

“I haven’t adapted fully, but I’m doing my best:” Democratic Advocates Being Forced into Political Exile

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Abstract:

A personal essay discussing the author’s advocacy for democracy in Belarus and the harsh response of the authoritarian leader, Aleksandr Lukashenko, with a particular focus on the human costs paid for by democratic advocates. Delving into the personal journey of activists, volunteers and ordinary citizens forced into exile and facing escalated state violence, the essay attempts to offer a poignant glimpse into the emotional struggles, sacrifices and resilience of peacebuilders facing political repression. It also stresses the importance of international attention and support for activists and political prisoners.

Keywords:

Refugee, Political Persecution, Exile, Illegal Detention, Authoritarian Leadership

My Story

My story started in August 2020. I was not present in the country when the protests started, I managed to arrive only a week later. Before that, I was following all the events from abroad, live through Telegram channels, not really believing the reality of them. I saw the cruelty and the level of violence by the law enforcement, and at the same time the bravery and belief of people who kept going to the streets all around the country. Even though the police violence stopped for a few days, it renewed almost immediately. Even after the biggest protests people were illegally detained. The law didn't work. There were no independent branches of power. Everyone just fulfilled the order to keep the power of Lukashenko at any price.

Seeing the impunity of the real perpetrators while the innocent people were arrested, together with a team, I started identifying state actors involved in the severe human rights violations and published the information about them. While I was in Belarus, the team learned that a 'hunt' on us started. It was the reason I left Belarus in mid-September 2020. I haven't returned home since then. Leaving Belarus was followed by the forced leaving of Russia in a few months. Special forces found out I was staying there, and Belarusian and Russian special forces have an agreement on cooperation, so I had to leave so that not be arrested. I moved to Ukraine, then to Lithuania, then Georgia, then Lithuania again. I am currently living between Poland and Lithuania.

While leaving Belarus and Russia, the only thought I had was not to be arrested at the border. When I appeared in Ukraine after 5 hours of waiting at the border, I felt relief. An emergency move didn't pass by itself. I worked with a war psychologist who helped me to accept a new reality, including the one where it was not safe for me to return home, and the one where I didn't have a home anymore. The further moves were related to a will to find a new home. But when I finally felt good in Georgia, I had to return to Lithuania. As in May 2021, a Ryanair plane was forcefully landed in Minsk. My colleague, Sophia Sapega was arrested. It was not safe for to stay in Georgia. Now, the only secure place for me now are the states that are officially announced as the enemies of Belarus by the Belarusian authorities.

Recently, the situation has become even worse as recently I had been tried and convicted in absentia for my activism. Newly adopted law allows the authorities to deprive me of citizenship and to ban me from entrance to Belarus. Thus, in fact, I have yet to experience the issues of political refugees who have no citizenship and are unclear about their legal status. But I know the stories of those who are already facing the uncertainty and pain of such displacement and exile from their homeland.

Belarus, 2023

Standing for human rights, peace and democracy in an authoritarian country is always being prepared to be detained, to have a go-bag, and to instruct the closest people on how to behave in case of arrest. But when repressions reach an unprecedented level, when dozens and hundreds of people are being detained and tortured daily, those who provide assistance become a special target for the regime. Activists, human rights defenders, and political leaders become such a security risk for the authorities that they must get rid of them at any cost. The most common response is to make those people flee the country under the threat of torture and years of imprisonment in inhumane conditions. Another response is just to imprison them immediately. And when choosing whether to be fully cut off from society for years or to try to continue helping people from abroad, hundreds leave not knowing when they will return. In this way, forced displacement of people is one of a number of actions that characterize authoritarian regimes.

Based on the official data, the population of Belarus has reduced by 209,642 since 2020. Based on the information of independent media, around 300,000 people left the country officially. The real number of Belarusians who have fled the country since 2020 remains unknown. For instance, the fact that there is a simplified visa regime and the rules of stay for Belarusians in some countries make it impossible to count the real number of Belarusians residing abroad. And while these numbers might seem not to be that large, for the country of ~9,5 million, these number account for -2,2% of population leaving Belarus in just over 3 years.

The primary reason for such an exodus of people from Belarus is the tough and unstoppable repressions that covered the entire country after the presidential elections on August 9, 2020. After the falsification of the presidential election results, the largest mass protests in the modern history of Belarus began. Of course, in response, the dictator Lukashenko did his best to remain in power at any price. In August 2020, for example, there were 24 political prisoners in Belarus. Almost all these prisoners were detained in 2020, after the presidential campaign started, since the regime of Lukashenko considered them a threat to its safety. As of August 2023, less than two weeks after the elections, more than 1,500 people are imprisoned for political reasons. (This is the data provided by HRC VIASNA, but the real number may be several times bigger). In addition, more than 5,000 people have been subjected to criminal persecution for participating in protests and protest-related activities since 2020.

