are highly trained in crisis intervention.

The challenge of this report was to open a space for the voices of survivors of human rights violations while making sure that this space was secure and supportive. We had the unique opportunity to rely on our network of activists and journalists who are used to listening to survivors and supporting them. However, it is a very different matter when one is trying to do this to make their experience public in order to raise awareness of the issues. While all involved wanted the narratives of the human rights abuses to be heard it was not so easy to do this, given the need to protect those giving testimonies – for security reasons, but also because of the professional requirement to protect confidentiality. A careful balance has to be negotiated between protecting personal integrity and the wish to make the truth heard as part of a self-healing process.

A 1½-year project has promoted cooperation among Russian, Belarusian and German NGOs, psychologists and care workers who are offering aid to victims of violence. This cooperation is aimed at building their capacity to address trauma resulting from armed conflict, grave human rights violations and other forms of violence. This report is part of this effort. It is a field-based study attempting to raise awareness about psychotrauma and its consequences in situations of acute political or armed conflict.

Human right activists are confronted with great suffering. Many of them have been working as front-line human rights defenders for years – sometimes alone and under threatening conditions – and they have encountered situations which have been overwhelming or traumatic. A cautious and restrained working attitude becomes a means of self-protection, possibly the only way to survive. Such activists may well need time to build trust towards outsiders and to open up to the benefits of professional support. Although this study does not offer statistical evidence, it shows clearly that most activists who have suffered traumatic violations are at the same time highly motivated to continue their activism, even if they have been forced to relocate outside their country – but also that they might well profit from psychosocial support to stay healthy and active and prevent burnout.

Among these human rights activists, psychologists are particularly aware of the need for mental health support, and through this and other projects a network of these professionals has developed which is committed to work with Belarusian victims of political violence and which needs further support to be sustainable. This report shows how important it is to strengthen Belarusian civil

society in the diaspora by giving voice to activists themselves as well as those trying to support them by offering psychosocial assistance.

Professionals who are supporting others, often working long hours and hearing repeatedly of the traumatic experience of others, may well find that this affects not only their own physical and psychological wellbeing, but also their relationships, their livelihood and that of members of their family. And they often face an extra layer of pressure: their efforts may challenge injustice in social and political practices, which in turn exposes them to conflicts with stakeholders in the host society. Witnessing powerlessness and injustice activates an inner drive in them to keep fighting. They have themselves been victims of injustice and understand the devastating effects of not having anyone to talk to or to rely on. This interrelation and their role as spokesperson for those in need of help may appear to be empowering, but they can only keep going if they can find their own networks of support.

Human rights activists often find support on an international level to be a valuable source of motivation. For those who are also psychologists, social workers or in caring professions, being able to reach out into a network of other experts for support or consultation in times of crisis is not only a valuable asset but seems to be a necessity if they are to continue their work.

International exchanges in this context are not only a tool for knowledge transfer and ongoing professional learning; they can also provide an important space for the recreation of one's own capacity for empathy, a means of burn-out prophylaxis, of self-care, and recuperation of strength and motivation.

Most of those who share their testimonies in this report have one thing in common: They are convinced that doing something is better than nothing. They are aware that their work may not bring about significant change overnight, but they hope that their efforts will contribute to societal changes sooner or later. This conviction is a powerful driving force. They told us what they think they need if they are to continue their work, and you can find their proposals in their own words in Chapters 5 and 6.

Based on what they have said, we have drawn up a series of recommendations to donors, governments and institutions as well as non-governmental organizations which want to invest in supporting civil society structures in Belarus by strengthening those who are actively defending human rights inside and outside the country. If they are to continue their work, they need psychosocial support structures and networks such as exchanges, specialized training and supervision, including exchanges with practitioners and experts outside the country. The report also draws attention to the importance of transnational exchanges, in order to work on a joint understanding of multi-modal, holistic approaches in the care for survivors of human rights violations.

As president of the BAfF I'm convinced that our professional activities must include advocacy of the rights of survivors. We must also be engaged in protecting the societies we live in from drifting into a culture of indifference and inhumanity towards the 'other': we have a responsibility to strengthen the tradition of humanity and of respect for all.

Supporting cooperation with civil society in Belarus is in our interest as a way of helping committed civil society actors develop their organizations, strengthen social cohesion and promote the establishment of a free and pluralistic society – and thus ensure the democratic and peaceful coexistence of peoples.

In this light I would ask our readers seriously to consider the recommendations which have been drawn up by activists, human rights defenders, journalists and experts in their interviews and compiled by the CAPC and the BAfF.

Elise Bittenbinder, President of BAfF

Table of contents

<i>List of abbreviations, protesters' terms and jargon</i>	7
<i>Recommendations</i>	8
<i>Introduction</i>	10
CHAPTER 1. <i>The political and human rights crisis of 2020: mass protests and repression</i>	11
CHAPTER 2. <i>'They kept saying that they were gods here': Reasons for fleeing</i>	19
CHAPTER 3. <i>Escape routes and challenges of adaptation</i>	29
CHAPTER 4. <i>Psychological consequences of traumatic events</i>	35
CHAPTER 5. <i>After 24 February: war and discrimination</i>	43
CHAPTER 6. <i>Psychological assistance: supply and demand</i>	51
<i>Conclusion</i>	64

List of Abbreviations, Protesters' Terms and Jargon

B-SH-B FLAG (Б-Ч-Б ФЛАГ, БЕЛА-ЧЫРВОНА-БЕЛЫ СЦЯГ, *Belarusian*): white-red-white flag, the official flag of the Belarusian People's Republic (1918-1919) and of the Republic of Belarus, (1991-1995). The symbol of opposition and of the national movement in the Republic of Belarus since 1995.

BAJ (БАЖ): Belarusian Association of Journalists.

CHEMISTRY (ХИМИЯ): a term used to describe forms of punishment for criminal offenses. There are two types: **1) 'Home Chemistry'**, under which offenders live at home and go to work, but are obliged to transfer part of their earnings to the state, as well as to live under certain restrictions (e.g. not drinking alcohol, not visiting friends, not going out at night); **2) 'Chemistry with Designation'**, under which offenders must live in a barracks-type dormitory which they can leave for work or for other purposes with permission of the wardens (as a rule, political prisoners are accompanied to stores, post office, etc.); they can meet relatives and friends at weekends with permission.

GLASS CUP (СТАКАН): barred rear section of a police car or truck intended for transporting one or two standing detainees or a small box for short-term incarceration during transportation of detainees. During protests 5-8 people were crammed into these spaces and sometimes kept for hours with severe lack of oxygen.

GUBORIK (ГУБОПИК): The Central Directorate for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption, a department of the Interior Ministry.

LONG LIVE BELARUS! (ЖЫВЕ БЕЛАРУСЬ!): the key protest slogan.

KGB (КГБ): Committee of State Security.

PEOPLE'S ARTICLE (НАРОДНАЯ СТАТЬЯ): Article 23.34 of the Administrative Code «Violation of an order forbidding the organizing or holding of a mass event.» Carries the penalty of a fine or administrative arrest.

PTSD (POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER): a psychological condition in which a person suffers severe anxiety and depression after a very emotionally or physically harmful or life-threatening experience. It may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event and can affect their mental, physical, social, and/or spiritual well-being. Examples include natural disasters, serious accidents, terrorist acts, war/combat, rape/sexual assault, torture and human rights violations. See WHO's International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) and the US Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5).

RELOCANTS (РЕЛОКАНТЫ): civil society activists forced to flee Belarus as a result of persecution but who plan to return when the situation permits.

SAMIZDAT: underground makeshift publication containing ideologically uncensored material passed from reader to reader.

SQUARE OF CHANGES (ПЛОЩАДЬ ПЕРЕМЕН): a famous district in Minsk where residents created a strong local protest community.

TSIP (ЦИП, ЦЕНТР ИЗОЛЯЦИИ ПРАВОНАРУШИТЕЛЕЙ): Center for Isolation of Offenders, with a reception center for juveniles, a temporary detention facility (IVS) and the offenders' isolation center. It is located at Okrestina Street in Minsk and is run by the Central Department of Internal Affairs of the Minsk City Executive Committee.

TO SERVE DAYS (ОТБЫВАТЬ СУТКИ): to serve a period of administrative arrest counted in days (up to 15 days).

TO HEALTH PROVIDERS, NGOS PROVIDING PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT, AND EXPERT INSTITUTIONS SPECIALIZING IN TRAUMA

Recommendations

- 1.** We recommend the prioritization of development and expansion of programs which provide psychosocial and psychological support to Belarusian civil society activists and journalists who have been displaced.
 - 2.** We recommend the involvement of people with psychological training in the provision of psychological first aid at an early stage after the arrival of a relocant. This must include measures to assess vulnerabilities and special needs at an early stage.
 - 3.** We recommend the provision of opportunities for mid-term and long-term support and specialized therapy to the most severely affected individuals and special needs groups, such as victims of torture and violence, political prisoners, individuals who have undergone violent or abusive administrative arrest.
 - 4.** We recommend the creation of opportunities for psychosocial activities, peer-support and off-line (group) therapy for relocated Belorussian activists in locations where Belorussian relocants live.
 - 5.** We recommend special psychosocial activities and off-line (group) therapy for the children and teenagers of Belarusian relocants.
 - 6.** We recommend that support programs include activists who were not members of NGOs and media, such as neighborhood activists, social media activists and others who took part in protests.
 - 7.** We recommend setting up context-specific and multimodal trauma trainings including social workers, human rights defenders, psychotherapists, lawyers, volunteers etc., and facilitate peer support networks and supervision for Belarusian psychologists, social workers, mental health professionals and helpers who are supporting civil society activists. These should be available free of charge.
 - 8.** We recommend that specialists providing psychosocial support engage in psychological education to de-stigmatize psychological help and explain causes and symptoms of trauma, sequential traumatization, coping strategies, importance of mental health, mechanisms of self-help and peer support.
 - 9.** We recommend that all actors in the field should ensure that ‘do no harm’ principles are applied in psychosocial support programs at all stages of their implementation. Make sure that staff is aware of the risk of re-activating traumatic experience.
-

**TO DONORS
SUPPORTING
BELORUSSIAN CIVIL
SOCIETY**

10. We strongly recommend that mental health be seen as a human right and as a basic need. It should be a priority and funding should be made available for mental health support and psychological education. In parallel, the community of psychologists, mental health professionals and social workers from Belarus should be strengthened.

11. Given the impact of torture and grave human rights abuses on health, livelihood, and social functioning we recommend strengthening the capacity of civil society infrastructure aimed at rehabilitation of survivors of human right abuses and torture in host countries. The provision of specialized services to the affected individuals and the strengthening of NGOs which are providing such services should also be supported.

12. We recommend continued social support for Belarusian relocants: temporary residence arrangements for new arrivals, financial support to those in acute need, legal advice as well as assistance in job-seeking, professional development, and re-qualification and training and support in starting one's own business or social enterprise.

13. We recommend supporting international exchanges for psychologists and helpers not only as a tool for knowledge transfer and professional learning but also as an important space for recuperation of strength and motivation, recreation of capacity for empathy, a means of burn-out prophylaxis and of self-care.

**TO GOVERNMENTS,
MUNICIPALITIES,
MEDIA AND CIVIL
SOCIETY
IN HOST COUNTRIES:**

14. As a way of preventing discrimination of relocants in the host countries, we recommend that awareness should be increased among social, health, educational service providers as well as in the media about the human rights situation in Belarus and its traumatic effect on Belarusian relocants.

15. We recommend that procedures be simplified for the acceptance of foreign diplomas in psychology and social workers if they comply with standards to allow quicker formal employment. We recommend that relevant professional chambers support such efforts.

16. We recommend that governments support efforts to create professional associations of Belarusian psychologists in exile.

**TO THE BELARUSIAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
COMMUNITY IN EXILE**

17. We support the creation of professional associations for members of the Belarusian psychological community in exile. We support the development of mechanisms both to verify professional qualifications of those providing help to relocants as well as to monitor compliance with professional standards and ethics in psychological counselling services which are offered free of charge.

Introduction

THESE ARE THE STORIES OF HUMAN LIFE IN EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES. THE STORIES OF ESCAPE, OF ATTEMPTS TO SAVE FAMILIES, OF FAMILY TIES SEVERED, OF PROTRACTED STRESS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA. THESE ARE EXPERIENCES THAT ALMOST ALL RELOCANTS HAVE GONE THROUGH

There have been systemic and grave violations of human rights as well as repression against media and civil society in Belarus ever since Aleksander Lukashenko came to power in 1994. For nearly 30 years his regime has violated the rights of Belarusian citizens to freedom of assembly, association and information. Peaceful protests have been dispersed with unwarranted force and protesters have been subjected to mass detention. The first violent crackdowns began as early as 1996–1997 during protests against the process leading towards the creation of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. Protests in Minsk, known as Ploshcha (Square)-2006 and Ploshcha-2010, took place after the 2006 and 2010 elections. In 2010, 700 people were arrested after the elections, including seven presidential candidates. Since the 2020 elections, Belarus has experienced the deepest human rights crisis in its contemporary history. Protests against election results seen as fraudulent by many Belarusians were once again crushed by unlawful violence. Further reprisals against dissenters among politicians, athletes, doctors, students, and journalists included arrests, searches, and fabricated criminal charges. They led to a mass exodus of civil society activists from Belarus to Ukraine, Georgia and the EU. Those who remained faced persecution.

This report examines the traumatic experiences of relocated Belarusian civil society activists and journalists, analyzes the triggers as well as the sequential nature of traumatization and offers recommendations on how to support their mental health, well-being and sustainable activism.

By civic activism we understand a wide spectrum of non-violent action aimed at solving issues of public concern and achieving political and social change. We consider as activists NGO members, participants in election campaigns, public initiatives and actions, volunteers, helpers, media staff, bloggers, opinion leaders, publicly active businesspeople and many others engaged in peaceful civil activities.

This is not academic research, and it does not aim to cover all the aspects of the problems, but to raise awareness and enhance understanding of mental health as a human right and psychological support as a prerequisite to successful rehabilitation of victims of grave human rights violations and political repression. The report is based on 89 interviews with Belarusian relocants (the term used by the activists themselves) – citizens of Belarus driven from their country by the fear of imprisonment, of losing their relatives, loved ones and friends. The interviews were collected in Georgia, Ukraine, Lithuania and Poland in late 2021 and 2022. Our findings and recommendations are based on an analysis of the evidence collected through the 89 interviews, discussions with experts and the authors' experience of running educational and psychological support programs. We only quote the most relevant bits of the interviews, but they all contributed to the conclusions we have been able to draw.

After February 24, 2022, when Russia launched its full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, many people who had left Belarus for Ukraine had to flee again, this time from war. They became refugees twice in less than 18 months.

Since the beginning of the war, public attention has been focused on helping Ukraine and its people who are living under conditions of war, and the problem of the displaced Belarusians has rather been forgotten. At the same time, Belarusian expatriates in the Ukraine have in a way ended up in a worse situation than Ukrainians. They had already fled their country, leaving their homes and loved ones; then, just like the Ukrainians, they fled again from the war, but, unlike the Ukrainians, they had no support from their state and they do not always find sufficient understanding and support from the international community. Moreover, Belarusian relocants have sometimes faced discrimination as citizens of a country which is a co-aggressor in the war: they suffer for the actions of the Lukashenko regime from which they have fled.

One of the main objectives of this study is to provide space for the relocants to tell their own stories. Some of the activists spoke to us openly, others requested anonymity or to have their names changed. Nonetheless, the reader will hear the voices of those who have lost almost everything while holding on to their political ideals and who are trying to build a new life while keeping the hope alive that they will be able to return home to a Belarus without Lukashenko's near-Stalinist regime. We hope that this study will contribute to continuing support for Belarusian civil society and to bringing the world's attention back to their problems.

Chapter 1

THE POLITICAL & HUMAN
RIGHTS CRISIS OF 2020:
MASS PROTESTS
AND REPRESSION



The massive blatant falsification was met with popular indignation and unprecedented protests across the country. **After the votes had been counted on August 9, peaceful protests were held in almost every city that same evening.** Protests continued over the subsequent days and lasted until November (and until February 2021 in Minsk)

The deepest human rights crisis in the history of modern Belarus began in 2020 on the eve of presidential elections. The following chapter will provide contextual background to the testimonials of our respondents, most of whom were affected by the types of repressions reviewed in this section. The antecedents of the 2020 developments were the protests of the end of 2019. On 7 December 2019, the Belarusian and Russian presidents, Aleksander Lukashenko and Vladimir Putin, met in Sochi, Russia, where they approved their countries' integration road maps. In Belarus, the agreement was perceived by many as paving the way for the absorption of Belarus by Russia. In late 2019, a series of protests against integration with Russia took place in Belarus.

The protest sentiment grew even stronger during the COVID-19 pandemic. The country's leadership ignored the danger of coronavirus, refusing to introduce any quarantine measures. Officials called the pandemic a 'psychosis' or an 'information attack' and made inappropriate statements about its victims.¹ At the same time, the real incidence rate was concealed. Trust in official sources was falling. Since it was older people who were most vulnerable to COVID-19, many of them began to be more critical of the government and to lean towards opposition views.

This situation exacerbated the existing contradictions and gave an impetus to civic activity. Citizens, who found themselves facing the challenge of the pandemic without state support, had to deal with it on their own, responding with mutual support and solidarity. Voluntary initiatives mushroomed, people bought protective equipment for medical staff, sewed face masks at home, and many companies and individual entrepreneurs delivered free lunches to ambulance staff and hospitals with Covid-19 patients. The #BYCOVID19 campaign is considered the largest volunteer campaign in modern Belarus. These skills of self-organization proved very useful before and during the election.

The Belarusian authorities, despite generally denying the threat posed by the coronavirus, nevertheless used the situation to their advantage. For example, during mass protests in 2020 the regime exploited quarantine rules as a way of banning relatives from visiting political prisoners, restricting pre-trial prison visits by lawyers, and imposing limitations on receiving parcels. Courts heard cases on political charges online rather than bringing the accused to the courtroom. Peaceful meetings and election campaigning were banned due to 'the danger of the pandemic.'

THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN OF 2020

The presidential campaign started in the spring of 2020 against the background of the COVID pandemic, with the election scheduled for August 9. Several new independent candidates announced their intention to run, among them the popular blogger and founder of the YouTube channel Country for Life (Strana Dlya Zhizni), Siarhieĭ Cichanoŭski (Sergei Tikhanovsky), the chairman of Belgazprombank, Viktor Babaryka, and the former diplomat and head of the Belarus Hi-Tech Park, Valery Tsepkala. The establishment of the candidates' headquarters and the collection of signatures for their registration were accompanied by an unprecedented level of civic activity. However, the authorities banned almost all independent candidates from the race. Candidates who were winning popular support, as well as some of their staff, were arrested.

