



Release into Exile: The Expulsion of Imprisoned Journalists from Belarus



Illustration generated with AI



**Funded by
the European Union**

This publication was funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the Belarusian Association of Journalists and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

Summary

1. Introduction	1
2. From prison to exile: how journalists and bloggers were expelled	3
3. Expulsion of journalists as an international crime: legal qualification and prospects for investigation	6
Deportation and persecution of Belarusian journalists and the International Criminal Court	10
4. Violations of domestic law in the expulsion of journalists: absence of legal grounds and non-compliance with procedure	14
Legal grounds for the release of detainees	14
Legal grounds for removal from Belarus	17
5. Human rights implications of the expulsion of journalists: legal qualification	21
6. Consequences of expulsion: challenges faced by journalists in exile.....	26
7. Recommendations.....	31

Introduction

Securing the release of journalists imprisoned for their professional activities is a matter of fundamental importance. However, recent practice has shown that this process does not always serve the interests of the detainees themselves—particularly when it is conditioned on their **forced expulsion** from Belarus.

This report scrutinizes the practice of forcibly expelling journalists and bloggers following their release from detention in Belarus, *assesses the legality* of these actions under national and international law, and *exposes the challenges* they are forced to confront in exile.

The report is structured in *five parts*.

The **first part** explains how the expulsion of imprisoned journalists and bloggers has been carried out in practice, establishing the *factual record* for the legal analysis that follows.

The **second part** analyzes the actions of the Belarusian authorities under *international criminal law*. It argues that the expulsion of journalists and bloggers *amounts to crimes against humanity, namely deportation and persecution*, within the meaning of Article 7 of the Rome Statute. It also considers the prospects for action by the International Criminal Court, particularly in light of its ongoing investigation into the Lithuania/Belarus situation.

The **third part** analyzes *national legislation* regulating the early release of convicted persons before they have fully served their sentences, as well as the expulsion of individuals from the territory of the Republic of Belarus. It questions whether any of these legal provisions can legitimately be applied to the expulsion of imprisoned journalists and bloggers and, if so, whether they have been properly followed in practice.

The **fourth part** examines the expulsion of imprisoned journalists and bloggers through the lens of *international human rights standards*. It identifies violations of the following rights: freedom of movement (Article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights); the right to privacy, family life, home and correspondence (Article 17); freedom of expression (Article 19); the right not to be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Article 7); the right to non-discrimination and equal protection of the law (Articles

2 and 26); the right to protection of the family, including the right to marry and to found a family (Article 23); the child's right to be registered immediately after birth and to acquire a nationality (Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child); and the right to social security, including social insurance (Article 9 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights).

The **fifth part** focuses on the *challenges faced by journalists and bloggers in exile*: the need to secure legal residence status, separation from their families, economic vulnerability, barriers to continuing their professional work in journalism, the need for medical and psychological support, difficulties with language integration, restrictions on property rights in Belarus, and limited access to administrative procedures. These issues were identified through the work of the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), including a survey conducted as part of a broader needs assessment among journalists and media professionals released from detention.

The report concludes with **recommendations** addressed to foreign states, the Republic of Belarus, as well as media actors and civil society organizations.

From prison to exile: how journalists and bloggers were expelled

In **2025**, negotiations between the Belarusian authorities and representatives of the United States led to the release and expulsion of 192 individuals (the vast majority of whom held the status of political prisoners)¹. This practice also affected media representatives: **14 journalists were released**—Andrei Kuznechyk, Ihar Karnei, Iryna Slaunikava, Mikalai Dziadok, Pavel Mazheika, Aliaksandr Mantsevich, Larysa Shchyrakova, Yauhen Merkis, Viachaslau Lazarau, Alena Tsimashchuk, Pavel Padabed, Ihar Losik, Maryna Zolatava, and Aliaksandr Fiaduta—as well as **bloggers** Dzmitry Kazlou and Pavel Vinahradau².

In **2026**, following a visit to Minsk by U.S. Special Envoy John Cole on 19 March, the authorities announced the release of an additional 250 prisoners, 15 of whom were transferred to Lithuania. Among them were **journalist** Katsiaryna Bakhvalava (Andreyeva) and **blogger** Eduard Palchys³.

The release and expulsion operations were carried out with the direct involvement of officers of the State Security Committee (KGB) and in a climate of secrecy, including for the detainees themselves. Journalists were abruptly taken from places of detention, transported to remote forested areas, where they were placed on buses and driven to the border⁴. Although these expulsions took place at different times (to date, in five stages), *they followed a consistent and coordinated pattern*:

- **None** of the imprisoned journalists **were informed in advance** of their impending release and expulsion. Moreover, most had never signed any petition for pardon. At no point were journalists asked to provide either formal or informal consent to their expulsion from the country, nor did they give such consent. In several cases, journalists explicitly stated during the process that they did not wish to leave Belarus; these objections were disregarded.

¹ The releases and expulsions took place on **12 February (Lithuania), 21 June (Lithuania), 11 September (Lithuania), and 13 December (Lithuania and Ukraine)**. See UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent Experts on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus, UN Doc A/HRC/61/57 (6 February 2026), para 55.

² Belarusian Association of Journalists, Mass Media in Belarus 2025 (2 April 2026) <https://baj.media/en/aglyady-manitoringi/mass-media-in-belarus-2025/>

³ Belarusian Association of Journalists, Major release: 250 political prisoners freed in Belarus, including key journalists (20 March 2026) <https://baj.media/en/250-political-prisoners-freed/>

⁴ Some detainees were transferred to the KGB pre-trial detention centre, known as “the Amerikanka”, in Minsk, where they were held overnight.

- The release and expulsion were carried out in conditions marked by **uncertainty and psychological pressure**. Throughout the process, journalists were given no explanation as to what was happening to them. KGB officers did not identify themselves or present any documentation when removing them from prison. When journalists attempted to seek clarification, the officers refused to respond. In some cases, journalists were transported in handcuffs and with bags placed over their heads, and were subjected to threats and verbal abuse.

“They didn’t explain anything to us—they just drove us somewhere,” said a former political prisoner. “**We had handcuffs on, bags over our heads, and guards sitting next to us.** In those conditions, it was impossible to talk to the other political prisoners—**we had no idea what was happening.**”

Ihar Karnei, released and expelled to Lithuania on 21 June 2025

Source: <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/102174.html>

“The head of the colony came out and said they would explain everything to us. Then a stocky man in plain clothes appeared—wearing a medical mask, a cap, with a gun at his side—and said: ‘**Take a step to the left or right, and we’ll shoot.**’ As it turned out, there were seven of us and seven of them. And no one said anything.”