Since 2021, the majority of international airlines have left Belarus and stopped flying over Belarusian air space. This is a result of when in May 2021, the regime of Lukashenko

committed an air piracy act and forcefully landed a Ryanair flight going from Athens to Vilnius in Minsk. At the same time, Lukashenko created a migrant crisis at the border of Belarus and the EU (mostly Lithuania and Poland). The authorities of Lukashenko invited migrants, mostly from Iraq and Syria, to Belarus, promising to help them get to Europe. In fact, the illegitimate authorities used the migrants as a human resource to create the crisis at the borders. The border control and other officers helped the migrants to reach the border and, as a mass, the people attempted to cross it. The situation calmed a bit, as the majority of migrants returned home, and the EU countries built additional protection at the borders. But the crisis continues to this day.

Then in 2022, Lukashenko provided Putin with the Belarusian territory necessary to launch the invasion and missiles into Ukraine. It made Belarus, already experiencing a complete political crisis and unrelenting political repressions, a co-aggressor country, an outlaw country. The suppression of activists continued that year as the Belarusian legislature adopted the amendments to the criminal law which enabled the government to take away the citizenship of activists – such as myself. Thus, within 3 years, since the beginning of the most mass peaceful protests in Belarusian history, the regime of Lukashenko has worked to create the total isolation on the international stage of Belarusians and Belarus. It worked to make activists and leaders who resisted these actions leave the country. The goal was a total suppression of the will and identity of the Belarusians.

These are the geopolitical facts of Belarus. Yet each geopolitical event has a human story behind it. Here are some of those stories:

Leaving Belarus Against Our Will: Three Stories of Exile

Maryna Dubina is an eco-activist. Currently, she holds refugee status in Poland. She left Belarus in 2021.

On July 14, mass searches started in the offices of civil society organisations and in the homes of their representatives. I woke up because of mass phone calls and messages. People were naming those who were already going through the searches. I packed quickly, took my laptop, and left my apartment. On July 16, I was called and told that a search was being run at the address of my registration. There was my name in the search warrant, and two articles of the criminal code – 342 and 293, financing and organising mass public order violations. It was the July of 2021. That day I decided to leave. Before that, I made a decision not to leave the

country as long as possible, until the police came for me. On July 16 I understood it was that very moment.

I was the head of an eco-organisation EcoHome. It was the reason the police chased me. There was a cleaning of the civil society. We did and we continue protecting the eco-rights of the Belarusians. We help people to go through the trials, we run consultations, and we inform and assist citizens. Also, we have an anti-nuclear campaign and some other areas of work in the organisation. Personally, I have been involved in some civil, social and anarcho activities since 2010. In 2020 I participated in protests, EcoHome condemned the state violence and asked for free and fair elections, as well as for the investigation of the cases of violence, accountability, and the release of the people who were illegally arrested. After August 2020, I consulted the victims of violence, the families of the arrested, ran the list of the detained, helped to find lawyers and created templates for appeals, and also helped and volunteered for some other human rights organisations.

Since August 2020 I had been living in different places. We were constantly moving, I was living without a phone. I was aware it could happen, but I wanted to stay in Belarus.

At the moment I decided to leave, there were covid restrictions, which delayed the departure. I had to do the PCR tests, it was unclear how to do it all safely and securely. Nevertheless, I was helped to find the people who assisted in transporting from Belarus to Russia. I crossed the border to Ukraine from Russia on foot. There were not many questions, but I was asked why I was crossing the border from Russia, not from Belarus. [A lot of Belarusians first reached Russia, and afterwards crossed the border with Ukraine. There is no strict border control on the border between Russia and Belarus. The reason for going to Russia first is that in case of an official crossing of the border from Belarus, the activists could be arrested.

The first feeling I had after crossing the border was a relief. I was in security. On the other hand, I felt hurt and offence, because I had to leave the country. By that time, I had no idea how long it all could last, I had just a small backpack with me. I just felt I had to leave. Later, I reached Kyiv where there were my friends who had to flee the country earlier. I spent a week there and left for Lithuania. There were also friends there by that time. I just went to the place where there was support. Lithuanian human rights defenders helped me to go through the process of legalisation.

In a while, I understood we were not going to return home either tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. I had to live somehow. I was thinking about moving to Ukraine, but the Russian full-scale invasion happened. Later I moved to Poland, and I'm staying here now.

