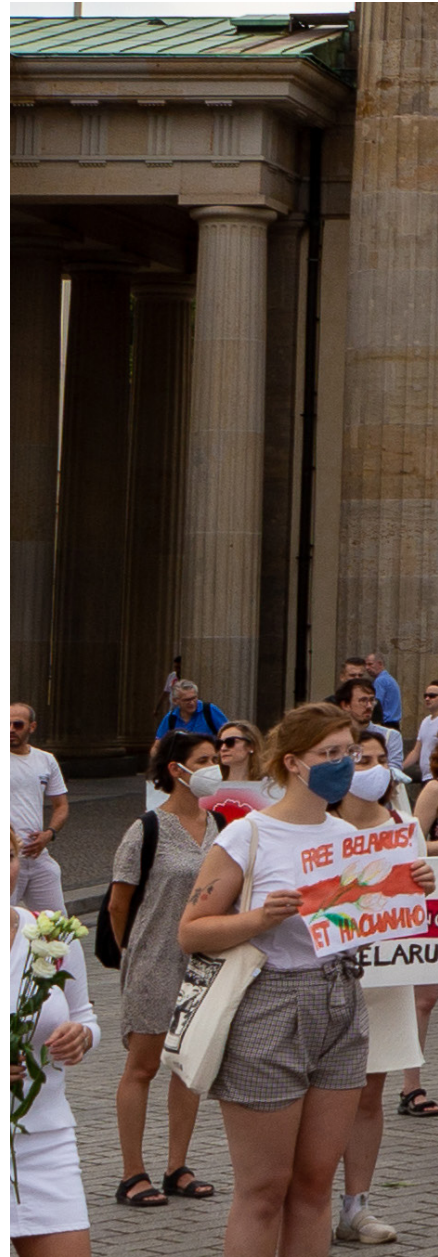


Report



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The Strategic Potential of Democratic Exiles

Belarusian Experiences

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ReThink.Democracy
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Washington, DC · Ankara · Belgrade · Berlin · Brussels · Bucharest · Paris · Warsaw

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Summary

Europe and the United States host growing communities of individuals and organizations that have been forced to flee countries with authoritarian regimes because of their pro-democracy activities. Can these exiled actors continue to contribute meaningfully to their countries' democratic development? If so, how can Western policymakers and donors most effectively support them and strengthen their efforts?

Belarus presents an instructive case study for answering these questions. Belarusians have been forced into exile since soon after President Aliaksandr Lukashenka came to power in 1994, with the outflow of political exiles over the years fluctuating in response to cyclical government repression, which tended to intensify during election periods and ease in the years between. This trend held until the stolen presidential election in 2020 provoked massive public protests. The regime shifted from targeting specific individuals to pursuing entire categories of people, such as those who attended a protest or gave money to a pro-democracy civic group, and forced the closure or departure of independent media and civil society organizations. As 2025 begins and Lukashenka claims a new presidential term, the regime is more reliant than ever on its repressive measures to silence or force the departure of its real and perceived opponents.

Many of Belarus's displaced activists, journalists, civil society members, political leaders, and likeminded compatriots have remained engaged in their work, attempting to support, inform, sustain, and grow the democratic cause in Belarus. The largest communities of Belarusian exiles are in neighboring Lithuania and Poland, with sizeable communities also present in Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, and countries further afield, forming a constellation of independent media outlets, civil society organizations, and individual activists across Europe.

The longevity, creativity, and achievements of this Belarusian exile community over the last two decades, and particularly during and since the 2020 election, show the potential short-term and longer-term impacts of pro-democracy exiles. Their key contributions have included:

- o Providing essential, secure "offshore" administrative and other support to counterparts still in the country
- o Ensuring the Belarusian public retained access to accurate reporting about their country and its leaders
- o Playing essential roles during the 2020 protest movement that could not be safely performed inside, including sharing information, coordinating protests, and fundraising
- o Enabling new exiles to quickly settle in host countries and to resume their activities
- o Fostering a stronger sense of Belarusian identity at home and among the diaspora
- o Elevating Belarus on the international agenda, which ensured greater Western understanding and support for its democratic movement

The Belarus experience also underscores the need for tailored assistance programs if exiles are to continue contributing to democratic movements in their countries of origin. Many Belarusian exiles received support over the last two decades from a small number of western partners. One of the most active has been the Fund for Belarus Democracy (FBD), an assistance program managed by the German Marshall Fund of the United States that has supported Belarusians inside and outside the country. A review of its record highlights the importance of tailored assistance to sustaining and empowering pro-democracy exiles. The FBD's flexible, sustained funding

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directly enabled many individuals and organizations to continue working, develop new approaches, build personal and institutional capacity, and make meaningful contributions in the short and long term to the Belarusian democratic movement.

The intersecting experiences of Belarusian exiles and the FBD show that exiles can play an essential role in supporting democratic movements in their country of origin, and that carefully and appropriately designed assistance can play an important, and sometimes critical, role in enabling the work of exiles at a relatively low cost.

Western policymakers considering the strategic implications of this finding must first ensure their expectations are grounded in reality. The struggle of democratic movements against authoritarian regimes can take years or decades. Exiles can play an important role in sustaining and advancing it, but they cannot bring about transformation alone or overnight. The impact of any exile community will also be affected by factors like geographic proximity and physical access to their country of origin, the security situation inside it, and the attitude of their host country.

Assistance programs can play a critical role in enabling exiles to fulfill their potential as pro-democracy actors, but only if they are tailored to purpose and reflect a different mindset from that of traditional development assistance. (What is more, exiles require not just grants but also government support for basic needs like visas, work permits, and access to public services.)

The FBD experience and the case of Belarus suggest the following principles for designing and delivering effective assistance to exiles:

- o Start early and support nascent pro-democratic exile communities as soon as they begin forming. They need not be large to be impactful and are likely only to grow. Early investments will be cost-efficient and pay long-term dividends.
- o Build a program and a strategy for the long haul, requiring a tailored operational platform, financial predictability, and an underlying theory of long-term impact.
- o Maximize programmatic and operational flexibility to navigate unpredictable operating conditions, to engage unconventional partners, to seize opportunities, and to adjust as circumstances warrant.
- o Adopt a portfolio approach to grant-making and assess success in the collective long-term impact of all grants rather than the outcome of any single activity.
- o Recognize the multiple benefits of an effective grant for planning and budgeting purposes, looking beyond the grant's most immediate outcomes to how it may build grantee (and program) experience, capabilities, reputation, and relationships.
- o Encourage creative approaches to advance goals, including by supporting well crafted, outwardly apolitical activities to reach and to engage target constituencies in new ways.
- o Accept repeat grants and financial uncertainty of key grantees whose work is delivering strategic impact; traditional development assistance preoccupations about long-term sustainability of grantees are not relevant.
- o Trust and defer to the recipients of assistance when it comes to assessing and mitigating security risks inside the country.