Pavel Padabed, released and expelled to Lithuania on 11 September 2025

Source: <https://nashaniva.com/ru/378816>

- None of the journalists received any documents confirming their current legal status. They have no understanding of the legal basis on which they were released and expelled from their own country, despite being citizens of the Republic of Belarus. The case of Mikalai Statkevich should be recalled: after his explicit and active resistance to expulsion on 11 September 2025, he was sent back to serve his sentence, which should not have happened had he been officially pardoned⁵.

⁵ For more details on the case of Mikalai Statkevich, see page 16 of this report.

“One more thing I find very interesting: **no one explained my status to me** in a single sentence, or whether I am allowed to return to Belarus.”

Pavel Mazheika, released and expelled to Lithuania on 11 September 2025

Source: <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/108458.html>

All the expelled journalists held the status of **political prisoners**, reflecting a heightened level of vulnerability resulting from years of arbitrary detention, during which they were subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment. Their forced expulsion thus constituted a *further punishment for their professional activities*, extending the pattern of persecution beyond detention itself. Many journalists have explicitly stated that they *had not intended to leave Belarus* following their release and *expressed a clear desire to return to their home country*.

“However difficult life there may be, I would like to remain in Belarus. But right now, that is impossible.”

Yauhen Merkis, released and transferred to Lithuania on 11 September 2025

Source: <https://nashaniva.com/ru/377195>

Moreover, some of the journalists were expelled from Belarus without passports. In addition, journalist Viachaslau Lazarau and bloggers Eduard Palchys and Dzmitry Kazlou later discovered that the Belarusian authorities had declared their passports invalid⁶.

⁶ Belarusian Association of Journalists, Passports of journalist Viachaslau Lazarau, bloggers Dzmitry Kazlou and Eduard Palchys annulled in Belarus (1 April 2026)
<https://baj.media/ru/pasport-zhurnalista-annulirovali-v-belarusi/>

Expulsion of journalists as an international crime: legal qualification and prospects for investigation

The release and forced expulsion of journalists and bloggers by the Belarusian authorities amount to **crimes against humanity** in the form of (A) **deportation** and (B) **persecution** within the meaning of Article 7 of the Rome Statute. The exceptional gravity of this qualification must be underscored—these are among “*the most serious crimes of concern to the international community as a whole,*” crimes that “*deeply shock the conscience of humanity*” (Preamble to the Rome Statute). This gravity arises in large part from the context in which they were committed: rather than isolated or sporadic acts, they form part of a coordinated State policy involving a widespread and systematic attack against the civilian population. Moreover, prior to their expulsion, the individuals concerned had been arbitrarily deprived of liberty in connection with the peaceful exercise of their rights—conduct that itself **amounts to the crime against humanity of imprisonment** or other severe deprivation of physical liberty (Article 7(1)(e)).

❗ The contextual element is a necessary condition for the legal qualification of acts as crimes against humanity. Article 7 defines it as a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population—that is, a course of conduct involving the multiple commission of acts referred to in Article 7 against any civilian population, pursuant to or in furtherance of a State policy. For a more detailed account of how such an attack has been carried out in Belarus, see *the reports of the United Nations Independent Expert Group on the human rights situation in Belarus*⁷.

(A) Deportation as a crime against humanity

Article 7(1)(d) of the Rome Statute sets out three cumulative elements for the crime of deportation:

- (i) the forcible character of the displacement;
- (ii) the lawful presence of the deportee; and

⁷ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent Experts on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus, UN Doc **A/HRC/58/68** (7 February 2025), paras 69–74; UN Human Rights Council, Closing gaps in accountability for human rights violations and related crimes in Belarus, UN Doc **A/HRC/60/CRP.1** (4 September 2025), paras 15–19.

(iii) the absence of a ground permitted under international law.

The cases of forced expulsion of journalists and bloggers satisfy all of the above criteria, as evidenced by the following circumstances.

● *(i) Forcible character of the displacement*

The forcible character of the displacement implies that the person was deprived of a genuine choice whether to remain in the country or leave it⁸. In accordance with Article 7 of the Rome Statute, such displacement may take the form of both **physical expulsion** and other coercive acts.

In the present cases, the journalists and bloggers, while under the physical control of State authorities, were forcibly removed from Belarus directly from places of detention. **None** of the journalists and bloggers concerned **had given their consent to the expulsion**. These facts therefore demonstrate the forcible character of the displacement through physical expulsion from Belarus to another State.

● *(ii) Lawful presence of the deportee*

In all the cases described, the individuals concerned are **citizens of the Republic of Belarus**. Accordingly, their lawful presence in the country from which they were deported cannot be called into question.

● *(iii) Absence of a ground permitted under international law*

In international law, the deportation of a State's own nationals is generally prohibited⁹. Moreover, agreements concluded between military commanders, political leaders, or other representatives of the parties to a conflict cannot render lawful a transfer that would otherwise be unlawful¹⁰. A similar logic applies outside the context of armed conflict: deportation does not become lawful merely because it is carried out on the basis of political agreements framed in humanitarian terms.

⁸ Prosecutor v Bosco Ntaganda (Judgment) ICC-01/04-02/06-2359 (Trial Chamber VI, 8 July 2019), para 1056; Prosecutor v Alfred Yekatom and Patrice-Edouard Ngaissona (Judgment) ICC-01/14-01/18-2784-Red, Trial Chamber V, 24 July 2025, para 397.

⁹ United Nations General Assembly, articles 12(3) and 13 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 19 December 1966, 999 United Nations Treaty Series 17955 ("ICCPR"); Decision Pursuant to Article 15 of the Rome Statute on the Authorisation of an Investigation into the Situation in the People's Republic of Bangladesh/Republic of the Union of Myanmar, ICC-01/19-27, 14 November 2019, PTC III, para 98.

¹⁰ Prosecutor v Radovan Karadžić (Trial Judgment), Case No IT-95-5/18-T (ICTY Trial Chamber, 24 March 2016), para 488, para 490.

Accordingly, the expulsion of Belarusian nationals detained on political grounds, carried out pursuant to an arrangement between the Governments of Belarus and the United States of America, **cannot be regarded as a lawful ground for deportation under international law**. Even if the release of journalists pursued a humanitarian objective, their expulsion cannot be justified on humanitarian grounds and remains impermissible under international law.

❗ Thus, the cases of physical expulsion of imprisoned journalists and bloggers satisfy all legal criteria for deportation as a crime against humanity within the meaning of Article 7(1)(d) of the Rome Statute.

(B) Persecution as a Crime Against Humanity

Article 7(1)(h) of the Rome Statute defines persecution as a crime against humanity by reference to four cumulative elements:

- (i) the severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law;
- (ii) against any identifiable group or collectivity;
- (iii) on political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender or other grounds that are universally recognized as impermissible under international law; and
- (iv) in connection with any act referred to in Article 7(1) of the Statute or any crime within the jurisdiction of the Court.

