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Belarusians in exile since the 24th of February 2022 and their rights in Council of Europe member States



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Traineeship in the Migration Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of
Europe

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Abbreviations

BDF : Belarusian Democratic Forces

CM : Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe

PACE : Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

COE : Council of Europe

ST : Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya

SOC : The Group of Socialists, Democrats and Greens

EPP : The European People’s Party

EC/DA: The European Conservatives & Democratic Alliance

Introduction

After having written my Master's thesis on the impact of the War in Ukraine on the Russophone Minority of Latvia, I was eager to apply for a traineeship at an international organisation that concerned itself with the protection of national minority rights across Europe. At the beginning of October 2023 I applied for an internship at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and towards the end of November 2023 I was informed that I had been shortlisted for a traineeship in the Committee for Migration.

Since the 4th of March 2024, I have been a trainee in the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. The supervisor I was assigned for this traineeship was Tatiana Termacic, head of the Secretariat of the Committee.

I spent January and February 2024 as an intern at the Belgian Embassy to Poland and Lithuania in Warsaw, Poland, so by the time the COE traineeship offer arrived I was well settled into my internship at the Embassy. I applied for various other internships, during the autumn of 2023, at organisations such as the OSCE, NATO and the European Parliament. My internship offer at the Belgian Embassy in Warsaw arrived at the end of October 2023. Following this offer I stopped applying for internships as I knew I would be guaranteed work experience at the Embassy from the beginning of January to the end of May 2024.

I received my traineeship offer on the 5th of February 2024, roughly a month before the traineeship was due to begin on the 4th of March. This meant that I had to decide on whether to stay in Warsaw and continue my internship at the Belgian Embassy or to accept the offer from the Council of Europe and attempt to find accommodation in Strasbourg, where I would be based, in the few remaining weeks before the beginning of my traineeship. Ultimately, I decided to accept the traineeship offer from the Council of Europe due to its reputation as a well-established international organisation and because my potential job prospects would be improved following this opportunity.

During my 2-month internship at the Belgian Embassy in Warsaw my main working languages were French, English and Polish; the diplomats I worked with were all Belgian but members of staff such as the Ambassador's assistant, the communications' assistant and the Protocol Officer were all Polish. On a few occasions I also used my Dutch language skills for translation purposes. The skills I acquired were mainly linked to the preparation of social media posts for Facebook and Twitter using Canva, a graphic design platform that provides

tools for social media graphics. Another responsibility I had at the Belgian Embassy in Poland was researching the Polish media for information that was relevant to the Embassy's work. My internship took place in the aftermath of the 2023 Polish parliamentary elections, during which the ruling Law and Justice populist party (PiS) was ousted by a coalition of Donald Tusk's Civic Coalition (KO) and other centre-left parties¹. However, following the election the situation remained extremely volatile, notably marked by the Wasik and Kaminski scandal².

The other tasks I was given during my internship at the Belgian Embassy in Warsaw, which coincided with the Belgian EU presidency, were assisting the Embassy staff in organising events and official visits. The highlight of my internship was the visit of the Belgian Prime Minister, Alexander De Croo, to the Embassy, on his way to Kyiv on the 23th of February 2024. Furthermore, I was also tasked with producing daily press reviews on the state of affairs in Lithuania, with a particular focus on the political and military situations in the country. This helped me develop an interest in Lithuania and provided an interesting comparison to the research I had already done on Estonia and Latvia in the past.



Photo of the (former) Belgian Prime Minister's, Alexander De Croo's, visit to the Embassy.

¹ TILLES Daniel, *Polish election result: ruling PiS party top but opposition have majority*, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2023/10/17/polish-election-result-ruling-pis-party-top-but-opposition-have-majority/> , 17 octobre 2023, consulté le 23 juin 2024.

² *Opposition politicians try to storm Polish parliament*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-politicians-mariusz-kaminski-maciej-wasik-storm-parliament/> , 7 février 2024, consulté le 23 juin 2024.

At the Council of Europe, my main working languages were English, French and, to a lesser extent, Russian. The two official languages of the Council of Europe are English and French, meaning that all documents had to be translated into both languages. The Committee of Migration which I worked in mostly used French as its main language of communication and would often ask me to proofread documents in English. I also carried out research tasks on migration policies; this included researching the needs and challenges of public and private actors involved in migration management, as well as the differences in legislation concerning migrant smuggling between COE member States. Apart from drafting research reports, I contributed to the minutes of Committee meetings and provided more general administrative assistance.

Tatiana Termacic, my supervisor, was the Head of the Secretariat but I also worked with the other secretaries of the Committee as well as my supervisor's assistant. The Migration Committee of the PACE cooperates closely with the Democratic Forces of Belarus, led by Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. On several occasions I would contact one of her representatives, Anatoly Lebedko, using Russian as the language of communication. I spent a substantial amount of time helping to organise a conference held at the beginning of June 2024 on how member states of the Council of Europe can help Belarusians in exile. Ever since the 2020 protests after the rigged elections in Belarus, some 200 to 500 000 Belarusians were forced to flee their country. These politically displaced persons face common challenges such as obtaining visa and residence permits, access to physical and mental health care, and the possibility for Belarusian businesses to be run from abroad³. In this internship report I'd like to explore **how the Council of Europe has adopted a new approach towards Belarusians in exile since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, and look at whether the war in Ukraine has worsened their positions, or rather helped raise awareness about their rights in the host countries.**

I will dedicate the first part of this report to explaining the administrative entities of the COE, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe works. I will then elaborate on how

³ *Belarusians in exile: an overlooked issue addressed by the Parliamentary Assembly*, <https://pace.coe.int/en/news/8955/belarusians-in-exile-an-overlooked-issue-addressed-by-the-parliamentary-assembly>, consulté le 14 mai 2024.

the Migration Committee works within this structure and examine how the Migration Committee engages itself in the subject of Belarusians in exile.



Picture of the PACE trainees and study visitors during the Aril part-session

Administrative entities of the Council of Europe

As the oldest European political organisation founded in 1949, the Council of Europe dedicates its work to promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law across Europe and beyond⁴. Similarly to the European Union, the Council of Europe is split into several different entities whose functions I will explain in this chapter.

The Committee of Ministers

The Committee of Ministers is the Council's lawful decision-making body. It consists of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of member states, who meet once a year. More regular work is carried out by the Permanent Representatives to the Council of Europe who meet on a weekly basis. Permanent representations to the Council of Europe resemble 'embassies' in Strasbourg and are mainly concentrated in the Orangerie district near the Council headquarters. Permanent Representatives are assisted by a Bureau, rapporteur groups, thematic coordinators and ad hoc working parties⁵.

The Secretary General

The Secretary General has the overall responsibility for the strategic management of the Council of Europe. Ms Pejčinović Burić is the current Secretary General after having been elected in June 2019⁶. Ms Burić has decided not to pursue re-election as Secretary General in June 2024. Her successor will most likely be one of the following 3 candidates to be elected by the Parliamentary Assembly during its part-session from the 24-28th of June 2024⁷:

⁴ *The Council of Europe at a glance - Portal - www.coe.int*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/the-council-of-europe-at-a-glance>, consulté le 24 mai 2024.