On May 31 2020, Siarhieĭ Cichanoŭski was arrested in Grodno and placed in custody. His wife, Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya, took his place in the election race.²

On June 18 2020, Viktor Babaryka was also arrested; the Electoral Committee recognized the signatures he had gathered to support his registration as valid but denied him registration.³ Tsepkala's signatures were deemed invalid and he was also disqualified and he subsequently left the country. On May 31 and June 7 2020, public leaders Mikalai Statkevich and Pavel Seviarynets were arrested as were other prominent political figures.⁴ By the day of the presidential elections, 24 political prisoners were being held, including politicians, members of initiative groups for candidate nominations, activists, and bloggers.⁵ In the face of this repression, the staff and supporters of the opposition candidates decided

1. Psychosis causes other illnesses; How Lukashenko subdued the coronavirus in Belarus <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-52068654>

2. Her official site is <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/ru/>

3. <https://www.rbc.ru/>

4. <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/paviel-sieviaryniec>, <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/mikalaj-statkievich>

5. The situation with human rights in Belarus, publication date September 1, 2020. Viasna Human Rights Center <https://spring96.org/ru/news/99334>

to run one united campaign. The most popular presidential candidate in the 2020 elections was Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya. She registered her candidacy on July 14, and on July 16, the Joint Headquarters in support of Tsikhanouskaya was created. It included Maria Kalesnikava of the Viktar Babaryka campaign and Valery Tsepkala's wife, Veranika. The three women became the symbol of the new stage in the election campaign. Thousands came to their rallies in all the major cities.

THE BEGINNING OF THE NEW REALITY

Following the election, the Electoral Commission announced the official results – Aleksander Lukashenko had won with a total of 80.23 percent of the vote. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya scored 9.9 percent.⁶

The massive blatant falsification was met with popular indignation and unprecedented protests across the country. After the votes had been counted on August 9, peaceful protests were held in almost every city that same evening. Protests continued over the subsequent days and lasted until November (and until February 2021 in Minsk).

On August 14, Tsikhanouskaya announced the creation of a Coordination Council, which was intended to become the main body of the opposition. A peaceful transition of power in the country and negotiations with the Lukashenko regime were its main objectives.

A criminal case was opened on December 21, 2020 against Coordination Council members Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Maryja Maroz, Paviel Latuška, Volha Kaval'kova, Siarhei Dyleuski and others; it went to court on December 16 2022.⁷

The security forces and law enforcement agencies reacted to the protests with unprecedented repression and violence, using stun grenades, water cannon, tear gas, rubber bullets and other weapons to disperse the demonstrations. In some incidents military-grade weapons were used. Many demonstrators were injured, some permanently disfigured. According to the Interior Ministry of Belarus, at least 121 policemen were wounded.

According to the UN, about 13,500 people were arrested in the five days of protests that immediately followed the elections.⁸ 3,000 of them were detained on the first night. At least 500 cases of torture have been documented.

According to Amnesty International, in the entire period of post-election protests, about 30,000 people were detained on administrative charges for participating in the protests and approximately 3,000 people were prosecuted on protest-related criminal charges. There were countless episodes of torture and ill-treatment.⁹

According to the Viasna Human Rights Center, the leading human rights group in Belarus whose leader Ales Beliatsky was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022 while in prison, three people died due to the use of weapons or the failure to provide timely medical assistance.¹⁰

The case that caused mass outcry was the death of Raman Bandarenka, an active participant in the protests, and a resident of the Square of Changes (a famous district where residents created a strong local protest community) in Minsk.

On November 12 2020, after Bandarenka had been detained in the yard near his house, he was delivered from the Central District Police Department of Minsk to the Clinical Emergency Hospital with multiple injuries, including a craniocerebral injury and a cerebral edema. He died in hospital. The evidence suggests that personnel of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Special Forces were involved in the activist's death.¹¹ The official media claimed that Bandarenka was drunk, fell down, and hit his head. However, Artsiom Sarokin, Raman Bandarenka's doctor, showed evidence that he had been sober to Katsiaryna Barysevich, a journalist from the independent media portal TUT.BY: his blood alcohol content was zero. She published this evidence.

On November 19, both Barysevich and Sarokin were detained. Their trial took place on March 2 2021. This high-profile case came to be known as the 'Zero per Mil case' referring to Bandarenka's blood alcohol content. Sarokin was sentenced to two years imprisonment suspended for one year and a fine under the Criminal Code article on 'Disclosure of medical secrets.' Barysevich was sen-

6. Weekend picture: the presidential election in Belarus, exit poll results and opinions of observers, 10.09.2020 BelTA – Belarus News/<https://www.belta.by/society/view/kartina-vyhodnyh-vybory-prezidenta-v-belarusi-rezultaty-exit-poll-i-mnenija-nabljudatelej-402241-2020/>

7. The criminal case against Sviatlana Tihanouskaya, Maria Moroz, Pavel Latushko, Olga Kovalkova and Siarhei Dyleuski was sent to court, 16.12.2022 The General Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Belarus/<https://www.prokuratura.gov.by/ru/media/novosti/nadzor-za-resheniyami-pogolovnym-i-grazhdanskim-delam/123v-sud-napravleno-ugo/>

8. UN report testifies to mass repressions in Belarus in August 2020 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1420122>

9. <https://eurasia.amnesty.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/belarus-crackdown-on-medics.pdf>

10. Collected information about those killed during mass protests, 09/02/2020, Viasna Human Rights Center <http://spring96.org/ru/news/99348>

11. According to BYPOL, the mortal injuries were inflicted to Roman Bondarenko by the fighters of SOBR <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/31476089.html>

tenced to 6 months imprisonment in a penal colony. Both have been recognized as political prisoners.¹²

Many medical professionals supported the protests, provided medical assistance, and conducted medical examinations of the victims. Currently, about ten political prisoners in Belarus come from the medical community.¹³

TORTURE AND CRUEL TREATMENT

Across Belarus, detainees were subject to brutal beatings, often to the point of losing consciousness. They were deliberately injured in police vehicles, police stations, pre-trial detention and temporary detention centers. Human rights organizations recorded incidences of sexual violence. Cases of genital injuries were recorded, and many detainees testified that they were threatened with rape.¹⁴

Minsk prisons became symbols of pain and horror during the protests – a detention complex at Okrestina Street (ЦІП на Окрестина) and a pre-trial detention center on Valadarskaha Street (СИЗО на Володарского) were particularly notorious, as well as the preliminary detention center in the town of Zhodino near Minsk (СИЗО в городе Жодино). Many of our interviewees spent some time in Okrestina and we will quote their testimonies in the chapters below.

Political prisoners face especially cruel conditions: lack of sanitation and medical care, unjustified detention in punishment cells, and illegal restrictions on visits and parcels. Most political prisoners are categorized as ‘prone to extremism and other destructive actions’ and are required to wear yellow tags on their uniforms.¹⁵

To date, the authorities have not opened a single criminal case addressing the torture of peaceful protesters.¹⁶ Impunity perpetuates violence.

COURTS AS AN INSTRUMENT OF RETALIATION

Fabrication of criminal cases has become a key repressive measure used by the Belarusian authorities. We have already mentioned the criminal cases against members of the Coordination Council (Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Maria Kalesnikava, lawyer Maxim Znak, ex-diplomat Paviel Latushka, Volha Kavalkova, Siarhei Dyleuski and others) – under Art. 361.1 Part 1 of the Criminal Code dealing with ‘creating an extremist formation,’ among other charges.¹⁷ On September 6 2021, Znak and Kalesnikava were sentenced to 10 and 11 years behind bars; the rest of the accused managed to leave Belarus.

Independent presidential candidates Viktor Babaryka and Siarhiej Cichanoŭski were sentenced to 14 and 18 years in prison, also on trumped-up charges.

Criminal cases have also been opened on less serious charges: insulting senior officials, hooliganism, resisting police officers, and economic crimes. As of May 28, 2023, 1,511 people had been recognized as political prisoners in Belarus by the Viasna Human Rights Center, while the initiative ‘Dissident’ put the figure at 1776.¹⁸ In late 2022, the authorities began to try its opponents in absentia.

Almost all politically motivated trials are held behind closed doors. Legal proceedings have lost any association with recognized standards of justice. There is not even a hint of the adversarial system. The judges do not react to allegations of torture or suspend cases until accusations of torture are investigated – on the contrary, they justify their sentences with evidence obtained through torture.

According to the UN report, during the protests of August 9-14, closed trials of detainees took place right in detention facilities: ‘The court hearings were held without observing basic procedural guarantees. According to the testimonies of many defendants, most often the trial lasted only a few minutes. With few exceptions, the judges ignored the testimony of the defendants about torture and ill-treatment despite the presence of bodily injuries.’¹⁹

The authorities exert tremendous pressure on defense lawyers. In November 2022, nine of them lost their licenses to practice law. They represented the interests of political prisoners or expressed their personal position in support of the protests.²⁰ In December 2022, Viktor Matskevich and Uladzimir Pylchenka, who-

12. Katerina Borysevich. Artsiom Sarokin, Political Prisoners of Belarus. HRC ‘Viasna’. <https://prisoners.spring96.org/ru/person/kacjaryna-barysevicz>, <https://prisoners.spring96.org/ru/person/arciom-sarokin>,

13. Doctors in Prison: Stories of Belarusian Doctors-Political Prisoners <https://www.dw.com/ru/vrachi-v-tjume-istorii-belorusskih-medikov-politzakljuchennyh/a-62543557>

14. UN report testifies to mass repressions in Belarus in August 2020 <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2022/03/1420122>

15. Yellow tags, handcuffs, total control: how they pressure ‘political’ prisoners in pre-trial detention centers and colonies with the use of preventive tracking 02.10.2021 Human rights center ‘Viasna’ <https://spring96.org/ru/news/105184>

16. New methods of persecution in 2022 of those who disagree with Lukashenko’s regime, 04.01.2023, Human Rights Center ‘Viasna’ <https://spring96.org/ru/news/110324>

17. The criminal case against Svetlana Tihanovskaya, Maria Moroz, Pavel Latushko, Olga Kovalkova and Sergey Dylevsky was sent to court, 16.12.2022 The General Prosecutor’s Office of the Republic of Belarus <https://www.prokuratura.gov.by/ru/media/novosti/nadzor-za-resheniyami-pogolovnym-i-grazhdanskim-delam/123v-sud-napravleno-ugo/>

18. The list of political prisoners Vyasna https://prisoners.spring96.org/ru/list_Dissident – <https://dissidentby.com>

19. UN report testifies to mass repressions in Belarus in August 2020 <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2022/03/1420122>

20. Lawyer Sergey Zikratsky since 2020 represented interests of journalists prosecuted for their political positions. In his interview to DW he details the issue of persecution of defence lawyers in Belarus, see How lawyers are being silenced in Belarus, 20.04.2021, Deutsche Welle <https://www.dw.com/ru/davlenie-na-advokatov-v-belarusi/a-57255726>

defended Siarhiej Cichanoŭski and Maria Kalesnikava, lost their licenses. Lawyer Ilia Salei had to leave Belarus when criminal charges were brought against him. Defense lawyers are routinely denied access to their clients.

Former law enforcement officials who have taken a stand against Lukashenko have also been prosecuted. One example is Yauhen Yushkevich, a former criminal investigator who resigned from the Investigative Committee, which carries out preliminary criminal investigations, back in 2017 and became an IT developer. In 2020, Yushkevich launched the ByChange project, which helped former security personnel and civil servants to change their career paths. Yushkevich was charged with inciting social hatred, organizing riots accompanied by violence, pogroms, arson and destruction of property, and organizing group actions that grossly violated public order. On December 26, 2022, he was sentenced to 11 years in a penal colony of strict regime.²¹ Yushkevich has been recognized a political prisoner.

21. <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/v-belarusi-evgeniyu-yushkevichu-dali-11-let-kolonii/32193817.html>

INDEPENDENT MEDIA CRACKDOWN

Repression has crushed nearly all Belarusian independent media. According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), the editorial offices of 20 independent media outlets have had to be relocated abroad since the protests began in August 2020.

The BAJ is a large professional association of Belarusian journalists, founded in 1995, 'liquidated' by a Supreme Court decision of August 27 2021, and subsequently declared an 'extremist formation'. At the time of its liquidation, the association had about 1,300 members.

Now, the BAJ continues to work in six countries, primarily to support journalists in Belarus, as well as Belarusian journalists in Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Georgia, and Germany. The Association's headquarters have moved to Vilnius, Lithuania. Currently, 33 representatives of the media (and 39 BAJ members and their relatives) are in prison.²²

Journalists are usually charged with organizing and leading an extremist formation or participating in riots. Some charges, however, are even more serious. The charge against journalist Katsiaryna Andreeva was reclassified as treason while she was in prison. Andreeva and her colleague, camera operator Darya Chultsova, were detained on November 15, 2020, and sentenced to two years imprisonment for streaming video of a protest rally on the 'Square of Changes' in Minsk. Initially, the journalists were charged with participation in unsanctioned mass events and refusal to comply with orders of police officers.²³ Andreeva's release was expected on September 5 2022. Instead, the court found her guilty 'of handing state secrets of the Republic of Belarus to a foreign state, an international or foreign organization or their representative' and sentenced her to 8 years in a maximum-security penal colony.

The case of Raman Pratasevich, editor of NEXTA, a popular protest channel, detained on May 23 2021, after his Ryanair commercial flight was forcibly diverted to Minsk, had a wide public resonance.²⁴ The KGB arrested him and his girlfriend Sofya Sapega on board the plane.

According to officials, Raman Pratasevich, agreed to cooperate with the authorities and was placed under house arrest; he subsequently gave an interview to state television and took part in an official press conference.²⁵ In May 2022, a court sentenced Sofya Sapega, a Russian citizen, to 6 years imprisonment.

Currently all major independent information portals, including Tut.by, Nasha Niva, BelPAN news agency, Radio Svaboda, NEXTA and others, have been officially declared extremist outlets. Their websites have been blocked, and they have lost their registration and accreditation. Personal blogs and Telegram channels, such as the channel of political analyst Artyom Shraibman,²⁶ have also been recognized as 'extremist.' Popular bloggers Ihar Losik, Eduard Palčys, Pavel Vinogradov and others are in prison.²⁷

According to the Prosecutor General, Andrei Shved, over 5,000 criminal cases on charges of extremism were opened in Belarus in 2022. 76% of these cases pertained to violations committed on the Internet.²⁸ In fact, any Internet portals

22. Colleagues in prison. Send them a support letter <https://baj.by/be/content/kollegi-v-tyurmah-napishite-im-pismo-podderzhki-aktualnye-adresa>

23. 7 to 10 years of penal colony: verdicts to political prisoners of 'Vyasna' has been passed. PRISON is OUR PULITZER PRIZE. THE STORY OF KATERINA ANDREEVA AND DARYA CHULTSOVA. <https://underpressure.press-club.pro/andreyeva-chultsova-2>

24. Roman Protasevich detained in Minsk after emergency landing of plane. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/31269315.html>

25. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PmMxQCJ_c

26. Shraibman <https://t.me/shraibman>

27. On December 30, 2022, the Zheleznodorozhny District Court of Homiel recognized the lifestyle social media platform of the website KYKY.org as extremist.

28. Our still-incomplete 2022 data indicates that the siloviki filed 5,000 reports related to 'extremism', and their 'frenzied activity' shows no signs of abating. <https://baj.by/be/content/za-nyapouny-2022-god-silaviki-zavyali-5000-sprau-za-ekstremizm-i-kipuchayadzeynasc-ne>

or channels that contain information about crimes committed by the authorities or criticize their actions are labeled extremist. Linking to, reposting or quoting any material from a source recognized as extremist entails administrative or in some cases criminal liability.

The authorities are particularly severe in prosecuting administrators of Telegram channels and neighborhood chats. Thus, Volha Zalatar, a mother of five, was charged with ‘creating an extremist formation, organizing and preparing actions that grossly violate public order, or actively participating in them.’ The Ministry of Internal Affairs stated that Zalatar’s extremism consisted of being ‘the administrator of a local chat and the organizer of unauthorized mass events: so-called “tea parties,” “walks” and “concerts.”’²⁹ The trial took place on December 3, 2021, and Zalatar was sentenced to four years in a penal colony.

PERSECUTION AGAINST HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The authorities suppress and persecute any alternative opinion. For example, after more than 800 Belarusian athletes, including Olympic medalists and World and European champions, came out in support of the protests in 2020 and against government violence, persecution against the sports community started. Doctors, workers, academics, students, singers and artists have all been deeply affected by this major crackdown on dissent.

Peaceful forms of protest, such as ordinary citizens using B-Ch-B (white-red-white) symbols of protest – even on their private property or in their apartments – have been prosecuted as extremism.³⁰ Offenders face administrative penalties in the form of a large fine or arrest. Citizens whose curtains or clothes feature this color combination can also be arrested.

By the summer of 2021, dozens of public organizations had been liquidated or had announced their shutdown.³¹ In total, as of November 2022, 1,102 non-profit organizations (public associations, trade unions, foundations, non-governmental institutions and associations, including environmental and humanitarian groups) had been liquidated since the elections.³²

The Republic of Belarus adopted new legislation to reinstate Article 193-1 of the Criminal Code, which criminalizes participation in a party or public association which is unregistered or has had its registration revoked. This gave the authorities grounds for more severe sanctions against volunteers, members of informal groups and local communities.³³

Lawyers from the Lawtrend human rights group note that the practice of using ‘extremist articles of the criminal code’ against representatives of civil society organizations is becoming more widespread in Belarus, as is the trend of the state take-overs of non-profit organizations.³⁴

Among NGOs, repression has hit hardest on the Viasna (Spring) Human Rights Centre, the largest and most authoritative human rights organization in Belarus. Founded by Ales Bialiatski, Valiantsin Stefanovich and other human rights defenders in the spring of 1996, Viasna has been helping victims of human rights violations for 25 years. The attacks against Viasna took place on February 16 and July 14, 2021. The authorities detained over 30 activists of the organization across the country and carried out over 50 raids. Viasna’s Chairman Bialiatski, deputy chairman Stefanovich and Uladzimir Labkovich were arrested on 14 July and sentenced to 10, 9 and 7 years in prison on fabricated charges.³⁵ Earlier the head of Gomel branch Lianid Sudalienka was sentenced to three years in a penal colony and volunteer network coordinator Marfa Rabkova and volunteer Andrei Chapiuk – to 14 years and nine months and five years and nine months in a penal colony, respectively.³⁶ All of them have been recognized as political prisoners. Repeated administrative detention is another widespread phenomenon in Belarus. Once a sentence comes to its end, another one is imposed immediately. Nasta Loika from the Human Constanta group was placed under 15-day arrest four times in a row. She was forced to record a ‘repentant video’ where she ‘confessed’ that she had received funding from foreign organizations. Loika reported being tortured, she said that she was given an electric shock with a stun gun and left

29. A Ždanovičy resident, who organized protests in the village, has been detained https://t.me/minobl_uvdi/4746

30. As of the end of 2022, the List of Citizens of the Republic of Belarus, Foreign Citizens or Stateless Persons Involved in Extremist Activities includes 2,263 individuals. The list is published on the Ministry of Internal Affairs website.