The cases of forced expulsion of journalists and bloggers satisfy all of the above elements, as demonstrated by the following circumstances.

● *(i) Severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law*

Not every human rights violation amounts to persecution; rather, it must constitute a *severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law*. As noted by the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Situation in Myanmar/Bangladesh, “deportation constitutes a severe deprivation of human rights, including the right of individuals to live in their communities and homes, and may amount to persecution.”¹¹

¹¹ Request for Authorisation of an Investigation pursuant to Article 15 (Bangladesh/Myanmar), ICC-01/19-7, 4 July 2019, Office of the Prosecutor, para 171.

Accordingly, the deportation of journalists and bloggers should be qualified as a severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law.

- *(ii) Against any identifiable group or collectivity*

The term “identifiable” implies that the group must be recognizable to the perpetrator, either by objective characteristics or as a group or collectivity not being the same as the group or collectivity to which the perpetrator belongs¹². Notably, the members of such a group need not share common views or consider themselves part of a single, unified group¹³.

The journalists and bloggers expelled from Belarus may be considered as a distinct group on the basis of their professional activity. However, in light of the broader context of persecution in Belarus, it is more appropriate to view them as part of a wider targeted group. For instance, the United Nations Independent Expert Group has defined such a group as **“Belarusians perceived as being critical of, or opposed to, the Government.”**¹⁴ Journalists—alongside human rights defenders, lawyers, and trade unionists—are perceived by the Belarusian authorities as forming part of this group, as evidenced, inter alia, by the systematic practice of violations of their rights and freedoms on political grounds.

- *(iii) On political grounds*

“Political” grounds are not limited to formal affiliation with a political party or a particular ideology. They also encompass differences in opinion on public matters, as well as an individual’s actual or perceived political views¹⁵.

Accordingly, the persecution of journalists and bloggers on the basis that they are perceived by the perpetrators as being critical of, or opposed to, the Government may be regarded as persecution on political grounds.

- *(iv) In connection with any act referred to in Article 7(1) of the Statute, or any crime within the jurisdiction of the Court*

¹² Otto Triffterer and Kai Ambos (eds), *The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court: A Commentary*, 3rd edn (C. H. Beck/Hart/Nomos, München/Oxford/Baden-Baden, 2016), p 221.

¹³ *The Prosecutor v. Al Hassan Ag Abdoul Aziz Ag Mohamed Ag Mahmoud*, ICC-01/12-01/18-2594-Red (Trial Chamber I, 26 June 2024), para 1206.

¹⁴ UN Doc A/HRC/58/68, para 74.

¹⁵ *Decision Pursuant to Article 15 of the Rome Statute on the Authorization of an Investigation into the Situation in the Republic of Burundi* ICC-01/17-X (Pre-Trial Chamber III, 25 October 2017), para 133.

The required nexus with an act referred to in Article 7(1) of the Statute may be established in different ways. One such way is where the underlying act itself is committed on discriminatory grounds: in such cases, it simultaneously constitutes persecution, that is, it is treated as an **aggravated form of the relevant act**¹⁶.

Given that it has already been established that the expulsion of journalists and bloggers may be qualified as deportation, persecution in this case may be regarded as an aggravated form of such deportation¹⁷.

❗ Accordingly, in light of the fact that the expulsion of journalists and bloggers was carried out on discriminatory grounds and for political reasons, it may also be qualified as the crime against humanity of persecution.

Deportation and persecution of Belarusian journalists and the International Criminal Court

The qualification of the expulsion of journalists and bloggers carried out by the Belarusian authorities as international crimes raises the question of how those responsible may be held accountable and how victims may obtain meaningful reparations. In the context of the prevailing climate of impunity within Belarus, international criminal justice mechanisms—in particular the International Criminal Court—are of particular relevance.

Following Lithuania's referral of the situation in Belarus to the ICC on 30 September 2024¹⁸, alleging crimes against humanity, the Office of the Prosecutor initiated a preliminary examination to determine whether the Court has jurisdiction and whether the situation is admissible. One of the key challenges concerned territorial jurisdiction, as Belarus is not a State Party to the Rome Statute, requiring the Prosecutor to assess whether the alleged crimes occurred at least in part on the territory of Lithuania.

On 12 March 2026, the Prosecutor formally announced the opening of an investigation, having found a reasonable basis to establish the Court's jurisdiction

¹⁶ K. Ambos and S. Wirth, "The Current Law of Crimes Against Humanity: An Analysis of UNTAET Regulation 15/2000" (2002) 13 Criminal Law Forum p 73 <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1020123920538> p 72

¹⁷ Bangladesh/Myanmar Investigation Decision, para 109.

¹⁸ Lithuania, "Referral of the Situation in Belarus under Article 14 of the Rome Statute" (ICC, 30 September 2024) <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2024-09/2024-09-30-state-party-referral-lithuania.pdf>

over crimes against humanity, namely deportation and persecution through deportation¹⁹. These crimes are of an extraterritorial nature²⁰, which allows for the conclusion that they occur, at least in part, on Lithuanian territory and may therefore fall within the Prosecutor's investigative mandate.

In other words, the subject-matter scope of the investigation includes the crimes described above that were committed against journalists and bloggers.

! Accordingly, cases of the forced expulsion of journalists and bloggers fall within the scope of the Prosecutor's investigation in the Belarus/Lithuania situation.

Moreover, although the territorial scope of the Prosecutor's investigation is currently limited to Lithuania, **the expulsion of journalists to Ukraine also gives rise to the prospect of further investigation.**

Although, as a general matter, in its prior practice the Court has defined the territorial scope of a situation by reference to the territory of a single State, this does not preclude an investigation into a situation encompassing crimes committed across multiple States.

While the Court's practice generally addresses situations within the territory of a single State, this does not preclude situations covering crimes committed in multiple States. In its decision on the situation in Georgia, the Court explicitly held that events falling outside the initially defined parameters may nonetheless be included in an investigation, provided that they are sufficiently closely linked to the situation under consideration and fall within the Court's jurisdiction²¹.

In other words, where such a nexus exists, the temporal and territorial parameters of an investigation may be extended.