Introduction

Since Belarus's presidential election was stolen in August 2020, a huge number of people have fled the country. There is no precise number but, in March 2024, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights estimated that up to 300,000 did.¹ A year earlier, a report of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council on Europe referred to estimates between 300,000 and 500,000.² These numbers are striking for a country with a population of almost 9.4 million in 2020.

These people left Belarus to escape potential punishment for as little as a social media post or as much as leading the democratic opposition. They have landed in Warsaw in Poland, Vilnius in Lithuania, and cities further afield, settling alongside those Belarusians forced out by earlier waves of government repression.

In Europe, North America, and elsewhere, Belarusian political and civil society exiles have joined the ranks of thousands of peers from countries as diverse as Afghanistan, Iran, Nicaragua, Myanmar, Russia, Syria, and Venezuela. At times and in some countries, they have been welcomed; at others, policymakers have treated them as another element in immigration debates occurring across Europe and in the United States. At the same time, the United States and most EU member states share the long-term goals of exiles seeking democratic change in their country of origin, which they view as essential to lasting peace and security in their regions (not to mention eventually slowing immigration flows). This is why many host governments fund efforts to support the growth of civil society, independent media, and other core democratic institutions in the often-hostile political environments that prevail in Belarus and elsewhere.

This raises the strategic question of whether democracy support in such countries should be complemented and reinforced by greater support for activists, journalists, civil society groups, political leaders, and other democratic actors that have had to flee abroad. Answering this question requires a clear understanding of if and how they can contribute meaningfully to democratic progress in their country of origin. Equipped with this understanding, democracy-supporting governments can then more effectively tailor their policies and assistance tools.

The experience of Belarusian exiles over the last three decades offers a useful window through which to explore whether exiles can have a democratic impact from abroad and, if so, how their work can be best supported. While the exodus triggered by the 2020 election was massive, it was not the first for the country. Belarusians have been driven into exile since soon after Aliaksandr Lukashenka came to power in 1994, and with increased frequency since 2010. As a result, there is a long history of Belarusians attempting to have a political impact in the country from abroad, making it possible to consider not only the short-term impact of their efforts but also their longer-term ones.

Over this period, there have been several long-standing donor programs that have provided support to Belarusian democratic actors, including when they have gone into exile. One of the longest-standing is the Fund for Belarus Democracy (FBD), run by the German Marshall Fund of the United States. The FBD's engagement with Belarusian

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exiles, particularly over the last 15 years, presents an instructive case study to examine the role of donor support for exile communities and to identify lessons for future assistance to these.

This report is based on interviews with FBD staff and grantees, interviews with independent Belarusian stakeholders, public reporting and academic studies, and an analysis of internal FBD documents. It focuses on democratic exiles—a broad term to encompass the thousands of journalists, activists, democratic politicians, civil society members, and other active citizens who fled the country due to fear of persecution for their pro-democracy beliefs or activities and who have continued working toward a democratic future for Belarus. They are an integral but distinct part of the broader Belarusian diaspora, which encompasses all Belarusians who have left the country for any reason, including many who relocated over the years for educational or professional opportunities.

This report begins with an overview of the cycles of repression in Belarus, mostly linked to the country's presidential elections, that sent waves of Belarusians into exile. It then examines the work of the growing exile community over the last 15 years and assesses its impact. The subsequent section describes in broad terms the support provided by the FBD to these actors and its relevance to their efforts. Finally, the report draws lessons from the FBD's experience in supporting Belarusian exiles at the strategic and tactical levels, and it makes recommendations regarding future assistance programs aimed at supporting democratic actors in exile.

Elections, Repression, Emigration

Lukashenka was first elected Belarus's president in 1994 in a vote international observers deemed imperfect but credible.³ The same would not be said of subsequent presidential elections. He consolidated his power and built an authoritarian regime increasingly effective at constricting public space for independent action and freedom of expression. The regime employed administrative, financial, and criminal penalties to intimidate or eliminate independent media, civil society organizations (CSOs), political opponents, and critical voices. When those were not sufficient, the regime employed extrajudicial detention, violence, and sometimes disappearance or assassination. It tightened and loosened the screws of repression as needed, balancing competing interests like regime security, domestic demands, economic pressures, and improved relations with the West.

The regime's calibration of repression produced a pattern throughout Lukashenka's three decades in power, and particularly pronounced since 2006. In the run-up to elections, it intensified repression to quash dissent and ensure electoral victory. Once victory was secure and any post-election protest quelled, the regime would gradually reduce the pressure, allowing a relative thaw until the next vote. This cycle held until the 2020 presidential election, when the regime began a campaign of repression of unprecedented ferocity that still shows no sign of abating.

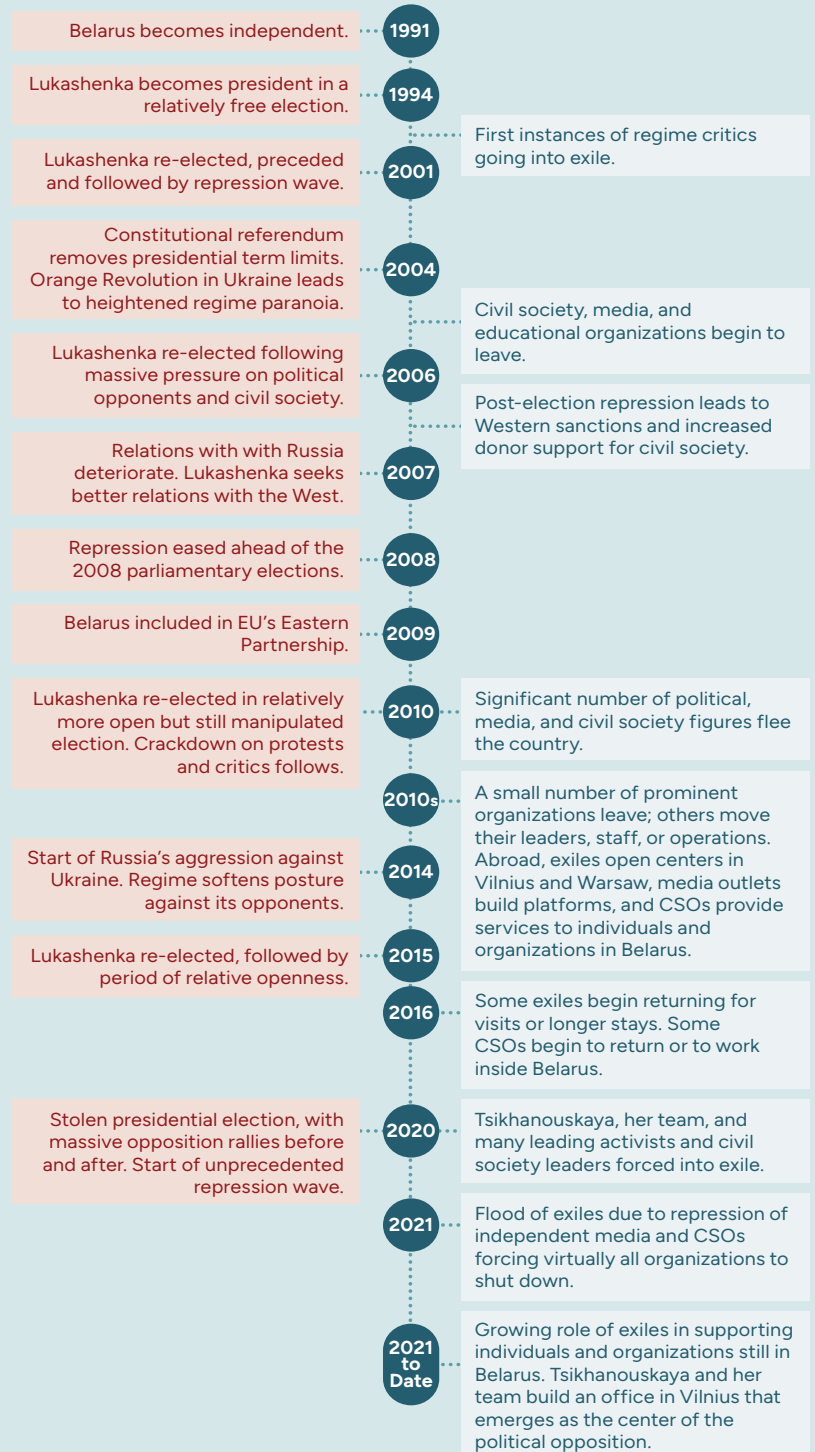
Lukashenka's readiness to employ any means to retain power was already evident ahead of his first reelection in 2001. Several opposition politicians were murdered while others vanished or were imprisoned. These years saw the first instances of regime critics going into exile, including Zianon Pazniak, one of Lukashenka's 1994 election