31. Among them are the Names charitable project, Press Club Belarus, human rights organizations such as Human Constanta, Lawtrend, Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as well as Belarusian National Youth Council ‘RADA,’ Belarusian Center for European Studies, Office for European Expertise and Communication, and others. The associations Legal Initiative (Pravovaya Initsiyativa), For Freedom (Za Svobodu), and Tell the Truth (Havary Praŭdu) movement were closed in the fall of 2021.

32. Situation with Freedom of Association and Civil Society Organizations in the Republic of Belarus: Overview for November 2022 <https://www.lawtrend.org/freedom-of-association/situatsiya-so-svobodnoj-assotsiatsii-organizatsiyami-grazhdanskogo-obshchestva-respubliki-belarus-obzora-noyabr-2022-g>

33. <https://www.lawtrend.org/freedom-of-association/ugolovnaya-otvetstvennost-za-organizatsiyu-i-uchastie-v-nezaregistrovannyh-organizatsiyah>

34. The Situation with Freedom of Association and Civil Society Organizations in the Republic of Belarus: November 2022 Review <https://www.lawtrend.org/freedom-of-association/situatsiya-so-svobodnoj-assotsiatsii-organizatsiyami-grazhdanskogo-obshchestva-respubliki-belarus-obzora-noyabr-2022-g>

35. 7 to 10 years of penal colony: verdicts to political prisoners of ‘Viasna’ has been passed. <https://spring96.org/ru/news/110945>

36. 7 to 10 years of penal colony: verdicts to political prisoners of ‘Viasna’ has been passed. <https://spring96.org/ru/news/110945>, <https://prisoners.spring96.org/ru/person/leanid-sudalenka>, <https://prisoners.spring96.org/ru/person/marfa-rabkova>, <https://prisoners.spring96.org/ru/person/andrei-capiuk>

37. A case that demonstrates all the lawlessness of the actions of the security forces and the authorities happened to Nikolai Bredelev, press secretary of the A1 campaign, the largest mobile operator in Belarus. On December 10, 2021, in the telegram channel of an employee of the state-owned 'Capital TV STV' Grigory Azarenok posted a video of Bredelev talking about his homosexuality. Also, the enforcers published intimate photos of him. Read more in the material <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/7219.html?c>

38. <https://euroradio.fm/ru/novoe-pokolenie-tatyana-gacura-yavorskaya-kotoroy-za-vseh-bolit>

39. <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/ru/violation/arrest-detention-imprisonment>

40. <https://360info.org/belarus-stands-alone-as-europes-last-defender-of-the-death-penalty/>

for eight hours without warm clothes in the courtyard of the Offenders' Isolation Center; as a result she became very ill. Loika was charged with organizing and preparing actions that grossly violate public order, or actively participating in such actions. The video and the 'investigation' were published by the state newspaper SB – Belarus Today.

Such televised 'repentances' are typical both on state TV and the security forces' Telegram channels. These videos are recorded under pressure, and often after torture and threats.³⁷

Another procedure used against civil society activists is the removal of their children or the threat of doing so, saying that the children are at risk. For example, Tacciana Gatsura-Yavorskaya – head of the Zvyano organization and a mother of four – was detained on April 5 2021.³⁸ In March 2021, Tacciana and her colleagues had organized the exhibition 'The Machine Breathes but I Don't' dedicated to Belarusian doctors and the fight against COVID-19. The authorities closed the exhibition, and Tacciana's home, dacha and office were searched on suspicion of 'educating or otherwise preparing persons to participate in mass riots, as well as providing funding or other material support for such activities.' On April 12, her house was searched again. Her husband, Volodymyr Yavorskyy, a well-known Ukrainian human rights activist who was at home at the time, was taken for interrogation and subjected to violence. Afterwards, Yavorskyy was offered a choice: either leave Belarus with his children within 48 hours or face detention on criminal charges and have the children placed in institutions. Yavorskyy left Belarus. Tacciana Gatsura-Yavorskaya was released from custody on April 15, although the charges had not been dismissed and she was restricted from traveling. She was able to join her family only after the start of the war in Ukraine, fleeing the country illegally.³⁹

Sometimes, relatives of those already convicted are detained. For example, Darya Losik, the wife of blogger Ihar Losik, was detained in Minsk on December 18 2022, charged with promoting extremist activities, based on an interview she gave in which she said she was the wife of a political prisoner, and sentenced to two years in penal colony. Her husband had been sentenced to 15 years in a maximum-security penal colony.

DEATH PENALTY

Belarus is the only country in Europe that still imposes the death penalty for 'especially grave crimes' such as genocide, terrorism, crimes against humanity, and murder committed in aggravating circumstances. There are no reliable statistics on the number of executions, but human rights groups estimate no less than 400 since Belarus' independence in 1991⁴⁰.

Human rights activists have repeatedly called for the abolition of the death penalty. Instead, the authorities expanded the list of crimes for which it can be used. In December 2022, the country's House of Representatives passed a bill in its first reading imposing the death penalty for treason. According to the new bill, the law can only be applied to civil servants and the military.

Some current political prisoners were convicted under Art. 356 ('treason') of the Criminal Code – among them journalist Andrei Aliaksandrau, labor activist Siarhei Shelest and art director Pavel Belous. How the legislative changes might affect their fate remains to be seen.

As has been shown in this chapter the toolkit of repressive instruments which are being used against human rights organizations and individual activists is very extensive. It has forced thousands of civic activists to leave Belarus to avoid arbitrary detention, torture, and even death.

Chapter 2

'THEY KEPT SAYING THAT
THEY WERE GODS HERE :
REASONS FOR FLEEING



The events of 2020-2021 affected people across society; men and women of different ages, and from large cities and small towns have been severely affected by the political violence.

The scale of protests and repressions was so great that it affected almost every family, directly or indirectly

“My husband and I had an agreement: if one of us ends up in prison, the other one takes the child and leaves the country,’ says Maria, a journalist with the independent Belsat TV channel. ‘No need to send parcels to prison, no risk that that our child would be sent to an orphanage. It was hard but we accepted the fact that if one of us goes to jail – and you could easily get between 7 and 10 years now – our family would be torn apart. If you are released from prison after such a long time you are no longer a spouse but a stranger. And your child will forget you. It will be very difficult or even impossible to rebuild a relationship. It was a terrible but sober assessment of the situation.’ Maria is 32 and now lives in Lithuania. She considers herself lucky since the family wasn’t separated but managed to leave Belarus together in May 2021, narrowly escaping arrest.

All our interlocutors were active in civil society as human rights defenders, NGO activists, journalists, election observers, participants and organizers of workers’ protests, actors, doctors, psychologists, neighborhood activists, students, anarchists, LGBT activists, businessmen, and in many other roles. Repression affected not only those who exercised their right to freedom of assembly and freedom of speech, but also ‘undesirable’ businessmen who had their businesses seized for being disloyal to Lukashenko’s regime or for supporting protests. Our respondents were sacked from their employment or expelled from their universities. They were arrested and beaten, criminal charges were fabricated against them, and they were slandered on state TV and pro-government media. Many served administrative arrests.

Two of our respondents reported having escaped after having been called up into the army and many others said they’d been threatened with the removal of their children. Representatives of creative professions were first deprived of the opportunity to work, and then threatened with criminal prosecution. Nearly all our respondents have personally witnessed violence at the hands of the security force.

VIOLENCE AND IMPUNITY

Artem from Gomel, 35, who now lives in Georgia, shared details about his experience of police brutality and impunity. After August 9 when the protests started, Artem and his wife travelled to Minsk and joined marches there. They returned home after August 13.

We ... returned to the flat. I’d just had a shower when there was a knock on the door. I looked through the spy hole and saw masked men with a chainsaw and a shield. They said, ‘It’s the neighbors, open the door.’ But I could see that it was the riot police ... I opened the door, but it did not help. First, they spent about 30 minutes beating me up in the flat, and then continued at the police station for about four hours. I was black and blue in the morning. They kept me at the police station and then put me in the ‘Glass Cup’.

In the morning, the KGB came to pick me up and then for the next 12 hours they grilled me mentally and physically in the KGB building. After the riot police, of course, you could say it was almost a child’s game. The riot police were particularly brutal. When I passed out, they would give me electric shocks to keep me awake. They were hitting me with their hands and feet and with their batons. When they took me to the police station, one of the officers started jumping over me ... so much fun he had! The other one placed his boot on my face. They kept repeating that they were gods here and they could kill me and they would get away with it; they would carry me to the forest and bury me there.

Iлона, 33, is from Soligorsk and now lives in Lithuania. She was beaten up at a rally and witnessed ill-treatment of other peaceful protesters.

They beat me with a truncheon over my head and my legs... My friend was knocked off his bike and beaten with truncheons. I saw other people being brutally beaten in the square...with truncheons on their heads, backs, arms, buttocks, legs. I saw five or six men in black beating one guy. Then he was

taken to the intensive care unit in the Soligorsk hospital. I don't know what happened to him afterwards.

Maxim Dmitrakov, 35, a human rights activist who relocated to Ukraine, was injured at a march.

On 9 August I was injured during the march, but I did not go to see a doctor because I was afraid for my family. My mother is a doctor and she experienced immense fear of loss as she removed pieces of shrapnel from my body, four centimeters from my carotid artery. Apart from this I had other wounds: burns to the torso, limbs, and so on. This is the evidence of the means of restraint they were using against peaceful protesters.

CONDITIONS IN DETENTION

Most of those we spoke to had been imprisoned – sometimes only briefly, but it was still a deeply traumatic experience. Our interlocutors referred to administrative detention as ‘serving days’.

Sasha, 31, relocated to the Ukraine at the time of the interview, said:

I did ‘days’. Before I ended up in Okrestina (a notorious detention center, see Chapter 1) I had never had any ‘girlie problems’ [women’s health issues]. After Okrestina I spent a crazy amount of money to recover because we’d slept on the bare floor. The food was of similar quality. There was no drinking water. I am still recovering my hormonal balance. I lost 7 kg. There were 22-23 of us in a 4-bed cell. There was a complete lack of air.

Stas, 19, a student from Minsk, went to rallies, distributed leaflets and samizdat, and ‘did days’ twice.

Conditions in Okrestina were inhumane: we slept on the floor, the police poured chlorine onto the floor and we couldn’t breathe, there was no food, no medical help, we were not able to wash, and there was the all-consuming fear that you would be beaten and worse

Next time as well they took Stas to Okrestina.

There they intimidated us; they chased us down the corridor. They put our [B-Ch-B] flags on the floor and made us walk on them. If someone did not want to step on the flag, they beat them, they even broke the arms and ribs of some.... After a few days I started having panic attacks but was denied medical help. Through a lawyer I was able to contact my parents and they managed to get me medication.

Prisoners reported that they were not entitled to food on the days of arrest, release and court hearings, so they were often very hungry. Upon release, they also had to pay significant amounts of money for their accommodation in the prison. Older people and sick people were treated in the same way as others.

Ulyana, 24, an activist from Minsk, described her experience in Okrestina:

We were 15 in a 4-person cell. The first four days there were 6-8 people aged 50+, there was one retired woman over 70. Almost all of them were detained preemptively from home, before the anniversary of the election. When I got into the cell for the first couple of hours I had a headache because there was no air to breathe. It was very hard to sleep. Not only because we slept on the bare floor and the bright lights were on. We did not have enough space to sleep. All the bunks were occupied, people slept under the bunks, two more under a small table measuring about a meter by half a meter. Someone slept just in the middle of the room, near the toilet... well, we all slept near the toilet, because the cell was small. One woman slept right on that one-meter by half-meter table.

For four days I slept under the bed with one retired lady, with whom I became friends. We hugged each other sometimes at night so we wouldn't be cold. There were a lot of woodlice, those little cockroaches. If you throw some breadcrumbs to the floor, they scurry there and you can watch them like in a zoo.

At night they [the guards] used to wake us up for roll-call, you had to get up and say your last name. Some female [prison guards] would just ask us to get up or you could even say 'I' from the bed, while some men, they would directly start banging on the door very loudly and insulting us so that we would get up faster. Some elderly prisoners were lying under the bunk, and they had to crawl out of there. There were two people sleeping under one bunk bed, and you could not easily roll out onto the aisle and stand up, because there were two other people lying on the aisle. You have to crawl forward with your whole body to get out from under the bed. And women in their 60s used to crawl on the floor twice a night like that. That said, they were still so inspired and cheerful!

We slept on the floor, the police poured chlorine onto the floor and we couldn't breathe, there was no food, no medical help, we were not able to wash, and there was the all-consuming fear that you would be beaten and worse...

Ulyana and two of other respondents said their cell was infected by COVID-19.

Everyone around was sick and coughing horribly. I hoped it wasn't Corona, but it ended up being Corona. I didn't really have any symptoms...but some people were coughing terribly, they had fever, they had trouble breathing, they were given aspirin or something.

FEAR, ANGER AND THE TRAUMA OF WITNESSES

Among our respondents there are also some 'lucky' ones: they did not end up in detention but they witnessed the detention of other activists, of their relatives and friends and also of random passers-by. 'The trauma of witness' caused fear and an acute sense of insecurity which led them to flee before they too should become victims of violence.

Diana, 29, from Mogilev, relocated to Poland. She was a witness in the infamous Bandarenka case (see Chapter 1).

In Minsk, I saw many repressions against peaceful protesters including beatings, the use of force and torture. I personally knew Raman Bandarenka and spoke to him five minutes before the tragedy. I saw the people who entered the yard. I had to leave, and when I came back there was nobody there. We called the police, they said Raman was not there. We called them again later. They said Roma [Raman's nickname] had become unwell and had been taken to hospital.

At the hospital we were told that Roma was in a critical condition and had had an operation in the neurosurgery unit. Unfortunately, Roma did not make it. His mother was not aware of what had happened. We went to her to tell her that her son was gone.

Another Diana, 39, a Minsk activist and organizer of neighborhood initiatives, volunteered outside the detention centers to support relatives

after mass arrests and saw many people who had been injured and beaten, including people taken at random. Many of our other interlocutors confirmed that random people were often caught in the mess.

My friends were injured. They were out for a walk when a police car pulled up, riot police jumped out and started kicking the husband in front of his wife. Then they took him to Okrestina, where they held him for two days. He spent a long time in hospital with a broken jaw as he'd been so badly beaten. It happened to a lot of people I know. We looked for them. We also volunteered at Okrestina. In those days it was impossible to focus on work, in my head I could hear the screams of the men being beaten in Okrestina. It was the most horrible time.

Three of our respondents who did not know each other and who now live in different countries, witnessed the events in the Square of Changes in Minsk. The Square of Changes is the unofficial name of several back-yards in Minsk which became a protest space decorated with protest symbols between August and November 2020. It hosted concerts, dances, tea parties, lectures and meetings of activists. In August 2020, 'unidentified activists' (one of whom was our respondent) painted a mural on the wall of a ventilation shaft, showing an

The Belarusian security services work in a predictable way. **Their aim is to intimidate, to sow fear in order to break.** Everyone can be affected by violence: women, the elderly and even children

41. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fm36J6-lnTk>

42. Kino, a late Soviet rock group, led by Victor Tsoi. The song 'Peremen' / 'Change' was written in 1989. And became one of the symbols of post-Soviet change <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PpaM11TX6ww>

43. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUM1v2q79dA>

event which occurred at an official pro-Lukashenko campaign meeting when two sound engineers from the Minsk State Palace of Children and Youth played the track 'Peremen' ('Our hearts demand change'),⁴¹ a song performed by Viktor Tsoi and his Kino rock group, which has become a protest song in both Belarus and Russia in recent years⁴². The young DJs soon became one of the symbols of the Belarusian protest. The mural was repeatedly painted over, tarred, and scrubbed by municipal workers, only to be repeatedly repainted.

It was here that Raman Bandarenko was seized by the police and then allegedly beaten to death on November 12 (see chapter I). After his death, a spontaneous memorial was set up on the Square of Changes, which attracted a lot of protesters. On November 15 tens of thousands of people across Belarus marched in his memory. Extra security forces were brought to the square to disperse the protesters with stun grenades and other weapons (*see photo project <https://squareofchanges.net>*). Many protesters were encircled in the yards of the Square, and sought shelter in nearby flats, garages and basements. The police cordoned off the area for 16 hours, searching flats, detaining and beating activists and journalists.⁴³

Natalia, who now lives in Lithuania, recalled:

It was the worst day ... they surrounded us, all those who came to pay respects to Roma Bandarenka. I ran to hide in a building. I ran up to the 12th floor, and I accidentally pushed a door and the door opened. The owner let me and a few other people in. I saw my journalist colleagues being taken out into the yard and ordered to face the wall. The police were acting like they were on a mission: they forced open the door of our building, checked all doors. Fortunately, they did not make it to our flat. The door in the corridor was closed. We saw people who'd been hiding in other flats being escorted out. Those who tried to escape were pushed face down on the tarmac.

Nastia from Novopolotsk in the Vitebsk region is the youngest of the relocated women we interviewed. She was 17 when the protests started. She ended up at the center of violent crackdowns in her native town twice and described how she and her family members were intimidated by the police when they joined the demonstrations in Minsk:

On the way to the Square we formed a human chain. I saw one man being dragged on the ground, saw people being taken out one by one... My mother and I... saw people being chased with batons. I started screaming at the top of my lungs when they got my boyfriend, they started dragging him on the ground... I ran to defend him, I threw myself at the cops. I didn't feel the batons hitting me... Somebody pushed me aside. I saw my father being beaten up. I ran to protect him too. They miraculously left the two of us alone. As it turned out later, my mother was fighting the cops and defending my boyfriend. Only my mother and one other woman were detained that day... I shouted at these people who were beating us that they were animals... They held my mum until the trial... My father started drinking and I felt really lonely... When we brought a parcel for my mother to the police station, they detained my father too but they released him later only because I was not 18 yet... I found a lawyer for my mother. I was crying my eyes out. Mum was released, but my boyfriend was not.

The Belarusian security services work in a predictable way. They don't always wear a uniform but often feature as 'men in black', often in plain clothes, sometimes with their faces covered. Their aim is to intimidate, to sow fear in order to break up the dissent. Everyone can be affected by violence: women, the elderly and even children. Children often found themselves witnessing violence.

Alena from Mogilev recounted:

At the last march I went to, I saw a child aged around ten and his father sitting in a car. The father shouted: 'Zhive Belrus!' ('Long live Belarus!')⁴⁴ and flashed the victory sign. At that moment a black van arrived, men in black jumped out, they started forcing him out of the car and shoving him into the van. The child was crying. We all stopped and shouted: 'What are you doing? How can you do this? The child is alone in the car!'

44. One of the slogans of the Belarusian resistance movement.

Olga, 43, who relocated from the Minsk region, described the anger she felt at the violence against the elderly.

When that first 'granny' march took place and our older people were treated with pepper spray and flash-bangs [stun grenades], I was driving from Minsk and was very angry. I put out a call, you could still do it in the open chats then. I called on everyone to come out to support our pensioners.