⁵ *Home - Committee of Ministers - www.coe.int*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cm>, consulté le 23 mai 2024.

⁶ *Secretary General - Secretary General - www.coe.int*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/secretary-general>, consulté le 23 mai 2024.

⁷ *Secretary General election: Committee of Ministers submits candidatures to Parliamentary Assembly - Portal - www.coe.int*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/secretary-general->

- Alain Berset (Switzerland)
- Indrek Saar (Estonia)
- Didier Reynders (Belgium)

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)

The Assembly is a parliamentary representation of all member states. A proportional number of MP's from each member state travel to Strasbourg 4 times a year for the Parliamentary part-sessions. This is different to the European Parliament which holds its own elections and who's MP's are permanently on site⁸. However, similarly to the European Parliament, the PACE does have its own political parties. These are the following ;

- The Group of Socialists, Democrats and Greens (SOC)⁹
- The European People's Party (EPP)¹⁰
- The European Conservatives Group & Democratic Alliance (EC/DA)¹¹ – the chairman from the Commission of Migration, Oleksii Goncharenko, is a member of this party.
- The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe¹²

[election-committee-of-ministers-submits-candidatures-to-parliamentary-assembly](#), consulté le 23 mai 2024.

⁸ *Parliamentary representation*, <https://pace.coe.int/en/pages/representation>, consulté le 24 mai 2024.

⁹ *Le Groupe SOC*, <https://www.socpace.org/le-groupe-soc/>, consulté le 24 mai 2024.

¹⁰ *History*, <http://www.epp-cd.eu/history/>, consulté le 24 mai 2024.

¹¹ *European Conservatives Group & Democratic Alliance (EC/DA)*, <https://pace.coe.int/en/pages/polgroup-13>, consulté le 24 mai 2024.

¹² *Home - ALDE-PACE*, <https://alde-pace.org/>, 5 février 2024, consulté le 24 mai 2024.

- The Unified European Left Group¹³

In total, the Assembly is made up out of 612 MP's with the delegations for member states ranging from 2 to 18 MP's. The political parties and their representatives within each delegation are to ensure a fair representation of the political spectrum of their respective national parliaments¹⁴. In terms of voting, a two-thirds majority is required for adopting draft recommendations, draft opinions and urgent procedures¹⁵. A pertinent example of this would be the Opinion passed by the Assembly on the 16th of March 2022, which stated that the Russian Federation could no longer be a member state of the Council of Europe¹⁶. Resolutions can also be adopted by the Assembly. These embody decisions, or expressions of view, taken by the Assembly on certain questions¹⁷.

The European Court on Human Rights

This is an international court set up in 1959, 10 years after the foundation of the COE. It rules on individual or state applications that deal with allegations of violations of civil and political rights set out in the European Convention of Human Rights. The Court's judgements are binding on the 46 member states of the COE and have led governments to alter their legislation and administrative practices in a wide range of areas. The Court's case-law ensures

¹³ *Unified European Left Group – at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe*, <https://gue-uel.org/>, 18 mai 2024, consulté le 24 mai 2024.

¹⁴ *Parliamentary representation*, <https://pace.coe.int/en/pages/representation>, consulté le 24 mai 2024.

¹⁵ *Assembly Procedure*, <https://pace.coe.int/en/pages/procedure>, consulté le 24 mai 2024.

¹⁶ *The Russian Federation is excluded from the Council of Europe - Portal - www.coe.int*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/the-russian-federation-is-excluded-from-the-council-of-europe>, consulté le 24 mai 2024.

¹⁷ *Assembly public documents*, <https://pace.coe.int/en/pages/official-documents>, consulté le 24 mai 2024.

that conventions are not forgotten and remain relevant, this is meant to consolidate the rule of law and democracy in Europe¹⁸.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

The Congress is responsible for strengthening democracy on a local and regional level and assessing the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Its role mainly consists of fostering dialogue between national governments and regional authorities through the COE's Committee of Ministers. The Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions make up the Congress. 306 representatives and 306 deputies are appointed to the Congress for a mandate of five years¹⁹.

The Commissioner for Human Rights

The Commissioner focuses on encouraging reform measures to achieve improvements in the respect for human rights and their protection. He or she cooperates with human rights monitoring mechanisms, national and international institutions such as the OSCE, the EU and the UN. Leading human rights NGO's, universities and think tanks also cooperate closely with the Commissioner²⁰.

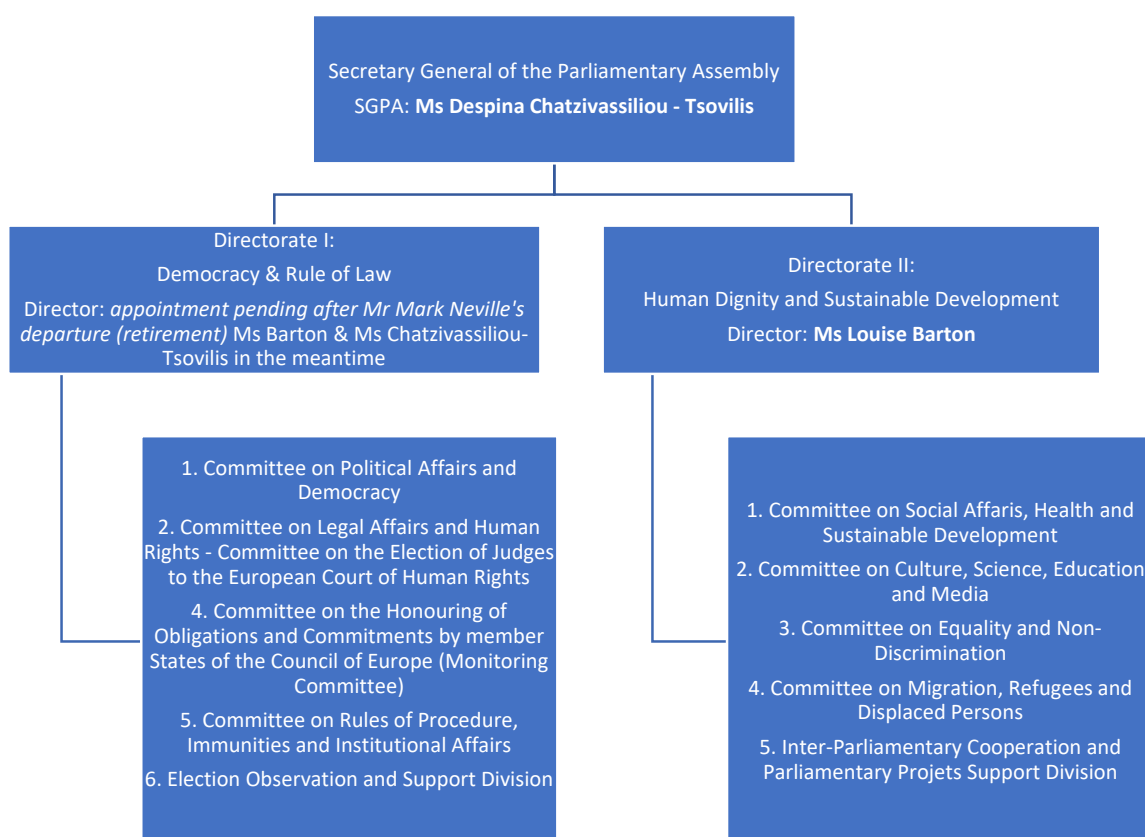
¹⁸ *General presentation of the European Court of Human Rights - ECHR - ECHR / CEDH*, <https://www.echr.coe.int/information-documents>, consulté le 28 mai 2024.