opponents, and Syamyon Sharetski, an opposition leader. They were joined in 2001 by two prosecutors who had told independent media about a regime “death squad” responsible for the murders of the regime’s political opponents.⁴

Monitors from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) concluded that the regime did “everything in its power to block the opposition” in the 2001 election.⁵ In its aftermath, the police suppressed scattered protests and repression continued for long afterward. The 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine heightened Lukashenka’s paranoia. Under intense pressure, some civil society, media, and educational institutions began to relocate abroad. For example, in 2005, the regime forced the closure of Minsk’s European Humanities University, which reopened in Vilnius the following year. The Belarus Human Rights House also opened its doors in Lithuania’s capital in 2006. Some newspapers began printing their issues abroad for distribution in the country.⁶

The campaign for the 2006 presidential election featured massive regime pressure on political opponents and civil society, with arrests of leaders and activists, and tight constraints on the media.⁷ When Lukashenka claimed an implausible 80% of the vote, the resulting protests were unprecedented in size. The security services responded with violence and arrested hundreds of demonstrators, including an opposition

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candidate who was sentenced to more than five years in prison. A period of repression followed, which drew sanctions by Western governments and saw increased donor funding for civil society and other democracy programs.

The environment shifted in early 2007, when Belarus and Russia clashed over energy policy. Their deteriorating relationship pushed Minsk to seek improved ties with the West, which led to the inclusion of Belarus in the EU's Eastern Partnership when it was launched in 2009. The regime exerted less pressure on independent media in the run-up to the 2008 parliamentary elections, and it released all political prisoners. The run-up to the December 2010 presidential election proved relatively more open than on previous occasions, though the leading challenger's campaign manager still felt it necessary to leave Belarus and work from abroad.

The regime's manipulations of the electoral process once again provoked unrest. On election eve, more than 10,000 people protested in Minsk, and police arrested more than 600 of them, including seven opposition candidates. After the election, the security services launched a crackdown of even greater ferocity, driving a significant number of political, media, and civil society figures to flee the country, most frequently for Lithuania or Poland. As their numbers grew, exiles opened physical centers for Belarusians in Vilnius and Warsaw.

In 2014, Russia's military aggression in Ukraine prompted a spike in public support for Lukashenka, whom many credited with keeping Belarus at peace and independent of Moscow. Lukashenka sought to position himself internationally as an arbiter between Russia and the West, and he also began softening the regime's posture against its opponents, including through the release of prominent political prisoners. European leaders began to visit Minsk, signaling a new relationship. As the 2015 presidential election approached, the domestic situation remained uncharacteristically calm. Lukashenka claimed electoral victory once more and, while it again found significant failings, the OSCE reported some improvements in the process, and the election was accompanied by scant public protest.

The years that followed the election in 2015 were ones of unusual openness. By the end of that year, all remaining political prisoners had been released. In 2016, some exiles began returning home for visits or longer stays. The EU lifted nearly all its sanctions. The regime concentrated on addressing the worsening economy. Some CSOs that had moved abroad began to return or to work again inside the country, sometimes openly.

When protests driven by widespread economic dissatisfaction broke out across Belarus in 2017, the regime revived its repressive practices. Nonetheless, as the economy recovered and relations with Russia and the West improved, the operating environment for civil society, the media, and—to an extent—activists remained relatively permissive. There were exceptions, including criminal charges against the head of an independent media outlet and police searches of another outlet's offices. But these years were a period when pro-democracy actors could work in some openness and within boundaries.

This changed in 2020. The regime badly mismanaged the Covid-19 pandemic, alienating even many of its long-standing supporters. It imprisoned the leading opposition candidates in the presidential election but failed to grasp the depth of public discontent and the threat posed by the unifying candidacy of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya,

the wife of a jailed candidate, or the importance of social media and digital tools used by Belarusians to access and share information and connect with one another. The election was preceded by unprecedented public rallies. When crudely falsified results were released, enormous protests broke out; those in Minsk drew more than 200,000 people. In one poll a month after the election, nearly 30% of respondents said they had participated in a protest.⁸ Despite their size, the demonstrations were eventually suppressed through police violence and mass arrests. With Russia's backing, the regime regained control of the streets and turned to pursuing its real and imagined opponents.

Tsikhankouskaya and her team as well as many leading activists and civil society leaders were forced into exile. What was initially a flow became a flood in 2021 when the regime embarked on a campaign of unprecedented ferocity against independent media and CSOs, forcing virtually all of the organizations to shut down and their staff to leave the country. The authorities waged a ruthless crackdown on individuals suspected of opposition views, detaining and sometimes jailing people for as little as having displayed the national flag associated with the opposition or attended a 2020 protest.

The largest numbers of those who left Belarus went to Poland and Lithuania, where it was estimated to be at least 100,000 and about 49,000 respectively.⁹ Thousands more went to Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, and countries further afield. As a result, a constellation of independent media outlets, CSOs, and individual activists are now dotted across Europe.¹⁰

Unlike in years past, there has been no reduction yet in the regime's repressions: the security services continue to pursue not just political activists but also ordinary citizens who participated in the 2020 protests. The resulting climate of fear has ensured that there have been few meaningful acts of protest since scattered demonstrations against Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Lukashenka has sought to again claim credit for keeping Belarus out of the war (although Russia has used Belarusian territory and airspace to launch attacks). He has also overseen a predetermined constitutional referendum and restructuring of the government to strengthen his grip on power into the future. All this suggests a regime aware of its unpopularity and illegitimacy, and determined to maintain a tight grip going into the January 2025 presidential election.