After the unprecedented violence of August 2020, the older people, until then considered a stronghold of the regime, began to come out regularly to protest against police lawlessness and to call for Lukashenko's resignation. 'Wisdom marches' or 'pensioner marches' were held on Mondays, and were repeatedly dispersed, sometimes with tear gas and stun grenades, but that did not put an end to the pensioner protests.⁴⁵

45. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NxkzL6ow9Yw>

Alexandra, 33, said she had seen an elderly man who had been beaten but was denied medical help:

There was this elderly man in the police van with us. He was not well, he almost fainted. It was clear that he'd had a concussion. People asked many times to call an ambulance for him – both in the van and at the police station, but they did not call one until he became really unwell a few hours later.

Many activists said that they were scared but they carried on, even though they feared arrest, violence and the removal of their children.

Alina and her husband are actors from Gomel, they had to resign from their jobs at the state theatre because of their ideological stance. They opened their own theatre, working with visually impaired people, but their performances were banned, they were not able to rent venues, and they were threatened with repressive measures.

We gradually moved underground. In December and January, we took turns in our activities so that if they detained one of us, the children would stay with the other one. We put stickers and hung ribbons [with protest symbols] at night. Then we started distributing leaflets. It was dangerous. I was very scared, my legs were shaking, there were cameras everywhere. But we did it so that people, especially the elderly, would be able to see the truth.

CRIMINAL PROSECUTION

The most active protesters usually took the risk of criminal investigation and raids on their homes. Acute insecurity and the direct threat of arrest and torture made them leave the country.

Maria, 34, an NGO worker from Minsk who relocated to Tbilisi, recounted:

A huge number of my relatives and acquaintances were detained; they ‘did days.’ Many of them are now in prison serving long sentences. Many partner organizations we worked with were searched. We worked with a lot of organizations and initiatives – non-governmental, educational and cultural. Most of them were liquidated. Their offices were searched, staff were searched. Many of them were either detained or forced to leave the country. People I worked with were detained in front of me.

Sergei Dylevsky said that events that took place during the election campaign in the spring of 2020 turned his life upside down. He began by collecting signatures for independent presidential candidates and ended up organizing industrial strikes in Minsk. He, like many others, was outraged by the lawlessness and violence, which only made him become more active.

At first we were just grassroots activists, we helped collect signatures, went to events, attended the pre-election speeches of the candidates. We didn’t expect such trouble. Then the election took place and I took part in several other actions. On the 9th, 10th and 11th, I saw all the horror descending on Minsk. I worked at the Minsk Tractor Plant [MTP] at the time. And when ... everybody saw what a mess the security services and the state apparatus had created, they started a strike. As luck would have it, I led the strike at the MTP, and then in Minsk [more generally]. I started organizing the strikes and calling on workers to hold protests. I led them to the Government House. I gathered people all over the city for marches. I took part in the Sunday actions in Minsk, and in Zaslavl, where I lived. And because of my active civil position I was ... arrested. I was tried twice. In total I did one month in jail. A week after I was released, several criminal charges were brought against me. I had to leave the country to avoid getting put back inside.’

Roman K., 45, a lawyer, moved to Batumi, Georgia, from Brest after his house was searched and he feared arrest. Here is how he recalls the events that made him leave the country:

On July 19 the KGB arrived with a search warrant. The search took seven hours. They were looking for money but didn’t find any as I hadn’t worked with grants for a long time. They even groped the cat, apparently looking for a flash drive. The cat later died of stress. They took away a lot of papers and questioned me, but they did not arrest me.

Roman says that the operatives bugged his office and tapped his phones. He says the reason for his persecution was a conversation with a well-known opposition activist, Pavel Latushko.

I realized that I might not avoid prison. It was scary. During that week I was in a hurry to close my cases. In my last two days I went to work with two backpacks. I left my resignation letter in the office but I had not shown it to anyone. I said I was going on holiday.

Diana, 29, from Mogilev, fled to Poland following a 'house chemistry'. She was convicted under Article 339.2 (malicious hooliganism committed by a group of persons) to two years of house arrest for her part in painting the mural of the DJs mentioned above. Because Diana was also a witness in the Bandarenka case, it soon became clear to her that things might take a turn for the worse, and so she decided to leave.

The other Diana, a neighborhood chatroom administrator, fled after a wave of arrests of other administrators. Her colleagues were questioned – and then released, but only, she believes, so that the police could follow them. At one point, 'a neighbor passed me a message from our guys that I needed to flee, that I might be detained. I have four children and I realized that my children needed me more than I'm needed in prison. So under cover of night, I packed my bags and decided to go.'

The accounts of our interviewees show that the events of 2020–2021 affected people across society; men and women of different ages, and from large cities and small towns have been severely affected by the political violence. This is what fundamentally makes these events different from the previous waves of repression in Belarus in 2010 and 2006. The scale of protests, and repressions was so great that it affected almost every family, directly or indirectly.

At the same time, many of our respondents, like Diana, 39, from Minsk, recall that during the marches ahead of the 2020 elections the feeling of unity was palpable, with people being energized by the energy of the others:

The main motivation during this period was the hope that peaceful action would help to change the regime. However, it soon became clear that the ruling elite was prepared to do anything to stay in power

We were thousands, people who wanted to bring about change, people who did not want to put up with injustice anymore. We believed in our slogan: 'Verem! Mojam! Peramozham! [We believe! We can! We will do it!].

The Belarusian psychologists we interviewed also noted this phase of enthusiasm that started with the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic and dried up with the violent crackdown on protests in August 2020. During this period, many felt that change was coming, and that change was possible. A spirit of altruism and solidarity was uniting people.

The main motivation during this period was the hope that peaceful action would help to change the regime. Many truly believed that the authorities would see that they had lost public support and would voluntarily step down. However, it soon became clear that the ruling elite was prepared to do anything to stay in power. The crackdown stopped many from taking part. Many moved to non-violent underground activities. However, the level of mutual help remained high. Our respondents often stressed the solidarity between protesters and people who were not involved in the protests, such as staff in cafes and shops or other ordinary residents, who offered activists shelter and thus saved them from violence.

Maria from Minsk recalls:

When I saw them in tracksuits with truncheons, I rushed to a shop and said that GUBOPiK was coming. The shop assistants started shouting for people to come in, hide, and said that they would close the shop. There were around twenty of us there, the shop assistants told us to lie on the floor, then they hid under the counter and turned off the lights. The GUBOP went past and beat those who were not quick enough to hide. We could hear everything.

For many of our respondents, this feeling of solidarity, unity, enthusiasm and hope remains an important resource which they have taken abroad with them. It continues to power their commitment and gives them their strength and resilience.

Chapter 3

ESCAPE ROUTES
AND CHALLENGES
OF ADAPTATION



The ease of adaptation also depends on each person's financial situation, their ability to find a job quickly, whether they have children, medical problems or psychological trauma.

According to our interviewees, one key factor turned out to be their social capital

Those of our respondents who were more or less sure that criminal charges had not yet been brought against them escaped by plane or train. Others crossed the border illegally. Many were afraid to go through Russia, aware that Russian and Belarusian law enforcement agencies have a shared database. The journey out of Belarus was often described as extremely traumatic. Maria, an NGO worker from Minsk, recalls:

After they detained my colleagues, I went into hiding. I was in 'flight mode' and did not stay at home. I reached the border with Ukraine by bus. It was too risky to leave on a plane. Fortunately, there were no questions from the border guards. I had documents and an invitation from my partners with me, and they let me through. But my heart was thumping, my memories of crossing into Ukraine are very vague. I came round only in Kyiv.

Often the decision was made while on holiday, or the escape was camouflaged as a holiday. **Roman K.** said:

I had got in touch with people who helped me leave. I realized I was being followed, so I changed my SIM card and phone. I even went to the train station to buy a train ticket because I was afraid to buy the ticket online. Two days after I left, Telegram was blocked on my new SIM card, and at 6 a.m. that morning people came to all the contacts on my new SIM card to search their places.

Andrei Pauk, 35, from the town of Oktyabrskij in Gomel region, author of the acclaimed satirical video 'I am from the village', said his harassment started back in 2012 after the video was released⁴⁶. But he did not leave until eight years later, straight from holiday.

46. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eG7Mk0axZfs>

On August 24 we went on holiday. It was our first trip to the sea with the children. The following day we learned that my wife had been called in for questioning, accused of organizing mass unrest. After our departure, a group called Anti-Pauki appeared on social media threatening and slandering our family and others who took part in protests in the town of Oktyabrskij. On the recommendation of human rights activists, we did not return to Belarus. We received our documents at the Lithuanian embassy in Kyiv and flew to Vilnius on September 5, 2020. The main problem was that we had just one suitcase between the four of us, filled with swimming costumes and holiday clothes. We had to start our lives again from scratch.

Relocation was especially difficult for those who had to leave their children or spouses behind. For instance, **Diana**, 39, left Minsk on her own:

That evening only my eldest daughter saw me leave. She was very upset. She was only 12 at the time. She kept her pain to herself and did not even say goodbye. The younger children aged 9 and 6, did not realize that I was leaving... The cops came early the next morning.

The other Diana, 29, a witness in the Raman Bandarenka case, had to cross the border illegally because of her sentence to 'chemistry'. She sent her six-year-old son abroad separately:

I knew I could not leave my son with my mother. I had to send him away. He had all the necessary paperwork and was able to travel 'normally'. We decided to send him away with a person I had known for two days. The next time I saw my son was a month and a half later. For a while he was staying with random people none of us knew. At first he would call me every 20 minutes asking when I was coming, and I didn't know what to say. Then he settled in Ukraine, in a house with eight other children. He felt better there. The children played together, baked, and had fun. A month and a half later I arrived.

Alena from Mogilev decided to leave after she was searched and interrogated and a false report about her was put out on state TV. She was able to take her son but her husband had to stay in Belarus. Their son was

faced with the difficult choice between staying with his father in their family home or leaving the country with his mother. The latter choice involved a dangerous and illegal border crossing:

With the help of volunteers, I got ready quickly... We asked our son if he wanted to leave with me or stay with his dad. He asked how much time he could take to think about it, and we said an hour and a half. Afterwards he came out of his room in tears and said he was coming with me. I knew that it was very hard for him to leave everything behind, his home, his dad, his family, his friends, his room and his pets. In the evening we packed our bags. Our way out of the country was difficult. We went through Russia. Illegally. We drove at night through the forests, crossed the river by boat, it was very risky. Then we reached Ukraine. There, a complete stranger from Belarus bought us plane tickets to Georgia. My colleague met me there. She helped us a lot, as did my other colleagues and acquaintances. We stayed in Georgia for two months waiting for a visa, and then moved to Poland.

CHALLENGES OF ADAPTATION

Any relocant or refugee who has left his past life behind first needs to resolve practical issues and find a way to make a living. Our researchers interviewed relocants in four countries: Ukraine (mostly before the war), Lithuania, Poland, and Georgia. Obviously, living conditions for relocants differ depending on the economic situation and the migration policy of each country, as well as possible language barriers, or the presence of well-developed support networks.

The ease of adaptation also depends on each person's financial situation, their ability to find a job quickly, whether they have children, medical problems or psychological trauma. According to our interviewees, one key factor turned out to be their social capital. Activists who already belonged to journalistic and human rights networks found it much easier to solve housing, employment and legalization problems, as they could rely on the help of colleagues and on existing programs. Relocants not previously involved in civil initiatives found these tasks more difficult since they had much less support.

Almost all respondents reported that, at the first stage of the move, financial difficulties were the most important problem. Most had to flee suddenly, were unprepared and had little to no savings. Some told us that, despite the arrests and searches, they did not dare to leave Belarus for fear that they would not be able to provide for themselves in a foreign country. Others decided to leave after they were sentenced to 'chemistry' or fired from work, which meant they were anyway unable to provide for their families.

Financial assistance from friends, colleagues, parents, employers, foundations, or simply Belarusians who donated money, was crucial at this stage. Much of this money was spent on travel, especially by those who had to take indirect or illegal routes. Some said their financial situation had been and remained dire.

After crossing the border, finding living accommodation became one of the first challenges. Many people fled during the pandemic and self-isolation requirements imposed by some countries for new arrivals became an additional complication. It was difficult to find a place to isolate and staying in lockdown in an unfamiliar country was also psychologically challenging.

Some were lucky to get free housing for a while. It has been extremely important to make sure a relocant had a place to stay at the end of the journey and did not need to rent expensive housing on the first day. Given enough time, people can usually find cheaper housing. Some relocants initially stayed in hostels or co-living spaces. Many had to move repeatedly between short-term residences. In Lithuania and Poland, language problems hampered the search.

Yevgeniya from Bylinichi in the Mogilev Region, who moved to Ukraine before the war, told us how important the help provided by the Chernihiv Human Rights House had been. The organization paid one month of rent on their apartment, 'because by then we already spent our savings on the plane tickets and the move.'

Alina, from the Minsk Region, a mother of four, had to move several times after arriving in Poland.

It was difficult to find accommodation: ...My children and I moved four times... There was a constant feeling of 'homelessness' because landlords did not want to rent to a family with four children. We had to move quite a bit. The children changed schools twice – they got used to the first one, then to the second one, and all of this in an unfamiliar language.

It was also difficult for **Yelena**, who fled from Minsk to Kyiv, to find an apartment with three children and a cat. Her friends helped her find an unfurnished apartment.

There was nothing in this apartment... So we slept on the floor covered with jackets. We arrived during lockdown, so we could not take the subway to buy something... A week later, friends from different cities in Ukraine sent us dishes, pots, a table, chairs ... because money was also very short.

Ilona from Soligorsk mentioned that also in Vilnius foreigners with children faced problems looking for a place to live.

Once the housing issue was resolved, the next problem was residence status. Georgia, where a person can live without a residence permit for a year, is said to have the easiest legalization process. It is also very easy for a foreign citizen to open a bank account. After the events of 2020 in Belarus, Lithuania simplified and accelerated the legalization procedures for Belarusian activists, despite the pandemic. According to a recent study by the Center for Eastern European Studies in Vilnius, 67.75% of Belarusian respondents had a residence permit in Lithuania, 14.58% came on a humanitarian visa, 9.49% came on a work or study visa, and more than 8 percent received political asylum.⁴⁷

In the EU, in order to obtain international protection, a person must provide documents proving persecution: protocols of interrogations, documentary evidence of an arrest or a search, media publications or court decisions. Such documents were not always available. Recently, the Belarusian security forces have stopped providing protocols of arrest or search, having realized that they were used to obtain residence rights abroad. In such cases, relocants had to provide letters of support from human rights organizations or public figures or other kinds of evidence. According to our respondents, it takes from two to six months for Belarusians to receive international protection status. The greatest difficulties with legalization were reported in pre-war Ukraine because the grounds for obtaining a residence permit were quite limited (see Chapter 5 for more details). But the advantage of the Ukrainian system was that there was no need to document persecution since the residence permit was issued on other grounds.

Many relocants need their documents renewed, but they don't want to risk returning to Belarus or visiting Belarusian embassies. In January 2023, Lithuania promised to issue identity documents for those who could not get a passport in their homeland.⁴⁸ Relocants can also get a so-called Geneva passport if they receive asylum or international protection in the EU.⁴⁹ In Georgia one can also theoretically get such protection, but in practice it is very hard.

The next challenge is finding employment. Lack of language skills is a major problem, and many found it much easier to move to Ukraine, where the language barrier was practically non-existent. In Poland and Lithuania, various organizations provide the opportunity to learn the language for free.

Some who had jobs that let them work remotely were often able to continue their employment online, but others whose activism had been combined with a regular job, like **Sergei who moved from Minsk to Kyiv, had to restart their professional careers.**

Clearly, it is almost impossible for political emigrants to find a job here officially... so I started working for a delivery service... at the age of 34... As it turns out, you start your whole life, including your working career, all over again. Now I have advanced a little through the ranks, I almost never personally

47. <https://www.eesc.lt/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/EESC-research-Migration-from-Belarus-and-economic-social-and-political-integration-1.pdf>

48. <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/8607.html>

49. <https://baj.by/be/analytics/kak-uehavshimiz-belarusi-poluchit-v-litve-novyy-pasport-sobrali-poshagovuyu-instrukciyu>

deliver orders, but manage deliveries of a specific restaurant location where I work. So, I settled down a little; the only thing is that it's still not quite the job and the level of income that I'm used to and that I expected to have when I am 30-40 years old.

Those who fled Belarus after having been arrested or searched faced another problem: their equipment, such as computer or smartphone, may well have been confiscated, and that further complicated the task of finding a job or even short-term online projects, as Roman K. described.

I still don't have a normal computer, only a phone, for which I pay in installments. Someone gave me an old computer, and I also have a flash drive containing all my 20 years' worth of work – the one I managed to hide during the search.

Yelena from Minsk also had her computer confiscated, but one of the Belarusian foundations supplied her with new equipment.

I received a link and was told, 'Write to these people. They help people whose equipment was taken away from them.'... I wrote, sent my reports, all sorts of articles, and a list of items confiscated from me. Four months later, I got a new laptop and a phone.

Finding a job is even more difficult for single mothers like Diana, who fled with her children.

I am raising a child alone. My son is seven years old, and, under Polish law, he cannot stay home alone. So I still can't get a job. Institutions where I can work with my qualifications usually stay open until eight or nine, so I can't pick up the child from school at 5:30. I am now intensively looking for project-based or part-time work, but such job options are few.

Many mothers from two-parent families also mentioned that taking care of children, running a household and working all became more difficult since they had lost help from relatives, on which many activists, journalists, and other working mothers had relied in Belarus.

Marina Korzh, a Belarusian diaspora activist in Tbilisi, left before the start of the 2020 protests to study for an MA in human rights. After the elections, when relocants were pouring into Georgia, Marina organized a system to help the new arrivals. She is very well informed and explains the challenges faced by relocants in Georgia.

Construction specialists are in demand here, but many newcomers do not want this kind of work. They want to engage in activism, become bloggers and create media. As a result, they are not looking for work and not doing what they were qualified to do before.

Of all the relocants interviewed for this project, those who were able to restore their earnings and feel there was a demand for their work adapted most successfully. Oleg from the Vitebsk Region, who relocated to Warsaw, said that a Polish company invited him for a job interview a week after he sent out his resumé, and that gave him a stable income and confidence.

Students can also find opportunities. For example, in Poland, expelled students are given the opportunity to continue their free education in the Kastuś Kalinoŭski program. The program was created back in 2006 for Belarusian students who faced political persecution. Selected students can enroll in a Polish university for free, receive a scholarship and study Polish in a preparatory program for a year. According to Tanya S, 'double refugees,' that is, Belarusians who relocated to Ukraine and then fled the war, 'got the green light more often' than relocants did before the war.

Chapter 4

PSYCHOLOGICAL
CONSEQUENCES
OF THE TRAUMATIC
EVENTS



Psychological trauma and its consequences greatly affected our respondents' quality of life – **not only their health, perception of the world, and family relationships, but also their ability to survive in new conditions,** look for work, obtain a residence permit and deal with their children's problems

All these experiences could not help but have an impact on the activists' psychological state, health and family relationships. Those who were arrested, even briefly, often described their condition upon release as 'deep shock.' Olga, a medical doctor, political prisoner and victim of torture, currently living in Poland, said the first thing she did upon her release from Okrestina was to take her child and go to her dacha (country house) and write everything down that she had seen.