¹⁹ *A European Assembly of local and regional elected representatives - Congress of Local and Regional Authorities - www.coe.int*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/overview>, consulté le 28 mai 2024.

²⁰ *Mandate - Commissioner for Human Rights - www.coe.int*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/the-commissioner/mandate>, consulté le 28 mai 2024.

Structure of the Assembly and the Committee

I. Structure of the Assembly – Directorates



II. The Bureau of the Assembly, the Standing Committee, the Presidential Committee and the Joint Committee

The Bureau of the Assembly

The Bureau is responsible for the co-ordination of the Assembly and its committees. It assists the President in his or her functions and guides the external relations of the Assembly. The Bureau also takes decisions on the organisation of part-sessions and plenary sittings and is made up of the President, twenty Vice-Presidents, the Chairpersons of the political groups or their representatives as well as the Chairpersons of the PACE Committees or their substitutes. Chairpersons of national delegations of member states holding the current, the previous and the next two chairmanships of the Committee of Ministers are ex officio members of the Bureau entitled to vote. National delegations from bigger countries have permanent seats in

the Bureau, whereas delegations from smaller countries alternate. Other duties of the Bureau include preparation of the Assembly's agenda, reference of documents to committees, arrangement of day-to-day business and relations with other international bodies.

The Standing Committee

The Standing Committee consists of the Bureau and the Chairpersons of national delegations. It convenes twice a year in the member states which hold the rotating chairmanship of the Council of Europe, and its major task is to act on behalf of the PACE (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe) when the latter is not in session.

The Presidential Committee

The Presidential Committee consists of the President of the Assembly, the chairpersons of the political groups (or their representatives) and the Secretary General of the Assembly. The Presidential Committee is a consultative body for the Bureau and the President of the Assembly. It prepares meetings of the Bureau and is entrusted by it with liaison tasks²¹.

The Joint Committee

The Joint Committee is the forum set up to co-ordinate the activities of, and maintain good relations between, the Committee of Ministers and the Assembly. It is composed of a representative of each member State government and a corresponding number of representatives of the Assembly (the members of the Bureau and one representative of each parliamentary delegation of member States not represented on the Bureau). The Secretary General of the Council of Europe is entitled to attend the meetings of the Joint Committee in an advisory capacity²².

²¹ https://pace.coe.int/en/rules?id=ENToc_N0A29C3B0N0A2EBAF8#Format-It, consulté le 15 mai 2024.

²² https://pace.coe.int/en/rules?id=ENToc_N0A29C3B0N13F92378#Format-It, consulté le 15 mai 2024.

III. The Table Office (TO) and the Executive Team (ET)

The Table Office (TO)

The Table Office serves as the custodian of the Rules of Procedure of the Assembly and advises its members and secretaries of delegations and political groups as well as other officials on how best to achieve their objectives within these rules. They oversee organising part-sessions, publishing the Assembly’s adopted texts and receive tabled motions and statements from members²³.

The Executive Team (ET)

The Executive Team is composed of the senior management of the PACE Secretariat.

IV. Secretaries of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons

Tatiana Termacic
Head of the Secretariat

Angela Garabagiu
Secretary of the Sub-Committee on Refugee and Migrant Children and Young People

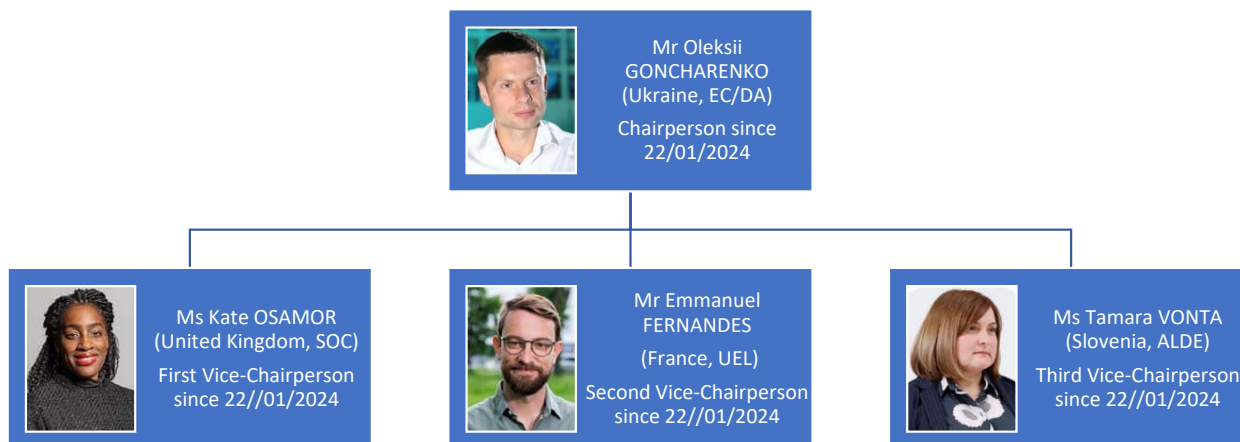
Gaël Martin-Micaleff
Secretary of the Sub-Committee on Diasporas and Integration

Marie Martin
Secretary on Sub-Committee on Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking in Human Beings

Clémentine Charlier
Assistant

²³ *Assembly Procedure*, <https://pace.coe.int/en/pages/procedure>, consulté le 15 mai 2024.

V. Bureau of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons²⁴



VI. Part-sessions and Committee meetings

The Migration Committee meets 4 times a year in Strasbourg during the Assembly's 4 part-sessions. Outside the part-sessions, the Committee convenes at the Council of Europe's office in Paris when deemed necessary. Moreover, once a year the Committee is entitled to hold a meeting outside of Strasbourg and Paris, following the acceptance of an invitation by a national parliament to host one of the Committee's meetings in their country. Sub-Committees usually meet during the part-sessions in Strasbourg²⁵.