The Growth, Work, and Reach of Belarusian Exiles

The number of Belarusians going into exile has fluctuated during Lukashenka's 30 years in power, in line with the regime's repression, but the overall trend has been one of increase as the regime has used greater repression to retain power. This trend accelerated exponentially in the year after the 2020 presidential election, when the regime shifted from targeting specific individuals to pursuing entire categories of people, such as those who attended a protest or gave money to a pro-democracy civic group. Throughout this period, the work of exiled individuals and

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organizations has evolved in line with changes in the domestic political and security situation, and the resulting needs and opportunities in the country.

2010–2020: The Exile Community Grows and Works

As noted, the 2010 presidential election was followed by the first flight into exile of prominent activists, political opponents and critics, and independent journalists. Afterward, CSOs were closely monitored, and their work on some issues and sectors was proscribed. The situation was sufficiently perilous that a small number of prominent pro-democracy organizations left the country, while others moved their leaders, staff, or operations abroad. Many of these individuals and organizations settled in Vilnius and Warsaw, where they opened centers offering meeting spaces and support to new arrivals.

While some exiled individuals left their activism behind and moved on to new careers, many sought to continue their activities. They registered new organizations in their new location, opened bank accounts, and resumed their work, carrying on old activities and starting new ones. They began hosting trainings and events in neighboring countries to which Belarusians could travel. Relatively safe from the regime's security services, they provided remote administrative support services for politically sensitive organizations and activities in the country. Independent media continued reporting and publishing for audiences there.

When the quiet 2015 presidential election led to a relative thaw, many exiled actors seized on new possibilities to work directly in Belarus. Some individuals risked going home for visits or longer stays. Many organizations resumed or expanded their activities in the country, and they were increasingly able to operate again as single unified entities. Some opened new offices or registered associated organizations in Minsk, hiring staff there, even as they kept their offices in the likes of Vilnius or Warsaw, where it was still far safer and easier to communicate with donors, receive funding, and keep sensitive information. The ease of crossing the border from Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine facilitated these collaborations. Belarusian participants could travel for trainings or events, funds (sometimes in cash) and supplies could be carried back into Belarus, and it was easy for staff and leaders to meet safely outside the country to discuss sensitive issues. Some CSOs in the country even began working in closer coordination with the authorities, particularly at the local level where their efforts could help compensate for limited local government capacity.

Belarus House

Belarus House was launched in Warsaw in 2011 as a joint project of two exiled organizations to strengthen civil society for an independent Belarus. This hub served from the outset as an informal Belarusian embassy, a gathering space, and a center for Belarusian activities. It became a key resource for Belarusian emigrants, civil society, and international partners, providing information and expertise, organizing public events, and fostering cooperation within the diaspora. Multiple initiatives got their start in the Belarus House premises, including analytical centers and prominent social media channels.

#By_Help

The roots of the crowdfunding organization #By_Help lie in 2017, when a group of exiles issued a public call for funds to support protesters who had been arrested. The effort was revived in 2020 and eventually formalized, with the goal of raising funds to support detained protesters, political prisoners, and other victims of repression. Funds are used to pay lawyers, cover fines and other related costs, and help family members of the detained. #BY_Help works closely and coordinates with several other prominent crowdfunding initiatives. Together, they are able to identify and vet recipients, and to arrange the safe delivery of funds despite the regime's aggressive efforts to halt their support.

Throughout the 2010s, Belarusian exiles contributed to the democracy movement inside the country. First and most visibly, independent media outlets successfully built platforms abroad (often relying on staff, stringers, and sources still inside) that published reliable reporting about events in Belarus. Media-support initiatives provided assistance and built the capacity of those outlets still operational in Belarus through services like in-country trainings for journalists and engaging donors. One prominent initiative provided regular trainings to journalists and editors in Belarus on investigative journalism, including early open-source intelligence techniques, and on effective design and production—skills that many alumni would later apply during and after the 2020 presidential election.

New and relocated CSOs outside the country provided unique services to like-minded individuals and organizations inside it. Some organized external trainings, conferences, and other events abroad where participants from Belarus could come to safely meet, learn from, and connect with one another and with peers from other countries. Other exile groups organized trainings and networking activities inside the country, with some conducted openly and others discreetly. Other exiled organizations provided “back office” support for affiliated and allied organizations and individuals still in the country, such as for banking, legal registration, and the hosting of sensitive digital data or other information. These services enabled organizations in Belarus to reduce their risk. Exiles also launched the first crowdfunding campaigns to support protesters who incurred fines or legal costs. The first major campaign of this kind followed the 2017 crackdown and raised \$55,000, showcasing the readiness of Belarusians at home and abroad to support their compatriots. The exiled team behind this effort would return in 2020 to initiate what evolved into a permanent crowdfunding platform to support political prisoners: #By_Help.

New and relocated CSOs outside the country provided unique services to like-minded individuals and organizations inside it.

Another significant contribution came in the form of support to newer exiles. Belarusians opened hubs in cities like Vilnius and Warsaw, where they offered workspace, cultural events, and some services for arriving compatriots. Some of these hubs endured; one of them hosted a nascent initiative that later played a key role in informing and organizing protesters in 2020. Finally, exiles also worked to raise international awareness and understanding about Belarus and its geostrategic importance. They established new analytical centers, hosted conferences, engaged with international media, and met with foreign officials. Following the earlier example of the Office for a Democratic Belarus, which was established in Brussels in 2006 to engage EU actors, several policy institutes

Center for Belarusian Solidarity

The Center for Belarusian Solidarity (CBS) was established in Warsaw in early 2020. It has grown to provide extensive services to individual exiles (as well as to Ukrainians after the since 2022). Located in a space provided by the Warsaw municipality, the CBS provides humanitarian and legal support services to Belarusians, and lobbies the municipal and national authorities on their behalf. It provides a space where other exile initiatives can work and offers studio space for media programs. It also offers free school classes to Belarusian and Ukrainian children.

such as the International Strategic Action Network for Security (iSANS) and the Center for New Ideas emerged and helped increase international attention to and understanding of dynamics in Belarus. In the process, leading organizations and individuals built their reputations, capabilities, and networks.

2020: Exiles and the Transformative Year

During 2020, the diaspora became engaged with events in Belarus with unprecedented intensity. As one young exile noted, being confined at home by Covid-19 restrictions left Belarusians across Europe with ample time to spend on their phones, through which many became increasingly involved in and informed about developments in the country.¹¹ No longer just the most politically active exiles but much of the diaspora attended demonstrations, participated in the online discourse, and donated money. Dismay over the regime's response to the pandemic blended with guarded optimism at the prospects for political change before the presidential election and then outrage over its stealing and subsequent repression.