This logic has already been applied in practice. For example, in the situation in Afghanistan, the Prosecutor sought to include certain incidents occurring outside

¹⁹ International Criminal Court, Office of the Prosecutor, "Statement: ICC Office of the Prosecutor concludes preliminary examinations into Venezuela II and Lithuania/Belarus" (12 March 2026) <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/icc-office-prosecutor-concludes-preliminary-examinations-venezuela-ii-and-lithuania-belarus>

²⁰ For further discussion of the extraterritorial nature of crimes and the territorial jurisdiction of the Court, see the Situation in Bangladesh/Myanmar: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/bangladesh-myanmar>

²¹ Decision on the Prosecutor's Request for Authorization of an Investigation in the Situation in Georgia ICC-01/15 (Pre-Trial Chamber I, 27 January 2016), para 64.

the country—in Poland, Romania, and Lithuania²². These concerned detainees who had been transferred to secret CIA detention facilities, where they were subjected to ill-treatment. The Prosecutor argued that these acts were linked to the armed conflict in Afghanistan and therefore formed part of the same situation. Although the Court initially approached this interpretation with caution, it was subsequently upheld on appeal, and the scope of the investigation was indeed expanded²³.

Importantly, the requirement of a “nexus” applies not only to war crimes, but also to crimes against humanity. In this context, the link is not established through the existence of an armed conflict, but through the contextual element discussed above—namely, a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population. This was the approach adopted by the Court in the situation in Myanmar/Bangladesh, where it authorised the investigation of crimes committed at least in part on the territory of Bangladesh. It also allowed the Prosecutor to extend the investigation to alleged crimes committed at least in part on the territory of other States, provided that they are sufficiently linked to the situation²⁴.

Building on this approach, the situation in Belarus/Lithuania provides grounds for extending the investigation, at a minimum, to crimes against humanity partially committed on the territory of Ukraine, which has been a State Party to the Rome Statute since 1 January 2025²⁵.

First, Lithuania itself indicated in its referral that “it is also reasonable to believe that part of the elements of these crimes was committed, and continues to be committed, on the territory of other States Parties.”

Second, the crimes of deportation and persecution committed in part on the territory of Ukraine are sufficiently linked to the situation described in Lithuania’s referral, as they form part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against the civilian population in Belarus. It is precisely this nexus that brings such incidents within the scope of a single investigation.

²² Request for Authorisation of an Investigation pursuant to Article 15 of the Rome Statute in the Situation in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan ICC-02/17-7-Conf-Exp (Office of the Prosecutor, 20 November 2017), para 49.

²³ Judgment on the Appeal against the Decision on the Authorisation of an Investigation into the Situation in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan ICC-02/17 OA4 (Appeals Chamber, 5 March 2020).

²⁴ Bangladesh/Myanmar Investigation Decision, para 124.

²⁵ ICC, States Parties—Eastern European States: Ukraine
<https://aspicc-cpi.int/states-parties/eastern-european-states/ukraine>

Accordingly, should the Prosecutor extend the territorial scope of the investigation, this would ensure that the interests of victims of deportation are fully taken into account, and would enable a more comprehensive investigation of the State policy underlying these crimes, as well as the effective identification and prosecution of those responsible.

Violations of domestic law in the expulsion of journalists: absence of legal grounds and non-compliance with procedure

In addition to the qualification of the expulsion of imprisoned journalists and bloggers as an international crime, it is also necessary **to assess the actions of the Belarusian authorities under Belarusian domestic law**. In this context, the expulsion should be understood as comprising two distinct processes: the release of detainees from correctional institutions and their subsequent removal from the country. The analysis below demonstrates that, in both respects, State authorities either **failed to comply with applicable legal requirements or acted in direct violation of them**.

Legal grounds for the release of detainees

A person serving a sentence in a correctional colony or prison may be released prior to the expiry of the sentence on one of the grounds provided for under the Criminal Code.

Once a portion of the sentence has been served, a person may be granted conditional early release (parole)²⁶, or the unserved portion of the sentence may be replaced with a more lenient form of punishment²⁷—in practice, typically restriction of liberty. Release from punishment, or its commutation, is also possible in cases of mental disorder or a serious illness preventing the serving of the sentence²⁸, as well as, in the case of women, during pregnancy, childbirth, and until the child reaches the age of three²⁹. In all such cases, the legal basis for release is a **court ruling or order** issued following a judicial hearing involving the prosecutor.

Convicted persons may also be released from places of detention through amnesty provided for by **law** adopted by Parliament³⁰. The law defines the categories of persons covered by the amnesty, as well as the period for implementation of its provisions, which is generally within six months from the entry into force of the law.

²⁶ Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus, art 90.

²⁷ Criminal Code, art 91.

²⁸ Criminal Code, art 92.

²⁹ Criminal Code, art 93

³⁰ Criminal Code, art 94.

Finally, the release of detainees may take place as a result of a pardon granted by the President through a **decree**³¹. Unlike amnesty, pardon applies to an “individually defined group of persons”, meaning that it is directed not at categories of convicted persons, but at specific individuals.

Consideration of a pardon is initiated upon an application submitted by the convicted person³². An exception to this rule—consideration in the absence of an application—applies only to persons sentenced to death.

A pardon does not necessarily entail full remission of the sentence and may instead provide for partial remission, commutation, or conditional early release, as specified in the pardon decree.

Upon release from a place of detention, the convicted person must be issued their personal documents, as well as documents confirming their release³³. Where an identity document is not present in the convict’s personal file, or where it has expired, the administration of the correctional institution is obliged to take timely measures to obtain a new document³⁴.

The circumstances of the release of imprisoned journalists and bloggers, as currently known, raise serious doubts as to whether the release complied with the law.

No reliable information is currently available about the legal basis for their release.

It is evident that, in the cases described, the release did not take place pursuant to a court ruling or order. There is no indication that any court examined such matters, and in any event, in many cases, the statutory conditions for release were not met, including having served the required portion of the sentence or medical grounds such as serious illness or pregnancy.

Nor did the release take place pursuant to an act of amnesty. Although such a law was adopted in May 2025, it did not apply to persons convicted of so-called “extremist” offences and therefore did not cover the majority of political prisoners.

³¹ Criminal Code, art 95.

³² Regulation on the Procedure for Granting Pardon to Convicted Persons and Exempting from Criminal Liability Persons Who Have Assisted in the Detection of Crimes and the Elimination of Their Consequences, approved by Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus No. 250 of 3 December 1994.

³³ Criminal Executive Code of the Republic of Belarus, art 191(3).

³⁴ Criminal Executive Code of the Republic of Belarus, art 191(4).

With regard to the expelled political prisoners, the press service of A. Lukashenko, as well as A. Lukashenko himself, stated that they had been pardoned³⁵. However, as noted above, none of them has so far received any official documentation confirming such pardons³⁶.

At the same time, many of the released journalists and bloggers claim that they did not submit applications for pardon. This circumstance could, in principle, be regarded as not decisive, since the practice of granting pardons in the absence of an application has occurred previously³⁷. However, the subsequent treatment of some of the former political prisoners raises questions not only as to the grounds for their release, but also as to whether they can in fact be considered “released” under Belarusian law, or whether they continue, de jure, to serve their sentences.