During a Committee meeting;

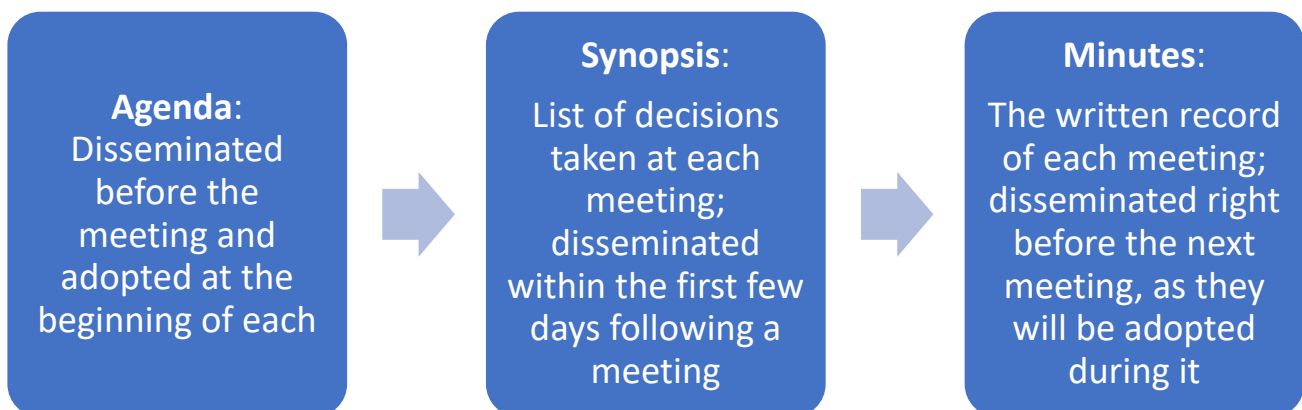
- the Committee adopts the agenda of the ongoing meeting, as well as the minutes of the previous one.
- the Committee holds hearings and exchanges of views with experts active in the fields of the currently prepared reports.
- the members elect the Committee's bureau.

²⁴ <https://pace.coe.int/en/aplist/committees/27/commission-des-migrations-des-refugies-et-des-personnes-deplacees>, consulté le 16 mai 2024.

²⁵ *Sessions of the Assembly and Standing Committees*, <https://pace.coe.int/en/pages/all-sessions>, consulté le 16 mai 2024.

- they appoint rapporteurs for the new reports.
- They choose their representatives for various networks and platforms (e.g. Parliamentary Platform for the rights of LGBTI people in Europe), as well as for other events (e.g. World Forum for Democracy).
- They approve the proposed changes to the composition of the three Sub-Committees.
- They authorise fact-finding visits.
- They examine the replies of the Committee of Ministers to the Assembly's recommendations prepared by the Committee.
- They consider draft reports and adopt draft resolutions and draft recommendations (which are then tabled for adoption by the Assembly or the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly).
- Committee members are free to raise any topic relevant to the mandate of the Committee that they believe will be of interest to the rest of the members and/or of importance for the Committee to examine/take action on²⁶.

Some important procedural documents used before, during and after each Committee meeting are the following:



Working documents of the Committee include reports/ explanatory memorandums, draft resolutions, draft recommendations and opinions. These are prepared by the respective rapporteurs with the assistance of the Secretariat. Rapporteurs can carry out fact-finding

²⁶ *Unofficial Induction guide for traineeship at the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2023, p.7*

visits accompanied by a member of staff in charge of their report to collect primary data. To do so, they need to secure the authorisation of the Committee.

In some cases, a Committee can be seized to provide an opinion on a report prepared by another Committee. Resolutions are addressed to the national parliaments of the member states, whilst recommendations are addressed to the governments through the Committee of Ministers²⁷.

The most common steps for the preparation of a report are²⁸:

A motion for a recommendation or resolution not exceeding 300 words is signed by at least twenty representatives or substitutes belonging to at least five national delegations, or be adopted with the requisite quorum by a committee.

A topic is proposed by the Bureau of the Assembly : the relevant Committee is asked to examine the issue by appointing a rapporteur to draft a report.

On the first day of the following part-session, the previous step is validated by the Assembly and the preparation of the report by the designated Committee starts.

A draft report and a draft resolution (and in some cases a draft recommendation) are adopted by the Committee.

A consideration of possible amendments to the resolution (and, if applicable, the recommendation) takes place by the Committee.

Adoption of the amendments and the draft resolution (and the recommendation), as a whole, by the Assembly.

²⁷ Op.cit., p.10

²⁸ https://pace.coe.int/en/rules?id=ENtoc_N0A29C3B0N0A353588#Format-It , consulté le 17 mai 2024.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Democratic Forces of Belarus

The Council of Europe played an important role in helping countries from the former Eastern Bloc transition to democracy during the 1990's and the early 2000's. Belarus submitted an application for membership in March 1993 but this application was suspended by the Parliamentary Assembly following the 1996 referendum in Belarus²⁹.

Between the 1996 referendum and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Lukashenka's regime cooperated irregularly with the Council of Europe; one day they would join the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings and the Group of States against corruption, the next day they would suspend all cooperation with the Council.

Belarus is the only remaining country in Europe to legally enforce the death penalty. This is something that the Council of Europe has fought long and hard for to abolish³⁰. My traineeship supervisor, Tatiana Termacic, actively pursued this cause. In 2021, as Head of the Coordination and International Cooperation Division at the Council of Europe, Ms Termacic gave a speech at the Fourteenth United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice in Japan, calling for the abolition of the death penalty³¹.

Following the falsified Belarusian presidential elections in 2020, the mass protests and exiles of Belarusian political activists, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya addressed the Committee of

²⁹ BLOCKER Joel, « Belarus: Council Of Europe's Assembly Considering Suspension », in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 11:18:33Z p.

³⁰ *Belarus: New death penalty law is the ultimate attack on human rights*, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/05/belarus-new-death-penalty-law-is-the-ultimate-attack-on-human-rights/>, 19 mai 2022, consulté le 22 mai 2024.

³¹ *Speech by Tatiana Termacic, Fourteenth United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice - Human Rights and Rule of Law - www.coe.int*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/human-rights-rule-of-law/speech-by-tatiana-termacic-fourteenth-united-nations-congress-on-crime-prevention-and-criminal-justice-2021>, consulté le 22 mai 2024.

Ministers for the first time in July 2022. She began her speech by labelling Belarus as a ‘shameful black hole’³², referencing the outdated use of capital punishment in her country. Tsikhanouskaya’s first appearance and speech at the Council of Europe marked the beginning of the cooperation between the Democratic Forces of Belarus and the Council. Tsikhanouskaya suggested that the Committee of Ministers establish a formal channel of communication between the Council and the Democratic Forces of Belarus. This led to the establishment of a Contact Group for the cooperation between the Council of Europe and, on the one hand, the Belarusian Democratic Forces and civil society, and on the other, Belarusian civil society³³. The work of this Contact Group for Belarus has resulted in the launching of a 15-point action plan to support civil society and opposition representatives³⁴.