When I arrived at the dacha with my child I was in a state of complete shock. I was so scared that, in order not to go crazy, my brain blocked out all emotions. 'Work with your head', that's what they teach you in medical school. No matter how horrible the situation around you, you should turn off your emotions, because a doctor who panics is a bad doctor... And I was so great at blocking out all my emotions that I had no emotional response left at all, I didn't feel hungry or cold, I didn't feel happy or sad or scared. No emotions at all. But my brain was working 100%.

Olga had to flee to Poland without her child.

[I felt] terrible apathy, you don't want anything, you can't get up, you just sleep and go to the toilet. You don't want to eat or drink... I started to have big memory lapses. I forgot absolutely everything, I forgot the entire university program, I could not remember obvious things. I started to have bruxism [grinding teeth while sleeping]; I was waking up at nights. Plus, the panic attacks, they develop like a snowball. At first you needed a trigger... but later, even if nothing seems to have happened, you suddenly develop a panic attack. I already had a clear denial of life. The only thing that saved me was medication.

Many of respondents said that leaving the country had a positive effect on them. There was no more, or much less, fear of arrest, violence, or losing one's children. They started sleeping more peacefully at night. The children had also become calmer: As Oleg from Braslav in the Vitebsk region, who relocated to Warsaw, told us: 'The child feels happy that the cops won't be coming here.' According to Olga P from the Gomel Region, who lives in Poland, 'It is absolutely certain that the situation is not easy for anyone, but everyone's reaction is different.' Many people remain anxious, as they lack a sense of security or the ability to make long-term plans.

Sergei Dylevsky from Minsk emphasized that it was not only what people had experienced in Belarus that was traumatic, but also the act of leaving the country and crossing the border.

Many people, including me, had never traveled outside Belarus in their lives. There is an incomprehensible fear, fear of the unknown, no idea of what could happen next. People, for the most part, just crossed into nowhere.

Alena from Belsat Media fled from Minsk to Tbilisi.

Tatyana Kuzina [a political scientist]⁵⁰ was taken off the same plane I was on. Now, she is in jail. I was scared. The main problem was that I had two of my small children with me. Once I arrived, for another two months I had no idea where I would be living and what kind of job I should look for. This has strongly increased my anxiety, and probably, caused the anxiety-depressive disorder.

50. Tatyana Kuzina was sentenced to 10 years in prison, she is recognized as a political prisoner.

Irina, 45, from Shchuchyn, now in Poland, said the court had banned her from traveling, so she was smuggled out of Belarus.

I was on sedatives, but I was still very nervous. Everything worked out thanks to the guys from BYSOL. They were very caring, right down to what medicine I took, whether I ate, how I felt, and if I was ready to move on. My journey was hard. ... I had to walk through a swamp and woods, through a corn field and sunflowers. I had to move quickly, with no stopping or resting. It was hot, it was very hard. But I had no choice, so I kept going.

A similar path was taken by **Vladislav**, a metal band leader, who had to cross the border illegally because he had been sentenced to three years of 'chemistry.'

It was through the forest, and the swamp, and through barbed wire. My pants were all torn when I climbed over. Walking was very difficult. I have extra weight and hypertension; I had breathing problems following COVID. But the greatest challenge was psychological. I was afraid that I would get lost, that they would catch me, or that my body would fail. Now it seems that, in my case, everything went relatively easily, as my acquaintances and BYSOL people helped me a lot.

Olga, 33, from the Gomel region, traveled to Lithuania.

I suffered depression due to a lockdown in Lithuania, as I had to be with the children 24/7 in an unfamiliar environment. We feared for the life and health of our relatives. My husband had panic attacks. The children behaved badly for the first year. The school administration even thought that we were hiding something about the children's mental health and demanded that they undergo a medical examination. The children were in a foreign environment, dealing with a foreign language, there was no link to anything familiar, and this greatly affected their condition. My daughter did not understand how to study on the computer and cried a lot. My son had behavior issues in class; he didn't do what the teachers said.

Vasily, 37, is an academic from Minsk.

The main thing is the inability to make long-term plans and being cut off from your familiar environment, from friends. [Things like] when you live in a completely different country and cannot get basic medical care because you need insurance, and for insurance, you need a residence permit. You are afraid that the child may get sick and not get help. Any small child's cough makes you worry. There is no basic sense of security... It is hard to live in a situation where there is no fundamental balance and understanding of what to do next.

Piotr, 22, who fled from Baranovichi to Kyiv, said that he had a hard time coping with the consequences of physical violence he first faced at the age of 17 when he was beaten by local KGB officers.

I was beaten in Minsk [back in 2017], and I saw them beating other detainees. At some point, I was diagnosed with severe depression, I was prescribed antidepressants, which I still take. I constantly suffer from nightmares and paranoia.

Many respondents told us that they had panic attacks, flashbacks, fear of persecution against themselves or their loved ones who remained in Belarus, or fear of people in uniform. 'I still can't stand fireworks. I understand in my mind that everything is OK, but my body starts shaking,' said Alesya from TUT.by media. As has been shown above, administrative arrest is often very violent and humiliating, and those who experienced it may have been severely traumatized.

Many relocants experience survivor guilt. They feel guilty about leaving their country, about being safe and having withdrawn themselves from the situation in their country. Olga, a relocant in Georgia, said that she 'feels a strong sense of guilt towards those who are imprisoned in Belarus.' She also speaks about 'constantly scanning the environment for danger' – as do many Belarusians surveyed, no matter what country they currently reside in. It's one of the symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Ulyana, 24, who fled from Minsk to Kyiv after having served a harsh administrative arrest, said that she could not find a way to cope with anxiety.

I am almost never relaxed – it is as if I am always in survival mode. Because my parents are still in Belarus, I worry about them all the time. At first in Kyiv, I was frightened by sudden noises. When someone opened the gate near the house, it made knocking noises, and I jumped up and froze every time, waiting for a few seconds. Or when a truck was passing near the house, I would get tense. Now I've calmed down a bit. It's still very hard – a lot of resources go into coping with fear.

Many of interviewees admitted that fear is still a big part of their lives. According to a Belarusian expert from Lithuania, this fear is not entirely unwarranted.

There are reports that the Belarusian special services keep the most active relocants in Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, and Georgia under surveillance. Bellingcat's investigation into the death of Vitaliy Shishov in Kyiv showed that Russian special services were able to infiltrate the Belarusian diaspora and opposition structures in Ukraine.⁵¹ Some representatives of the Belarusian democratic forces in Vilnius warned their colleagues to be careful, as they noticed surveillance in the courtyards of their homes. This factor may not be relevant for all Belarusians who have moved to Lithuania, but it creates a general background of tension and distrust when communicating with the diaspora and with unfamiliar contacts.

51. <https://nv.ua/world/countries/vitaliy-shishov-v-bellingcat-rasskazali-o-sotrudnikah-fsb-v-ryadah-beloruskoy-oppozicii-50176219.html>

For some activists, like *Maria* from Belsat TV, psychosomatic effects started when still in Belarus:

After the crisis of 2020, when stun grenades were exploding near our house, one night my child threw a terrible tantrum. She wouldn't calm down for several hours. The psychologist said that it was a compensatory reaction, and that it was good that my daughter relieved stress in this way... On the eve of our departure, my husband ended up in intensive care with an acute allergic reaction due to stress. His blood pressure was 20/60 and he actually almost died.

In some families, the consequences came in the form of increased discord and conflict. ***Olga, 43, lived in the Minsk Region before leaving for Georgia.*** She had a small business providing accounting services to businesses. She was an active participant in protests and was placed under administrative arrest twice. Her daughter, a 20-year-old student, was detained by people in plain clothes in front of her home and taken to the Investigative Committee, where she was interrogated for five hours and threatened with long prison terms for her and her mother. Due to persecution and relocation the daughter could not finish her fifth year at the university and was expelled. The daughter's health began to deteriorate, with psychosomatic illnesses and signs of PTSD. The mother still experiences increased background anxiety.

From some of her statements, I understand that my daughter blames me for having to leave her friends, having to leave her apartment with her cozy room... There was a time when we didn't talk to each other at all for two or three months.

Children often blame their parents for the challenging situation in which they find themselves as they cope with a foreign environment. Political persecution and relocation are also a test for marital relations. Some spouses could not or did not want to leave Belarus with their partner, others could not handle the difficulties of relocation, and conflict led to divorce.

Alena, 33, is a Belsat TV journalist from Minsk who relocated to Lithuania.

I saw torture, imprisonment, beatings, persecution, and threats. I personally received threats and was tortured at Okrestina for three days. As a result of the beatings, I ended up in the hospital. They kicked me in the stomach. After August 2020, I was detained three times while doing my job ... My last detention was in March 2021. We were kept in the police station for about 6 hours, I was stripped naked in a room with an icy floor and not allowed to go to the toilet... I still receive threats... My detentions had a very negative impact on my husband's mental state. Very serious problems began in our family, and now we are in the process of divorce. My relatives wanted me to stop working because it was dangerous. I continued to work until June 2021. The relatives were apparently acting out of concern for me but they did it in the form of pressuring me. It didn't end well for anyone. I have three children. The two younger ones (4 and 6 years old) have come with me to Lithuania, while the older one stayed with his father, and this is a big challenge for all of us.

In most cases, our respondents said that relatives in Belarus were supporting them and were very worried about them. On the other hand, activism sometimes caused, at the very least, bewilderment or conflict among family members. For

example, one of our respondents told us how difficult it was for her to explain to her grandparents why the activists are considered to be traitors by the authorities: ‘They do not understand this.’

I.Z., who relocated to Lithuania, said that she had very strong ideological clashes with her relatives:

I don’t communicate with my close relatives. It’s not an easy decision, but these are very toxic people, and I can’t trust them... Living in Minsk, I avoided communicating with them. In a way, the move made it easier for me, because I was further away from them.

Family members often reacted to traumatic events in different ways. There were always some who dealt with them more easily, while others had a much harder time. For example, in Vasily’s family, it’s his wife who suffers most from their relocation.

She was used to her life in Belarus, had her own circle of friends in Minsk, and relied heavily on the help of relatives in caring for the children. In addition, she does not know foreign languages. It is difficult for her to accept that we won’t return to Belarus.

Peter, 22, believes that in his case, his mother suffered the most.

She cried, worried, and couldn’t sleep at night if she didn’t hear from me, or when it turned out that I was being detained.

Alena, is a journalist from Minsk who separated from her husband as a result of the persecution she suffered.

Absolutely all the members of the family are in bad shape... I got an anxiety-depressive disorder, which I completely associate with repression against me and their effect on relations within the family... Overall, my husband was worst affected. He used to be a normal person but became emotionally unstable. I am sure that he has some kind of disorder, but he does not seek help. I think that our eldest son suffers more, since he lives separately from me with his father, who is not in the best emotional condition.

The relocation was often especially traumatic for children. Our respondents said that it was hard for their children to leave their familiar environment, their relatives, grandmothers, school or kindergarten, room, and sometimes one of their parents. Finding new friends in a new country was hard for many of them due to the language barrier. Some children faced negative attitudes from their peers, and several respondents said that their children were bullied. Due to stress and trauma, some children had behavioral problems and their teachers complained. Older children understood that their parents were in danger and were very afraid for them; they were afraid of people in uniform. Some were present during the searches and saw their parents being detained.

The children of *Ilona* from Soligorsk were directly threatened.

Guardianship agency officers came to see my children in kindergarten and at school and threatened to take them to a children’s home. They said their mother was too active and if she did not stop speaking out, they would be taken away. They also told them how they would be treated there – that they would be beaten, shouted at, not given food and made to sleep on the floor. Then some psychologists talked to them and also tried to frighten them. The eldest daughter (she was 14) was told that she would end up in a juvenile colony. Children were affected [by the move] worse [than I was]. The youngest son has panic attacks. He was scared to go outside or go to kindergarten, because he was afraid that he would be taken to a home. My daughter was also afraid of leaving the house or being alone. At the same time, they were terrified if I left the house – they practically wouldn’t let me go outside alone. We go everywhere together – they never stay home alone.

Clearly traumatic experiences like this have an impact also on young adolescents. According to Olga from the Minsk Region, it was her daughter who was worst affected by the situation: *‘After we moved, she didn’t leave her bed for a week, didn’t go out, didn’t eat anything.’* Her daughter does not want to consult psychologists because she does not trust them.

All respondents said separation from their families remains the most painful problem. Yevgeniya from Belynichi said that her whole family was involved in civic activism, and now they have ended up far away from each other.

My grandmothers, grandfathers, and mother stayed in Belarus with the dog. My dad and brother are in Lithuania. I am in Ukraine. My friends are all over – some are in Poland, some in Lithuania. Everyone who could leave just left. The grandmothers cry during every call and say that nothing will change, and we will never see each other again. Everyone is depressed. And nobody believes in anything. Nobody believes it will end.

Yevgeniya and her husband are terribly homesick

You seem to have left Belarus, but Belarus is always on your mind. All your thoughts, your whole life, and all your plans are geared toward it. At Christmas... they sent me some Belarusian chocolates, and I sat down and cried. When someone comes from Belarus, you stand there and keep touching them like a fool, because they were recently in Belarus. We can say that we are slowly going crazy. My husband is really depressed in this regard ... He does not want anything. Only to go back to Belarus.

Relocants who are separated from their spouses and children, like Natalya, 55, from the Gomel region, are in the most difficult situation.

The consequences are huge. We live in different countries – I moved, but my husband and children stayed. We communicate only by phone. The psychological state of all family members is very tense. I lost my home and my job, I live in a foreign country, and I cannot find a job or a way to support myself. The children suffered a lot.

Vladislav from Minsk had to leave his wife and children behind in Belarus.

Lots of pressure comes from the fact that I can’t participate in family life, I have no influence on my children. The family is torn apart, and this feeling is always with me. Consequently, I have many fears related to family, anxiety that this situation can break the family itself.

Another recurrent topic that came up during interviews was what would happen if loved ones who remained in Belarus were to die. Would they be able to be there in their last days or be able to attend their funeral? They have good reason to be afraid of traveling to Belarus – in 2021, a young political emigrant going to his father’s funeral was detained upon entering the country.⁵²

52. <https://news.mirror.io/life/8607.html>

Natalya from the Gomel region said that her mother died when she wasn’t there.

Mom got lost in the woods and was never found. My emotional condition has deteriorated significantly. I don’t know how to manage it.

Vitaly, who relocated to Poland, lost his father within a year after he left, and now he tries to comfort and support his mother from a distance on the phone. Several respondents who are facing criminal charges in Belarusian courts for their political activity are worried that the security forces might raid the houses of their elderly parents (often a relocant’s official address) and cause them great stress.

Alexey Kokorin from The Free Belarus Center in Kyiv worked a lot with Belarusian relocants before the war and summarizes the situation he observes in the families.

I see a pattern now in the families that have not fully left. Either the father was forced to leave, or the mother had to leave with the child, etc. A lot of these people are in separated families, and this ... has a tremendous impact on relationships in general and on their mental state. Also, especially in a situation of risk, it is very easy to strain relationships with your loved ones based on politics, and this ruins people's lives so much.

Psychological trauma and its consequences greatly affected our respondents' quality of life – not only their health, perception of the world, and family relationships, but also their ability to survive in new conditions, look for work, obtain a residence permit and deal with their children's problems. An expert from a human rights organization in Lithuania who prefers not to be named notes that relocants sometimes miss their visa application deadlines or fail to resolve other fairly straightforward issues, because they are at the limit of their endurance.

Vitaly, 32, who now leads an assistance initiative in Warsaw, said that he was also unable to cope with the task of finding housing, early on after fleeing from Belarus.

My acquaintance, a volunteer from Wrocław, paid my hostel during the quarantine. Then they helped me pay rent for a month. At that moment, I was in an emotionally depressed condition and was unable to do anything. I was just coming to my senses. I didn't understand what I should do next.

Katya, 21, from Minsk, described how bureaucratic obstacles to obtaining a residence permit seemed too huge at that time.

Under normal conditions, this whole bureaucratic thing is not hard, but for me, it was very hard, because, in general, it was hard for me even to shower or to eat.

Another young activist in Ukraine said he failed to obtain a residence permit due to his poor psychological condition and ended up an illegal immigrant.

Alexei, 22, felt that the stressful situation mobilized him to action.

For me, this is an unexpected transition into adulthood. Because before that, I lived with my parents all my life, and then, bam, I moved to another country.

All our respondents gave evidence of a huge demand for mental health support among Belarusian relocants. Still, many of them felt that, in general, they were quite comfortable in their new environment. Numerous respondents in Lithuania particularly emphasized the attention the Lithuanian state has paid to their problems. Many said that the legalization process in Poland was also quite fast and smooth, and that there were various support mechanisms. Georgia and Ukraine (before the war) were comfortable due to the non-existent language barrier, people were friendly, and life was relatively inexpensive.

Even though relocants face problems with finances, adaptation and mental health, their situation also has many advantages – they are safe, living in democratic states, and, for those who want to, they can continue their activism and journalism and develop their projects. In 2021, many did not know how to plan their lives, how long they would stay in relocation, or if there was still hope of returning to Belarus soon. After the start of the war with Ukraine, there are few hopes left for a quick return, so integration in a new place becomes a priority.