Politically engaged exiles often provided leadership and structure for this new energy. Initially, they organized fundraising drives and donated supplies to help in the pandemic. Investigative outlets based abroad helped shed light on the reality of the Covid-19's toll and the government's mismanagement, which fueled deepening domestic discontent. As the election campaign gathered pace, exiles began organizing demonstrations in host cities that attracted unprecedented numbers from the diaspora to draw international attention to the political situation in Belarus. In other cities than Vilnius and Warsaw, previously politically disengaged members of the older diaspora sometimes assumed leadership and organizing roles. Belarusian programmers abroad began developing tech tools to support their compatriots in the country; these included crowdfunding platforms and, reportedly, contributions to a seminal election-monitoring platform that helped demonstrate the brazenness of the regime's electoral theft.

As protests inside the country grew, Belarusians abroad continued to play a leading role in keeping their compatriots in the country informed, organized, and supported. Telegram channels run by exiles became invaluable resources for those looking for reliable news as well as protest information and guidance. The most influential channel was run by a small team of young people working out of one of the hubs established by earlier exiles.

As the regime assaulted and jailed protesters after the election, several purpose-built crowdfunding platforms developed and run by exiles became central to the democracy movement. They were used to raise and deliver funds to political prisoners and their families, lawyers, and others in need. These contributions did not only

help meet the emergency needs of activists and citizens in Belarus—they also underscored the new levels of connectivity and mutual support undergirding Belarusian society, at home and abroad, and they demonstrated the size of the public movement opposed to the regime.¹²

2021 to Date: Mass Repression and Mass Exile

The flow of exiles from Belarus became a flood during the mass repression in the summer of 2021, when the regime set about eradicating virtually all that remained of independent media and civil society. Those already in exile intensified their support to the new arrivals: additional hubs opened in major host cities, and they provided a wider range of types of support that included short-term financial support for housing and legal advice, which was instrumental in enabling Belarusians to get back on their feet and, in some cases, to restart their pro-democracy work. Those who did sometimes also benefited from the coworking spaces established by earlier exiles, who sought to ensure that the newly arrived journalists and activists would have places to operate from.

With virtually all independent media closed or forced out of the country, the exiled independent media became the most prominent and relied-upon authority for those in Belarus seeking the truth about what was going on in the country. Their readership spiked at key junctures like Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, new exiles created a diverse array of news portals and social media channels aimed at reaching and engaging people in the country. Others, particularly in the early days, developed initiatives targeting key pillars of the regime like the security services, seeking to chip away at its base of support and to reveal the depths of its corruption and abuses. New investigative projects were established, including innovative social media-based projects like one that rapidly validated and consolidated citizen reports to document and publicize critical developments inside Belarus, such as the movement of Russian military units.

Meanwhile, the importance of exiles grew in supporting civically engaged citizens and organizations still operating in Belarus despite the regime's brutal measures. They raised funds from donors and organized activities and the safe delivery of resources to their colleagues and partners. Exiles built new platforms and launched new initiatives to raise funds and distribute them to political prisoners, activists, and others caught up in the repression, constantly changing their methods to circumvent the regime's controls. Others sought to foster a greater sense of national identity among Belarusians, organizing events and organizations at home and abroad, often with an emphasis on the Belarusian language.

Most prominently, Tsikhanouskaya—the legitimate winner of the 2020 election—and her team built an office in Vilnius that emerged as the center of the political opposition. It managed to develop, and mostly maintain, a largely unified front with associated initiatives run by other exiled political leaders—including the Coordination Council and the National Anti-Crisis Management initiative. The greatest success of Tsikhanouskaya and her team was to keep Belarus on the international agenda, regularly securing meetings with heads of state and foreign ministers across Europe and in Washington. While criticism of Tsikhanouskaya has grown over time and her team has struggled to remain connected with citizens in the country, they managed to keep Belarus on the international agenda—and distinct from Russia in the eyes of Western policymakers—even when Russia's war against Ukraine consumed almost all international attention from February 2022.

Six Forms of Strategic Impact

The pro-democracy shift in Belarusian public sentiment over the last decade—as evident in the majority vote for Tsikhanouskaya and in the shifts in public opinion on issues like Belarus’s geopolitical alliances and form of government—has been shaped by many factors. But at least part of it is due to years of work by the country’s civil society, media, political leaders, and other pro-democracy actors. The exiled components of the democratic movement have played a significant role in enabling this progress, particularly when the regime’s repression has been at its worst. They have had six forms of strategic impact.

First, exiles have provided critical support to colleagues and allies in Belarus. This includes secure “offshore” management and operational support, raising and delivering funds to recipients, safeguarding sensitive information, and organizing trainings and activities inside and outside the country. By taking on these responsibilities from a safe location abroad, they have reduced the risk to those inside and to enabled pro-democracy activities to continue.

Second, they have enabled Belarusians to have greater access to fact-based reporting and independent information through the work of relocated independent media, exiled media-support and investigative journalism initiatives, and the creative outputs of new social media channels and online platforms. It was only when the journalists, editors, and offices were out of the regime’s reach that they could keep publishing news and opinions during times of repression. Today, it is only exiled groups that can produce news, commentary, and satirical shows, and serve as trusted sources of information and commentary to audiences inside.

Third, exiles played an invaluable role during the 2020 crisis, underscoring that in critical moments there are likely to be functions that can only be performed by activists and supporters safe from the regime’s repression. This included organizing protests and demonstrations in Belarus, building new online initiatives like fundraising platforms, and serving as reliable sources of information. When thousands of journalists, opposition leaders, and activists were being thrown in jail or forced to flee, their counterparts in exile were able to fill at least part of the vacuum to keep their compatriots informed, organized, motivated, and supported.

Exiles worked to make it easier for subsequent arrivals to resume their work by helping them meet essential personal and professional needs.

Fourth, exiles worked to make it easier for subsequent arrivals to resume their work by helping them meet essential personal and professional needs. The existence of hubs in key locations, support to enable emergency relocation, assistance providers to help navigate new bureaucracies and resolve immediate daily needs, and sources of interim funding to enable a rapid return to work all contributed to the undiminished efforts by thousands of Belarusians even as they were forced from their country.

Fifth, exiles have played an important role in building and sustaining at home and abroad a distinct Belarusian identity. In the post-2010 period, the efforts of exiled musicians, theater groups, and artists to showcase their

work in foreign capitals help build awareness of Belarus's distinct national identity and of its democratic struggle. Since 2020, when the regime essentially criminalized efforts to foster Belarusian identity (including by targeting those who use the historic flag or the Belarusian language), exile initiatives have enabled people in the country to continue learning and practicing the language or to engage with and celebrate its art and music—all of which has helped reinforce Belarus's identity as separate from Russia.

Sixth, exiles have played the leading role in elevating and maintaining Belarus's place on the international agenda—initially during the 2010s through analysis, reporting, advocacy, and artistic efforts, and even more so since 2020 through the leadership and travel of Tsikhanouskaya and her allies. Some exiles criticize her team for over-prioritizing this work and achieving too little through it, but her leadership and relentless travels produced important successes in the initial period at least, including forging an international consensus that Lukashenka's presidency is illegitimate and encouraging a unified European-US front against his regime with sanctions, visa bans, and other measures.