❗ The case of **Mikalai Statkevich** is illustrative in this regard³⁸. On 11 September 2025, he was taken from Correctional Colony No. 13 in Hlybokaye to the Kamienny Loh border crossing and forcibly moved across the Belarusian State border. However, **he refused to enter Lithuania** and remained in the buffer zone for several hours. He was then taken back into custody by Belarusian security forces and returned to Correctional Colony No. 13.

In November 2025, the Ministry of Internal Affairs informed his relatives that he was “serving his sentence under the judgment of 14 December 2021”.

He was released only five months later, on 19 February 2026, after suffering a stroke.

³⁵ See, for example, Official website of the President of the Republic of Belarus, Meeting with Journalists (20 March 2026) <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/obsenie-s-zurnalistami>

³⁶ It is also worth noting that the official website of the President of Belarus did not report the signing of pardon decrees concerning groups of political prisoners expelled from Belarus, whereas all other pardons have been accompanied by publicly posted announcements.

³⁷ In particular, some political prisoners detained following the 2010 presidential elections and later pardoned denied having written or submitted clemency petitions. This was stated, for example, by journalist Aliaksandr Atroshchanka and civic activist and blogger Pavel Vinahradau, who were released in 2011 (Radio Svaboda, “All 11 released political prisoners are heading home”, 11 September 2011, <https://www.svaboda.org/a/24328743.html> accessed 29 April 2026). In 2015, a similar claim was made by politician Mikalai Statkevich (Deutsche Welle, “Police will monitor Statkevich for eight years”, 24 August 2015, <https://www.dw.com/ru/статкевич-будет-8-лет-находиться-под-наблюдением-милиции/a-18669239> accessed 29 April 2026).

³⁸ Human Rights Centre “Viasna”, Mikalai Statkevich <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/mikalaj-statkievich>

Commenting on these events, the press secretary of A. Lukashenko, Natallia Eismont, stated that “the decision to pardon Mikalai Statkevich had been taken by the President long ago”, but that he had refused to travel to Lithuania and had “returned to prison”. According to her, his release in February 2026 took place at the request of his relatives due to his medical condition³⁹.

It is clear that, regardless of the formal basis for release, including pardon, such treatment of a released detainee is not legally permissible.

Thus, the legal grounds on which imprisoned journalists and bloggers were released **remain unclear**.

At the same time, *the failure to issue release certificates and to return identity documents* (passports), as reported by some of the expelled journalists and bloggers, cannot be attributed to any objective circumstances. Rather, it reflects a departure from applicable legal requirements by the correctional institutions and therefore constitutes **a clear violation of domestic law**.

Legal grounds for removal from Belarus

Article 30 of the Constitution guarantees citizens of Belarus the right to freely move within the territory of the Republic of Belarus, to choose their place of residence, to leave the country, and to return without impediment. It follows from this provision that there can be no legal grounds or procedures for depriving citizens of the right to remain in the country or for their forcible removal from its territory.

The only exception to this rule is the extradition of a Belarusian citizen to a foreign State in the context of mutual legal assistance, and only where such a possibility is expressly provided for in an international treaty. As a general rule, however, Belarusian citizens are not extradited to other States⁴⁰.

Given that all journalists and bloggers subjected to removal are **Belarusian citizens**, and that their removal from the country, as noted above, was carried out by coercive means, these actions by State authorities are **clearly unlawful and constitute a serious violation of their rights**.

³⁹ BELTA, Details of the release of previously pardoned Mikalai Statkevich have been revealed (20 February 2026) <https://belta.by/society/view/stali-izvestny-detali-vyhoda-na-svobodu-ranee-pomilovannogo-nikolaja-statkevicha-765509-2026/>

⁴⁰ Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, art 10.

 Notably, the removal of journalists and bloggers took place in groups together with other political prisoners, including not only Belarusian citizens but also foreign nationals. The circumstances surrounding their removal likewise give grounds to question the lawfulness of the procedures applied.

The removal of foreign nationals and stateless persons from Belarus is expressly provided for under domestic law and may be carried out through several procedures, including deportation, expulsion, or transfer to a foreign State pursuant to an international treaty.

Deportation is one of the forms of administrative sanction established under the Code of Administrative Offences. It is provided as a sanction for certain administrative offences related to crossing the State border, the stay of foreign nationals in Belarus, and the receipt of foreign gratuitous assistance⁴¹. The imposition of this sanction falls within the competence of border authorities, internal affairs bodies, or the courts, depending on which authority is empowered to hear cases under the relevant provision of the Code.

The procedure for deportation is governed by the Regulation on the procedure for the deportation of foreign nationals and stateless persons⁴². It provides, inter alia, that a foreign national may be deported to one of the following States: the State of citizenship; the State of habitual residence; the State from which the person entered Belarus; a State that has agreed to accept the person; a State requesting extradition; or a State with which Belarus has concluded a readmission agreement.

Another mechanism for removal from the country is **expulsion**⁴³, which is governed by the Law on the Legal Status of Foreign Nationals and Stateless Persons in the Republic of Belarus, as well as the Regulation on the procedure for the expulsion of foreign nationals and stateless persons from the Republic of Belarus⁴⁴.

⁴¹ Code of Administrative Offences of the Republic of Belarus, arts 24.15, 24.18, 24.19, 24.20, 24.21, 24.35. Law of the Republic of Belarus No. 105-Z of 4 January 2010 on the Legal Status of Foreign Citizens and Stateless Persons in the Republic of Belarus, art 65.

⁴² Approved by Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus No. 333 of 15 March 2007.

⁴³ The term “expulsion” is used in Belarusian legislation exclusively in relation to the procedure described below, which differs from its meaning in international practice. In this report, except for this section, the term is used in its international legal sense.

⁴⁴ Approved by Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus No. 146 of 3 February 2006.

A key distinction from deportation is that expulsion does not constitute a sanction and may, in fact, be unrelated to the commission of any specific offence. It is carried out “in the interests of national security of the Republic of Belarus, public order, protection of morality, public health, and the rights and freedoms of citizens of the Republic of Belarus and other persons”⁴⁵. In addition, expulsion may be applied to foreign nationals who have served an administrative sanction or criminal sentence but cannot be subject to deportation⁴⁶.

A decision on expulsion is taken in a non-judicial procedure by internal affairs bodies or State security authorities. The legislation requires these authorities to notify the person concerned in advance of the examination of the matter and allows for their participation in the proceedings.

The implementation of an expulsion decision may take two forms: voluntary departure or forced removal. Forced removal is only possible where the person has failed to leave the country voluntarily within the prescribed time limit, or where there are initial grounds to believe that they will not comply with the decision. The States to which a foreign national may be removed are the same as those provided for in the case of deportation.

