

Speech by Belinda Gottardi, Rapporteur for a democratic Belarus

2nd Kościuszko Forum: Culture as a driving force of democracy

↳ *Why is culture the answer during political impasse?*

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Dear Ms Tsikhanouskaya, *[Head of the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus]*

Dear Mr Harazim, *[Undersecretary of State, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland]*

Dear Mr Bialiatski, *[Belarusian human rights defender, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, founder of the Human Rights Centre "Viasna", ex-political prisoner]*

Dear colleagues,

It is an honour to stand before you today in Gdansk, a city with a history of solidarity, resilience, and a symbol of freedom. I am humbled to share this platform with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who continues to lead the Belarusian democratic movement with immense courage; with our special guest and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski, a leading voice against the Lukashenka's authoritarian regime; and our distinguished colleagues on the panel.

As the newly appointed Rapporteur for a democratic Belarus at the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, this forum marks my first official event in this capacity. I cannot think of a more fitting or urgent question to address than the one before this panel: *Why is culture the answer during political impasse?*

When political channels are violently blocked, when independent institutions are dismantled, and when a regime attempts to enforce an artificial silence through systematic repression, politics appear to reach a dead end. But human rights and democracy do not. This is where culture steps in to lay the foundation of a democratic society.

When we at the Council of Europe speak of culture, we look beyond artistic expression. We speak fundamentally of a **democratic culture**. This is a culture rooted in the values of human rights, the rule of law, and pluralist democracy. It is a shared understanding that every individual possesses inherent dignity, and that power must belong to the people.

In a political impasse, authoritarian regimes try to rewrite history, erase identity, and monopolise the narrative. In response, a vibrant democratic culture becomes a shield and a strategy. It preserves historical truth, fosters community solidarity, and co-ordinates peaceful resistance. For Belarusians, celebrating their rich cultural heritage, their language, and their European identity is an act of defiance. It is a declaration that Belarus belongs to the European family of values.

This brings us to the core of what the Congress stands for. We believe that a resilient democratic culture cannot be built from the top down; it must be nurtured from the bottom up. **True democracy is local.** Our guiding standard is the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Local democracy is the closest layer of government to the citizens. It is where democratic culture is practiced daily: in our towns, villages, and neighbourhoods. This is where citizens learn open debate, civic responsibility, and mutual respect.

Even during a severe political crisis at the national level, the local dimension remains critical. Authoritarianism seeks to centralise control, but a democratic culture thrives in local solidarity networks, in civil society organisations, and through the brave actions of local activists. By defending local cultural initiatives and independent civic spaces, the Belarusian people are laying the foundations of their future democratic state.

Europe is incomplete without a democratic Belarus. The European Belarus represented by the democratic forces and civil society is an essential part of our common European home. Your quest for democracy is a struggle for the very values that underpin our continent: democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. A democratic Belarus is essential in Europe.

The Council of Europe has translated this conviction into concrete mechanisms. Through the Council of Europe **Contact Group** on Co-operation with Belarusian Democratic Forces and Civil Society, established in 2022, we have built a unique, pioneering framework to provide expert assistance under unprecedented conditions.

Within the **Congress**, we took a historic step forward. Since 2025, a dedicated delegation of Belarusian democratic forces has been officially represented within our political assembly. Belarusian exiles elected in the Coordination Council have a seat at the table in Strasbourg, ensuring their voices are part of our European dialogue.

Through our ongoing initiatives, the Congress works closely with Belarusian democratic institutions, elected representatives, youth leaders, and civil society. We focus our efforts on capacity building, sharing Council of Europe standards, and preparing the ground for the day when Belarus returns to a democratic path. We are co-operating to ensure that when that day comes, a new generation of local leaders is ready to build robust, independent, and transparent local authorities, equipped to co-ordinate local public services, and practice local democracy.

Furthermore, we are currently developing **report** on the role of local and regional authorities in supporting Belarusian democratic forces and Belarusians in exile. This report will provide practical guidelines to help local and regional authorities across Europe localise the so-called “Luxembourg Solutions” to address the many hurdles that Belarusians in exile are facing. Our goal is to empower European municipalities to protect the Belarusian diaspora from transnational repression, ease their legal status, and ensure access to local services.

With this, we want to ensure that Belarusians in exile are not merely passive recipients of aid, but active participants in the civic life of their host communities. This active engagement serves a dual purpose: it supports individuals in their integration, and it acts as a practical school of local democracy.

Dear colleagues,

Politics can be frozen by fear and force, but culture cannot be jailed.

As the Congress Rapporteur, I pledge my full support to deepen our co-operation, to amplify your voices in Strasbourg, and to uphold the Council of Europe principles that bind us together.

A democratic culture is the answer during a political impasse because it keeps the spirit of resistance and solidarity that this city championed. It reminds us that when the political walls finally crumble – as they inevitably do – the foundations of a free, democratic, and European Belarus are already firmly in place.

Thank you very much.