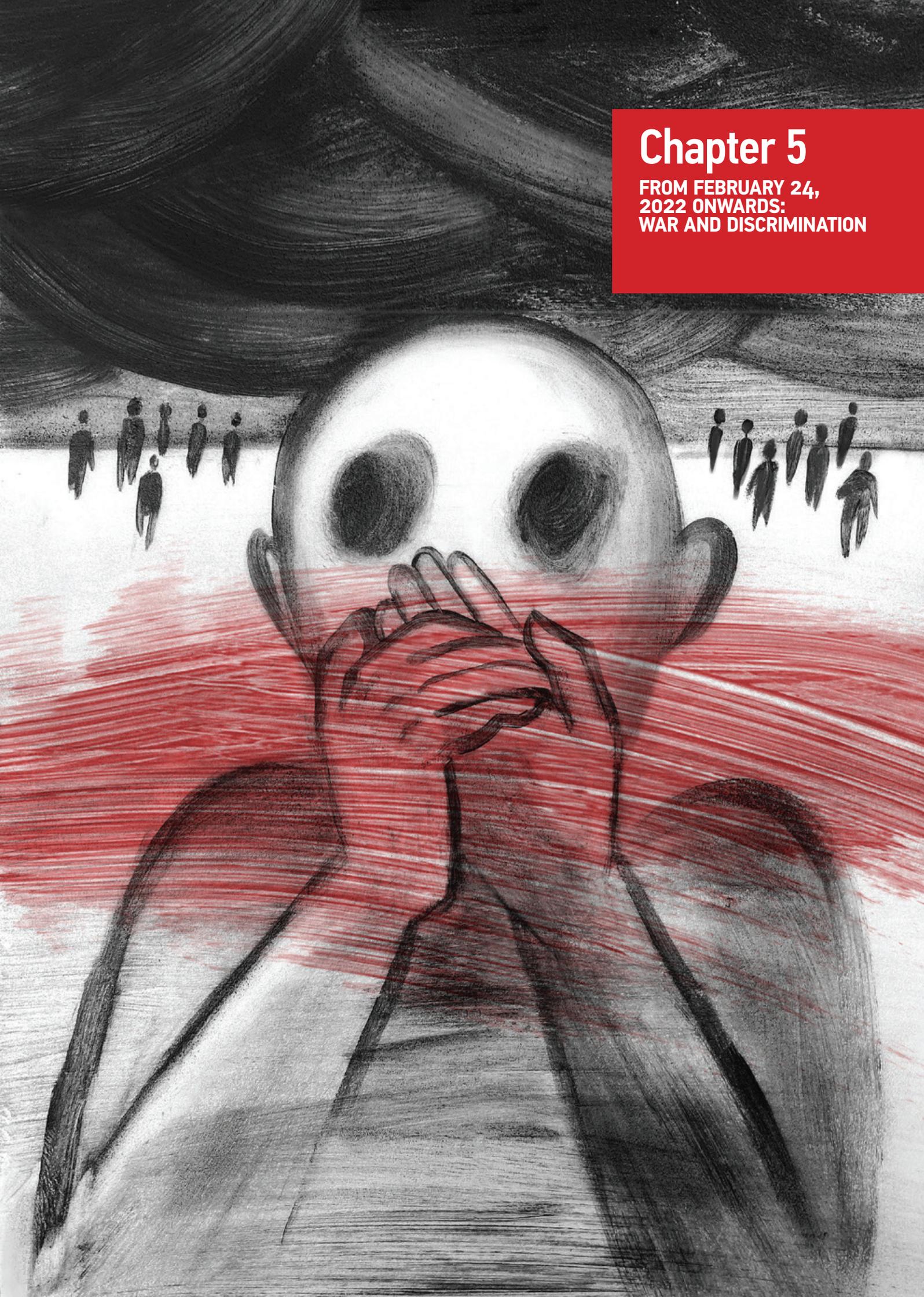
Andrey from Oktyabrskij now lives in Vilnius.

Now the main problem is psychological. The shock of relocation gradually passes, but suppressed reactions appear – panic, paranoia, fear for one's health, and fear for the fate of one's relatives. The main problem is how to live from now on.

Working with psychological trauma, and restoring mental health is a prerequisite for the successful adaptation and integration of Belarusian activists in relocation. All the 89 respondents we interviewed agree about that.

Chapter 5

FROM FEBRUARY 24,
2022 ONWARDS:
WAR AND DISCRIMINATION



It is evident that discrimination became a major issue for Belarusian relocants after the war broke out. By an irony of fate, the war has not only pushed Belarusian activists into the background but has caused many people to see them as collectively responsible for the actions of the regime from which they fled

To escape arrest in Belarus, some of our interlocutors decided to seek refuge in Ukraine. They planned to build their life there until they would be able to return to Belarus. Some moved on to Poland or Lithuania. After the events of 2020, Ukraine seemed an obvious choice for those who had to move in a hurry: Belarusians did not need a visa and there was no language barrier, which made job hunting easier. Some had personal and family ties and there was already a Belarusian diaspora there. On top of that, a number of Ukrainian and Belarusian organizations were helping Belarusian activists find their feet. The main obstacle in settling down in Ukraine before the war was legalization. All our respondents noted that they needed help with paperwork. Without a residence permit Belarusians were allowed to stay in the country for 90 days, later extended to 180 days. A residence permit was normally issued on the grounds of work, marriage to a Ukrainian citizen, volunteering (but only with organizations listed with the Ministry of Social Policy) or studies. The advantage was that there was no need to prove that one had suffered political persecution.

Most of our respondents said that they had to find organizations that would agree to take them on as volunteers and issue the relevant paperwork. This was challenging for those who did not have connections, or if their mental state prevented them from navigating the complex world of paperwork effectively. However, after the most pressing issues – housing, employment and paperwork – were taken care of, life in Ukraine turned out to be comfortable.

After February 24, Belarusians in Ukraine were in the same situation as Ukrainians in the face of full-scale war. Like Ukrainians, they had to hide in bomb shelters and metro stations, and become refugees. Most of the Belarusians fled Ukraine, escaping both war and the danger of Russian occupation.

Tanya Svirepa, a journalist who relocated from Minsk to Kyiv in 2020, said that reports were circulating in Belarusian chat rooms two days before the war about ‘execution lists’ of Belarusians which Lukashenko had allegedly given the Russians in case Kyiv was occupied.

Before the outbreak of hostilities we laughed about it: ha, ha, ha! what lists! what paranoia! But when the bombing started and Russian troops seized Irpin and Bucha near Kyiv, most of the Belarusians no longer dared to stay in the country.

At the same time, the attitude towards Belarusian refugees deteriorated in Ukraine and in the other countries to which they fled, as Lukashenko was now seen as an accomplice of Russian aggression. According to a research paper ‘Belarusians in Poland, Lithuania, Georgia: Attitudes Towards The War, Aid For Ukraine And Discrimination’⁵³, supported by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, after February 24, 39% of Belarusians in Georgia and 31% in Poland said that they faced discrimination because of their Belarusian background. In Lithuania, it was 16%. Belarusians in all three countries experienced verbal insults and derogatory comments during everyday communication, but prejudice at the institutional level was more serious for them. In Lithuania and Georgia, over 30% faced housing discrimination. More than 24% in Poland and 33% in Georgia were refused service at the bank. According to the authors of the report, some of the claims can be taken with a grain of salt (e.g. refusal to rent or refusal to employ someone) as they can be interpreted subjectively, but in most cases discrimination was evident.

The report examined cases of discrimination experienced both first-hand and anecdotally, i.e. told by friends and acquaintances. The figures are impressive: 58% of Belarusians in Poland and 59% in Georgia faced or heard about discrimination. The figure is lower in Lithuania: only 39% faced discrimination. 61% said they had not experienced or heard about negative attitudes. The report suggests this might be because Lithuania received fewer Ukrainian refugees. But also, while Georgians are in general not very interested in the situation in Belarus, Lithuanians do follow the developments in their southern neighbor.

In this chapter we present testimonies of four women who have faced discrimination and outright hostility against themselves and their family members since the start of the war simply because they are Belarusian.

53. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/19480.pdf>

ALINA: “I’VE BEEN DOING VOLUNTEER WORK ALL MY LIFE”

‘On the first day of the war, it became evident that the attitude towards us had fundamentally changed. When I brought my child to kindergarten, I noticed that no one said hello to me,’ says Alina, 39, a psychologist and a mother of four from Stolbtsy in the Minsk region, now relocated to Poland. Alina left Belarus for Ukraine on August 9 2021. As a volunteer she did shifts outside the detention center in Baranovichy town, collected money and parcels for the detained, and provided psychological help to the victims. Once, when a colleague was being detained, Alina was also beaten so badly that she needed stitches. KGB officers told her directly that they would throw her in mental hospital, plant drugs on her husband, and her children would be taken to an orphanage.

When the war in Ukraine broke out, Alina and her family were already in Poland. A few days after the war started, someone slashed the tires of her car, which had Belarusian number plates. She had the car repaired but it did not end there. About a week later, ‘when I was parking the car and got out with the children, one of the neighbors who was walking his dogs came up to us, swung a stick at us, and started shouting and swearing. Then he somehow cooled down, but he still hit the wheel hard with the stick and spat on the car before he left.’

People stopped saying hello to Alina and her family not only in kindergarten but also in her neighborhood in Warsaw.

Before the war, we socialized, always said hello to each other. But after the war started, everyone just stopped saying hello, all the residents. Only one neighbor still replied to my hello. We were stared at, as if my children and I were walking around with a gun and threatening them.

Open discrimination deeply affected Alina and her family. They felt bewildered and confused about how to keep going, while they knew they wouldn’t be able to return to Belarus any time soon. Alina started voluntarily providing psychological aid to Ukrainian refugees at Peace House 2, a reception center for refugees.

Many refugees from Gostomel, Bucha and Irpin had just arrived. People were in a very difficult mental state. ...I’ve been doing volunteer work all my adult life. In Belarus I set up an animal shelter, we organized events in orphanages, bought nappies for babies. In Poland, I tried to help Belarusians who had suffered from repression. Since the war, I have been helping Ukrainian refugees with supplies, food, or transportation. Ukrainian refugees are very grateful to us, Belarusian volunteers... And now this question is always ringing in my head: ‘Whatever for? Why? Do we really deserve such treatment if we are doing good?!’ We are refugees too. Yes, we were not bombed, but we have been ‘pressured’ in a different way – we were jailed, beaten with truncheons, threatened with the removal of our children. We came here to save our lives and our families.

DIANA: “YOU ARE JUST LIKE LUKASHENKO!”

Diana, 29, sentenced to two years of ‘chemistry’ for a mural in the Square of Changes in Minsk, has been quoted in the previous chapters. She escaped from house arrest and crossed the border to Ukraine illegally. She had already sent her six-year-old son there a month and a half earlier and he’d been living with other political emigrants. Diana did not stay long in Ukraine as she secured a Polish visa and moved to Poland on November 1, 2021.

In December I put my child in a regular Polish school and rented a flat in Warsaw. At first he was very anxious, wanted to go back home to Belarus because that’s where all his friends, relatives, and grandmother were. But then he somehow settled and made friends with other children.

The situation changed dramatically after the war in Ukraine started. A lot of refugees arrived in Warsaw from Ukraine. The school set up a class for Russian-speaking Ukrainian children and advised Diana to let her son join so that he could learn Polish better. Diana did so. Soon the boy asked her to go back home to Belarus. When Diana asked him why, he confessed that he had been beaten by Ukrainian children. They beat him and said: ‘You are like Lukashenko!’ She says the boy was extremely upset: ‘He refused to go to school and asked to go back to his gran’s house in Belarus; he did not want to stay in Poland any longer.’

Diana complained to the school, but the boys who mistreated her son denied doing so. When her son returned to school, he was chided for lying and for involving his mother. The school did not offer support. Diana said that her son desperately needed to be seen by a child psychologist because ‘first the move from Belarus was very difficult, and then this’. But help was not available: ‘After the move I wrote to many organizations asking for psychological help for the child but none was offered.’ Another woman who relocated to Lublin also told us that her child was beaten at school ‘for Lukashenko’. However, that school reacted differently and the problem was resolved.

TATYANA: MINSK-BUCHA-WARSAW

The stories of Tatyana and Maria (below) illustrate what many refugees from Ukraine have had to go through since February 24 2022: a long journey to safety, with kilometers on foot, long queues at the border, and children who are crying with hunger and cold. Tatyana and Maria had an additional trauma – although both fled from the Lukashenko regime, now they found that they were perceived as Lukashenko’s ‘envoys.’ Such a reaction is understandable in Ukraine in the midst of a terrible, brutal war, but it does not make it less painful for the Belarusians, many of whom find themselves on the brink of despair, both from the horror of what is happening and from the fact that they have become guilty without guilt. Tatyana is 36 and now lives in Warsaw. She was an independent observer in the 2020 presidential election. The move from Belarus to Ukraine was traumatic.

The two older children crossed the border with people we didn’t know, and the twins with me. My husband was the last to join us. Volunteers helped me and my children cross into Ukraine via Russia, illegally. While we were crossing the river to Russia, we were shot at from the other side. The first shots we ever heard were not fired during the war but on February 17 2022. I was very scared for myself and for my children.

In Ukraine, Tatyana and her family settled in the now infamous town of Bucha. They stayed there from 8 February until March 9, 2022. On February 25, the railway tracks were blown up, making it impossible to leave. On February 26, all the bridges in and around Irpin were blown up. There was no more electricity, gas or heating.

Russian tanks rolled through the streets. From our windows we could see destroyed cars, dead bodies and body parts lying in the street. And again we ran, but this time from the deadly Bucha to Poland, through Kyiv. We had to walk through Romanovka but we were able to leave only on March 8. From Bucha we walked to Irpin, where we stayed with a Belarusian volunteer who then helped us get to Kyiv.

Many Belarusians who had to flee in the early days of the war had to make similar journeys.

From Kyiv we were taken to Lviv, like other refugees. In Lviv we queued 24 hours for the evacuation train to Poland. When our turn came, the police asked if there were any foreigners in the queue. I still felt strong fear when I saw people in police uniforms, so I immediately ran up to the policeman and showed him our Belarusian passports. The policeman shouted: ‘Stop! Don’t move!’ And about 20 other policemen with guns came running towards us. They surrounded me, my

husband, and our four children. The children were then seated in a waiting room at the train station, and they took my husband and me to the police station. At the station they checked all our phones and chats, they checked our passports. They questioned us for two hours, and finally we were able to join our children. Then they told us that we could board the next train in four hours.

However, when the time came, Tatyana and her husband were again approached by the police. They said that the family would not be able to leave after all. Tatyana asked the police to let them on the train because they were refugees like the others.

The police officers showed us some correspondence on Viber. They told us that Poland wouldn't accept us Belarusians because they weren't allowing Belarusians into Poland. We were very confused and asked them to confirm this information. Some girl arrived, introduced herself as a customs officer and confirmed that Poland did not allow Belarusians in, and that we would have to leave the station immediately, otherwise we'd be in trouble...In any case, we wouldn't be able to get on the train in Lviv.

She quickly contacted the Belarusian volunteer who'd helped them when they arrived in Ukraine. The volunteer helped the family get to the Polish border, where they had to queue for ten hours. When the border guards discovered that Tatyana and her family were from Belarus, they became hostile. The border guard said as he returned their passports: "Tell Lukashenko to move his troops away from the border with Ukraine!"

At passport control we were separated. My husband, my 17-year-old daughter and I were fingerprinted, and the police questioned my husband. My husband explained why we had to flee Belarus and why we had to leave Ukraine, and finally they let us through. But this question is still ringing in my head: If there is a war and you are a refugee, what difference does it make what nationality you are?

MARIA: "I WANTED TO THROW MYSELF UNDER A TANK"

We present Maria's testimony in some detail, so that the reader can better imagine the difficult journey that most refugees from Ukraine had to take but also empathize with the specific challenges for Belarusians under these conditions.

I left Belarus in June 2021. I am 30 years old. I was one of those people who did not want to leave until the last minute. I was a volunteer with one of the human rights organizations. I was detained many times... There was a risk that they would come for me again and bring criminal charges against me. I traveled by car with my boyfriend through Russia to Ukraine. We even took some of our belongings. I was feeling fine. I chose to go to Ukraine because I have a specific job that requires me to speak the local language. The Ukrainians we met there were friendly to us. We settled in. We had a place to live, a nice flat in the center of Kyiv, but I missed Minsk every day. I was trying to convince myself that they would not arrest me if I returned. I dreamt of waking up back in June 2019. I had a feeling that my life had been stolen from me. And then the war started ... I absolutely could not believe it. In the past, when we'd talked about the possibility of war breaking out, I even used to smile. However, after the [Russian] recognition of the LPR and DPR [the two Russian-controlled self-proclaimed republics in Eastern Ukraine], I signed up for a medical course with the Red Cross, just in case. My boyfriend laughed at me. He even asked, 'Why did you buy into this war hype?' And we giggled. On the evening of February 23, we went to see a stand-up comedian. The next morning my boyfriend left for work. I said to him: 'When you get back from work, we need to discuss what we're doing if the war starts...' He giggled and five hours later the war started. I was at home. I was asleep. I normally sleep

like a log. In the past, you would have said that you couldn't wake me up with a tank. But on that day, I was woken up by an explosion.

My boyfriend was in the city center at the time. I called him and I had to convince him that there really was an explosion. I woke up a girl who was staying with us and told her that the war had started. I could not believe my own words. Not that I could not accept what I said, I simply could not believe that in today's world there could be war planes flying and bombs falling. You thought it was impossible...

We quickly threw some of our belongings into our rental car. We wanted to go a bit west of Kyiv, to wait it out, read the news on the internet and get a grip of what was going on so that we wouldn't panic...

We found a hotel 88 kilometers from Kyiv. We got in the car. We started driving and then the car rental people called us and asked, 'Are you going to leave the Kyiv region?' We said yes. They told us that they were going to block our car. We asked why. They said, 'Because we are at war. Go back to Kyiv. We want the car back.'

We went back to Kyiv, returned the car, packed our bags. And we went to spend the night in the metro. We slept in the metro ... The girl who was staying with us could not get any sleep in the metro. My boyfriend did. To me, it felt great. Somehow, everything seemed quiet. There was a toilet, there was water. A smoking area was put up. Things were fine...

Then we started looking at ways of getting out. In the end, we left Kyiv by bus. It took 53 hours to get from Kyiv to the border. We were supposed to get a lift to the border and then cross on foot. But they drove us to Lviv and told us, 'Now go on foot.' There was a long queue from Lviv to the Polish border, only women and children were allowed through. Then the siren went off in Lviv as well. We asked people where the bomb shelter was and they said, 'There probably is one but we don't know where.' We ended up near the train station, which is full of places made of glass. If the place had been shelled nobody would have stood a chance. We stood by a wall. We tried to find some acquaintances, someone who could put us up for the night. And we actually did find someone.

The queue [of people and cars] at the border stretched for 40 kilometers... Someone gave us a lift and brought us 20 kilometers closer. We thought we would get to the border by bus and so we'd stuffed a lot in the suitcases. Between us, we had around 50 kilograms. Two suitcases. We walked for 20 kilometers. Let's just say it was very hard. All the wheels on the suitcases broke and we literally had to drag them. At one point we just sat on the ground. We were exhausted. I said I didn't care, I was going to stay there on the road. I just couldn't go on...

While we were walking, people started saying that Belarusians were not being allowed out of the country. We were political [refugees], why would they not let us out? And so we reached the border. And there's a catch: you can't cross the border on foot. People get in the queue and then they are bussed to passport control. There were a lot of people at this border... They were queuing there for three or four days. Some were allowed through, some were not. Officially there were two queues: one for Ukrainians and one for non-Ukrainians... What did that mean for us? That we could not go through. Or at least that we had to wait until all the Ukrainians were let through. While we were walking, our bank cards got blocked [due to sanctions]. And all our money was in the bank account...

From four to eight in the morning the border guards didn't let anyone through. We were standing in a closed-off space, there was no toilet, nothing. Polish volunteers sometimes threw over water or food. Someone asked that at least small children should be allowed in so that they could warm up. A pregnant woman as well. But the border guards did not let anybody in. For us it was a shock.

Finally, they started letting us through. We passed quite quickly, in three minutes, although it usually took longer. They started insulting us, saying that we had voted for Lukashenko, that if they had a chance they would kill us. They asked if Lukashenko was a father⁵⁴ to us.