The Council of Europe was the first international organisation to formalise its relationship with the Belarusian Democratic Forces. Despite this, it only became possible to truly engage with the BDF following the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in 2022 and its subsequent expulsion from the Council of Europe. Prior to this, the Lukashenka regime remained the main Belarusian interlocutor of the Council of Europe, even after the 2020 Belarusian protests³⁵.

³² ADMIN, *Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya’s speech at the 1439th Meeting of the Ministers’ Deputies Council of Europe*, <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/news/b3b90642f955458.html> , 6 juillet 2022, consulté le 22 mai 2024.

³³ *Contact Group on Belarus - Portal - www.coe.int*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/contact-group-on-belarus>, consulté le 22 mai 2024.

³⁴ *SG Inf(2020)18 Speaking Notes SG 1380 Deputies*, <https://rm.coe.int/list-of-council-of-europe-activities-planned-for-2023-annex-2761-4703-/1680aa0737>, consulté le 22 mai 2024.

³⁵ *Council of Europe - Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus*, <https://mfa.gov.by/en/multilateral/organization/list/bceb2bae0fb895c5.html>, consulté le 22 mai 2024.

The PACE plays a crucial role in cooperating with the BDF through regular contact with its representatives and their involvement, where needed, in the activity of the COE. The Assembly has adopted two reports on Belarus;

1. The first report on ‘Addressing the specific challenges faced by the Belarusians in exile’ by Luxembourg MP, Paul Galles, analyses the challenges faced by Belarusians who fled the Lukashenka regime and recommends practical solutions to the Council of Europe member states. These concern the entry and legal stay of Belarusians in exile, their freedom of movement, the consequences of the denial of consular services by the Belarusian state, and promoting Belarusian culture and identity abroad³⁶.
2. The second report on ‘A Democratic Future For Belarus’ by Finnish MP, Kimmo Kiljunen, calls on the Council of Europe member states to take measures to hold Lukashenka’s regime accountable for its actions, and seek redress for its victims, and to increase support for the Belarusian opposition in exile. The aim of the report is to establish a permanent representative delegation of the BDF in the PACE and a General Rapporteur³⁷ for a Democratic Belarus³⁸.

Delegations of the BDF only appear at the Council during Assembly part-sessions, usually to address matters that concern them directly. There is an office at the disposal of this delegation at the COE headquarters in Strasbourg³⁹. Previously this office was located in the Belarusian State University in Minsk.

³⁶ *Doc. 15783 - Report - Details tab*, <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/31822>, consulté le 22 mai 2024.

³⁷ A general rapporteur can be designated by Commissions for specific topics, rather than a single report.

³⁸ *Doc. 15892 - Report - Details tab*, <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/33223/>, consulté le 22 mai 2024.

³⁹ ADMIN, *Office of Democratic Belarus was launched in the Council of Europe*, <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/news/daa655fada72bd6.html> , 10 octobre 2023, consulté le 22 mai 2024.



Office of the BDF delegation to the PACE at the COE

It is important to note that this is the first time that the COE has established such a close and institutionalised relationship with a non-state entity. Only two years ago, the establishment of a contact group for a non-state entity would have been unthinkable. Nevertheless, without Belarus being a full member state, the BDF do not have a say in the steering of the COE and can only benefit from it. Therefore, even as leader of the BDF, Tikhanouskaya can only address the CM when invited. The BFD do not have representatives in the CM, do not participate in the development of new standards in the COE, cannot ratify treaties and, naturally, there can be no monitoring of the implementation of these standards at the national level. As a result, there is little reciprocity between the COE and the BDF; without Belarus being a full member state, the Council cannot benefit from all Belarusian experts in the relevant fields.

The COE's relationship with the BDF is a symbol of hope for the future. As noted by the PACE, since the fraudulent 2020 presidential elections, the Lukashenka regime has further repressed dissenting voices in Belarus. The regime's involvement in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine⁴⁰, the forced landing of a Ryanair passenger plane, and the

⁴⁰ Res. 2463 - Resolution - Adopted text, <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/31390/html>, consulté le 23 mai 2024.

weaponization of migration have all contributed to this worsening of relations⁴¹. I will now proceed to look at the conclusions drawn by the two PACE reports, which I previously mentioned, on Belarusians in exile and a Democratic Belarus.

⁴¹ *PACE President: “The ‘elections’ in Belarus are a travesty of democracy” - Portal - [www.coe.int](https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/pace-president-the-elections-in-belarus-are-a-travesty-of-democracy-), <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/pace-president-the-elections-in-belarus-are-a-travesty-of-democracy->, consulté le 23 mai 2024.*

‘Specific challenges faced by Belarusians in exile’ and ‘A democratic future for Belarus’

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022 helped to draw the Council of Europe’s attention to issues faced by Belarusians in exile. This is best shown through the two PACE reports ‘Addressing the specific challenges faced by the Belarusians in exile’ by Luxembourg MP, Paul Galles’ and ‘A Democratic Future For Belarus’ by Finnish MP, Kimmo Kiljunen. The first of these reports was published in June 2023⁴², whilst the latter was published more recently in January 2024⁴³.

Kimmo Kiljunen’s report gives a good overview of the impact of the Russian aggression against Ukraine on the international level by underlining that Belarus’s territory and infrastructure were used as a platform for Russia’s attack on Ukraine and even though the Belarusian military was not participating directly in Russia’s war, it provided the Russian army with full logistical and military medical support. Accordingly, Mr Kiljunen cites the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3314 (XXIX) which states that “the action of a State in allowing its territory, which it has at the disposal of another State, to be used by that other State for perpetrating an act of aggression against a third state”, qualifies as an act of aggression⁴⁴. As a result, the United Nations General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1 of the 2nd of March 2022 deplored Belarus’s involvement in Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine⁴⁵.

Furthermore, Mr Kiljunen recounts that 2150 Ukrainian children have been illegally transferred from Russian occupied territories in Ukraine to Belarus. This is a blatant violation of international law. Mr Kiljunen emphasises that accountability must be sought for the

⁴² Doc. 15783 - Report - Details tab, <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/31822>, consulté le 4 juin 2024.

⁴³ Doc. 15892 - Report - Details tab, <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/33223>, consulté le 4 juin 2024.

⁴⁴ KILJUNEN Kimmo, *A Democratic future for Belarus*, PACE, Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, 2024, p. 15.

⁴⁵ A/RES/ES-11/1, <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FRES%2FES-11%2F1&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>, consulté le 4 juin 2024.

human rights violations for failing to return children illegally transferred to Russia and Belarus⁴⁶.

The report on ‘a Democratic Future for Belarus’ concludes that a reestablishment of the COE’s relations with the Lukashenka regime is not currently viable. This is mostly due to Lukashenka’s own response to democratic processes in 2020 and his support for Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2022. However, Mr Kiljunen also talks about other events in his report such as the forced landing of the Ryanair passenger plane and subsequent arrest of Belarusian journalist, Roman Protasevich, as well as the instrumentalization of migration from 2021 onwards⁴⁷. In his conclusion, Kiljunen outlines 4 pillars for guiding future action with regards to prospects for Belarus’s democratic future⁴⁸.