Before the departure, all the time since 2020 I had been feeling insecure. I had a feeling that anyone could have been arrested. But this feeling was replaced by the feeling of guilt, I felt lost and confused. Even though I was thinking only about appearing in a safe place, while I was leaving the country. My friends who had to flee Belarus earlier helped a lot.

Adaptation is a strange word. Of course, now I feel safe, I don't shake with noises and rustles. While in Belarus I was not using a phone in public places, I was not visiting the places where there were cameras, I was living outside the apartment where I was registered, and I constantly changed the apartments. Here, I feel safe. I don't think about the police breaking into my home. Though, during the first few months I was waking up at 6-7 in the morning. It was automatic, as it was the time when police usually had been coming with searches.

It was very tough. First, I thought I had to stay at home, to hide and wait somewhere for a while. Later, these thoughts passed. I haven't adapted fully, but I'm doing my best. It becomes better.

Tatyana Astrouskaya is a volunteer. She left Belarus in 2022 after staying in a detention center for 301 days. She is telling her story of displacement.

No one persecutes us. Everything happens unexpectedly. I was a volunteer of the DissidentBy initiative. We were collecting and sending parcels for political prisoners in Belarus. In May 2021 we met a team of "Country for Living" and decided to cooperate to send the parcels more effectively. Since May 2021, I had been delivering the parcels to Volodarka, a pre-trial prison at Volodarskiy Street in Minsk. There was no persecution until the authorities decided the volunteer activity was illegal. Before the arrest, I had a feeling of surveillance, but I was sure I was just a volunteer. Later, it was announced that the arrest was a special operation of the KGB for "a cleansing of especially radical persons".

I was arrested on July 9, 2021. Eight people from KGB, OMON, and GUBOPiK, a special state department for fighting organised crimes and corruption; in fact, this department is one of the main entities participating in the suppression of the activists in Belarus. They broke into my apartment and to the apartments of another three people. I was detained, and after three days I learned from a lawyer that my accusation article is not related to volunteering. It was a

serious accusation of an attempt to seize the power in an unconstitutional way and for financing extremist organisations. So, there was nothing, and then it all happened out of a sudden.

In eight months, they didn't manage to prove anything, so they changed the article of accusation. At that moment I was accused of financing extremist activities. The article was not that serious, so it allowed the release of a person on a signature bond. During the trial, I was quietly selling my three-room apartment to exchange it for a two-room one. Also, I was preparing documents to bring my children out of the country and doing a visa for myself. The process was extremely hard and needed to be discrete, as a visit to an embassy is being considered as an attempt to escape.

On the last day of reading the case, we received visas. I sent my children to Warsaw. That day, I went to the investigative committee for the last time. After leaving it, I spent two weeks in the Belarusian forests. I had no phone and no connections. I was waiting for a window of opportunity. After two weeks, I reached the border with Lithuania and on August 2, I swam across the Neman River. The current was constantly carrying me back, especially in the middle of the river. I had no swimming equipment. Absolutely nothing. When I reached the bank, I just started crying.

I was lucky to find a jeep of the border control around 200 meters away. They told me to ask for a political asylum. None of them could understand how I had managed to swim across the river, especially its widest part while having nothing on me. But I had a chance of being sentenced to 12 years of imprisonment behind me and a great fear pushing me forward. The Lithuanians helped me a lot. They helped me to get warmer and brought me to the city. The next day they interrogated me and everything necessary was done. They welcome us in a very good manner. I spent one month in Lithuania, while my children were in Poland. The eldest started working, the youngest was taken in by a family. In a month I received international protection in Poland and moved to Poland.

Some foundations helped me a lot. I had tremendous problems with my back. The whole year passed already, and I don't really know what was in this year. There were lots of expenses. I had the money from selling the apartment and some other support. But now it's over. Also, my husband left me alone with a child. I don't work, I just continue volunteering. I help people to escape arrests and to leave the country. I helped to bring cars to Ukraine. But I don't get any money for this. I don't know how to live further, alone, with a 7-year-old child. Recently, we had to move to another apartment. Also, I got into a car accident when I learned a political

prisoner Ales Pushkin had died. In general, one year after getting to security, I started therapy and taking antidepressants.

Darya Rubleuskaya is a human rights defender, and a former student activist. She left Belarus in the autumn of 2020.

I am an employee of Viasna, a human rights centre Viasna. Before my departure, I had been monitoring peaceful protests since August 2020. In September 2020 my colleague Marfa Rabkova was arrested. After a while, we learned that the authorities were preparing for my arrest. The reason is that the authorities didn't know why we were monitoring the peaceful protests, so they considered it as a preparation, participation, and coordination of the mass public order violations. It was the first reason for my departure.

