

Explainer / Q&A: Supporting Belarusian Residents

When passports become weapons: Local authorities' response to transnational repression against Belarusians abroad

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This document addresses common questions and clarifies key considerations for local and regional authorities in effectively responding to the unprecedented challenge of transnational repression against Belarusian residents. It is designed to empower leaders with accurate information, helping to distinguish facts from common assumptions and foster proactive, human-centred governance.

1. Ensuring legal status for existing residents

Question: Why is this different from a typical asylum or migration issue, and what is the primary aim of providing documentation solutions?

Answer: The core challenge is maintaining the legal status of existing residents. Most affected Belarusians are already legally resident, working, and paying taxes in host communities. They are not seeking a new status, but trying to prevent their home state from deliberately making them illegal. Providing alternative documents would allow them to continue their self-sufficient lives, contributing to local economies and preventing them from being pushed into an undocumented status.

The asylum system's limitations: Forcing established, self-sufficient residents into the already overloaded international protection system (with processing times ranging from 6 months to 5 years and reported rejection rates of 30 to 90%) would cause its collapse. Moreover, during the asylum process, individuals often face restrictions on work and travel, turning contributors to the local economy into dependents. Providing targeted documentation solutions allows Belarusian residents to remain autonomous.

2. Understanding the impact of alternative documentation

Q: What are the actual implications of issuing alternative documents (like alien's passports) to this group?

A: Issuing alternative documents is a targeted administrative tool that promotes community stability and prevents irregularity. These solutions are exclusively for individuals who already hold a valid residence permit in the host country, having previously passed vetting and approval processes. Such measures simply ensure that current residents can maintain their legal identity and continue their contributions.

3. Assessing the security context

Q: How should local authorities assess the security context surrounding Belarusian residents?

A: The security assessment should critically differentiate between the Belarusian regime (the actual security threat) and the individuals who fled that very regime. These residents support democratic values and have undergone initial security checks. Democratic Belarusian organisations in exile are valuable partners in identifying real threats emanating from Minsk, such as the misuse of the Interpol system for political persecution. Maintaining these residents in a secure legal status makes communities *safer* by shielding them from hostile state coercion and engaging them as allies in upholding democratic values.

4. Ensuring correct and fair application of rules

Q: How can local administrations ensure that frontline staff duly apply complex legal and policy rules?

A: Effective implementation requires continuous, targeted training and clear internal guidance. The legal landscape in Europe is exceptionally complex and constantly evolving, with nuanced exceptions (such as those for Belarusians in some national laws). Regular, mandatory briefings for all relevant staff, co-designed with the diaspora to provide up-to-date information about the country of origin, are essential to find solutions to transnational repression. Such training would ensure that policy is applied correctly, preventing costly legal errors and wrongful denials of rights.

5. The power of local action in a national issue

Q: What is the actual scope and impact of action at the local level for what seems to be a national or international issue?

A: While national governments set overarching laws, implementation largely happens at the local level, and local leaders are powerful drivers of policy change. Municipalities often hold significant discretionary power to interpret rules, notably about what constitutes “sufficient proof” for unobtainable documents. By documenting administrative deadlocks, showcasing local good practices, and advocating upwards for clearer, consistent national guidance, municipalities can be primary catalysts for sensible, nationwide policy. Local action is not just possible; it is essential for both human dignity and integrity in public administrations.

Way forward: Informed action for community integrity

This complex situation demands informed action and human-centred governance. By clarifying these key considerations, local leaders can confidently implement solutions that uphold human rights and dignity, strengthen the rule of law, and protect the integrity and stability of their communities from transnational repression.