1. Support:

Member states of the COE and international organisations should actively engage in strengthening the capacity of Belarusian people to promote democratic principles, human rights and the rules of law. A transformation of the Coordination Council (created by ST in August 2020 as a representative body of democratic forces and civil society in Belarus⁴⁹) into a fully representative and elected body would help to reconfigure the dialogue between the PACE and the BDF. Furthermore, Kiljunen encourages national parliaments, that have not already done so, to establish parliamentary friendship groups, to create a network of exchange on the best measures to support Belarusians in exile. Representatives to international organisations such as the COE, the PACE and the EU should also have a place within the BDF to enhance dialogue at the institutional level. Further support to human rights defenders, lawyers and civil society organisations who assist political prisoners and their families, should also be provided⁵⁰.

2. Pressure:

⁴⁶ KILJUNEN Kimmo, *A Democratic future for Belarus*, op. cit., p. 15.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 18

⁴⁹ *Coordinating Council*, <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/coordinating-council.html>, consulté le 12 juin 2024.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19

Further sanctions against the Lukashenka regime should be implemented. In addition to this, sanction mechanisms need to be further strengthened to address loopholes and sanctions evasion. Finally, Kiljunen reiterates the Assembly's opposition to Russian and Belarusian athletes participating at the Paris Olympic Games 2024⁵¹.

3. Accountability

Kiljunen stresses the importance of combatting impunity for the perpetrators of human rights violations and underlines the Assembly's call for the COE member states to support and contribute to establishing a special international tribunal for crimes against humanity committed against the Belarusian people. Furthermore, this accountability also extends to Russia and its failure to return Ukrainian children illegally transferred to Belarus. For justice to be done and to hold perpetrators accountable, support for human rights defenders and civil society must be maintained for the monitoring, documenting and reporting of grave human right violations and crimes against humanity⁵².

4. Commitment

Kiljunen ends his report by stating that it is crucial to ensure long-term institutional support for the Belarusian Democratic Forces, so that they can maintain their influence in the face of repression and the multifaceted challenges. Pledges to support the democratic aspirations of ST's Transitional Cabinet are rooted in the values of the COE. It is once more reiterated that the COE's commitment to supporting Belarusian civil society and the democratic forces is key⁵³.

Paul Galles's report on 'Specific challenges faced by Belarusians in exile' emphasises the involuntary consequences of sanctions imposed on the Lukashenka regime. Galles argues that removing legal administrative and practical obstacles faced by Belarusians in exile should be a priority for the Council of Europe member states, because a democratic Belarus is part of

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19-20

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 19-20

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 20

the solution to security in Europe. The BDF's efforts to alleviate challenges faced by their compatriots abroad should be supported whilst focusing on the integration of Belarusians in exile in their host countries⁵⁴.

⁵⁴ GALLES Paul, *Adressing the specific challenges faced by Belarusians in exile*, PACE, Committee for Miration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, 2024, p. 21

The Luxembourg Solutions

As a follow-up to Paul Galles's report on the 'Specific challenges faced by Belarusians in exile', a conference on 'the role of national parliaments in addressing the challenges faced by Belarusians in exile' was organised by the Migration Committee of the COE. This conference took place in the Grand Chamber of the Deputies of Luxembourg with participation of the BDF, national parliamentarians of Democratic Belarus friendship groups, parliamentarians of the Migration Committee, journalists, representatives of NGO's and others. It took place from the 6th to the 7th of June 2024, and I spent a significant part of my traineeship at the COE organising this event.

My role in organising the conference was largely administrative. Along with my supervisor's assistant, I oversaw the communication with the participants. This involved sending them information forms to fill in (with their addresses, phone numbers and bank details for reimbursements), invitations and various other enquiries. I travelled with my supervisor and her assistant to Luxembourg for the conference during which I took notes for all the panels. Afterwards, I was tasked with drafting a report of the conference to present the proposed solutions for helping Belarusians in exile.

The conference was organised into 6 different panels with introductory and conclusive speeches at the beginning and at the end of each one. Each panel had 3 speakers, as well as a moderator. The panels were divided into the following subjects, based on Paul Galles's report;

- Legal Entry and stay
- Threats to freedom of movement and denial of consular services
- Reprisals at home
- Access to education
- Pursuing a professional career in exile
- Preserving and promoting Belarusian cultural identity

Many, but not all, of the speakers came from the BDF and Belarusian civil society. The main objective of the conference was to discuss how national authorities and parliaments of member states could support recommendations made by the PACE. In this case, the relevant document is Resolution number 2499 (2023) which calls upon member States to recognise the unique situation in which Belarusians in exile find themselves in and presents an array of

solutions to their plight⁵⁵. During the conference in Luxembourg, various participants presented their own personal solutions for the six different categories presented above.

I. Legal stay and entry

In the panel on legal entry and stay, 4 main topics were discussed. These were the facilitation of obtaining visas for Belarusian citizens, the creation of consultative centres, raising awareness about Belarus and the role played by international organisations.

For visa facilitation, it was said that the Contact Group on Belarus at the Council of Europe should prioritise producing a draft resolution on visa facilitation for Belarusians. A coordinated policy on visa facilitation in COE member states would facilitate the development of a prospective visa-free regime for Belarusians across Europe. Furthermore, member States should ensure asylum rights for Belarusians and consider issuing multiple-entry visas to those who need them.

Since Lukashenka's Decree n.278 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Belarusians abroad have faced greater administrative difficulties. In order to support the Belarusian Democratic Forces' efforts to provide alternative consular services, it seems necessary to create a network of administrative consultative centres across Europe. Furthermore, in terms of member States' legislation, there is a need for there to be a legal basis upon which migration structures may offer administrative arrangements, among other solutions, to Belarusians.

International organisations should play a leading role in facilitating the legal entry and stay of Belarusians abroad. The COE should collaborate directly with the IOM and UNHCR, concerning the issue of Belarusians and the repressions of the Lukashenka regime. Coordinated and consolidated responses are needed at an international level to assist governments in implementing recommendations, with the cooperation of the BDF. Furthermore, preventative measures must be taken to stop the Lukashenka regime from instrumentalising Interpol for politically motivated extraditions. This is illustrated by the

⁵⁵ *Res. 2499 - Resolution - Adopted text*, <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/32899/html>, consulté le 18 juin 2024.

recent case of the Belarusian filmmaker and journalist, Andrei Gnet, who was detained in Serbia in October 2023⁵⁶.

With regards to legal entry and stay of Belarusians, a general effort should be made by member States to raise awareness about the distinction between the Lukashenka regime and the people of Belarus. This includes raising awareness about the Belarusian language, which is all too often overlooked or perceived as a linguistic offshoot of the Russian language. These steps will help to foster favourable attitudes towards Belarusians fleeing from the Lukashenka regime⁵⁷.