I was at work when I realised I needed to leave. I talked to Ales Bialiatski. I had three days to pack my belongings. First, I had a reaction of rejection. It was October 2020, the protests continued, and by that moment there were not many people who left the country. I didn't understand why I had to leave the country. It felt weird. I thought I was leaving for a month before everything would become clear about the case of Marfa. There was a plan to spend that month in Georgia, to fix my health a bit. But in the process, it became clear that the plan was falling apart. In a month after my departure, there was Black Thursday, when 12 students and 1 university teacher was arrested. I was named in that case as well.

I departed for Ukraine with a morning flight from Minsk. My friend saw me off. I asked my parents not to arrive for a reason. I was afraid to pass the control. I was absolutely terrified, but everything went fine. I was supported and helped by my colleagues. When I arrived in Ukraine, colleagues from the Chernihiv Human Rights House helped me – there was a shelter organised for activists there. First, I stayed in Kyiv, then in Chernihiv, then Kyiv again, Tbilisi and Vilnius. The Ukrainian period lasted around two months. Over that time, I managed to establish good connections with the Ukrainian youth organisations in Kyiv. Also, during that time, the arrest of students happened, as well as the first mass emigration of the other students. So, we created shelters for students in Ukraine.

It was a very tough period. Probably, the toughest. The period of rejection. I rejected communicating with anyone who went to emigration. I considered it as a betrayal and in that way, I would recognise my weakness. I constantly worked. I didn't go anywhere. I wrote a lot to political prisoners. After that I went to Georgia to a program of rehabilitation for human rights defenders. I stayed there for two and on half months during winter. It was a period of

freeze. I became very closed. I was waiting for something to change. And I slept a lot. It was not easy. I started therapy. I found there the same people and improved my health. After that, I went to Vilnius. I think I accepted the emigration only in Vilnius. I found calmness here. I realised that my life had to continue. Not in waiting for a new point in life, but here and now. I continued therapy. Here, in Vilnius, I had a dissociation attack, while I was treating secondary traumatisation. It happened because of the fact that I was documenting torture).

The hardest part was to go through the first stage. Now I feel pretty calm. I managed to adapt and to go through the traumas. I think I am not affected by this experience anymore.

Conclusion

These stories are just a few representations of the examples of what the Belarusians are going through because of the political crisis in Belarus, because of the efforts of the regime of Lukashenko. As mentioned above, the illegitimate government has recently adopted an amendment to the Law on Citizenship, so that to be able to deprive the Belarusians in exile of their citizenship. In addition, recently a new program was developed by the authorities and law enforcement of Lukashenko. Named "A Road Home," the program is aimed at bringing people to Belarus from exile. The authorities lie to people that despite the previous politically motivated persecution, the people who apply for it will receive the guarantees of safety for the return. In fact, when people return home, they are being arrested. Thus, the persecution of Belarusians doesn't stop with a forced displacement. The regime of Lukashenko has created the conditions in which people have to flee the country to escape torture and inhumane treatment, but after fleeing they meet the conditions of a distanced persecution, and an unknown future in sense of their legal status.

Even though there is almost no news about the level of repressions in Belarus, they continue to happen daily. Activists, academics, the participants of protests, and other people are being arrested and unlawfully sentenced to imprisonment every day. People still flee the country. It is still unsafe to stay there. The recent news mainly covers Belarus being a co-aggressor in the Russian war in Ukraine, so this is the reason why it is extremely important to keep Belarus in focus. This is the reason why it's crucial to shine a light on the atrocities happening to the Belarusians. This is also the reason why it is important to support the people who have been unlawfully placed into custody by the regime of Lukashenko.

Volya Vysotskaia was editor of the Telegram channel, the "Black Book of Belarus." According to Vyotskaia, the project "identified law enforcement officers and other

government authorities who committed human rights violations, hiding behind their high-power statuses.” It published the pictures and personal data of riot police officers, prosecutors, judges, and other officials to hold them accountable for their repression of Belarusian citizens demanding democracy and freedom. In October of a government agent infiltrated “Black Book” and leaked information about members. Member of “Black Book” were imprisoned, including Sofira Sapega whose Ryan Air flight was forced to land in Belarus in order to arrest her. Vysotskaia was forced to flee Belarus and continued her activism in exile. (To see full interview on which this profile is based, see <https://hrf.org/meet-hrf-freedom-fellow-volya-vysotskaia/>)