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COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Strasbourg, 4 February 2025

TRAINING SEMINAR  
**YOUNG WOMEN TRANSFORMING BELARUS  
LEADERSHIP FOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL  
CHANGE**

4-6 March 2025  
European Youth Centre, Strasbourg (France)

CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS  
Deadline: 14 February 2025

## CONTEXT

Young people under 20 in Belarus have grown up without direct experience of democratic governance. They navigate a society where expressing political opinions or other beliefs can lead to persecution. They come of age in a society marked by social conservatism and growing militarism, particularly following the war of aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine. At the same time, this generation has greater access to information than any before, with the internet, social media, and connections with peers in other countries allowing them to challenge state propaganda and censorship.

For young Belarusians living in exile, the situation is complicated, especially for those involved in activities opposing the government. While they did not choose to leave their country but were forced into exile due to fear of persecution, imprisonment, or death, they also face indifference or even discrimination in their host countries. The political priorities of these countries often overshadow their struggles, and many young Belarusians face stigma and a sense of shame due to the actions of the Lukashenka regime, particularly in relation to the Russian war in Ukraine, even though a significant number of young people have volunteered to serve in the Ukrainian military alongside their peers.

The situation of youth civil society is precarious. Between September 2020 and the end of October 2023, no fewer than 1 457 non-profit organisations were liquidated, removed or forced to self-liquidate<sup>1</sup>. Many involved in any form of independent civic activity - whether formal or informal, local or international - has either been incarcerated or forced into exile. Young people are wholly over-represented, constituting half of this group. The Belarusian National Youth Council (RADA) has maintained independence since its creation in the early 1990s, first as an underground organisation and since 2020 in exile. It attempts to rally what remains of youth-led civil society, to bridge communication between young people inside and outside the country. RADA also seeks to impress upon democratic forces in exile that what young Belarusians inside and outside the country say about the kind of democracy they want for their country once democracy is won must be considered in policy planning and advocacy activities.

Despite these multifaceted challenges, young people in and from Belarus are leading the counterculture by challenging and disrupting the authoritarian status quo with their creativity, diversity and inclusivity and constantly finding new ways to meet, associate and exchange. Young women are often at the forefront of such efforts. Not only have they emerged as the avant-garde of the Belarusian democratic forces, but they are also enacting leadership across the spectrum of Belarusian representation in exile, from alternative art and culture to the national revival. Within the country, it is primarily women who hold the space for what little independent activity is still possible at the grassroots and community level, and tending to immediate community needs where the state fails, with the Covid-19 pandemic being a case in point. And yet, as so often happens, the conservative, patriarchal attitudes and traditional gender roles present in Belarusian politics and society are replicated in exile, even though gender equality and the full, equal and effective participation of women in public and private decision-making processes are essential to the rule of law and democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> Rada, "Situation of freedom of association and civil society organisations in Belarus October 2023", <https://en.rada.fm/2023/11/15/situation-of-freedom-of-association-and-civil-society-organisations-in-belarus-october-2023/>

## SEMINAR

The Council of Europe's Gender Equality Division, in cooperation with the Youth Department and its Belarusian youth and feminist organisation partners, is organising a three-day training seminar entitled 'Young women transforming Belarus: Leadership for Social and Political Change'. This seminar will coincide with International Women's Day on 8 March 2025 and will take place at the Council of Europe's European Youth Centre in Strasbourg.

The seminar will bring together young women leaders and activists in all their diversity, to deliberate upon gender as a key dimension of democratic transformation. It will also delve deep into the role and agency of young women in social and political change, in general, and in specific relation to the situation of Belarus, its democratic opposition and independent civil society surviving in exile.

The seminar is understood as a contribution to the capacity building of the participating youth leaders and activists. It also serves as a moment for reflection on current practice and policy regarding gender equality among Belarusian democratic forces, the wider community in exile and their combined plans for the democratic transformation of Belarus, for which the democratic aspirations and imagination of young women continue to be largely overlooked.

The **objectives** of the seminar include:

- To strengthen the capacity and motivation of young Belarusian women leaders and activists to meaningfully participate in the social and political transformation of Belarus, such that they can take responsibility for the democratic future of their country once the change takes place;
- To strengthen the capacity and motivation of young Belarusian women leaders and activists to advocate for gender and youth perspectives to be meaningfully considered in policy discussions undertaken by Belarusian democratic forces, notably the Coordination Council led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, with the aim of contributing to the transformation of gender relations in Belarusian society and politics now and during periods of post-authoritarian regimes and democratic transitions;
- To identify the challenges and priorities of Belarusian young women both inside and outside the country, and to consider how these can be better taken into account in the context of policy discussions towards Belarus at the level of the Council of Europe and other relevant European institutions;
- To elaborate upon proposals for how to address the challenges of political and social engagement of young women in the transformation of their country, whether while in exile or still living in the country;
- To identify, analyse and consider the relevance of different examples of transformative female leadership and other initiatives of young women in civil society for social and political change in a variety of closed or closing contexts in relation to the Belarusian reality;
- To associate participants with the Council of Europe and its work, notably that of the Gender Equality Division and the Youth Department;
- To strengthen participants' links with elected officials, institutions, civil society and the donor community with a view to influencing the European policy agenda towards Belarus and its young people, by providing direct input to decision-makers.