Once we'd crossed the border, things changed within seconds. I burst into tears because Polish volunteers greeted us as if we were not fleeing the war but as if we had been fighting for Poland on the frontline for four years... Here's a doctor,

54. Lukashenko is often ironically referred to as 'papa' or 'bat'ka'

here's food, what can we do for you... That's how we were welcomed in Poland! But [later] in Poland, renting a flat turned out to be a big problem. Once we had nowhere to sleep. I called one of the shelters and they asked me what passport I had. When I said Belarusian they told me, 'No, we do not help Belarusians.' Then we tried to rent a flat. Using Google Translate I posted in a Facebook group that we wanted to rent a flat, that we were Belarusians, that we were political refugees, that we had lived in Ukraine since June, that we'd had a residence permit, and that we were looking for a flat in Poland. Poles started replying that we were spies and that I was making things up. They asked me, 'How can you prove it?' I answered that I would provide all the documents: residence permit, stamps that we crossed the border etc. The woman replied that the documents could be forged and that we were fascists and Putinists. And that we were horrible. And so on. It felt as if you'd been raped by your stepfather and you asked everybody for help; some felt sorry for you, some just nodded along, and when the stepfather went screwing everybody around, people would say, 'Ah, you are a bad girl, you didn't fight back.' I wanted to go back to Belarus and throw myself under a tank and get run over by that tank... to get everyone off my back. And this feeling of guilt... Yes, I know that we were not able to oust Lukashenko. But we had done what we could, and I understand very well why there is no point in resuming protests in Belarus now – because we have very few people now. I don't understand how we've got to such discrimination. I feel bad... But then the problems I have faced are nothing compared to what happened to the children in Mariupol. There are people in Bucha, in Mariupol and in many other places who have had it really bad... You understand that your problems are nothing in comparison, but it does not make you feel better. I do not want to be a doormat. And I don't understand why this is happening... I really want to return to Belarus. It's been breaking me that I've always had to prove that I'm not a piece of shit. That I AM NOT A PIECE OF SHIT!

It is evident that discrimination became a major issue for Belarusian relocants after the war broke out. By an irony of fate, the war has not only pushed Belarusian activists into the background but has caused many people to see them as collectively responsible for the actions of the regime from which they fled.

Clearly, not everyone was affected by such negative attitudes. Tanya Svirepa, a journalist who first escaped from Minsk to Ukraine, for example, had a much easier escape route to Poland and has not experienced negative attitudes.

Poles are highly supportive of both Ukrainians and Belarusians. I saw posters about torture in Belarus at bus stops. Poles are well aware of the situation in Belarus. They have helped a huge number of Belarusian students and they issue humanitarian visas [to Belarusian activists]. Belarus was once part of the Polish state, maybe that is why they care, and I think they like us.

Tanya added that she has never experienced any aggression when she volunteered with the Ukrainian refugees in Poland, even though she spoke Russian.

According to Alena, a relocant in Poland, the first tide of negative attitudes eventually dissipated, largely because Belarusian activists worked hard to explain everywhere that Belarusians in Poland were against the war in Ukraine and that they had sacrificed much to resist their own country's dictator. They also collected cases of discrimination and tried to deliver the message at the political level.

Svetlana, a relocant in Georgia, explained that the same happened there when Belarussians arrived in 2020, especially after the war Ukraine started.

Georgians are very communicative people, and Belarusians would talk to them, explaining what happened in Belarus. We tried to deliver the message that Belarus is also under Russian occupation, just like South Ossetia and Abkhazia. We were explaining that the Russian language is not the language of the occupiers, but a communication tool. And the attitude has visibly changed, at least here in Batumi.

Chapter 6

PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSISTANCE:
SUPPLY AND DEMAND



Most people don't see the need for psychological support because they are busy with moving to a new country: they pour all their energy into settling down, organizing their lives, finding a job etc.

At the same time their health deteriorates, and within half a year, dormant mental health problems may come to the surface

The interviewees to whom we spoke included relocated psychologists, social workers, human rights defenders and experts who had assisted victims of violence while in Belarus and were continuing to support vulnerable compatriots in relocation. Volunteer psychologists started providing psychological first aid to the victims of political repression right outside the detention facilities in Belarus but also at the quickly organized volunteer platforms. **Sofia**, who relocated from Minsk to Ukraine, volunteered at the notorious Okrestina at the height of the tension.

I'm not a political person but it makes me sick when someone is beaten and hurt. [At Okrestina] we were about 20 volunteers. We helped relatives who'd brought parcels. Many psychologists got involved at the time but those who had worked in 2010-2012 were not really helpful. They'd been used to a long-haul approach, but during a crisis you need to offer a different type of support. What worked better was a more simplistic and non-professional approach. Food, drink, and a hug! I am not a very tactile person but during that time I hugged so many people!

Elena Griбанова, a psychologist from Mogilev, also started to offer mental health and psychosocial support in early August.

In the first six months after the August events, many victims of police violence came to see me. They were in a very serious state. Then came those who had been affected six months earlier but thought that it would pass, that they would cope by themselves. And they came in with delayed, severe symptoms. In relocation, there were also those who may have somehow overcome the trauma without any help while they were still in Belarus, but relocation amplified previous problems and caused disorientation when they didn't know where to run, what to do, where they were and what was going on. The protractedness of trauma is affected by all these factors, it's like a snowball effect.

Many activists are not aware of the sequential nature of their traumatization and that not only events in Belarus but also subsequent developments can have a negative influence. According to the psychologists we have interviewed, provision of psychological help doesn't match the need, and provision is decreasing, mostly due to lack of resources. In 2021 activists had a better chance of receiving socio-psychological assistance.

Now the situation is worse, even for relocants who have just arrived. There are far fewer opportunities to find temporary social housing, not to mention financial assistance and psychological help for those in particularly difficult situations. This is due both to the reduction in resources and to the fact that after the beginning of the war in Ukraine both donor money and private donations have been redirected to help Ukrainians. Often people don't ask for help themselves because they don't think they are entitled to it, as refugees from Ukraine need help more.

WHO TURNS TO PROFESSIONAL HELP

Predictably, the vast majority of those who seek help are women. Olga from Minsk, who helps relocated Belarusians, says that 'there will be one man for every five women.' Olga says some men's coping mechanism of choice is drowning their stress in alcohol. Some of the relocated men she knows would go on a binge, drinking for several weeks. Many respondents confirmed the role alcohol plays for some men.

Alesya, a journalist who relocated to Vilnius, stresses that getting men to accept therapy is very important because 'many men, due to their patriarchal socialization, do not know how to deal with their emotions.'

According to Maria, another journalist, 'Usually it's the activists and people with a higher income who turn to psychologists or it's those in whose circles it was ok to go into therapy also before, during peace times.' Alesya notes that 'among NGO people, cultural activists and journalists the demand for psychological help is huge.'

Artyom, a transgender man who relocated to Ukraine, said that he had received a lot of support from his psychologist, and that he was also seeing a psychologist in Minsk because it was a common practice in his social circles. Irina, also a journalist, observes that children rarely go into therapy, even though they often need help.

Crisis psychologist **Elena Gribanova**, relocated in Poland, says that she and her colleagues receive many requests from parents for free psychological support for their children, but they are unable to help them all.

The need for work with children is huge, especially with teenagers. Most requests we get are about addressing the effects of trauma or manifestations of social adjustment disorders in children and adolescents. Children need group therapy, interactions with children of different ages, preferably offline. However, there is a catastrophic shortage of child trauma specialists.

CHALLENGES IN SEEKING HELP

Our respondents felt that almost all relocated activists would benefit greatly from psychological support, and that many of them do not realize how much they would benefit. Many spoke of the importance of psychological awareness raising, of explaining the mechanisms and symptoms of trauma and its impact on someone's life. There is still a stigma attached to seeing a psychologist. Men in particular put seeing a psychologist on a par with being a 'psycho' and if you are not a 'psycho' everything will come right by itself.

Many spoke of the importance of awareness raising, explaining the mechanisms and manifestations of trauma and its effects.

As one of our interlocutors said: 'Many think that others had it worse, thinking along the lines of "no one has beaten me so I can handle it all myself."'

Another said: 'I think everyone's problems are different and so is the perception of these problems. Some people get beaten up during detention and then laugh it off: "well, yeah, it was just a baton in my face". But others get all worked up by a threat of violence, even if they have not actually been detained.'

According to the trade union leader **Sergei Dylevski**, all activists who relocated have mental health problems – but most do not seek professional help.

Belarusians will suffer till the end, they will suffer silently, and they will bottle everything up. It is very difficult to get someone to talk, especially when someone is in a state of shock, traumatized by the protests.

That's a view echoed by **Irina**, who relocated to Warsaw.

From what I see, people who have really experienced serious stress will rarely go to see a psychologist. Some have never had this experience before and don't understand how talking to a professional can help. Other survivors detach themselves from what has happened to them. For example, I have often heard the phrase 'I was lucky' from the survivors. This is usually said by people who have been through some very, very scary things. Some people hit the bottle. Some people take on a lot of volunteer work because they often feel guilty about being safe.

Marina Korzh is a social activist from Minsk who is now based in Georgia.

Those who have relocated rarely ask for psychological support. You need to actively offer it, almost impose it. We bring in psychotherapists from different countries. Not everyone is happy with the therapist provided and they often drop out. We don't know if ending therapy is linked to the competence of a particular therapist.

Alesya from TUT.by media noted that therapy does not work for everyone and it makes a difference if you can find an experienced psychotherapist.

An acquaintance complained that free sessions with a psychologist did not help at all, he did not see any effect or feel that he had been heard. But my experience is different, a psychologist working in the same program helped me a lot. She has experience of working with refugees from Donbass and specializes in PTSD.

Finding experienced, specialized, well-trained psychotherapeutic support is important because of the risk of reactivating traumatic experience, but there are also concerns which might be specific to human rights activists. That certainly matches Marina's experience:

And then there are people who don't want to talk to a psychologist because they think that they will be forced to revisit the traumatic events and talk about them over and over again. Some are held back by safety concerns and are afraid of revealing too many details about themselves.

Those who decided against psychological support said they did not have the necessary money or time. Some also said they did not have the internal resources to address their mental health. Some attended free sessions but could not afford paid sessions however much they needed them. Others said that they did not believe that 'talking could help', and in general they found it easier to go onto medication or deal with their stress in a different way. Several activists we interviewed believed that their mental health problems were caused by objective circumstances, and that recovery is only possible once circumstances have changed.

Evgeniya attended five free sessions with a psychologist provided by one of the foundations, but it did not help her. She believes that Belarusians do not go to a psychologist because they believe that only a change in the situation in Belarus can help them recover.

Everybody realizes that the only solution to their depression and trauma is not an appointment with a psychologist but the end of the dictatorship. I agree. My psychologist was more about 'you know this is not forever, you have to live your life, why become so worked up if the situation doesn't change?' It just doesn't work with me. I don't want to adjust to the circumstances, I want the circumstances to adjust to me. And I see that many Belarusians think that too, at least in my circles. No one wants to accept the fact that we're not going back home.

This is typical for survivors of political repression and torture. Justice is an important milestone in their healing process which might need as much attention in therapy as the trauma they experienced.

Boris, a journalist from Minsk, reflects that his condition was caused by objective circumstances which applied at a certain time, when he was under high risk of arrest. He then turned for help to a psychologist, but as soon as the destabilizing factor was eliminated he no longer needed psychological support.

You walk around with your finger on speed dial, ready to send an SOS message. You know you have to delete everything quickly, just in case, so you don't incriminate yourself or others. You can't predict where they can trace you. You keep locking the office and everything. A random buzz on the intercom makes you jumpy. It's unpleasant and it's stressful, you're jumpy all the time. You're driving in your car, and someone calls to say they're being searched...It really was stressful. So I went to a psychologist, but then I left the country and that was no longer necessary.'

Some respondents had negative experiences with psychologists and did not attempt to continue. **Maria** from Belsat said that she had gone to a psychologist back in Belarus when she was suffering from panic attacks at the height of the protests.

In the end, the psychologist was in tears. It was obvious that he had not experienced anything like what I was telling him about. He was more affected by what I had told him than I was. That was the end of my story with a psychologist.

Irina from Shchuchyn also did not feel comfortable with her specialist.

There was one psychologist, but it didn't work out. I want to forget her. I haven't worked with anyone since, and I don't want to.

Psychological consultation also needs to come at the right time: Free sessions with a psychologist are usually offered by organizations offering support on arrival, as part of the relocation package. Most people don't see the need for psychological support at that stage because they are busy with moving to a new country: they pour all their energy into settling down, organizing their lives, finding a job etc.

At the same time their health deteriorates, and within half a year, dormant mental health problems may come to the surface. It is only once the urgent problems are resolved and tension goes down that the psychological issues come to the surface.

Often, as **Palina Brodik**, a media host and coordinator at the Free Belarus Centre, has observed, delayed treatment comes at a price.

We've had people who went five days without sleep. They came for one consultation and then said, 'Fine, I seem to be getting better,' and did not want to continue. There've been cases when I was woken up in the morning because someone wanted to commit suicide.

According to the crisis psychologist Elena Gribanova, 'The risk of suicide is unfortunately quite high among the relocated. This is caused by a number of factors:

- high risk of PTSD and delayed clinical implications of trauma,
- delay in seeking psychological support when significant health problems have already surfaced,
- absence of accessible, structured psychological consultation and psychotherapy,
- insufficient number of qualified specialists with experience of working with trauma and its consequences, able to recognize suicide risks in time.'

We are aware of two cases of suicide among the relocated Belarusians, however, we were unable to document them directly. Within Belarus, more cases have been recorded among activists.⁵⁵ If the victims wait too long before they ask for help, they often need to be put on medication or sent to hospital.

55. Case 1: on 25 May 2021, 17-year-old Minsk Dmitry Stakhovsky from Minsk committed suicide after an interrogation. He was accused of participation in mass protests and 'promised' a criminal charge. In his last post on VKontakte Dmitry wrote: 'If they hadn't stepped up the pressure I think I wouldn't have dared to do such a terrible thing as suicide. But my strength was gone.' Dmitry Stakhovsky was an orphan and lived in a dormitory. Dmitry's friend, also underage and who was also intimidated, was able to leave Belarus using the emergency relocation tool. But Dmitry's coping mechanisms failed him, and he saw suicide as the only way out.

Case 2: In January 2022, Dmitry Dudoyt from Grodno, who had been under a house arrest, committed suicide by jumping off a bridge. Dmitry had been sentenced to two years of restricted freedom for insulting Lukashenko, Putin and Kadyrov, despite the fact that he was suffering from a mental disorder.

Case 3: Stepan Latypov tried to commit suicide in the courtroom.

Case 4: Igor Losik, who is still in custody, regularly reports suicidal thoughts in correspondence with his wife.

NEED FOR COORDINATION AND STREAMLINING

Sergei Dylevsky, a workers' protest leader and member of the Coordination Committee who has relocated to Poland, thinks that the main problem with the system of psychological support for relocants is that there is no system.

There is no single hotline, no number or telegram-channel to call. Services are random and offers differ from one organization to another: some organizations have a psychologist and some do not. There is no single organization focusing solely on psychological support. International foundations and organizations could help by making psychological support available and raising awareness by putting out the message that it is natural to seek help and there is nothing embarrassing about it. People very rarely admit that they need help. Structured and accessible psychological support is a must. We need to simplify the process of getting help as much as possible so that it does not turn into an ordeal, or you have to go round in circles in order to get support when you really need it.

Volha, a psychologist from Minsk who has relocated to Poland, also believes that psychological support for relocated people needs to be streamlined.

Psychological services are insufficient. To me, they seem chaotic and fragmented because psychologists work either as volunteers or privately but unofficially because there are difficulties with legalizing a practice abroad.

In her opinion – a view shared by other relocated psychologists – a coordinated approach is needed, perhaps by setting up a union or association of psychologists in relocation. Due to the lack of professional verification mechanisms, Volha considers that the likelihood of ending up with a cowboy psychologist is high.

Applications from potential clients could be received and work distributed according to qualifications and experience. Currently many psychologists and potential clients are groping in the dark: they find one another through word of mouth. There are a lot of chat rooms now, not always verified, where psychological support is offered and it is not always clear who's offering such support.

According to the crisis psychologist Elena Gribanova, the downside of the emergence of numerous small psychological support initiatives is the absence of security guarantees.

There are many chat rooms and ads offering psychological help. I read them sometimes: they ask you to fill out a form and give them some information about what happened to you. Security agents are sitting in many telegram channels these days. How can you fill out such a questionnaire, give your personal information if you don't know who you are sending it to?

Coordination would create more awareness about what psychological support is available. Information is usually posted in closed Belarussian chats, these ads are ad hoc and there is no aggregator collecting all the available opportunities. Another problem with psychological support is that it is short-term and usually offered as part of the initial relocation package. Usually, NGOs offer between one and five free sessions, or on occasion up to ten. This is not enough for most respondents. First results can be seen after 8-10 sessions, but some might need 15–20 sessions.

Tatyana, 40, is a journalist from Minsk.

Ten sessions quickly got me back on my feet. I didn't go through burnout and quickly got a grip on myself. Now I don't need a psychologist anymore.

Even with a few sessions an experienced psychologist is able to help relieve tension and teach self-regulating techniques. Some of our respondents who could afford to pay for psychological support found their long-term therapist through a free psychological support program. After a few free sessions they switched to paid therapy.

Our respondents named a few organizations, set up both by relocated Belarusians and by groups in the host countries, offering psychological support: BySol Foundation, ByHelp, Dapamoga, Razam, Belorussian Association of Journalists (BAJ), Chernihiv Human Rights House, Free Belarus Center, Vostok-SOS, Frontline, People in Need, and many others, including small initiatives set up by Belarusians, such as Phoenix and E-health. Apart from social support, some of the organizations offer or pay for individual therapy sessions, group therapy, and physical rehabilitation – e.g. in a health resort. Some organizations offer retreats for activists, and these enjoy enormous popularity, according to our respondent psychologists. ‘Some organizations have their lists filled in two hours after they’ve opened registration for a retreat,’ one of them noted.

The Conflict Analysis and Prevention Centre (CAPC), which co-authored this study, has also been providing free long-term individual psychological support or psychotherapy for Belarusian journalists and activists since 2021, initially offering 10 sessions with highly qualified psychologists or psychotherapists, or up to 20 if necessary. Our program also allows therapy to continue with the same psychologist as a client was seeing before we were involved. The German Association of Psychosocial Centres for Refugees and Victims of Torture (BafF) in cooperation with CAPC offers free training to Belarusian human rights defenders and activists on how to work with trauma survivors.

Several of our respondents noted that human rights activists, journalists, NGO workers have greater chances of getting help because they are eligible for special programs and because they are better informed. However, neighborhood activists, people who simply participated in protests without being members of NGOs or media, and those who were persecuted for their activity on social media, usually have much fewer options. They do not apply for them and do not know about their existence. This should be changed, through raising awareness and additional funding.

‘IT TAKES A BELARUSIAN TO HELP A BELARUSIAN’: MUTUAL HELP AND GROUP THERAPY

Professional psychological support might have been important to the relocated activists, but it was the support of fellow Belarusians that proved crucial. Almost all the activists we interviewed said that fellow Belarusians and their solidarity

networks helped them the most during the relocation process. Fellow activists helped with everything – from hiding from the police and treatment of injuries, to leaving the country, finding accommodation and work, handling paperwork, and providing cash assistance. Many spoke highly of BySol who took care of all the nitty gritty and stayed in regular touch with those leaving the country.