II. Threats to freedom of movement and denial of consular services

The next panel on the freedom of movement and denial of consular services to Belarusian citizens discussed the following topics: the new Belarusian passport, foreigners' passports, apostille requirements, migration legislation, international protection and expired passports. Only a small minority of Belarusians benefit from international protection, making these topics even more important. The Lukashenka regime continues to use consular services as a weapon against the Belarusian people, whilst host countries of Belarusians in exile often require documentation that is impossible to obtain.

The project of an alternative, democratic Belarusian passport is by far the most ambitious project of the BDF⁵⁸. Participants of the panel explained that this project would require the establishment of a new system with an official issuing authority and the recognition of other countries. An unconventional step must be taken to realise this project and create a precedent. The passport of the Order of Malta was mentioned as an example to follow. Although it is not representative of a state in exile, the passport of the Order of Malta is not linked to a specific territory. An alternative Belarusian passport would not only be a remedy for Lukashenka's

⁵⁶ *Serbia court decides to extradite Belarusian filmmaker to Belarus*, <https://www.jurist.org/news/2024/06/serbia-court-decides-to-extradite-belarusian-filmmaker-to-belarus/>, 16 juin 2024, consulté le 18 juin 2024.

⁵⁷ The role of national parliament in addressing the challenges faced by Belarusians in exile. *The Luxembourg Solutions*, 6-7 June 2024, Chambre des Députés du Grand Duché

⁵⁸ AL, 8 "hot" questions about new Belarusian passport, <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/news/8-hot-questions-about-new-belarusian-passport.html>, 28 mars 2024, consulté le 19 juin 2024.

decree n.278, but also a precedent for helping other undocumented refugees and migrants across the world.

A foreigner's passport (sometimes called an 'alien's passport') is a travel document for which foreigners can apply if they do not have a valid travel document and are unable to obtain a new one in their home country due to reasons beyond their control⁵⁹. Within a week of Lukashenka's decree n.278, the website pashpart.org was created, with clear instructions on how to obtain a foreigner's passport in over 30 countries. Participants of the panel agreed that foreigners' passports should be made available to Belarusians in exile, not only refugees. This also applies to Belarusians whose passports are still valid.

Furthermore, Belarusians should be exempt from providing apostilles on documents that can only be obtained in Belarus. In Austria, Germany and Lithuania it is possible to avoid providing an apostille on a document by justifying the impossibility of obtaining it. Solutions to the challenges faced by Belarusians in exile should be sought within existing migration legislation. Participants mentioned that Poland was extending temporary residence permits for Ukrainian nationals under temporary protection, from 1 to 3 years. It was agreed that the same ought to be done for Belarusians in exile across Europe.

Concerning international protection, it was said that authorities should not confiscate passports of those who seek international protection, after they have been verified, and residence permits should not be cancelled when receiving international protection. For instance, in Slovenia it is possible for both these statuses to coexist. Moreover, it necessary to recognise expired Belarusian passports as valid. Austria, Estonia, Lithuania and Sweden have all recognised expired Belarusian passports during legislation procedures. Countries should remove obligations to justify the impossibility of obtaining a new Belarusian passport and recognise that Belarus is unsafe to travel to⁶⁰.

III. Reprisals at home

The next panel discussed ways in which national parliaments of COE member States could help to alleviate the continuing repressions of the Lukashenka regime in Belarus. Increasing

⁵⁹ *Alien's Passport*, <https://frs.gov.cz/en/administrative-proceedings/aliens-passport/>, consulté le 19 juin 2024.

⁶⁰ The role of national parliament in addressing the challenges faced by Belarusians in exile. *Op.cit.*

numbers of political dissidents are imprisoned in Belarus and their relatives who remain in the country are in danger. There are over 1500 political prisoners in Belarus, who have been imprisoned for exercising their basic human rights such as their freedom of speech, assembly, and association. Targeting families of the prisoners can often involve the denial of consular services, harassment at work and threats of physical violence.

The panel first spoke of the importance of forming alliances between NGO's and human rights organisations, who support Democratic Belarus, and working in tandem with the Belarusian Democratic Forces. Closer cooperation between these organisations is likely to increase the impact of their initiatives. It was proposed that a European conference of NGO's and human rights organisations, who support Belarus, should be organised. The establishment of these alliances would also enable the further development of services, such as for those Belarusians who suffer from mental trauma.

Furthermore, it was emphasised that parliamentarians can support political prisoners in Belarus by becoming their 'godparent' and speaking on their behalf. There are already 415 parliamentarians involved in this campaign, although many have remained inactive since joining the initiative. A revival of the Godparent campaign is needed for the many remaining political prisoners in Belarus.

Leading on from this, the panel explained that national parliaments should enact laws that provide asylum and protection for political refugees and their families. This includes simplifying processes for obtaining visas and residency permits, ensuring access to social services, and protection against deportation. By offering a haven, we stand in solidarity with those fleeing persecution.

Increasing public awareness of the worsening situation regarding reprisals in Belarus was also outlined as an important factor. National parliaments should organise hearings, debates, and public forums to keep the plight of Belarusian political prisoners in the public eye. This also involves working with media and civil society organisations to highlight individual cases and the broader issue of state repression. Moreover, it was mentioned that the establishment of support networks for the families of political prisoners is vital. These networks can provide financial assistance, psychological support, and legal advice. National parliaments can collaborate with NGOs to ensure that these families do not feel abandoned. These efforts must be coordinated and planned in the long-term so that those who remain in Belarus do not feel abandoned but supported by the international community.

Lastly, the panel spoke of how COE member States should help Belarusians in exile integrate into host societies. Empowering exiles, not only helps them to rebuild their lives, but also strengthens the global campaign for a Democratic Belarus⁶¹.

IV. Access to education

Political unrest and subsequent repressions following the presidential elections in Belarus in 2020 led to the exile of university professors, students and schoolchildren seeking refuge in Europe. Participants of the panel on ‘access to education’ addressed issues concerning the pursuit of education and academic freedom among Belarusians in exile. During this panel it was emphasised that the Lukashenka regime is doing its utmost to prevent school and university graduates from moving abroad. One of the cruel methods of doing this is by instructing schools and universities not to give diplomas directly to graduates, thereby retaining proof of their achievement. The participants of the panel underlined that Belarusians in exile should have the right to study their native language and access decent education abroad. Since Belarusian independence, the development of a strong civil society in education has enabled the people of Belarus to remain part of the European family, despite the oppressions of the Lukashenka regime.

Parliamentarians of the COE member States were asked to support the creation of diverse forms of education for the strengthening of Belarusian national identity in exile. This includes the establishment of public schools or classes taught in the Belarusian language, as well as Sunday schools, distance learning programs and educational camps. Furthermore, an EU level support program for Belarusian language education would be helpful for all Belarusian children in exile. This has already been done for Ukrainian refugee children⁶² and the same should be done for Belarusians in exile, bearing in mind that these educational support programs should remain active until it is safe to return to the country of origin.