In addition, the removal of foreign nationals and stateless persons from Belarus is carried out in accordance with **international treaties governing border crossing regimes or readmission agreements** (i.e., agreements on the acceptance by a State of its own nationals who are being removed from another State). These forms of removal are applied in cases involving violations by foreign nationals of the rules governing entry into or stay in Belarus.

As a consequence of the application of all the above-mentioned procedures, the foreign national is included in the List of persons whose entry into the Republic of Belarus is prohibited or undesirable, and a ban on entry into the territory of Belarus is imposed for a period ranging from six months to five years, and, in the case of expulsion, up to ten years.

⁴⁵ Law of the Republic of Belarus No. 105-Z of 4 January 2010 on the Legal Status of Foreign Citizens and Stateless Persons in the Republic of Belarus, art 65.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Assessing the circumstances of removal of political prisoners from Belarus, it could be assumed that, in respect of foreign nationals, there were formal grounds for the application of expulsion (while the other procedures are clearly inapplicable in such a context). However, the foreign nationals removed from Belarus have not reported being notified of the examination of such matters, let alone being informed of any such decisions. This may indicate a breach of the expulsion procedure, but more likely suggests that no such decisions were taken at all.

An analysis of the legal framework described above in light of the circumstances of the forcible removal from Belarus shows that these acts **do not fall within any of the procedures provided for under domestic law**. This conclusion covers the entire sequence of events, from the moment the imprisoned journalists and bloggers were taken out of correctional institutions to their transfer across the State border.

The acts involved a combination of unlawful detention—as there were no lawful grounds to restrict their liberty once they had been released from the correctional facility—and their forcible removal from the country by vehicle. Under Belarusian law and judicial practice, such conduct is generally classified as “**kidnapping**” and is punishable by up to 15 years of imprisonment⁴⁷.

.

⁴⁷ Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus, art 182. The act is defined as the unlawful taking of a person and moving them to another place.

Human rights implications of the expulsion of journalists: legal qualification

By forcibly expelling journalists and bloggers from places of detention to foreign States, the Belarusian authorities also breached fundamental rights under international human rights law. This practice has been publicly condemned not only by Belarusian human rights organisations⁴⁸ but also by independent UN human rights experts⁴⁹.

At a minimum, such actions breach the following fundamental rights protected under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Freedom of movement — Article 12 of the Covenant

Freedom of movement includes not only the right to leave one's country, but also **the right to remain in it**⁵⁰. By expelling journalists and bloggers, the authorities deprived them of the ability to remain in Belarus—including to remain within their cultural, social, and linguistic environment.

"I lived 52 years in my homeland, and I want to die there. Even in those conditions, I would have managed—even under this regime—if it had not been so brutal. I would have taught English, I would have found a way to survive [...] Life in the European Union is good, it's fine, but **I want to go home. At 52, I don't want to start my life over. I want to go home—to where my mother is buried, where my house is, where my friends are."**

Larysa Shchyrakova, released and expelled to Lithuania on 11 September 2025

Source: <https://ru.belsat.eu/90350620/kogda-za-mnoj-prishli-larisa-shchiryakova>

⁴⁸ Belarusian Helsinki Committee, Statement by a Human Rights Coalition on the Forced Expulsion from the Republic of Belarus of Persons Released as a Result of Pardon (22 December 2025) <https://belhelcom.org/en/news/statement-human-rights-coalition-forced-expulsion-republic-belarus-persons-released-result>

⁴⁹ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Belarus: UN experts denounce expulsion of citizens, warn about risk of statelessness (8 December 2025) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/12/belarus-un-experts-denounce-expulsion-citizens-warn-about-risk-statelessness>

⁵⁰ UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No 27: Article 12 (Freedom of Movement), CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.9 (2 November 1999), para 19.

Moreover, freedom of movement also includes the right to enter one's own country⁵¹. However, given the uncertain legal status of the expelled political prisoners and their background of political persecution, **safe return is not currently possible**. Accordingly, this expulsion violates not only the right to remain in one's country, but also the right to return to it.

"Moreover, they did not receive any document certifying their release and are thus uncertain about their status in Belarus and particularly **whether they would still have to finish serving their sentence if they were to return**. An interviewee told the Group of Independent Experts that he believed that, in the eyes of the Belarusian authorities, he **remained a criminal** and that he feared that, if he were to return to Belarus, **he could be accused of being a fugitive**."

UN Group of Independent Experts on Human Rights in Belarus

Source: <https://docs.un.org/ru/A/HRC/61/57> (para. 60).

Right to private and family life—Article 17 of the Covenant

Article 17 guarantees that no one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with their privacy, family, home or correspondence. Particular attention must be paid to the issue of **family separation**. Forced expulsion inevitably means that a person is compelled to leave their family members behind in Belarus, cutting them off from day-to-day contact and support.

The UN Human Rights Committee has explicitly emphasized that a State's refusal to allow a family member to remain in its territory may constitute an interference with family life⁵². In particular, in cases involving the forced expulsion of a State's own nationals, the State cannot rely on the formal legality of its actions to justify the resulting separation of families, which points to arbitrary interference with family life.

⁵¹ ICCPR, art 12(4).

⁵² Human Rights Committee, Hendrick Winata, Barry Winata and Ms So Lan Li v Australia, Communication No 930/2000, UN Doc CCPR/C/72/D/930/2000 (26 July 2001), para 7.1.

“My whole family is in Belarus. My husband, **Ihar Iliyash, a journalist** who has been deprived of his freedom, is also in Belarus, currently held in Penal Colony No. 2 in Babruysk. **If I had been given a choice, I would have stayed in Belarus.** I would go to visit him, bring him parcels, and be with him the way he was with me for all four years before he was arrested.”

Katsiaryna Bakhvalava (Andreyeva), released and expelled to Lithuania
on 19 March 2026

Source: <https://baj.media/ru/ekaterina-andreeva-ob-osvobozhdenii-i-pervyh-dnjah-na-svobode/>

Freedom of expression — Article 19 of the Covenant

The expelled journalists and bloggers are former political prisoners who were deprived of their liberty for activities directly linked to their professional work. In particular, **the nature of their work is inseparable from the exercise of freedom of expression**—namely, the right to seek, receive and impart information freely.

As noted above, their forced expulsion immediately after release may be seen as an **additional form of punishment** for the peaceful exercise of their freedom of expression.

Right not to be subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment — Article 7 of the Covenant

Not only the fact of expulsion itself, but also **the manner in which it was carried out raises serious concerns under international human rights standards.** The release and subsequent expulsion took place in an atmosphere of uncertainty and psychological pressure, causing disorientation and fear.

The journalists were not informed of the nature of the measures being taken or their legal basis. Officers of the KGB did not identify themselves or present any official documentation during the transfer from places of detention, while requests for clarification were met with silence.

In some cases, journalists were transported in handcuffs and with bags placed over their heads, further intensifying their disorientation and sense of humiliation.