The Fund for Belarus Democracy

The question is not only whether exiles can have an impact on their country of origin but also how foreign state and nonstate democracy-support actors can assist them in their efforts. In the case of Belarus, the experience of one of the longest-running such assistance programs offers some lessons about the potential import of this kind of support and how to ensure it is maximally effective.

The Fund for Belarus Democracy (FBD) was established by the German Marshall Fund of the United States in 2005. It has always had to navigate a highly precarious security environment, which entails balancing public transparency about its work with security and efficacy. Accordingly, the information here is either already publicly available or presented with the consent of those involved.

The FBD has since provided \$24 million in assistance, disbursed through nearly 1,500 grants to 825 organizations inside and outside Belarus.¹³ These grants support “Belarusian democrats, civil society, and independent media as they withstand dictatorship and work toward democracy and human rights, self-determination, and Euro-Atlantic integration.” About three-quarters of these grants have gone to partners in the country. Over the years, the FBD has developed a long track record, networks, and ability to identify and work with new actors there.

The FBD has key features that distinguish it from most foreign assistance programs. To begin with, it has benefited from an essentially open-ended time horizon, thanks in significant part to supportive donors. This has allowed it to focus on democracy goals that are only achievable over the long term, and enabled it to avoid pitfalls such as having to focus on short-term results or annual work plans, or having to change direction in reaction to the latest political development.

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The FBD has also maintained a consistent strategic focus that allows for breadth and discretion in what it does. It has from the start focused on supporting long-term democratic change in Belarus through assistance to broadly defined civil society. This has kept its work focused on its long-term aims, despite the innumerable changes in the political and social landscape, while a wide understanding of civil society has enabled it to pursue unconventional opportunities.

The FBD has also deployed considerable flexibility in its assistance, operations, and geographic scope. It can consider and respond quickly to emergent needs, changing circumstances, and creative ideas. It is not bound by the traditional type of work plan that can limit many aid programs. Operationally, it is not limited to providing funds only via bank transfers to well-established partners and it can find creative ways to provide support to virtually any recipient. This flexibility enables it to move swiftly; it can provide support within days when circumstances require. The FBD is similarly unconstrained geographically; there are no donor-imposed restrictions or administrative limits to where or in which countries it can deliver support.

Finally, the FBD approach emphasizes relatively small grants, with the majority being of a value less than \$25,000. This makes it possible to work with small or less experienced grantees that might not catch the attention of or qualify for traditional assistance programs. A larger portfolio of smaller grants also encourages greater experimentation and risk-taking in approaches, as the individual sums at stake are less.

A Capability to Engage Exiles

The FBD was not created to support Belarusian exiles specifically, but it became increasingly engaged with them over its two decades of assistance as the size and importance of this community grew. This gradual shift was the result of three factors.

First, having been created nearly 20 years ago, the FBD was already operational when repression began to force Belarusians from their country. The deep network of contacts it built over years of providing support inside the country meant that it was often the first call for prominent individuals and organizations who needed assistance in escaping, wanted to brainstorm how they could continue their work abroad, or needed support for their new initiatives in exile.

Second, FBD assistance has had an international component from the outset. While always focused on developing democratic culture, organizations, and practices inside Belarus, it recognized from the start the importance of cross-border learning and relationship-building, as well as the need to increase the international awareness and understanding of the country. From the start, FBD grantmaking enabled Belarusians to travel abroad to connect with peers or attend trainings, organizations based abroad to host conferences and advocate to foreign governments, and cultural groups to travel abroad, among other activities.

Third, the FBD's flexibility meant that it was able to adapt quickly as the need for and importance of working with exiled individuals and organizations grew. This was evident as early as 2011, when it issued two grants to help cover

the core costs of a pair of key initiatives establishing themselves in Warsaw. FBD support for exiles grew from there and reaching a new height after 2020, especially given its ability to respond quickly to needs.

The Exiles Portfolio

The FBD's longevity, preexisting international scope, and flexibility made it uniquely positioned to work with and support Belarusian exiles over the last two decades. Over this period, about a quarter of its grants—nearly 400—went to partners outside Belarus. Most fell into one of the following five categories.

Indirect support to in-country initiatives, individuals, and activities

The FBD has provided grants to groups in exile so that they could then deliver support to initiatives or individuals inside Belarus. Examples of the type of work being done by these grantees include raising funds for political prisoners or activists, organizing trainings or events in the country, or providing back-office functions for groups still in the country (including in meeting donors, maintaining a foreign bank account, and holding sensitive information).

Fostering domestic capacity through cross-border exchanges

The FBD supported exiled actors in organizing learning or networking opportunities outside Belarus, to which people still living in the country could travel to learn, connect, and develop new ideas. In these settings, participants could speak more freely about sensitive issues, build relationships with one another, and connect with counterparts from other countries.

Support to independent media and content creation for domestic audiences

The FBD has provided rapid support to fund new pilot programs, to help leading Belarusian media relocate, and to fill urgent funding gaps. Having had their original advertising-based business models destroyed, independent media outlets forced into exile depend on donor support to rent offices, to buy equipment, to pay salaries, and to cover other operational expenses so that they can continue informing Belarusians inside. The FBD's speed and flexibility has enabled it to cover these critical needs when other donors could not.

Support to and engagement with exiles and the broader diaspora

FBD assistance enabled grantees to support, engage, and organize fellow exiles and, occasionally, members of the broader diaspora. Some opened hubs in key locations to provide spaces where exiles could gather, work, network, and receive assistance. Others provided emergency support to new arrivals, enabling them to meet key needs like rent or legal fees. Some organized conferences or other events to bring exiled Belarusians together to discuss political and related topics.

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Building international public awareness, understanding, and support

The FBD supported exile initiatives aimed at broadening Western understanding of and interest in Belarus. This included analytical and reporting centers intended to engage think tanks or governments, as well as conferences aimed at analysts or thought leaders. It also supported cultural and artistic projects that sought to raise Western awareness of Belarus and to distinguish from Russia.

Assessing Impact

There are three reasons to conclude that FBD assistance has played a significant role in enabling and deepening the impact of Belarusian exiles inside Belarus, which demonstrates the strategic potential of assistance to pro-democracy actors that have had to leave their country.

First, numerous exiled actors have depended on FBD support, often at critical moments in their organizational development, to pursue the types of meaningful work described in the preceding section. In the 2010s, this included grants for core operational support to new exile-run initiatives to set up prominent hubs, relocate and resume independent media operations, establish new analytical centers, and support new arrivals. This support was critical during these years when fewer donors were focused on Belarus, and fewer still were in a position to provide support outside the country to cover costs like rent, salaries, and equipment to new exiles. During the 2020 crisis and since, FBD support enabled individuals and organizations to relocate abroad and to reestablish their operations, to support the centers assisting new arrivals, to ensure that the democratic political leadership was able to operate effectively, and to ensure that creative new initiatives of new exiles were able to get off the ground.