## **PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS**

The seminar will welcome up to 15 young Belarusian women leaders actively contributing to the democratic transformation of Belarus through independent civic, social, cultural or political activity, whether inside the country or from exile, to allow for meaningful follow up and result multiplication based on their participation. We are especially interested in the participation of young women who are currently in or will soon take up leadership roles within youth or women-led civil society organisations. We welcome applications from people who are actively working on Gender as a key dimension of democratic transformation, including from people in the LGBTI+ community. We may consider male applicants if they can demonstrate enough experience and knowledge in the aforementioned field.

The seminar is designed for participants who:

- Are committed to the values of the Council of Europe, democracy, human rights and the rule of law;
- Are aged 18 – 35 (exceptions are possible when justified);
- Hold Belarusian nationality;
- Are residing in a member state of the Council of Europe or in Belarus;
- Are able to autonomously and actively communicate in English;
- Are committed to attend for the whole duration of the seminar;
- Are active in a civil society organisation, initiative, youth or gender-related project, and have a letter of support from that organisation/initiative/project;
- Occupy a prominent role in the organisation or have the intention to become active in a leadership role;
- Are actively engaged with gender as a key dimension of democratic transformation.

The Council of Europe (and partners) welcomes applications from all candidates who fulfil the above-mentioned profile, irrespective of gender, disability, marital or parental status, racial, ethnic or social origin, colour, religion, belief or sexual orientation.

## **MAIN CONTENTS OF THE SEMINAR**

The seminar will take a gender-transformative approach to address key aspects of social and political transformation and the foundations for meaningful democracy. Topics will include:

- Insights from transformative female leadership and young women's in civil society initiatives driving social and political change across restricted contexts, with particular focus on Belarus;
- Theory and practice of gender-transformative leadership, focusing on the gender and youth dimensions in democratic social and political change;

- Essential competencies for effective civic, social and political leadership that prioritises gender and youth perspectives, including advocacy skills to promote these perspectives within Belarus' democratic transformation;
- Skill development for supporting other young women to develop their motivation and capacity to take up leadership roles, and advocate for gender and youth perspectives within the community of Belarusian democratic forces;
- International standards and policy on gender equality, democracy and youth participation, including Council of Europe frameworks and specific provisions for young people and women.

## **BACKGROUND**

This activity, as well as the cooperation between the Gender Equality Division and the Youth Department, follows the Youth Department's training course to support action for democratic youth participation in Belarus based on Council of Europe standards, which took place in October 2023. This activity strengthened competencies in advocacy, democratic leadership and participation, and critical thinking necessary for effective and meaningful participation in democratic processes.

That first experience highlighted an interest in gender among youth activists for democracy as a critical dimension of democratic transformation, as well as a lack of attention it receives in the Belarusian community, despite the prominence of female leadership and the over-representation of young women among civil society activists.

The Gender Equality Division cooperated with Belarusian democratic forces and civil society in 2023 to increase their knowledge and understanding of international and Council of Europe standards on gender equality and countering violence against women and domestic violence, as well as promoting women's rights in general. The seminar is implemented within the project "Co-operation with Belarusian democratic forces and civil society on gender equality policy making" of the Gender Equality Division. The project is expected to continue building the capacity of Belarusian democratic forces and civil society to contribute to the development, in the future, of laws and policies to foster women's rights and gender equality and to counter violence against women in line with the Council of Europe standards. This new cooperation effort also contributes to the Youth Department's ongoing work to support the independent youth-led civil society of Belarus in exile, which in 2025 will include a strategic workshop entitled "A youth agenda for democracy and human rights" and a capacity building programme for young Belarusian political leaders and activists to effectively participate in the democratic processes at the European and national levels.

The seminar is embedded in the work of the Contact Group on co-operation with representatives of Belarusian democratic forces and civil society, set up by the Committee of Ministers to support civil society and democratic representatives in their efforts to bring the human rights standards of the Council of Europe to Belarus.

The importance of this work has been stressed by the Reykjavik Summit Declaration, where heads of state and government of the Council of Europe resolved to:

pursue the work of the Contact Group on co-operation with Belarusian democratic forces and civil society and will find ways to strengthen co-operation with Russian and Belarusian human rights defenders, democratic forces, free media and independent civil society.

## **Financial and practical conditions of participation**

### *Travel expenses*

Travel expenses and visa fees for the training course in Strasbourg will be reimbursed by the Council of Europe according to the rules in place. Only the participants who attend the entire training course can be reimbursed.

### *Accommodation*

Board and lodging for the training course will be provided and paid for by the Council of Europe, at the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg.

### *Working languages*

The working language of the training course is English. Additional support to participants who may not feel confident in expressing themselves in English may be provided on a needs basis.

## **Application procedure and selection of participants**

All candidates must apply online at <https://youthapplications.coe.int> .

A group of up to 15 participants will be selected based on the profile outlined above; A waiting list may be established. Candidates will be informed whether their application has been accepted or rejected, and if they have been put on the waiting list, by 20 February 2024.

The full application form must be submitted on-line by **23:59 (CET), 14 February 2025**.

## **Further information**

For any questions, please contact us at [eyc.programme@coe.int](mailto:eyc.programme@coe.int).