In certain cases, threats and insults were also reportedly used during the process.

Taken together, these circumstances point to a violation of the right not to be subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

“Eventually the bus started moving again, but it didn’t go far. We were already allowed to take off our hats, and we realized we were somewhere on a country road between a forest and open fields. We were transferred to another bus. Nearby stood a large one, and quite a few more vans and small buses arrived, from which men were being unloaded. **It was a deeply distressing sight: their hands were handcuffed behind their backs, and they all had hats pulled down over their eyes or bags over their heads. They were completely disoriented, not understanding where to go or what to do.** Many were still wearing prison uniforms and padded jackets. There were also large numbers of masked security officers everywhere. It is entirely unclear why a ‘release’ had to be carried out in this way at all.”

Maryna Zolatava, released and expelled to Ukraine on 13 December 2026

Source: <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/121735.html>

Obligation to respect and ensure rights without discrimination — Article 2(1) of the Covenant

The journalists and bloggers concerned have faced the violations of rights described above as they belong to a group targeted by state repression. This group may be described as Belarusians perceived as being critical of, or opposed to, the government. This, in turn, indicates **discrimination on the grounds of political opinion**.

❗ Moreover, it is important to recall the widespread practice of **transnational repression** against Belarusians in exile. As noted earlier, some of the journalists and bloggers were deported without passports, while in other cases their passports were declared invalid.

The issue of passports, however, is relevant to all deported individuals in light of **Presidential Decree No. 278 “On the Procedure for Issuing Documents and Performing Actions” of 4 September 2023**, which effectively terminates the issuance of passports abroad. As a result, given the impossibility of return due to legal uncertainty and the high risk of continued persecution,

journalists and bloggers are inevitably confronted with **the problem of invalid or inaccessible travel documents**.

This, in turn, gives rise to additional violations of a range of rights⁵³. In particular, it affects the right to equal protection and non-discrimination (Article 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights), the right to freedom of movement (Article 12 of the Covenant), the right to privacy and family life (Article 17 of the Covenant), the right to marry and to found a family (Article 23 of the Covenant), as well as the right of every child to be registered and to acquire a nationality (Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child).

Right to social security — Article 9 of the ICESCR

In addition to violations of civil and political rights, the expulsion of journalists and bloggers also obstructs the enjoyment of their economic, social and cultural rights in Belarus. A particularly acute issue concerns **the payment of pensions**. Article 9 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights guarantees the right of everyone to social security, including social insurance.

In particular, even in relation to non-nationals who have contributed to social security schemes, the Covenant safeguards their right to receive accrued entitlements upon leaving the country⁵⁴. However, journalists and bloggers who have been forcibly expelled from Belarus are effectively deprived of access to these funds as a consequence of the authorities' actions.

⁵³ Belarusian Helsinki Committee, The Analysis of Violations by the Republic of Belarus of International Human Rights Obligations and Constitutional Guarantees in Respect of its Citizens Due to the Adoption of Decree No 278 "On the Procedure for Issuing Documents and Performing Actions" (18 September 2023) <https://belhelcom.org/en/news/analysis-violations-republic-belarus-international-human-rights-obligations-and-constitutional>

⁵⁴ UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No 19: The Right to Social Security (Article 9), UN Doc E/C.12/GC/19 (4 February 2008), para 36.

Consequences of expulsion: challenges faced by journalists in exile

“I would like to appeal to the European authorities. I am very grateful—both to the US administration and to the countries of the European Union—for the assistance they provide. But I would ask them **to make the process faster and more straightforward**, because these are people who have been through extremely difficult experiences, and life in exile will also be difficult for them. It is one thing to be in your homeland, and another to find yourself in a foreign country. I would ask them to look at this situation from a different perspective and to slightly ease the conditions for former political prisoners who end up in EU countries.”

Iryna Slaunikava, released and expelled to Lithuania on 11 September 2025
Source: <https://ru.belsat.eu/90099102/sozhaleyu-o-vremeni-irina-slavnikova>

The forced expulsion from Belarus, which political prisoner journalists and bloggers were subjected to simultaneously with their release from places of detention, has created a wide range of challenges in exile. **These challenges are being faced in the countries where they have been transferred and are currently residing.**

A study conducted by the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) on the needs of journalists and media professionals who are former political prisoners identifies the main categories of problems faced by the majority of expelled journalists⁵⁵.

Legalisation needs

The first and most urgent issue for Belarusian citizens expelled abroad is the need to obtain legal residence status in their country of destination.

Lithuania and Poland have the most extensive and long-standing experience in providing legal pathways for individuals subjected to political persecution by the Belarusian authorities. As a result, during the 2025–2026 deportations, they were generally able to respond relatively quickly and establish the applicable procedures for admitting newly arrived Belarusian nationals.

⁵⁵ Belarusian Association of Journalists, BAJ Study Reveals the Urgent Needs of Freed Belarusian Journalists (2 March 2026) <https://baj.media/en/aglyady-manitoringi/baj-study-the-urgent-need/>

However, this does not alter the fact that the journalists and bloggers concerned left Belarus involuntarily and had no opportunity to choose their country of residence. Once transferred to a specific state, they are, as a rule, required to regularise their stay there, inter alia under the Dublin Regulation and other applicable legal frameworks.

Receiving states may exercise a degree of flexibility in this regard. While the Dublin Regulation explicitly allows individuals to obtain legal residence status in an EU Member State where their family resides⁵⁶, there are also documented cases of expelled journalists being able to relocate to another country on other legal grounds. In particular, Katsiaryna Bakhvalava (Andreyeva), a journalist with Belsat TV who was expelled to Lithuania in March 2025, was subsequently permitted to move to Poland and apply there for international protection⁵⁷.

Evidently, the absence of a passport—or its subsequent invalidation—significantly complicates any legal procedures and substantially prolongs the process of obtaining legal residence status.

Separation from family

At the time of their release, some journalists and bloggers already had family members living in EU countries. Others, however, remain separated from relatives who continue to live in Belarus and, for a range of practical and personal reasons, are unwilling or unable to leave. These include, in particular, the lack of housing and employment prospects abroad, children continuing their education in Belarus, and the need to care for other family members.

In practice, **family reunification procedures** usually apply only to spouses and minor children. They do not extend to other close relatives—such as parents living separately or adult children—even though they are immediate family members. As a result, many have no legal grounds to relocate and, in any event, would face a complete upheaval of their lives if they were to do so.

As a result, journalists and bloggers are left in a situation of forced separation from parts of their families.

⁵⁶ Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 (Dublin III Regulation), Article 9.

⁵⁷ Belsat, Former political prisoners Katsiaryna Andreyeva, Valiantsin Stefanovich and Anastasia Loika apply for international protection (25 March 2026) <https://ru.belsat.eu/92281806/byvshie-politzaaklyuchennye-mezhdunarodnaya-zashchita> accessed 29 April 2026.