Most often, activists were supported by those closest to them; family, friends and colleagues, as was *Maria* from Belsat TV.

I was supported by a very small circle of people – friends whom I'd told that I was going to leave. It was touching that they came over the night before we left and handed us money saying, 'Take at least these 300 dollars.' And now they refuse to accept it back.

Often, employers too did all they could. Barys Haretski, vice-chair of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, said that the journalists enjoyed 'enormous in-house help and solidarity.' He and his family were helped with everything, even 'after the search, people came and helped us put things in order.'

As regards mental health, what really helped was communication with other Belarusian activists, colleagues and friends who had gone through similar experiences. Talking to friends was easier for many than talking to a psychologist. However, the flip side of this was that, according to one of our respondents, people eventually had had enough: 'Everyone is really tired of talking about it.'

Many relocated activists said that it was structured group therapy that helped them because it involved people who had been through the same experiences of violence, fear and flight, and who could relate and share how they had dealt with their problems.

However, as a Lithuania-based Belarusian expert says, one of the limitations of group therapy is mistrust towards other members of the Belarusian diaspora, which makes people less ready to share their experiences during therapy.

But journalist and activist *Tanya Svirepa*, who put together an in-person support group for Belarusians in Warsaw, said that their group had no major problems with trust.

Everybody gradually opened up. It was clear that they would not share everything at once in the first meeting. Details always come up in the process.

Perhaps a positive factor in this case was that trust was already there: the participants had been selected and verified by the organizers, and Tanya herself is viewed as trustworthy.

***Olga Pauk* from the Gomel region has been helping relocated activists in Lithuania.**

Not everyone can talk openly about their problems. As a rule, only those very close to one another are able to open up. People lack basic skills of talking on such issues, which also hinders communication: they are not very good at disentangling their emotions, they don't know how to recognize them, they don't know self-regulating and self-help techniques.

***Palina Brodik* from the Free Belarus Center believes that there is also a downside to the solidarity.**

Many Belarusians tend to gravitate towards their countrymen, and it leads to ghettos, it doesn't allow for an open mind and an outward view of the world around us.

However, taking into consideration the large demand for psychological support, group therapy may be the most feasible way to meet demand. According to the psychologists we have interviewed, formats both offline and online (if online, then with proper security) are needed. The former are especially effective and are very useful if held where Belarusian relocants live in significant numbers.

SELF-HELP AND ACTIVISM: ‘BETTER BE USEFUL AND KILLED IN THE WAR, THAN REMAIN IN PRISON’

Some respondents shared with us their self-help techniques, among them **Andrus** from the village of Rechitsa in the Gomel region.

I will honestly say that in Belarus, when you are expecting that someone might come for you any day, any hour or any minute, it's easier to go for a walk, to walk in the woods. That's what I used to do ... When I was getting scary news, I just went into the woods. I'm not at home, that's it. Death will come but it won't find me.

Igor, 50, from Minsk, was arrested, lost his successful business and had to relocate to Georgia without his wife and children.

No-one turns to psychologists, we are not accustomed to this. I just somehow help myself not to get depressed: I go to the sauna, I walk. A cool shower helps, or wine. I think others are managing in the same way.

Many feel better if they continue activist work related to Belarus. Most of the activists we interviewed are involved in one way or another in helping other Belarusians and Ukrainians. For example, Olga, owner of an accounting firm in Belarus, told us that she had received several interesting job offers while in relocation but she keeps turning them down. Instead, Olga has committed herself to projects helping people in Belarus and those who had to leave the country. Much of the work Olga is unpaid. ‘I have chosen my way,’ she sums up.

Maxim Dmitrakov, who calls himself an all-round human rights activist, is following the same path. Having himself relocated, he provides human rights and psychological support to others.

Natalia, 55, from the Gomel region, had to flee while her husband, children and grandchildren remain in Belarus.

I find solace in following the news about protests, about solidarity. I took a lot of videos in Oktyabrskij and Minsk so I re-watch them to relive the emotions of hope and unity, just like back then.

After the war in Ukraine broke out many Belarusian activists threw themselves into helping the Ukrainian refugees.

Tanya Svirepa, a journalist from Minsk who ended up in Poland, got involved in helping the Ukrainian refugees as soon as she arrived.

I immediately came to the Free Belarus Center and told them I had good organizational skills and offered myself. They told me they had many requests for psychological help but they didn't know how to organize it. They already had a list of volunteer psychologists available to help Ukrainians and they gave it to me. I went home and wrote to all my acquaintances, we organized ourselves in one day, my boyfriend created a [Telegram] bot. I spread information about our service to all the refugee groups.

The first 2–3 weeks requests came in every 15 minutes. I spent all my time on this bot. The psychologists at first didn't understand how to operate [using the bot], they didn't understand the instructions. I had to explain many times, to adjust the process.

We received some 700 requests and supported around 300 people. Among them were the people who'd suffered bombing attacks or military men who felt fear; later on people turned to us with family problems. At such times, relationships deteriorate, people clash. All my Belarusian acquaintances helped Ukrainians in one way or another. Some of them worked in camps, some at the border, distributing clothes, driving. The “Partisanka” organization turned into a huge clothing warehouse. The Center of Belarusian Solidarity helps Ukrainians, too. It was easier for us as we have already had the experience of crisis, and the Belarusians understand the Ukrainian language well.

Not all the Belarusian activists fled from Ukraine. Sofia, a child psychologist from Minsk, was in Odessa when the war broke out and later moved to Kharkiv. She joined a volunteer center in Odessa on the day it was founded. *The war broke out and everyone started to leave. On the 24th I called one of my acquaintances and told her, 'If anything gets organized, please, let me know.' And already on the 25th February a volunteer center was set up in Odessa dealing with various things and I joined it immediately. This center was salvation to me. Later I took charge of a unit. We had 4-6 wonderful girls, some from Mariupol, from Kherson. Their houses had been destroyed, their husbands were at the front, but they did not give up. I was working all day long, coming home at night and just collapsing into bed... On one hand it was psychologically supportive, on the other we were always at the center of events, all the negative information was coming there and being discussed."*

Sofia continues to volunteer for families of Belarusian detainees remotely. She says she has never even considered leaving Ukraine.

Here I am needed more. Here everything is closer to me, more understandable. If everyone leaves, who will stay? It's people with children and the elderly who should leave.

Asked why she fled Lukashenko but not the war in Ukraine, Sofia says without hesitation, 'It's better to be useful and killed in the war than to stay in prison.'

According to the aforementioned research by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, over 70% of the Belarusian relocants surveyed were volunteering for Ukrainians, 84% in Poland, 76% in Lithuania and 73% in Georgia.

over **70%**
of the Belarusian
relocants they
surveyed were
volunteering
for Ukrainians,
84% in Poland,
76% in Lithuania,
73% in Georgia

For many, activism became a very healthy way of helping others, giving life new meaning while addressing their own traumas. In some cases though, unaddressed trauma manifests itself in activism in a way that leads to further exhaustion.

Anastasia, a psychologist and activist who was relocated to Georgia, said that she observes several ways in which trauma affects activists: first, some get involved in volunteer activities as soon as they arrive, they take up many tasks and at the same time try to organize their lives: new home, new job, solving financial problems. Such people just cannot stop for a moment, they quickly overstrain themselves and burn out. This reaction is usually driven by survivor guilt. Someone volunteering at night after her job might say she shouldn't sleep at night because the political prisoners in Belarus are sleeping on cold floors.

Anastasia calls this 'activism until full exhaustion.'

There are also 'ritual activists' who come out on Sundays as they used to do in Belarus and go to the Georgian Parliament to protest, even if such an action in Georgia does not make much sense. You can immediately spot those who are badly traumatized: they might be completely covered in Belarusian national symbols walking the streets of Georgia. And there is another reaction: people get addicted to reading news on social media, they can't tear themselves away from the bad news from Belarus and they are always inside this nightmare.

Clearly, not everyone finds the strength to continue activism. Some say they do not have the time, health and energy to do so. Some have lost any hope of change and that makes them apathetic and frustrated. Some think, if you can't change anything, it is better just to leave it. Many cannot find funding for their projects. Some relocated activists do not want publicity and are inactive on social media because they are afraid for their relatives and do not feel safe in the new location.

Vasiliy, 37, from Minsk, is one of them.

When I moved my family out, I deleted all the posts in which I criticized the authorities. I don't have the resources to resume my social media presence and to write analytical posts. Besides, the Investigative Committee came to my relatives' place in Minsk to get information about me.

Difficulties in providing psychological support

Psychologists and social workers we interviewed identified several systemic problems which hamper effective provision of help to the victims:

1. **Insufficient financing for psychological support:** there is far less psychological support available than needed. Already in 2021 donors preferred supporting education, training or legal assistance rather than mental health. Even if psychological support is included in a project, it is often offered short-term as part of a relocation package upon arrival, at a time when activists have other priorities. After February 2022, provision shrank even further as priorities shifted towards helping refugees from Ukraine. Volunteer psychologists do not have enough resources to meet the demand for psychological support, and most relocated activists cannot afford to pay therapists, even at a reduced price.
2. **Security and trust:** before therapy starts, relocated activists need to be sure they can trust the therapist and the organization, and that personal data and information revealed in therapy will be kept secure and confidential. Organizations must carefully select trusted professionals, ensure personal data is protected and maintain good communication with the survivors of repression.
3. **Lack of mechanisms to verify professional qualifications of volunteer psychologists** and to monitor compliance with professional standards. According to psychologists, there are Telegram channels where support is not always offered with due verification of therapists' qualifications.
4. **Absence of a single 'point of entry'** – a platform to provide crisis- and trauma-informed counselling which can be accessed with the assurance that the help offered is professional and safe and where clients can look for a verified professional for therapy.
5. **Professional staff shortages:** there are not enough qualified professionals. Many relocated Belarusian therapists lack experience and skills in trauma-informed counselling, in dealing with crisis and the aftereffects of trauma. There is what is described as a "catastrophic" shortage of psychologists trained to work with child trauma and with teenagers.
6. **Language barrier:** not knowing the local language often makes communication with local specialists in the host countries impossible. Problems with the recognition of Belarusian diplomas in the EU make it difficult for qualified Belarusian psychologists to find employment in health and psychosocial services.
7. **Psychologists sometimes have insufficient understanding of trauma in the socio-political context:** this often came up in our interviews. Some activists told us they 'did not have the energy to explain the whole context to a specialist.' According to a relocated psychologist, it often happens that 'local psychologists are not familiar with the Belarusian context and with the activists' trauma, do not understand their social vulnerability or realize how traumatizing it can be. Sometimes we had to do briefings for psychologists.'
8. **Insufficient mental health awareness** among relocants coupled with persistent stigmatization of psychological support.
9. **Instability of the client-therapist relationship:** the short-term nature of the free support offered by some agencies means that activists who require longer therapy need to find a new offer. Most programs work with their own specialists, so that a new offer means a new unknown therapist.
10. **Quick burnout of psychologists and other professionals** who are themselves relocated activists who have experienced the trauma of repression.
11. **Insufficient or absent professional supervision** for volunteer psychologists; limited opportunities to train in various aspects of trauma-informed counselling; no professional space for communication and sharing experience.

Relocants' Needs and Future Plans

We asked what kind of support Belarusian civil activists felt they needed in relocation

1 BASIC REQUIREMENTS

IN THE FIRST PLACE, ALMOST ALL OUR INTERVIEWEES SAID THEY NEEDED INITIAL "EMERGENCY" HELP UPON ARRIVAL

- help in finding temporary housing, or the provision of temporary free housing
- monetary support for relocants who find themselves in a difficult financial situation
- advice on legalization procedures, day care and schools for children, finding long-term housing, paying utility bills, and otherwise organizing aspects of daily life that are difficult to manage without language skills.
- information about organizations which provide help and support

Our respondents named employment and mental health support as the second and third most important necessities. Some considered that these only needed to be addressed after basic living provisions have been secured. Often assistance with employment means assistance in starting their own business. Many respondents said they did not want a job but had interesting ideas for their own projects — a media outlet, business, or social enterprise that was important to them. Relocants saw the need for the following help in this area:

2 ASSISTANCE WITH EMPLOYMENT

RELOCANTS SAW THE NEED FOR THE FOLLOWING HELP IN THIS AREA:

- assistance with finding a job, obtaining formal employment or organizing job fairs,
- help with understanding the local taxation system, tax optimization, health insurance system and business legislation,
- professional training programs and courses to master new skills, such as, for example, video editing in Adobe After Effects, cosmetology, photography, or training in European journalism standards; training programs which included opportunities to learn in a professional environment would be especially valuable,
- help with verification of higher school diplomas,
- small-scale financial assistance for start-ups (a microcredit or a grant)

3 MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

RESPONDENTS SAW THE FOLLOWING NEEDS:

- access to affordable and long-term psychotherapy to effectively work through trauma,
- group therapy for those who have difficulties with adaptation,
- comprehensive rehabilitation in severe cases, especially for former political prisoners and people with physical injuries,
- immediate psychological first aid upon arrival: many relocants noted that, especially in severe cases of persecution, among those who support a newly arrived relocant should be someone with a background in psychology who can talk and support immediately, and 'surround them with care,'
- mental health support also a few months after arrival, when basic survival needs have been met and activists can focus on their well-being.

4

OTHER NEEDS

AMONG THEIR OTHER NEEDS, THE RELOCANTS CITED:

- high-quality intensive local language courses,
- free meeting spaces for Belarusians,
- staffing and financial support for organizations helping Belarusians, so they can respond to requests more effectively.
- most importantly, the opportunity to continue to support people inside Belarus, in particular to organize individual and group rehabilitation for them. Issue of assisting Belarusian activists inside Belarus is beyond the scope of the present research, but its importance was emphasized by many respondents

Besides inquiring about their past experiences, we asked activists about their plans for the future. With very few exceptions, everyone wanted to return to Belarus and build a democratic European state there. However, especially after the outbreak of war in Ukraine, it had become clear that they may not be able to return soon. Many cannot plan anything long-term because they have no permanent job and they do not know what is going to happen to them. But almost all have plans for creative, professional or civic projects.

Ilona from Soligorsk:

Now I am studying to become a cosmeticist, so I associate the future with an independent business. I plan to open my own salon after training.

Irina from Minsk:

Now I have a small project – I make T-shirts with portraits of political prisoners. I would like to have the T-shirts auctioned or promoted in some way, so that the political prisoners' families would get the money from the sales through the BySol Foundation because I think that those who are behind bars and their families are the worst affected.

Bella, 32, a journalist relocated to Vilnius:

I have plans to organize my own media. I have a lot of media experience in different roles, I already have a project ready, and I am looking for grant support and advertisers for it. I am currently working at a startup and on a radio station in Lithuania. I am preparing for a new period in my life. For this I need to recover myself and move my mother to a safe place. I want to meet a cool guy, get married and have a baby. And I want to self-realize as a host on my own media program.

Civic activists are active, independent and creative people. With a little support, they turn their trauma into a resource and grow from it. It is very important for them to engage in meaningful activity, to provide for their children and, of course, to continue living a fulfilling and (as much as possible) happy life, despite all the tragedies and difficulties that have befallen them.

Conclusion

This report is based on the testimonies of 89 Belarusian activists, experts, journalists and helpers who were forced to flee from the repression of the Lukashenko regime to Poland, Lithuania, Georgia, and (before the war) to Ukraine. Its purpose is to examine the socio-psychological aspects of what happened to the relocants, and, largely using the activists' own words, analyze the psychological trauma they faced during and after the events of August 2020, as well as the complex traumatic experiences many have endured in relocation.

Since 2020, Belarusians who have spoken out against election fraud and police brutality have been subjected to unprecedented abuse, persecution, and other forms of pressure. As a result, tens of thousands – an active, intellectual, creative, educated and conscientious part of society – have been displaced. Most of them have experienced illegal arrest, violence and other forms of legal and psychological pressure, including the threat of losing their children.

Since their departure, trauma and stress have continued in relocation. Crossing the border was often difficult and dangerous, and the need to adapt to a new country, come to terms with separation from family and loss of home and familiar social environment, as well as with financial difficulties, often caused extreme stress, vulnerability, and sometimes disadaptation. With the outbreak of war in Ukraine, new social factors came into play – a sense of responsibility for the co-aggression of the Lukashenko regime against Ukraine, horror at the brutal war, compassion for Ukrainians, but also a sense of injustice and resentment in the face of discrimination against them, which became part of their reality once the war began. Some activists who had originally relocated to Ukraine decided to flee again, even while others stayed to help Ukrainians.

Acute and sequential traumatization and psychological distress often hindered the activists' ability to adapt, to find the motivation to obtain a residence permit, get a job or solve everyday problems. Some became apathetic and frustrated with the very idea of activism. Children lived through these traumatic experiences along with adults and faced their own challenges in forming relationships with peers, coping in different ways, usually without professional support.

As a response, NGOs and initiatives helping Belarusians launched mental health projects and programs for activists. All our respondents in one way or another encountered such programs with various degrees of involvement and success. However, most said their traumas are still very acute and have yet to be processed: they suffer from high levels of anxiety, fear, flashbacks, they live in perpetual stress or feel depressed. Some say they are still very much stuck in their trauma and cannot get out of it. Several reported having been diagnosed with PTSD, some take anti-depressants, others need professional help but cannot afford it. After the start of the war in Ukraine and the refugee crisis, funds for Belarusian civil society have significantly decreased.

But despite their difficulties, the activists on the whole have maintained their morale and faith in the future. Almost all have found their footing, become employed in full or part-time jobs, are studying or getting new qualifications and learning the local languages. Moreover, they continue their activism by participating in volunteer and professional civic initiatives. Many provide help for Belarusians and Ukrainians. Some, especially journalists and NGO staff, have even grown professionally and have been able to develop their projects more actively after emigrating to safer and freer countries. Thus, they are turning their traumas into post-traumatic growth.

Although the focus of this research is on the individual, the testimonies we have collected vividly show how deeply repression has affected activists' families and society as a whole. This report shows that mental health care is a necessity for Belarussian civil society relocants and argues that it is a fundamental right; it is a precondition for their successful integration into their host countries, for their sustainable activism and post-traumatic growth. Support for psychological recovery, for new projects and social entrepreneurship will help Belarusian relocants get back on their feet with confidence, fulfilling their potential, gaining new experiences and skills, and preparing for future opportunities in their home country.

This report shows that mental health care is a necessity for Belarussian civil society relocants and argues that **it is a fundamental right; it is a precondition for their successful integration into their host countries, for their sustainable activism and post-traumatic growth**



**German Association of Psychosocial Centres
for Refugees and Victims of Torture – BAFF e.V**

Paulsenstraße 55–56, 12163 Berlin, Germany
Tel.: +49(0) 30-310 124 63
E-Mail: info@baff-zentren.org
www.baff-zentren.org



**Project Partner
Conflict Analysis
and Prevention Centre
(CAPC)**