Moreover, Belarusian teachers in exile face a similar number of challenges with access to education abroad, and it was suggested that admittance procedures for teachers from Belarus should be simplified in host countries. Furthermore, the most widely used school textbooks in

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Fleeing Ukraine: support for education - European Commission*, https://eu-solidarity-ukraine.ec.europa.eu/information-people-fleeing-war-ukraine/fleeing-ukraine-support-education_en, consulté le 22 juin 2024.

Europe should be translated and adapted in the Belarusian language. This is crucial to help develop pupils' civic and social competences.

The panel then went on to talk about how collaboration with civil society in Belarus, through education, remains vital; the future of both Belarus and its diaspora will be determined by developments within the country. They then spoke about the need for scholarships and funding for researchers and prospective PhD students. The European University Association and Scholars at Risk have already called on the European Commission to establish a dedicated fellowship program for Belarusian researchers at risk. This would enable the establishment of special scholarship programs for writing and defending PhD theses, available to Belarusians abroad. International research projects between Belarusian scientists and scientists from their host countries should also receive funding, as well as joint publications, by scholars from Belarus and other European countries, in recognised international journals and publishing houses.

In response to Paul Galles's report on 'Addressing the specific challenges faced by the Belarusians in exile'⁶³, the Council of Europe launched an Action Plan to support Belarusian democratic forces and civil society. This includes human rights training, study visits for legal professionals, and workshops for journalists in exile. The plan promotes non-discrimination and democratic governance and includes specific actions to support journalists and raising awareness on key issues such as the abolition of the death penalty and gender equality.

Lastly a discussion took place to analyse the envisaged project of the European Qualification Passport for refugees⁶⁴. This project, launched by the Council of Europe in 2017, would help to recognise the education of Belarusians in exile and assist them in continuing their studies or schooling in their host countries⁶⁵.

V. Preserving and promoting Belarusian cultural identity

⁶³ *Doc. 15783 - Report - Details tab*, op. cit.

⁶⁴ *European Qualifications Passport for Refugees - Education*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/recognition-of-refugees-qualifications>, consulté le 22 juin 2024.

⁶⁵ The role of national parliament in addressing the challenges faced by Belarusians in exile, op. cit.

The last panel of the conference was on preserving and promoting Belarusian cultural identity whilst in exile. Preserving traditional Belarusian cultural heritage in exile is extremely important. Belarusians in exile have been cut off from their roots and identity, faced with the erasure of history and aggressive russification in their home country. Since the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the russification of Belarus has increased, as well as the militarisation of social life and education. Belarus is flooded by cheap Russian popular culture, theatres only have Russian plays and the main cultural partner, in all spheres in Belarus, is the Russian Federation. Participants in this panel went on to state that the expansion of Russian culture would mean the destruction of Belarusian culture, and that language and culture would continue to be the determining factors for forming young Belarusians' identity in exile.

During this panel, a consensus was reached that national parliaments of COE member States should invest in a new generation of Belarusian cultural managers. This next generation of cultural managers would firmly embrace Belarus as part of the European family. Investment is needed in extracurricular programs and academic scholarships in European institutions, covering mentoring fees, training programs based on contemporary business models, and research and development projects. These strategies would help young Belarusians to embrace a different set of values, to the ones propagated by the Lukashenka regime.

Another need that was discussed by the panel was the support needed for the translation of Belarusian artistic, scientific and research texts, written in the Belarusian language, into the language(s) of host countries. A special translation program ought to be established to support the Belarusian language as a language under the threat of extinction, as classified by UNESCO Atlas. Collaboration should also be maintained with the Institute for Belarusian books, PEN Belarus.

Furthermore, it was mentioned that member States' curatorship over national art industries, could help to provide aid to Belarusian artists and art managers in exile. This includes direct financial assistance for the creation of Belarusian products for national and international promotion. These can be traditional areas of artistic production such as cinema, theatre music, art, dance, as well as more experimental art genres. In addition to this, it was mentioned that support of Belarusian cultural institutions and sub-sectors is essential. Funds should be created for Belarusian cinema, film production, theatre, history, literature, and other cultural activities. Those member States that do not yet have Institutes of Belarusian culture should seek to establish them. It was emphasised that the establishment of institutes of Belarusian

culture in host countries would facilitate cooperation with the BDF, diaspora, and other cultural organisations.

The participants also spoke about cultural diplomacy as a set of measures to strengthen cultural ties between the Belarusian people and their host countries. This could include financial support for initiatives organised by Belarusian artists and the organisation of cultural events aimed at promoting Belarusian culture, such as Belarusian art exhibitions. Participants encouraged national parliaments to do their utmost to push the boundaries of the typical, often nationalistic, and exclusive, narratives around identity and culture, and to engage young people, especially young Belarusians in exile, but not only, in deliberation about the contours of Belarusian identity in the current and future reality.

Finally, the panel was concluded with a plea for political support for non-traditional, alternative, cultural initiatives that seek to engage young Belarusians in dialogue and discourse on Belarusian identity⁶⁶.



Photo of the participants of the conference on the role of national parliaments in addressing challenges faced by the Belarusians in exile. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya is standing in the front row (centre-right).

⁶⁶ *Ibid*

Conclusion

Rights of Belarusian exiles in COE member States have undoubtedly been put in the spotlight by the consequences of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Lukashenka regime's participation in the aggression pushed COE member States to tighten restrictions against Belarusians. With time, awareness spread about the injustices that Belarusian exiles were forced to experience abroad. Reforms have been made, and special mentions should be given to the national governments of Poland and Lithuania for their efforts to create a more favourable environment for Belarusian exiles.

However, progress has been slow, and a lot remains to be done. Belarusian exiles have not been granted the same level of support as Ukrainian refugees. This is despite European countries being aware of the danger posed to Belarusian exiles, which includes the presence of the Belarusian KGB in Europe, notably in Lithuania⁶⁷. I personally spoke to a Belarusian exile living in Vilnius who told me that he felt unable to attend rallies to support Ukraine in its war effort or any other public rally related to politics for that matter. Therefore, it seems pertinent to conclude that the Russian aggression against Ukraine did help to raise awareness about Belarusian exiles and the COE has, without a doubt, adopted a bold approach, however the positions of many Belarusian exiles remain burdensome and much remains to be done.

My experience as a trainee at the Migration Committee in the PACE has been valuable and enriching. All the members of the secretariat of the committee have been extremely helpful in helping me understand the functioning of the Committee at the Council of Europe. I remain grateful to Tatiana Termacic for having allowed me to travel with her on mission to Luxembourg, and having introduced me to the intriguing subject of Belarusians in exile.

⁶⁷ *Belarusian KGB activity in Lithuania at 'historical high' – intelligence,*

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