Even short-term visits to EU countries by relatives remaining in Belarus may carry risks of pressure from the authorities. These risks are particularly acute where the released individual continues to work as a journalist and collaborates with Belarusian media in exile, many of which have been designated as “extremist” in Belarus.

Economic vulnerability

Journalists and bloggers expelled from Belarus immediately upon release find themselves without a stable source of income. At the same time, they face pressing financial burdens—including the cost of rent, food, clothing, essential equipment and other basic necessities. According to a survey conducted by BAJ, **access to housing is the most pressing concern for the majority of journalists forced to leave Belarus**⁵⁸.

Despite the availability of financial assistance programmes, stipends and temporary accommodation in shelters, such support is short-term in nature and does not provide lasting financial stability. **Long-term support mechanisms remain largely unavailable.** At the same time, the first months after release are typically insufficient to secure stable employment and address financial needs, leaving expelled journalists and bloggers at real risk of being left without the means to support themselves.

Inability to continue professional activity

For journalists and other media workers, the ability to continue their professional work abroad remains a key challenge. **Media outlets operating in exile often lack the resources** to immediately employ even their own recently released staff. As a result, many journalists face a forced break from their profession and are often required to seek work in other fields, which can lead to a loss of skills and professional expertise.

This problem also has a broader, systemic dimension: the loss of experienced professionals undermines the long-term resilience and sustainability of the Belarusian media sector as a whole.

⁵⁸ Belarusian Association of Journalists, BAJ Study Reveals the Urgent Needs of Freed Belarusian Journalists.

Need for medical care

Former political prisoners often require **urgent medical attention**, as detention conditions typically result in a deterioration of both physical and psychological well-being. According to a survey conducted by BAJ, **this need ranks second among the issues most frequently mentioned by respondents**⁵⁹.

Journalists and bloggers expelled from Belarus lose access to the national health-care system, while in host countries medical services are often fee-based or require additional steps to access, including obtaining legal residence status. Existing support programmes focused on medical assistance are frequently insufficient to meet these needs.

Challenges faced by older persons

The situation of older individuals is of particular concern. Many had not planned to return to work after their release. However, following their deportation to another country, they often find themselves without housing or access to pension payments, which leaves them with no choice but to seek employment. At the same time, their prospects on the labour market are often more limited than those of younger people, due to both age and a long break from professional activity.

Language integration

The ability to speak the language of the host country becomes essential for everyday life and access to employment. For many expelled journalists and bloggers, this poses a significant challenge due to their psychological state, age, and individual circumstances. This is further compounded by the fact that host countries do not always provide language integration programmes that are genuinely accessible to all who need them. **Notably, 66.7% of respondents in the BAJ survey reported a need for language training**⁶⁰. For those who do not speak the language of the host country, this creates an additional barrier to employment.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Restrictions on property rights and access to administrative procedures in Belarus

A particular issue affecting all Belarusian citizens forced to live abroad concerns the restrictions introduced by *Decree No. 278 of 4 September 2023, “On the Procedure for Issuing Documents and Performing Actions”*. This decree prohibits transactions in Belarus based on powers of attorney issued abroad and bars applications for administrative procedures submitted through representatives acting under such powers of attorney.

In practice, **this leaves expelled journalists and bloggers unable to use or dispose of property they own in Belarus**, including selling residential real estate or legally renting it out.

At the same time, living abroad cuts them off from administrative procedures carried out by Belarusian state authorities. This includes the inability to obtain certificates and other official documents, which are often required by authorities in the countries where they reside.

Psychological impact and the need for rehabilitation

Prolonged periods of detention—often involving torture or other forms of ill-treatment—have a profound impact on the psychological well-being of former political prisoners. This harm is further compounded by forced expulsion from the country and the wider difficulties described above.

Against this background, there is a clear and sustained need for psychological support. However, as the BAJ study indicates, expelled journalists and bloggers who are former political prisoners **often underestimate this need, which can have serious long-term consequences for their mental health, social reintegration, and professional life**.

Addressing their psychological well-being therefore requires not only support upon request, but also proactive outreach and assistance from external actors.

Recommendations

To foreign States:

1. Support the referral by the Republic of Lithuania to the International Criminal Court and cooperate fully with the Office of the Prosecutor of the ICC in its investigation of alleged crimes against humanity in the context of the Lithuania/Belarus situation.
2. Investigate and initiate criminal proceedings under the principle of universal jurisdiction in relation to the deportation of Belarusian nationals as crimes against humanity.
3. In bilateral and multilateral engagement with Belarusian authorities, raise the issue of the prohibition of forced expulsion practices and the need to restore the rights of expelled individuals.
4. Continue to facilitate (including through expedited and simplified procedures) the granting of legal residence status to expelled Belarusian journalists and bloggers, where applicable, given the absence or invalidity of passports.
5. Enable family reunification and simplify visa procedures for relatives residing in Belarus, thereby supporting the right of expelled journalists and bloggers to family life.
6. Expand and strengthen integration programmes accessible to political prisoners released from Belarus — including journalists and bloggers forced into exile.
7. Continue to support independent Belarusian media in exile, as well as assistance programmes for journalists subjected to politically motivated persecution.

To the Republic of Belarus:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release all journalists and other individuals imprisoned solely for exercising their human rights and fundamental freedoms, and end politically motivated persecution.
2. End forced expulsion of Belarusian citizens, including journalists and bloggers, and ensure that the release of political prisoners is unconditional and free from unlawful restrictions.
3. Provide guarantees of safe and dignified return to Belarus for expelled journalists and bloggers.
4. Issue expelled journalists and bloggers with official documents confirming their release, and ensure that they receive valid passports.
5. Ensure effective remedies for journalists and bloggers forcibly expelled from Belarus, as well as other individuals subjected to similar treatment.
6. Repeal Presidential Decree No. 278 of 4 September 2023 “On the Procedure for Issuing Documents and Performing Actions”, as well as other legal acts restricting the exercise of property rights and access to administrative procedures for Belarusian citizens residing abroad.

To media and civil society organisations:

1. Develop comprehensive support programmes for released political prisoners, including journalists and media professionals, covering assistance in securing legal residence status as well as legal, psychological, medical, and other forms of support.
2. Monitor and document cases of forced expulsion from Belarus, and collect and systematise information on the adverse consequences faced by expelled journalists and media professionals.
3. Develop specialised reintegration programmes for journalists and media professionals, including temporary employment opportunities,

internships, and fellowships to enable them to continue their professional work in journalism.

4. Raise awareness among foreign governments and international organisations about the unlawful nature of the expulsion of political prisoners from Belarus, including journalists and media professionals.