Providing small, often seed, grants to individuals and nascent initiatives, funding the most promising ones as they developed, and then of continuing to support them when they were forced to leave the country, resulted in a set of more experienced, capable exiled individual and initiatives.

Second, beyond their initial outcomes, many FBD grants have had secondary and tertiary impacts that were evident only in hindsight. For example, in the mid-2010s, the FBD provided essential support to enable journalists and activists in Belarus to receive training in investigative and open-source intelligence techniques. These skills were applied initially by journalists with the country's leading media outlets, but their relevance came to the fore in 2020, when journalists used them to document and prove what was occurring around the stolen election, and later around Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, when some applied their skills to help reveal Russian military activities inside Belarus. Another example is a physical hub that received core operational support for several of its first years of existence, and which in 2020 provided office space for a prominent Telegram channel helping inform and organize protesters.

Third, the FBD invested early in capacity-building efforts for a diverse range of promising individuals, from local community organizers to journalists to student leaders, and then continued to support them as they further developed their skills and professional projects, including when they went into exile. One grantee received their first grant in the mid-2000s to support a public campaign. When was forced into exile, this individual consulted extensively with the FBD on potential new projects and eventually co-created a physical hub in a foreign capital with its support. As time passed, this person established new initiatives, frequently with FBD seed funding, including a prominent research project and a new physical hub focused on assistance to new exiles, all of which are prominent actors today.

One cannot be sure how the community of Belarusian exiles would have developed in the absence of these three elements, but it is clear the FBD played a meaningful role in enabling and deepening their contributions to the cause of democracy in Belarus over the years. Particularly prior to 2020, there was a very limited pool of donor support for exile initiatives, and interviewed grantees attest to the criticality of early FBD support. The approach of providing small, often seed, grants to individuals and nascent initiatives, funding the most promising ones as they developed, and then of continuing to support them when they were forced to leave the country, resulted in a set of more experienced, capable exiled individual and initiatives than would have existed otherwise. The FBD's consistent presence provided reassurance and encouragement to at least some exiles that not only was their cause not forgotten but also that some funding would remain available even when the international spotlight was elsewhere. It is likely that at least some if not most of these initiatives would otherwise have struggled or vanished, that secondary and tertiary impacts would not have been realized, and that the individuals who created essential institutions might have followed different paths.

Lessons for Supporting Exiles Strategically

The experience of Belarusians over the last two decades demonstrates that exiles can make meaningful contributions to pro-democracy efforts in their country, and that their active engagement can significantly enable and complement the work of their counterparts there. Carefully and appropriately designed assistance can play an important, and sometimes critical, role in enabling the work of exiles at a relatively low cost. Therefore, democratic exiles offer an avenue for Western donors to advance their goal of change in countries where the environment is particularly hostile to local democratic actors and to external democracy assistance. And donors can enhance the impact of exiles through assistance that is carefully tailored to the specificities of exiles and their situation.

For all their contributions, the experience of Belarusian exiles also highlights the need for realistic expectations of what such actors can achieve and on what timeline. Despite the advances of the democracy movement in Belarus and the expressed will of its citizens, Lukashenka has held on to power since 2020, and will likely do so again in 2025. Advancing democracy in a fully authoritarian state is a difficult, long-term project, pitting advocates for change against a vastly more powerful opponent. The most meaningful work done by exiles is not aimed at somehow triggering instant transformation: rather, it contributes to the long-term development of democratic norms, institutions, and expectations, and the shifting of how citizens relate to their government

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and to one another. It supports, sustains, and complements the democratic movement in the country. Through public engagement and education, it builds citizens' demand for a more accountable, effective political system. And it can make it more likely that a transformation will succeed when the opportunity arises. The ultimate goal of transition from repressive authoritarianism to a stable, responsive democracy may take years or decades to achieve, and the metrics for progress along the way need be chosen accordingly.

Ensuring expectations are realistic also means fully taking into account the security situation inside the country and the exiles' proximity and access to it. The reach and impact of exiles in their country of origin will invariably be reduced when a regime grows more repressive and the space for activities, organizing, and external communication shrinks. Belarusian exiles always benefited when the regime loosened its grip. For example, in the years after 2015, it became safer for domestic groups to be active and even for some exiles to venture home, and exiles could contribute to a greater range of work in the country. When it becomes safer for democracy-adjacent activities to take place in the country, it becomes easier to support them from abroad: to deliver money and resources, to send experts for trainings or events, to enable democracy actors to travel abroad, and to communicate with and reach volunteers as well as the broader public. Conversely, when the state becomes increasingly repressive, the work done by exiles becomes more critical by supporting what is done in the country and sometimes replacing it, but also more difficult and restricted.

The efficacy of exiles is also affected by their geographic proximity to and their ability to physically connect with people in their country of origin. Belarusian exiles have been fortunate in being welcome to stay in large numbers in Lithuania and Poland, with which Belarus had until recently a relatively open border. Both countries' governments have not only allowed them to operate openly; they have also provided the exiles generous assistance. This has made it easy for individuals to flee Belarus when in danger, and it has enabled the movement of people, equipment, cash, and ideas back into the country. However, when crossing the border was slowed or halted (on either side), it became more difficult to move funds into the country and for individuals to travel in both directions for meetings or trainings.

It may take years before significant change occurs in a country under an authoritarian regime; therefore, this support needs to be patient and steady.

It is important to be similarly realistic about the timeline involved in supporting exiles so that they can have an impact. It may take years before significant change occurs in a country under an authoritarian regime; therefore, this support needs to be patient and steady. Assistance over the long term makes it possible for exiles to ride out periods of heightened repression until there are ones of relative openness or the regime seeks improved relations with the West, when exiles have more access to and opportunities in their country of origin. It is because of the work of Belarusian exiles during the period of relative openness after 2015 that they have had the capabilities, organizations, resources, relationships, and credibility to be relevant since 2020.

For all these reasons, it is essential that any attention and resources given to exiles does not come at the expense of support to those inside the country. To the extent allowed by security and logistics, assistance should remain centered on democratic actors, initiatives, and projects still inside, where it is most impactful, even if it more difficult and even dangerous. But assistance provided in the country and abroad is mutually supporting.

Effective assistance programs may also involve exile initiatives focused on the broader diaspora. This has been a less frequent focus of efforts in the case of Belarus—perhaps because of donor priorities, but also because a high proportion of the Belarusian diaspora today is aligned with the democratic movement. Diasporas from other countries are usually more politically divided and even fractious, and in these cases democratic exiles may develop creative, promising ways to engage and to educate the larger population of their compatriots abroad. Such initiatives are worth considering as long as represent strategic value to the long-term democratic cause, and not simply because they are easier to implement.

Finally, supporting exiled democracy actors should involve more than grants. When individuals and organizations struggle to secure residence or work permits, to open local bank accounts, to enroll children in schools, to acquire travel documents, or to access services and benefits necessary for daily life and work, their activities invariably suffer and decline in quality.¹⁴ In the case of Belarusian exiles, the governments of Lithuania and Poland, as well as the municipal authorities in cities like Vilnius and Warsaw, have showed how committed and responsive authorities can address such challenges. This includes issuing travel documents to those who no longer have valid passports, providing free office space in public buildings, and easing the path to work permits. Supporting pro-democracy exiles should involve a whole-of-government effort; national, regional, and municipal governments can all play a role in supporting and facilitating their work.

Principles for Effective Assistance to Exiles

The example of the Fund for Belarus Democracy shows that a carefully designed and flexible assistance program can play an essential role in seeding and sustaining exile initiatives. At the same time, donors should not assume that their standard assistance mechanisms (which are typically designed to advance traditional development goals) are automatically well-suited for this. Support for exiles needs to be designed to purpose, and those involved in its implementation, from managers to evaluators, need to apply a different mindset from that of traditional development assistance. The Belarus experience suggests key strategic and operational principles that should guide the design and execution of such an assistance program.

Start Early

There is no size threshold for an exile community to be relevant. The arrival of a low number of initial pro-democracy exiles from an increasingly repressive regime is usually a harbinger of what more is to come in their country of origin. Early assistance will enable them to take advantage of any opportunities still present back home, to prepare for the eventual arrival of others, and to start building a new environment for individuals

and organizations to develop over the long term. It will also enable assistance providers to build experience, relationships, and a reputation in the emerging exiles community. All of this will ensure exiles are better prepared to seize opportunities in their country of origin when they arise, even unexpectedly.

Build a Program and a Strategy for the Long Haul

The work of pro-democracy exiles is likely to take years, perhaps even decades. A long-term perspective in operational design and strategic planning is essential. At the operational level, an assistance program's structure, funding, and scope should reflect this, including by being insulated from fluctuations in donor funding cycles. It should also be grounded in a clear strategic theory of how exiles will best contribute to democratic change in the long term and how it can most effectively facilitate this in the short term. This should guide decisions on a daily and monthly basis, determining the types of partners and projects pursued. The assistance strategy should be revisited regularly as more is learned about what works and as political events unfold.

Maximize Programmatic and Operational Flexibility

Working with exiles inherently requires great flexibility, with the recipients of assistance often on the move and the environment constantly evolving. An assistance program will be effective when it is able to provide grants to partners of all types across all sectors, unconstrained by whether they are registered with the authorities or have a bank account (and much less an audit record or any of the other benchmarks often required by donors). Assistance providers must have the operational flexibility to navigate the situation when circumstances necessitate changes in activities, force grantees to flee the country, or erect other obstacles.

Adopt a Portfolio Approach to Grant-Making

Providing many, relatively small and short-term assistance grants makes it possible to try out new partners and ideas, to respond quickly, to take risks, and to diversify approaches. Such a portfolio approach emphasizes the collective impact of all grants over a longer time horizon, and accepts that some individual grants will not work out. It also makes it possible to invest in building the capacity of promising individuals and nascent organizations, even in cases where the immediate intended outcome of a grant is disappointing.

Recognize the Multiple Benefits of an Effective Grant

Effective assistance grants have an immediate, direct outcome, but they also have knock-on effects. They enable the individuals and organization involved to remain active and thus to build up the experience and capacity that will make them more effective in the future. At the same time, every grant improves the assistance provider's base of experience, capabilities, and network of relationships, enabling it to better select and oversee partners and projects. These overlapping outcomes mean that it is possible for even a grant that fails to deliver on its immediate intended output to ultimately prove to be a valuable investment.

Encourage Creative Approaches to Advance Goals

Not every assistance grant has to be explicitly about democracy or political processes. Particularly in politically polarized or repressive regimes, ones that are will likely attract only a particular segment of the population. Instead, assistance should recognize and encourage activities on a wide range of topics that employ approaches chosen to reach different constituencies. Community organizing, environmental activism, and other problem-oriented grassroots projects can be effective in introducing citizens to democratic principles and practices.

Accept Repeat Grants and Financial Uncertainty

Donors are sometimes reluctant to provide recurring grants to an organization or for the same work; many are also concerned about the long-term sustainability of initiatives reliant on their funding. These common preoccupations in traditional development assistance are largely unhelpful in the fluid political environment of pro-democracy exiles. There is nothing inherently problematic in issuing repeated grants to good partners doing important work, including for them to continue doing the same work. Not only can this achieve the intended objective, it can also strengthen the partners and increase their overall impact and efficacy over time. Similarly, financial self-reliance is simply not realistic for many exile actors and initiatives, given their inability to operate openly inside the country or to fundraise when people may be criminally prosecuted for making a donation. There is no strategic benefit in demanding that partners move toward self-sufficiency when this is not viable and when their work advances the strategic goals set for the provision of assistance.

Trust and Defer to the Recipients of Assistance

Given the security considerations that accompany assistance to pro-democracy exiles, providers need to be prepared to work closely with and ultimately defer to the recipients on questions regarding their safety, especially those that maintain some presence in the country of origin. Such deference is not always natural for donors, but effective assistance must consistently put first the safety of partners and beneficiaries, based on their calculations, and plans must be amended as needed to minimize risks.

Conclusion

The Belarus experience shows that determined exiles can make meaningful contributions to the cause of democracy in their countries of origin. Their impact was evident in the periods of relaxation between elections, as well as during the most tense and difficult moments around elections, including in 2020. And it remains clear today as they continue working for a democratic future for Belarus. Through much of this time, and above all during the periods of harshest repression, exiles were able to build organizations, set up initiatives, and enable activities in the country that would not have otherwise been possible given the domestic security reality. Their efforts enabled organizations still in Belarus to develop and grow; they engaged, informed, organized, and educated the public; and they delivered critical support to organizations and individuals when it was most needed.

The Strategic Potential of Democratic Exiles

Without the work of exiles, it is highly unlikely that the democratic movement in Belarus would have advanced to the extent that it did. Fewer activities would have occurred in the country, fewer resources would have reached people and initiatives still there, and the international community would have been less aware of and focused on the situation in Belarus. With authoritarian regimes tightening their grip from Azerbaijan to Georgia to Venezuela, the number of political exiles from such countries will only grow in the years ahead. The experience of Belarus suggests that Western policymakers should view this phenomenon not merely through the prism of migration but also as an opportunity to advance the West's long-term interest in the prospects of democratic change in their countries. At the same time, the size of this opportunity should not be overestimated and expectations need to be calibrated accordingly. Democratic transformation will not come overnight and exiles alone will not bring it about. But, with the right kind of support, exiles can play a meaningful role in supporting democratic actors in authoritarian states, building public demand and support for democratic change, and laying the groundwork for change. What is more, the investment in the kind of assistance outlined in this paper would amount to a very small fraction of the sums Western governments spend to manage the political, security, and migration-related challenges emanating from authoritarian regimes from which exiles increasingly flee. Western policymakers should learn from the Belarus experience and start working more directly and effectively with exile communities to advance the common goal of a shared democratic future.

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